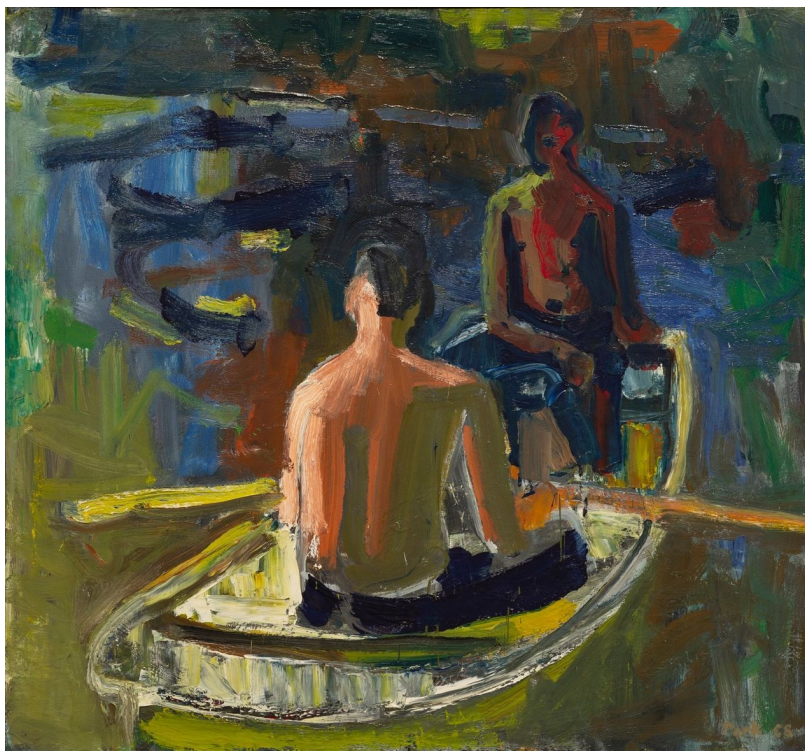


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ART REVIEW

‘David Park: A Retrospective’ Review: Subtle Humanism in Thick Paint

The underrated Bay Area School artist—who, early on, turned from abstract painting to thoroughly modern figuration—receives his first major museum exhibition in over three decades.



David Park's 'Rowboat' (1958) PHOTO: © ESTATE OF DAVID PARK/MODERN ART MUSEUM OF FORT WORTH

By Peter Plagens

July 15, 2019 4:29 pm ET

Fort Worth, Texas

David Park (1911-1960) is one of the artists who made San Francisco almost as famous for a figurative style of painting (the “Bay Area School”) as New York is for Abstract Expressionism. Park was a stupefyingly adroit applier of paint to canvas whose generous but subtle humanism makes him one of the most art-historically underrated artists of the mid-20th century. There’s a good chance, however, that “David Park: A Retrospective,” now at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, will help rectify that. (After this venue, it will travel to the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, and then back to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, which originated the show.) With over 120 works, including more than 70 oil paintings, it’s the first Park exhibition in a major museum in over three decades.

David Park: A Retrospective

*Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth
Through Sept. 22*

A Bostonian who was diagnosed in childhood as being more than halfway blind, Park stopped wearing glasses in 1926 and never put them on again. Two years later he moved to Los Angeles, where he attended the Otis Art Institute—for less than a year, his only formal art education. In 1929, Park moved to Berkeley, heard

Matisse lecture, and fell in love with Lydia Newell (the younger sister of his roommate), whom he married at age 19. In rather short order, he was the father of two daughters, a circumstance that caused him, in 1936, to move his family back to Massachusetts so that he could take a position as head of the art department at the Winsor School for girls in Brookline.

Five years later he returned to Berkeley with his family, writing to his brother: “The east was never my medium. I have never had the friends, influence, position, esteem, contacts, and even love for it that I have here [in California].” Although in near-constant back pain from a 1942 crane accident at his day job (actually, a night job) at General Cable Corp., he lived the rest of his life as a copiously productive painter, and teacher at the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute) and the University of California at Berkeley. He died at 49 of lung cancer, in Berkeley.

Originally an onward-and-upward social realist, Park converted to painterly abstraction in 1947—when Clyfford Still and Mark Rothko were doing teaching stints at the CSFA. It didn’t last long. In 1949 or 1950 (even his daughters, who attended the Fort Worth opening, aren’t exactly sure) he abandoned almost all his abstract paintings at the dump (four rather respectable examples survived to be included in this retrospective) and returned to figuration. One of his colleagues, the abstract painter Frank Lobdell (another undervalued artist), recalled: “I thought it was a joke. The idea of somebody making such a drastic switch from one style to another just didn’t occur to you.” (Richard Diebenkorn—roughly Park’s contemporary—made the same switch, but later returned to abstraction.)



David Park's 'The Concert' (1954) PHOTO: © ESTATE OF DAVID PARK/MODERN ART MUSEUM OF FORT WORTH

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His
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(1952), “The Market” (1952-53) and “The Concert” (1954)—are demi-masterpieces of daring composition, with flat foreground shapes dominating to the point of obscuring the background subject matter for which the pictures are titled. Park comes fully into his own in 1958, with such paintings as “Rowboat” and “Two Bathers.”

Park’s figuration is not, however, traditional realism. It’s a thoroughly modern interplay of what’s being depicted with the undeniable physical fact of thick paint applied enthusiastically to a flat surface. “Rowboat,” a painting of two men in their craft, is a stunning, deceptively casual arrangement of color and shape. The upper right diagonal half of the painting contains sharp dark blues with interruptions of hot red and orange that, remarkably, help place the more distant figure in recession. The lower left part of the picture, with muddier, more neutral colors, shows us the back of the rower, whose anatomical shading is one of the most beautifully concise modelings of flesh you’ll ever see—a few brushstrokes of creamy muted orange and a chalky olive green. “Two Bathers” is chromatically simpler (although still inventive: one woman’s dark blue bathing suit, and the marginally lighter blue water behind her would ordinarily be

reversed) but quietly breathtaking in a seemingly offhand rendering of gesture—the blue-clad woman putting up her wet hair while her friend in a rust-red suit waves to someone unseen.

If you can't get to Fort Worth, Kalamazoo or San Francisco to see these and many more similarly wonderful works, the superbly designed catalog might be reasonable consolation. The reproductions are large and accurate, and the spare-no-expense paper is glossy and thick. If there's a flaw in this iteration of the show, it's only that the Modern is so capacious (remember, this is Texas) that there's almost too much white wall space between the paintings.

By 1959, Park was an artist on the way up, nationally. Works at auction had fetched rising prices and a prominent New York gallery (60 years ago, California was still a bit of a modern-art province) had scheduled a solo show. But cancer soon left him bed-ridden. During the final months of his life he could work only on small gouaches and, with felt-tip pens, a 30-foot-long paper scroll. Thinking of Park's abbreviated career risks melancholy, but if you want a bit of joy from the work of a real painter, David Park is your guy.

—*Mr. Plagens is an artist and writer in New York.*

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