

Growth of an Artist

Landscape painter David McCosh (1903-1981)

David McCosh is considered one of the preeminent painters in the Northwest. Though he received national recognition throughout his career, McCosh became largely forgotten after his death but is now being rediscovered.

Through Feb. 26, Karin Clarke Gallery's *David McCosh and The Promise of Oregon* retraces the evolution of McCosh's crucial relationship to the Northwest landscape, at once the focus and wellspring of his art. An exhibit of 30 pieces selected from the McCosh estate owned by the UO Foundation, the show offers a unique opportunity to become acquainted with the artist's work, including rarely seen pieces.

Roger Saydack, an arts scholar, patron and writer as well as a Eugene attorney, curated this exhibition with great understanding and sensitivity. The author of two thoughtful, empathetic essays on McCosh, Saydack is intimate with the painter's life and work.

Iowa native McCosh studied at the Art Institute of Chicago where he also taught, after a period of traveling and painting in Europe. In 1934, he married artist Anne Kutka and accepted a position at the UO, where he taught painting, drawing and lithography until 1970. McCosh exerted a strong influence on several generations of students.

After McCosh moved to Oregon, the Northwest landscape became the focus of his painting, and this is where the exhibit begins. It takes us through McCosh's career chronologically from 1934 to 1973, with a special emphasis on the works from his 1949-50 sabbatical, a turning-point in his long career.

Given the wide range of the selected works, Saydack has taken pains to group the paintings meaningfully in terms of evolution and theme as well as aesthetics. The resulting arrangement is excellent. The harmonious groupings greatly enhance the visual impact of each individual piece. I found myself regretting that this layout can never be repeated again, since these are all works destined to be sold.

Three oils side by side — *Farmhouse on the Mill Race* (1934), *Rainy Season* (Woolen Mill) (1935) and *Mills* (1935) — convey McCosh's initial impressions of Oregon.

"In Chicago, he'd been teaching at the Art Institute in Chicago. It was the Depression, and his work was becoming rather cynical," Saydack said. "Coming here, his work exploded with colors." Saydack understands the experience, having lived it himself. "It's an almost overwhelming experience when you first see this landscape," he said. "Oregon is so different from the Midwest. Nature is so much apparent here. The light has a very different quality."

There is an almost violent quality to these paintings with their tumultuous skies and clashing reds, wine-purples and greens, and in this they are indicative of the artist's emotional response to the landscape, espe-

wife, Anne, spent the fall of 1949 in wild, primitive Cohasset on the Washington Coast, an experience which proved decisive.

"A very refined and skilled painter started to smear, using sticks and twigs to pull the paint, using pigment directly out of the tube," Saydack explained. "In Chicago, his painting had become in some ways academic. Coming here, his painting became a more natural response. It was grounded in reality. He painted as a record of observation. Then as time went by, he started to lose his edge, his work became academic again. It started including tricks of the trade. In the Cohasset series, he returned to that direct response to what he saw and felt as the foundation of his art."

McCosh once told a student, "I believe that learning to paint is learning to see." And again, he noted, "The main pitfall is

The sense of immediacy is quite extraordinary. One senses the painter's emotional involvement, his passion for his subject as he strove to see it with as little interference as possible from preconceptions. Interestingly, despite their spontaneity, these later paintings don't yield themselves readily to the viewer. Instead, they demand we take time to not just look but to see. They require that we learn to see them on their own terms.

As we do so, we move past the first impression of abstraction to discern the structure of the landscape McCosh painted. It takes genuine observation of the finished work to begin to understand, and perhaps participate in, the initial act of observation out of which the work was born. We derive a pleasure from this exercise that exceeds mere aesthetic enjoyment. We receive a fresh vision, as a gift from the painter.

One of my favorite pieces is *Dunes Edge*, a watercolor and ink. It's all there: the patches of color in the sand, the special quality of the air, the light by the ocean, and the calligraphic ink marks, the texture of grasses and debris. The mood in *Misty Day at Cohasset* or *Pool in the Dunes* is quite different, but the approach is similar. The *Horse Creek* paintings from the 1950s are created in the same vein. "McCosh had this amazing ability to give structure to all this wild stuff happening," Saydack pointed out.

The latest paintings, *Brambles* and *Blackberry Bush*, both from the 1970s and in black-and-white, bear ever more the appearance of abstraction. To the superficial glance, they approach Mark Tobey's abstract expressionism, yet a closer look reveals how true these works are to their impossibly difficult subject: the impenetrable tangles of brambles.

The last McCosh retrospective took place in 1985 at the UOMA, now the Schnitzer Art Museum. The museum houses the largest repository of McCosh's works (almost 2,000), thanks to a donation by his widow in 1988. Ann Kutka McCosh also provided for some of McCosh's works to now-and-then be made available to collectors. Proceeds from sales benefit the museum.

Gallery talk with curator Roger Saydack and painter Margaret Coe, once McCosh's student, is scheduled for 11 am Saturday, Feb. 19.

This exhibit is most highly recommended. **ew**



Dunes Edge, watercolor and ink, by David McCosh.

cially in the over-dramatic *Rainy Season* with its gaudy rainbow.

Soon McCosh's palette quiets down, as can be seen with *On Fairmount Hill* (1940s) and in a lovely sequence of oil paintings, *Lumber Yard* (1940s), *Skinner's Butte from our Alley* (1940s) and *Veneta* (1936). The latter is one of my favorites, as it relies for dramatic impact on compositional simplicity and an economy of color. *Down Our Alley*, a watercolor from that same period, provides in a few decisive strokes an image of Eugene which still rings true today.

The sabbatical years of 1949-50 were a transitional period for McCosh. He and his

the substitution of a generalized ideal for the direct experience of painting and seeing." As with Cézanne, McCosh's experimenting with painting was also an experiment in observation.

The results can be seen on the south and east walls of the gallery, as well as in the back alcove. These paintings are striking. A new style has emerged, spontaneous, vigorous, and at first glance more abstract. Yet McCosh said of them, "Without exception they are very precise in referring to a specific situation." Again, like Cézanne, McCosh found his own individual answer to painting from observation and giving structure to what he saw.

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