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Exhibition note

by Franklin Einspruch

On “Hyman Bloom: Matters of Life and Death” at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, is righting a longstanding wrong. A movement that altered the course of modern art took place under its nose. Hyman Bloom, among a group of artists that came to be known as the Boston Expressionists—or, more simply, the Boston School—was exerting wide influence. Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning related to Bloom’s student Bernard Chaet that they regarded his teacher as the first American Abstract Expressionist, having seen his work in the “Americans 1942” exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art.

But by the 1950s, the museum had adopted what Chaet called “a hands-off policy towards modern art.” The germane blue bloods were disposed toward Impressionism and disdainful of a school of moderns whose names read like the congregational roll of a *shul*. In 1959 the mfa did exhibit Bloom’s work alongside that of John Singleton Copley, Washington Allston, and Maurice Prendergast. They never devoted another show to him again, until now. “Hyman Bloom: Matters of Life and Death” laudably attempts to rectify the neglect.

Something else needs putting right, this time regarding Hilton Kramer, the founding editor of this magazine. Kramer did not hurl low blows. But writing about Bloom’s painting *The Synagogue* (ca. 1940) for *Commentary* in 1955, he landed one on the south edge of the belt line:

To the “foreign” eye, which brings no associations to it, it must be as absorbing as a kosher dinner—a matter of taste. But for the observer who has associations with this imagery from childhood onwards, Bloom’s Jewish paintings stimulate the same surprise and dismay one feels on finding *gefilte* fish at a fashionable cocktail party.

I can’t concur with Kramer’s jaundice, but I suspect that those paintings seemed a lot more literal in 1955 than they do in 2019. Nowadays art can hardly be literal enough for some people. Charts abound, as do documentaries, and we’re seeing a resurgence of the most banal sort of figuration in support of the most banal sort of politics. In comparison, Bloom’s work looks like poetry itself.



Hyman Bloom, Synagogue, ca. 1940, Oil on canvas. Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Bloom's generation of Jews worked feverishly to assimilate in a cultural landscape dotted with land mines of anti-Semitism. It helps explain why the artist, painting corpses, limbs, and viscera in the 1940s and '50s, refused associations of his work with the Holocaust. One wanted to escape a pigeonholing. Henry Adams, a professor of art history at Case Western, writing in this year's

Modern Mystic: The Art of Hyman Bloom, invites us to contrast Bloom's seclusion with the Barnumesque self-promotion of figures like Jeff Koons. Another telling comparison would set Bloom's strivings for universalism next to the efforts of any number of contemporary artists who want nothing better than to represent their identity, conceived racially, sexually, or otherwise, in a spirit of doubt that universalism exists.

In Bloom's paintings, death reveals the true form of the body, and biological processes of decay, however repulsive, result in life for other beings. Life, in turn, takes place against an existential background that calls ceaselessly for endings and transformations.

"Matters of Life and Death" focuses on those aforementioned paintings of the dead and dismembered, though, as its title suggests, it includes images from the world of the living as well. (The show has its own excellent catalogue. *Modern Mystic* is another effort, and the two represent a sudden and welcome explosion of Bloom scholarship.) Indeed, the artist sensed the realms of life and death as continuous. In Bloom's paintings, death reveals the true form of the body, and

biological processes of decay, however repulsive, result in life for other beings. Life, in turn, takes place against an existential background that calls ceaselessly for endings and transformations. Bloom's spirituality started in the Levant and moved eastward, taking good advantage of the burgeoning interest in Asian religion in America (and, in one episode, the early availability of lsd at Harvard).



Hyman Bloom, Chandelier No. 2, 1945, Oil on canvas. Photo: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Thus life and death interpenetrate in *The Bride* from 1941. When I first viewed it, I thought that something had gone wrong with my glasses. The flowers adorning the titular woman's dress seemed to hover in front of the painting in places. Bloom lifted the technique from Rembrandt, situating impasto next to glazes. But a distinctly modern, do-or-die search for true form via the use and abuse of painting materials underpins the project. The linens upon which she lies consist of complicated passages formed by scraping. Her celebratory dress cocoons her from a background of cruelly abraded darkness.

Bloom, as a teenager, could draw astonishing approximations of William Rimmer (*Man Breaking Bonds on a Wheel*, ca. 1929) and Reginald Marsh (*Boxer at Rest*, 1930). Somehow he detected this almost immediately as a trap. By his twenties he was working against the excesses of his own talent. *Skeleton* (1936) recalls the agonized distortions and crusty textures of Soutine, with the form laid into a long sepulcher of a horizontal.

It happened often that the technical ability won the struggle. Bloom drew so well that he had trouble maintaining Expressionism. The mfa has installed his series of human cadavers and animal carcasses from the 1950s in a single dark, grisly room. Passages in some of these look, weirdly, like they came out of the brush of the contemporary realist Vincent Desiderio. (This impression, of Bloom's work recalling a subsequent development in art, came up over and over again. You could insert *A Leg*, 1945, into a show of '70s-era Philip Guston, and few would detect the intrusion.) Large-scale sanguine drawings such as *Female Cadaver* (1954), a picture of, more or less, Bernini's *Blessed Ludovica Albertoni* (1671–74) opened from sternum to pubic bone, stun with their draftsmanship. But the results don't persuade me like the works in which Bloom, pursuing Roualt or Soutine, tones down the specificity in favor of effect.



Hyman Bloom, Female Cadaver, 1954, Red chalk on paper. Photo: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Fortunately, the show features many examples in which effect predominates. Bloom painted a series of synagogue chandeliers. One of these, *Chandelier No. 2* (1945), sparkles like a pile of costume jewelry contained by the squirming arabesques of the interior from which it hangs. There is also one of his Christmas trees from 1944, all but unrecognizable as such in its turmoil of color, painted as the chandeliers' *treyf* analogue. (Kramer praised the latter series: "relieved here of circumstantial details and stagey effects, they become occasions for his purest painting.")

More important than those old anxieties about content and form, though, these works evince an acute seriousness of a kind that has almost no contemporary equivalents. That sounds exaggerated, I realize. Certainly, many artists are working in serious (or at least dogged) ways and on serious (or at least urgent) topics. Just as certainly, there is room, lots of it, for play in art. But the kind of excavation of the soul that we see in Bloom has become a rarity and an exception in a world given over to mere display. Treasures, though perhaps not worldly reward, await any artist who would again take up the work.

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