

# The Gallery: A Tale of Two Artists

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**WORKS OF TWO IMPORTANT**, out-of-the-mainstream American artists can currently be seen in museums on the east side of San Francisco Bay. Ten large sculptures by Martin Puryear are positioned about the 6,700-square-foot central space of the University of California Berkeley Art Museum. Seventy-seven paintings and drawings by Elmer Bischoff (1916-1991) fill the Great Hall of the Oakland Museum of California.

Martin Puryear, born in Washington, D.C., 60 years ago, creates huge abstract shapes—sometimes solid, sometimes hollow—out of wood or wire mesh. From these simple materials, he painstakingly crafts objects that evoke giant seashells and birds, human organs and body parts, cages and prisons, religious cult figures, primitive boats and buildings. He attained a certain renown about a decade ago, when he was named the sole American representative at the 1989 Bienal in São Paulo (where he was voted best in show), won a MacArthur Foundation “genius” grant of \$295,000 and saw a major sampling of his work travel from Chicago’s Art Institute to museums in Washington, Los Angeles and Philadelphia. Although works of his are owned by all four of New York’s major art museums, his most notable presence in Manhattan is a tall pair of segmented pylons at Battery Park City, which now seem a kind of memorial to the ghost towers behind them.

The selection of his work on view here was intended to let art lovers know what Mr. Puryear has been doing since 1991. The austere, awe-inspiring installation at Berkeley is a perfect match of space, light and art.

The sculptures made of wood include “Lever No. 2,” a 25-foot-long doohickey that calls to mind some giant Oldenbergian electrical appliance, with a great looping “cord” of finely sanded wood plugged into the bottom of a strange, many-branching socket. In “Alien Huddle,” an impeccably formed 53-inch sphere (made of laminated strips of wood curved over an invisible inner frame, then glued and stapled together) gives birth to a smaller hemisphere attached to it like a fungus, out of which grows a baby quarter-sphere. The strange, glowing, reddish-gold object hypnotizes with its multitude of allusions.

“Brunnhilde” is at once utterly simple in its form and mind-boggling in the complexity of its craft. Parallel strips of laminated cedar are crossed by other strips

to form a lattice. These all rise from an oval base about six by nine feet, billow outward like an inflated pillowcase and meet at two sharp corners eight feet above the ground. The wonder of this airy, fragile cage is that every intersection in the lattice has been cut, fitted and joined by hand—an effort that must have taken months.

A similar dedication to minutely finished, hand-crafted work is visible in the awesome, bulging creations he fabricates by overlapping squares of metal mesh atop a precisely fashioned frame made of curving steel wires. The stiff, transparent, ballooning surfaces are then daubed here and there with black tar. His mesh-and-tar works assume the shapes of giant heads or thumbs, coiling snail shells (with inset windows) and six-foot wide, four hole bagels. “Confessional” confronts us with an arched wooden door, behind which billows a head-shaped wire mesh room, like a dark aviary of the brain.

As a rule, all the allusions one reads into Mr. Puryear’s objects are one’s own. But “A Ladder for Booker T. Washington” is a title that nudges the imagination. An ash tree on Mr. Puryear’s property in upstate New York was split in two. The two halves were sawn and sanded down to serve as the matching sides of a waving, 36-foot-high ladder. About 80 shorter pieces of wood were then doweled in between them as rungs. Those at the bottom of the ladder (which is suspended in space by wires) are about two feet across; those at the top less than two inches, and obviously untenable; this “ladder” goes nowhere, disappears into nothing. The resultant object, however one interprets it, is at once beautiful and profoundly disturbing. But the title pressures one into reading it as an emblem of the folly of Booker T. (“Up from Slavery”) Washington’s early-20th-century advice to his—and Mr. Puryear’s—fellow African Americans: Work hard, remember your place, and you too can climb the ladder of success.

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Elmer Bischoff is doomed to be forever linked with two better-known artists—David Park and Richard Diebenkorn—as one of the founders of what came to be called the Bay Area Figurative School. Although the three friends were regarded as equals during the short heyday of the movement, Park and (especially) Diebenkorn have now moved to secure places in the pantheon of postwar American artists; Bischoff has not. Park made the first serious break with Abstract Expressionism in his painting “Kids on Bikes” of 1950; he died of cancer in 1960, at 49, but the legend of his mellow humanism persists. His painted

people (the subject of a national touring exhibition in 1962 and a Whitney Museum show in 1988) are the most vigorous and memorable of the three artists’. After moving to Santa Monica, his student and colleague Richard Diebenkorn perfected a luminous, intellectually abstracted means of continuing his earlier visions of sun-washed California landscapes in the famous “Ocean Park” series of 1966-88. By the time he died in 1993, he had won acceptance from the New York establishment, certified by his own giant Whitney retrospective four years ago.

Bischoff has never had a New York museum retrospective. His spirit will have to make do with the Oakland Museum’s—an excellent show in a appropriate setting. Born and educated in next door Berkeley, Bischoff lived, taught and painted there most of his life.

Guest curator Susan Landauer makes a case for the vitality and integrity of the floaty abstract works with which Bischoff began and ended his career. But the real object of a Bischoff retrospective, at this point in time, is to see how well his expressionist/objective works of 1953-72 measure up to the best of Diebenkorn and Park.

Quite well, it turns out. Although he moved through a variety of pictorial and gestural modes during those 20 years, the best of Bischoff’s big canvases successfully merge free-flying, slabbed-on, any-colored oil paint—the hallmark of 1950s Abstract Expressionism—with recognizable (if often faceless) human figures in recognizable (if unidentifiable) earthly settings.

In the six or eight masterworks here, ghostly, lonely humanoid shapes live in, emerge out of or are threatened by worlds made entirely of rampaging, wrong-colored paint. When his paintings of people work, our responses to them are largely determined by our responses to the density, direction and hue of the paint that surrounds them: the fiery crimson patches that hover over a worried nude woman wading in a pond made out of paint; another nude stretched out on a blue beach towel, unaware of the violent orange sky and blue clouds above, the cobalt tidal wave about to engulf her.

The Martin Puryear show, created for the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts by Margo Crutchfield, has already been to the Miami Art Museum. After closing here Dec. 30, it will travel to the Seattle Art Museum from January to April next year—although where Seattle will find room for the ladder I have no idea. The Bischoff exhibition closes in Oakland Jan. 13. Its troubled people will spend the rest of 2002 basking in Newport Beach, Calif., and West Palm Beach, Fla.