Engaging show recaps the history of modern art in the Northwest

Art review

"WHAT IT MEANT TO BE MODERN, SEATTLE ART AT MID-CENTURY," at the Henry Art Gallery, 15th Ave. N.E. and N.E. 41st St., Seattle, through Jan. 23. Hours are Tuesdays through Sundays, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Thursdays until 8 p.m. Info: 206-543-2280

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Like much about the Pacific Northwest, the history of modern art in this region is not a simple story, nor one that follows a clear trajectory. Like their contemporaries in other walks of life, the Western Washington artists of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s were independent-minded individuals who valued the mythic qualities of this physically magnificent, little-known corner of the nation. At the same time, they often longed for the forbidden fruit of the more sophisticated art scenes of Paris and New York.

As far as the rest of the nation was concerned, the history of modern art in the Pacific Northwest crystallized in September 1953, when Life Magazine published a flattering story about four of this region's most accomplished artists — Mark Tobey, Morris Graves, Guy Anderson and Kenneth Callahan — and knighted them the "mystic painters of the Northwest."

The notion that there was a school of "Northwest mysticism" that influenced everything that came after it also was a popular explanation of this region's art scene. Until well into the 1980s it was impossible to have a conversation about art here without reference to the Life story, and the prevailing theory that every artist in this rain-soaked, gray-skied land of big trees and snow-crested mountains saw the world through an idiosyncratic lens of Asian mysticism, reverence for the land, meditative introspection and a spiritual yearning for cosmic transcendence.

The engaging new show at the Henry Art Gallery recaps all this history, but adds nuances often overlooked in less inclusive exhibitions about modernism in the Pacific Northwest. Called "What It Meant To Be Modern, Seattle Art at Mid-Century," the big, broad show of more than 100 works...
Show recaps history of Northwest art

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was curated by Henry senior curator Sheryl Conkelton. The works on display come from the Henry's deep collection, as well as from the Seattle Art Museum, Tacoma Art Museum, the Safeco Collection and various local private collectors and galleries.

Also on display is archival material including letters between artists, photographs, rare exhibition catalogs and a copy of the famous "Life" article. (Which for all of its impact is a mere six paragraphs long.)

There are few masterpieces in this exhibition, but many worthy works by a great many artists. The 45 artists included make up a who's who of mid-century talent. Besides the "mystic" foursome, there are works by Wendell Brazeau, William Cumming, Richard Gilkey, Paul Horiuchi, William Ivey, Leo Kenney, Kenjiro Nomura, Spencer Moseley, Margaret Tomkins, Helmi Juvonen, George Tsutakawa and Wesley Wehr, to name a few.

Though many of the artists in this show are no longer living, some who were just starting careers in the '40s or '50s are alive and working.

The period covered spans the early '30s to the early '60s. It was the time when contemporary artists here were exploring modernism, or the idea that change and invention meant progress, even social change. Conkelton's curatorial mission was to investigate how modernism manifested itself in the Pacific Northwest.

Conkelton didn't turn up anything especially new or groundbreaking in this show, but she does emphasize some often underplayed points, such as the strong influence of the European avant-garde and New York-based abstract expressionism on many Northwest painters. Tobey traveled extensively in Europe and later lived there, as did Graves and some others. Surrealism, cubism, even hints of expressionism are obvious in works by them and others.

Virginia Bank's delightful "Repair Shop," 1949, oil on canvas, is a cubist scene of an instrument repair shop, with lutes, guitars and a cello all hanging off a clothes line in brightly colored broken planes. Anderson's "Martyrdom of St. Sebastian," 1950, oil on board, is unmistakably Anderson with its strong sense of figuration and earth-tone palette. Yet the sharp planes of color suggest a stained-glass window in the way that the French 20th century expressionist Georges Rouault often portrayed his religious scenes.

Surrealism is especially noticeable in some work by Tomkins and Kenney. In "Enchanted Rock," 1946, Kenney has placed two odd, humanoid figures on a moonscape of rocks. Ghostly white "auras" emanate from the figures, suggesting a science-fiction mysticism.

Likewise, in her "Anamorphosis," 1944, tempera on board, Tomkins' intricate, complex image of veins and roots could describe the workings of the human body or the interconnectedness of every plant and creature in the natural world.

Much is made of the influence of this region's many Asian-American artists on their non-Asian colleagues, and in one gallery sumi ink paintings and paper collages by such artists as Horuchi, Frank Okada and Tsutakawa make up an extraordinary display of calligraphic clarity and spare beauty. Yet, as the exhibition notes point out, these mostly Japanese-American artists were the ones who taught Tobey and others, such as Carl and Hilda Morris, how to paint with sumi. Tobey's famous white writing, of which there are examples in this show, is closely linked to his interest in sumi painting and calligraphy.

During and after WWII, many Northwest artists' works expressed their distress over violence and warfare. While none of these works are as obvious as showing guns and carnage, a theme of universal struggle and ominous threat runs through many pieces by artists such as Anderson and Callahan.

One of the most intriguing works in the show is the huge (12 by 8 foot) mixed media on board painting by Callahan, "The Races of Man," painted in the '40s. Large, naked, red, green and blue men and women, all looking similar except for their skin colors, struggle with one another, aid one another, and sometimes fall to the ground in exhaustion. The piece suggests the monumental themes of the Mexican muralists of about the same period, or the group scenes of struggle by El Greco. The painting seems to say that all humans, regardless of color, race or other distinctions, are engaged in the same enterprises, and are equally culpable for the world's woes, at the same time that they are equally deserving of empathy and redemption.

Not to be missed are the many brooding landscapes - including surprising ones by people such as Alden Mason, an artist who now has a completely different style - and scenes of the Pike Place Market. Tobey was famous for his sketches of the Market. But other artists were also intrigued by its color, movement and urban energy.

Though this exhibition offers no radical new theories about the Northwest's take on modernism, it is a show full of small surprises and insightful links.