

Passing Fancies

Art that's always there rarely gets the respect it deserves.

by C. Kevin Smith

We tend to think of places we have lived in terms of the relationships and the jobs we had at the time. But one's deeper memories of a place may be associated with a certain smell, color, or sound that is unique to a city, perhaps a view out a particular window, a quality of light, the flavor of a special pastry impossible to find anywhere else.

Sometimes art plays a role in this kind of remembering. When I think back to my year in Seattle—several wet months of a bleak love life and a shaky career—I remember a walk I would take from my apartment to the Asian Art Museum. The museum is inside a beautiful park that overlooks Puget Sound, and is housed in a handsome Art Deco building that was once the city's principal art museum. The walk never failed to cheer me, but I especially looked forward to a little bowl that was on permanent display. There was nothing very special about this bowl—it was old, it was green, it was from Vietnam—yet I was drawn to its own mysterious brand of comfort. Perhaps I saw a little of myself in it: fragile yet whole, laced with cracks yet enduring.

Art galleries and museums are constantly spinning on a wheel of change. There is always a push to celebrate the new: the big opening reception, the special painting or sculpture from some faraway collection, the rush to see a show before it closes. Still, what matters most to me are the things that stay. During a recent stroll through Pacific Grove and Monterey, I took a moment to appreciate what I can count on remaining here, day after day, year after year.

Permanence, of course, is an illusion, and no object evokes this more poignantly for me than the “Woman's Burden Carrier” that hangs on a wall inside the Pacific Grove Natural History Museum. Called a *kiâhâ* in the Pima language, this type of basket, once common throughout the Southwest, was made by densely weaving together branches and stalks from native trees and grasses. Hung flat on the wall, it is hard to imagine how this forerunner to the backpack would appear on an actual woman. The basket looks hollow and inert, a sad if succinct symbol of how the land we now occupy was systematically emptied of its original culture.

At the nearby Pacific Grove Art Center, what happens to be hanging on the walls is less important to me than the Center's unique atmosphere. Each time I walk up that long flight of stairs, it feels as if I am entering a world far removed from the streets and traffic and everyday life below. I love the smell of paint that wafts out of the artists' studios, the music from the occasional dance classes, the sense of ongoing artistic endeavor. The last time I was there, three people were doing tai chi in one of the galleries.

Among all the arts, nothing transports me more than a good book. At the Pacific Grove Public Library, the power of storytelling is magnified by the building itself, the only

Carnegie library building in the area that is still a library. (The Carnegie libraries of Salinas and Watsonville were razed in 1960 and 1976, respectively. The Monterey Library from 1907, at 425 Van Buren St., now houses the president of MIIS.) Completed in 1908, with sections added on in '26, '38, '50 and '78, the P.G. Library's original western wing still affords views out to the bay. I have come to associate some of my favorite authors, such as Eudora Welty and Peter Matthiessen, with the view I can see when I stand by their books. Even some of the windows date back to the 1908 building, a perspective that reminds me how old art is given new life each time someone encounters it.

Some artists are so original in vision they must invent new techniques to match their ideas. Two such artists are Eve Tartar and Emile Norman, whose works can be seen at the Conference Center in downtown Monterey. Their art never fails to amaze and inspire me. I can stare endlessly at the woven strips of paper in Tartar's "Asymmetry of Summer's End" and still feel there is more to know about this bountiful swirl of deep color and texture. Norman's wood-inlay sculptures, "Two Birds" and "Two Dolphins," marry the elegant forms of nature to an artistry that is both rigorous and freewheeling. The works of Tartar and Norman resemble a kind of visual music, shaped equally by soaring lyrical impulses and a meticulous devotion to structural design.

A profound understanding of structure is also key to the art of painter David Ligare, whose "Serifos (Thrown Drapery)" is displayed upstairs at the Conference Center. Besides being one of the most purely beautiful paintings around, this work, showing a stretch of fabric suspended in the air, is also our most erotic instance of public art in a region more noted for unpeopled landscapes. There aren't any bodies in Ligare's painting, but it isn't hard to imagine the thrown drapery as the result of the exuberant undraping of someone who now stands nude, just outside the picture frame, inspired by the glistening foam of the sea and the warm sun that bathes the painting in such dazzling light.

Art is evanescent. At the Monterey Museum of Art, one group of paintings currently on display is described as being "on long-term loan," a phrase which to my mind pretty much sums up life itself. Still, some things last longer than others. When, years from now, I think of the lovely earthenware jar from ancient Thailand in the glass case on the museum's second floor mezzanine, what I'll remember most is the way I can look past the archaic vessel and its record of centuries long gone, to the old wooden beams of the museum gallery and the changing exhibits below, to the men and women who come to look at the art, each one inhabiting a private, ever-changing world of memory, each one seeing something different.

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