

Generous Imaginings

The artworks of Emile Norman and Eve Tartar grace many of the Central Coast's public spaces.

by C. Kevin Smith

To appreciate art in a museum setting, most people have to put themselves into a kind of mental “art zone.” The zone allows us to stare at a painting or a sculpture for several minutes, absorbed in an act of deep concentration, open to a world of interpretation, mystery and beauty. Personally I find large museums extremely satisfying, even necessary, yet also exhausting. After an hour or so of active artistic contemplation—two at the most—I’m ready for the cafeteria, then the gift shop, and then some fresh air.

But what about the art all around us? I’m not suggesting that everyone traipse to the supermarket and gaze at the Campbell’s Soup aisle, à la Warhol. I’m talking about the art that can be found in public and semi-public places, such as hotel lobbies, churches, hospitals, businesses, courthouses, schools and libraries. This is art we can catch on the sly, as it were, during our busy days, when we haven't necessarily "scheduled" time to go to an exhibit. It is art that, for reasons of civic virtue, artistic charity, or simply somebody’s good taste, is just there. The works of two artists, Emile Norman and Eve Tartar, stand out among the many fine pieces of public art on the Central Coast.

Eve Tartar died earlier this year at the age of 89; the recent announcement of an upcoming retrospective of her work, which was planned before she passed away and will be held in January at the Monterey Museum of Art, is therefore all the more poignant. Tartar worked in several media; most striking are her paper collages, three of which can be seen in downtown Monterey.

“My Heart Leaps Up When I Behold A Rainbow,” located in the lobby of Hotel Pacific (300 Pacific St., Monterey), is an ideal introduction to Tartar’s unique artistic style, for like the rainbow, which is both color and shape, light and moisture, vision and illusion, her works are at once sculptures, paintings, collages and murals. I see them as relief maps of the creative spirit. The title of the work, a quote from Wordsworth, evokes the heart-soaring experience of Romantic nature, yet also a feeling of childlike wonder. Tartar, who once described creativity as the “marriage of innocence and skill,” here uses her colored paper and scissors—the tools of children’s art projects—to create a complex work of careful design and bold aesthetic grandeur.

Facing “My Heart Leaps Up” in Hotel Pacific’s atrium courtyard lobby is another Tartar creation, a charming, whimsical peacock standing in a river of vividly cool color. The peacock’s three-dimensional body evokes the messy harmony of a bird’s nest. In this piece, color, shape, line and texture work together to keep the viewer’s eye constantly on the move.

“A Symmetry of Summer's End,” a work from 1983 located on the ground floor of the Monterey Conference Center (1 Portola Plaza, Monterey), takes the modernist, abstract forms of Mark Rothko and transforms them into something organic and alive and strangely affirming. “Symmetry” is difficult to describe; both painterly and sculptural, it’s almost dizzying, hypnotic, like the warm hazy air of a late summer evening. Tartar uses her colors—strongly shaped fields of burgundy, ebony, peach and green—to depict the colorful weave and swirl of the human imagination.

The Monterey Conference Center is a great place to see art, and its welcoming spirit is symbolized by the magnificent sculpture “Two Dolphins” (1981), one of three pieces at the Center by the consummate artist Emile Norman. Norman, who at age 82 continues to create works of astonishing precision and beauty at his studio in Big Sur, developed his own sculptural technique of wood inlay, seen here in the pair of dolphins. Crafted out of literally thousands of tiny pieces of wood, these majestic yet playful creatures leap out from an elegant wave whose curving, protective shape seems to suggest motion itself. The work’s colors evoke an oceanic world: sand, foam, earth, water, sky, all the exuberance of nature in which plants and animals and the elements combine to flow as of one harmonious mind.

Behind the dolphins stands one of Norman’s illuminated crushed glass murals, which tells in delightfully creative images the history of Monterey; a third Norman at the Center, another wood inlay sculpture entitled “Two Birds,” captures the muscular grace of birds in flight. Here one feels the swoop of nature—and of art. The birds’ wings contain plant and animal motifs, as if to remind us that these are works of the imagination, but also to express a deeper truth that purely representational art cannot: that all life is organically, necessarily, interconnected. Indeed, one of the things that makes these pieces so joyous to us is their insistence on the figure of the couple, the streaming motion of two beings living together.

Art has long been associated with spirituality and healing, and it is no secret that art can be immensely therapeutic, a word that evolved from the Greek word meaning “to minister to.” It should come as no surprise, then, to discover that Norman’s art occupies a special place at the Community Hospital of the Monterey Peninsula (23625 Holman Highway, Monterey). Visitors to the Comprehensive Cancer Center are greeted by a stunning selection of Norman’s birds: two sculptures, two tapestries, and a wood inlay panel. In several mythological traditions birds are associated with longevity and health, and these works pulse with the shimmering promise of life. The two tapestries, featuring a blue heron and an owl, are especially suggestive of a kind of timeless comfort.

Finally, among the many pieces of Norman's work found at the hospital, situated at the brightest corner of the central fountain, overlooking the beautiful outdoor courtyard, his sculpture “Four Fishes” (1963) sums up the magic of his artistry. From afar the fish appear almost like the wide tail of a breaching whale, yet up close one can see the tiniest components of the sea: sand, drops of water, reflected sun. Norman’s art is both sophisticated and elemental, and it shares with Tartar’s paper collages a generosity—

which is, after all, one of the cornerstones of public art—that brings together in elegant forms all the detail and drama of a universe overflowing with creative possibilities.

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