

Carl Hall, Painter

Reconsidering his work

That an extraordinary painter of the Northwest such as Carl Hall (1921-1996) has not received the broad public recognition he deserves illustrates the vagaries of the art world, especially since his early paintings brought him a measure of national acclaim.

Prestigious art institutions, including the Whitney Museum, exhibited and acquired Hall's work. Influential art dealer Julien Levy offered to represent Hall with a group of artists called the Neo-Romantics or Magic Realists. By 1947, Hall had a one-man show at the Levy Gallery, following which *Life* magazine featured six of his paintings in a four-page article. Then Abstract Expressionism took over the avant-garde marketplace, and Levy's gallery closed in 1949. Hall settled with his wife, Phyllis, in Salem, where he taught at Willamette University, wrote about art for the *Oregon Statesman*, and painted.

Today, beyond the savvy collectors of Northwest art who have long appreciated Hall, only the Hallie Ford Museum of Art in Salem, which named its gallery of Northwest art after him, houses a number of Hall's works.

Locally, Karin Clarke Gallery is now showing Hall's work from the 1960-70s in hopes of increasing public awareness of this important painter.

Hall was never strictly a regional painter. His paintings convey not only his visual perception of the Northwest environment but also the emotions it stirred in him. His powers of observation were complemented by exceptional draftsmanship and medium mastery. The magic in Hall's realism derives in part from the spiritual mystery of geography which he sought to render.

His palette is subdued, inspired by the colors around him: deep greens, blacks, blues and grays, pale yellows. His landscapes are strikingly accurate, whether a full panorama (*Mountain and Fog*) or a piece of driftwood. Yet it is never photographic accuracy — his images are never frozen. He captures the quality of light, atmosphere, movement, fluidity, patterns, texture in *Spring Woods #2*, with its impressionistic flash of vivid new green surrounded by dark old growth, and in *Vetch*, muddy soil that resists the suffused winter light. Hall's exquisite

detail leaves ample room for our imagination to roam.

Hall succeeded equally at evoking the blurry, quiet melancholy of winter (*Rookery*) and the tortured form of old trunks (*Dark Chamber*) or driftwood — and in *Hidden Bird* did both at once. In *Allegory*, the fantastic aspect of contorted driftwood is emphasized. The wood appears ghostly and weightless, in part because our eyes are level with the sandy beach, the branches floating above us. A palette of yellowish gray-blue, shared in slightly different proportions by earth and sky, reinforces this impression.

Hall experimented with mixed media, materials and processes. He variously combined India ink, watercolor, gouache, silkscreen gel, acrylic and graphite. He also used pure oil, as in *Hooded Figure*, in which the boy's gentle, meditative expression is offset by a forceful composition and strong lines defining the folds of his garment.

Hall's subtle yet rich texture could be the result of scratchwork, rubbings from acrylic relief masters, tissue paper and collage elements or line itself, for he was a master of line. He produced elaborate, rigorous layerings (*Log Raft*), or spontaneous studies with fluid, sometimes calligraphic, strokes, as in *Hidden Valley*, a favorite of mine. Asian in its sensibility and aesthetics, this mountain-and-waterfall landscape is barely suggested yet whole and alive.

Hall's work often functions simultaneously at a representational and an abstract level. One can appreciate the paintings as pure abstractions of form, color and texture (*Ocean Forms*, *Sea Ghosts*, *Skull with Rocks*, *Allegory*, *Hidden Valley*). Viewers project into these paintings an extra layer of metaphor, symbol and allegory, so that Hall's work acquires for them personal meaning.

Bundle of Sticks, another favorite of mine, engages us in purely sensual terms with its varied textural effects. Compositionally, it relies on a contrast between simple geometric forms on both sides and a pile of organic shapes in the center — wood sticks to which water-erosion has lent the aspects of sun-bleached bones.

Although the content bears the force of Hall's perception and personality, the artist nonetheless leaves meaning to the viewer. He gives form to the mystery that preoccupied him without reifying it or destroying the mystery by solving it.

Hall thought and felt deeply, and he went honestly where his own thought and curiosity took him, which allowed him to become a truly distinctive painter. There was a price. In his monograph, *Eden Again: The Art of Carl Hall*, art historian Roger Hull noted: "Carl Hall had become a prolific anomaly that accorded with no contemporary trends, with the result that he was increasingly an outsider in his own region and on the national scene." Trends, however, fade. We now have enough perspective to allow quality to reassert itself. It is time to give Hall's work its due — and treat ourselves in the process.

"Carl Hall (1921-1996): Paintings from the 1960s — 70s" at Karin Clarke Gallery through July 31 is an exhibition not to be missed.

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Hidden Bird, 1965, Acrylic on illustration Board



Hooded Figure, 1954

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