

AN OREGON PAINTER WHO ONCE ROCKED NEW YORK CITY

The Louis Bunce retrospective in Salem looks back to an era when painting mattered



BUNCE'S 'BURNED LAND NO. 2'

Walk into the luscious new Louis Bunce retrospective at Willamette University's Hallie Ford Museum of Art in Salem, and you're immediately confronted with a 1932 self-portrait of the artist.

Wearing a banded fedora and sporting a 20-something's raffish sneer, Bunce — whose career as an Oregon painter spanned the mid 20th century — glances forward through the decades as if to challenge the 21st century museum-goer: "You'll never meet another artist quite like me," he seems to say.

All the portrait needs is a cigarette dangling from the lips under that pencil-thin mustache to bring it fully to life.

A generous and charismatic teacher, a hard smoker and drinker, a lover of the Oregon coast, a ladies' man and a friend of the New York art elite, Bunce was among the most famous Northwest painters working at a time when American middlebrow culture worshipped painting. He was written up in *Life* magazine and in *The New York Times*. He was a friend of Jackson Pollock — Bunce encouraged the meeting of Pollock and his wife, Lee Krasner — and of such luminaries as Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko and Robert Motherwell.

As illustrated in this thoughtful and engaging retrospective, Bunce's career was born in the social realism of the 1930s and '40s, blossomed during the cool modernism of the 1950s, and then seemed to lose its way as the artist chased the explosion of art-isms that followed, from abstract expressionism and post-modernism to a return to romanticism.

Roger Hull, a retired art historian from Willamette, curated *Louis Bunce: Dialogue with Modernism*. Hull stops at the little self-portrait as he offers a visitor a guided tour. "Louie was very debonair," Hull says, using Bunce's nickname. "I never met him, but I feel like I know him now."

Bunce was born in Wyoming in 1907. The family moved to Oregon in 1920, and the young Bunce graduated from Jefferson High School, attended the Portland Art Museum school for a year, and then headed with a friend to New York City, where he studied painting at the prestigious Art Students League.

In the city, he met Pollock and de Kooning and saw the new Museum of Modern Art's first exhibition, in 1929, which showed works by Vincent Van Gogh, Georges Seurat, Paul Gauguin and — most influentially — Paul Cézanne.

Cézanne's work had a profound effect on the young Bunce. You can see that clearly in the early landscapes in the Hallie Ford show, such as a small 1929 oil painting "Roadway, Maine," whose swirling energy and earth-toned palette echo those of the French genius, or the structural drawing in the 1934 "Beach, Port Orford," painted here after his return to Oregon in the early 1930s.

On his return to Portland, Bunce set himself up for the first time as a serious artist, having rejected the security of a career as a commercial illustrator after ogling those delicious Cézannes. With the country plunged into the Great Depression, he worked for the federal Public Works Art Project and taught at the Federal Art Center in Salem.

And he met and married a Swedish beauty, Eda Hult (yes, from *that* Hult family). He and his new wife opened the Khrouba Gallery in Portland in 1949, showing contemporary art by such Northwest artists as Jack McClarty, Manuel Izquierdo, Charles Heaney and Amanda Snyder. (The marriage and the gallery would founder together six years later.)

The couple also had a son, John (now Jon), Bunce's only child. Bunce and his wife traveled back and forth between Portland and New York, establishing a practice of introducing Northwest artists to the larger East Coast scene.

As the 1950s dawned, Bunce's painting had grown more sophisticated, darker and moodier. He created large, nearly abstract landscapes at the Oregon coast, and he became fascinated by the enormous devastation still apparent in the Coast Range's Tillamook Burn, the 500-square mile stretch of forest that was still smoldering from a series of wildfires that began in the 1930s.

The '50s were Bunce's decade. He had work in a survey show at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. His painting "Burned Land No. 2," which you can see in the retrospective, was featured in the 1951-52 Whitney