

ART REVIEW

'Lennart Anderson: A Retrospective' Review: Tutorial on an Underknown Painter

A small show traveling to schools elevates the late-20th-century American realist's profile and deserves to be more widely seen.



Installation view of 'Lennart Anderson: A Retrospective'

PHOTO: AMAYA GURPIDE

By Lance Esplund

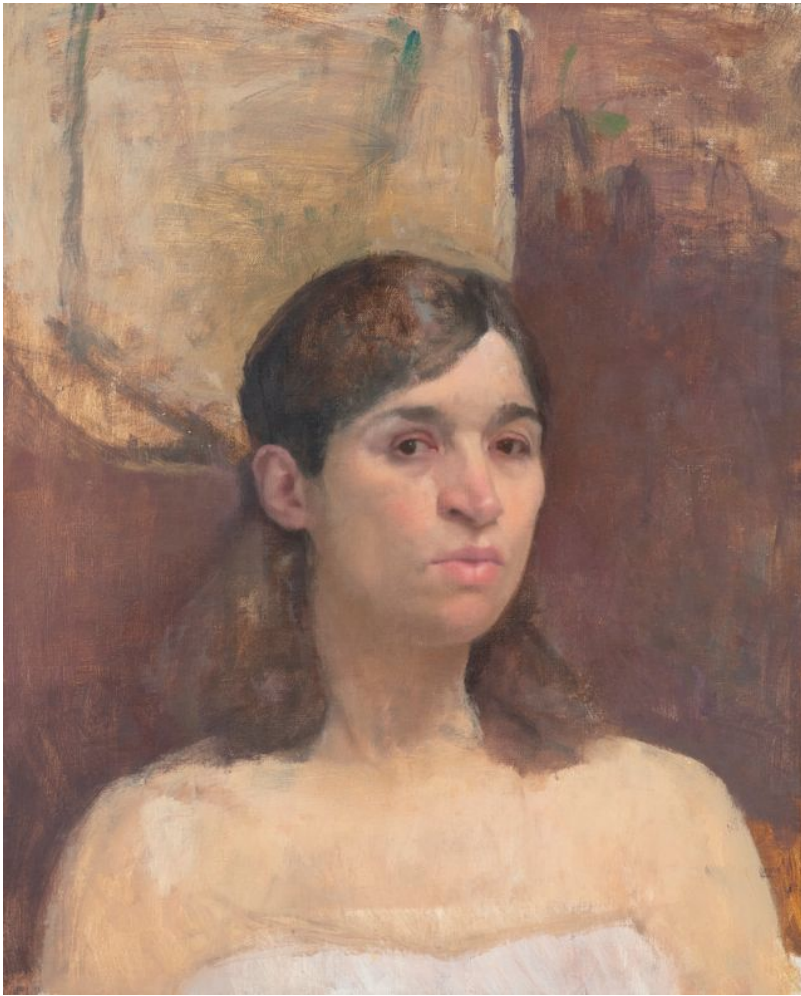
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Old Lyme, Conn.

The art critic Hilton Kramer called the late-20th-century American realist painter Lennart Anderson (1928-2015) a “Degas of our time.” Another avid fan and a collector of Anderson’s paintings refers to him as “America’s Chardin.” These French masters were undoubtedly important to Anderson, as were Roman frescoes, Piero della Francesca, Poussin, Ingres, Corot, Puvis de Chavannes and Balthus, as well as the psychologically charged portraits of Anderson’s teacher Edwin Dickinson. The influence of these earlier painters, flashing here and there like familial traits throughout Anderson’s oeuvre, shine through in “Lennart Anderson: A Retrospective,” a handsome exhibition (curated by Amaya Gurpide and Jordan Sokol) of more than 30 oil paintings and drawings here at the Lyme Academy of Fine Arts.

personalities found in early Roman Fayum mummy portraits. Most, such as “ Morris Dorsky ” (1990-91) and “Portrait of Jeanette” (1995), like Byzantine Madonnas, explore the tension between a solid, fully realized head and its surrounding mostly flat and neutral-colored ground. “Portrait of Mrs. Suzy Peterson ” (1959), reminiscent of Renaissance portraiture, is monumental, yet emits soft, milky light. In “Portrait of Barbara S. (the First One)” (1972), the sitter’s eyes hover just above center, as if she is struggling to hold our gaze and to keep her head above water.

Also included at Lyme are a few nudes; a handful of wonderful still lifes; two small, striking, light-filled landscapes, “Patmos” (1959) and “Motecastello di Vibio” (1990), which summon Corot; and the large, multi-figure narrative painting “Street Scene” (1961). A rich array of warm, heightened oranges, salmons, ochers, limes, roses and blues, it depicts the unfurling reactions to an accident involving a child and his broken toy wagon. Radiating summer heat, the painting recalls, in color, drama and organized chaos, Poussin’s “The Abduction of the Sabine Women” (c. 1633-34), in New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art. The injured boy and an attending woman (a pocket of calm) suggest a pietà; and a girl, her blond pigtailed flapping like angel’s wings, surges into the scene like a superhero. The painting’s numerous figures, as if suspended, begin to collide, freefall, tumble and topple, as if abandoned, midair, by a juggler.



Lennart Anderson's 'Portrait of Barbara S. (the First One)' (1972)

PHOTO: COLLECTION OF VINCENT ARCILESI

For me, however, the most compelling pictures here are Anderson's still-life paintings, which unfold like dramatic narratives. In one, from 1993, the tiny, crinkly, gleaming aluminum-foil facets of a Jiffy Pop popcorn bag mesmerize, as does its torn opening—gaping like a hellmouth. In “Still Life With Mannequin (Admiration)” (1997), an artist's jointed, wooden studio mannequin gazes upward, toward a plaster bust fragment—perhaps an ancient Roman goddess arisen from her tomb. She leans out, toward us, as the reclining mannequin, like a fallen warrior, leans in. Their gazes, like ships passing, miss each other, a palpable emptiness in their wake. It's a humble, beautiful, melancholic picture, painted by “America's Chardin.”

—*Mr. Esplund, the author of “The Art of Looking: How to Read Modern and Contemporary Art” (Basic Books), writes about art for the Journal.*