

# CELEBRATING TWO LIVES IN PAINT

A retrospective at the Schnitzer Museum traces two Eugene artists

It was strangely disorienting for me to visit the *Our Lives in Paint* exhibition of art by Eugene husband and wife painters Mark Clarke and Margaret Coe, which runs through April 1 at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art.

Curated by JSMA associate curator Danielle Knapp, the show examines two well-known local painters whose lives and careers have stood firmly at the heart of Eugene's art world for decades.

In some ways, that world — one that features representational easel paintings in gallery shows — has been culturally moored in the 1950s, that central 20th-century decade in which America enjoyed its brief but enthusiastic love affair with serious art.

It's a world in decline now, as gallery after gallery closes and society chases the art of concept and identity rather than observation and expression.

Those were heady days. Newspapers and magazines — remember them? — wrote regularly about painters and art exhibitions. Regional art was big, and would stay big at least through the 1970s. In 1953 *Life* magazine anointed four Northwest artists (Kenneth Callahan, Mark Tobey, Morris Graves and Guy Anderson) as the "Mystic Painters of the Northwest."

In those days, lesser-known but accomplished artists such as Clarke and Coe could even expect to make a modest living off the sale of their work. It was during the '50s that the couple met in a painting studio at the University of Oregon. Clarke was a graduate student; Coe was an undergrad.

"Originally and ultimately what I admired in Mark was not only his talent, but his total confidence in the bottomless well of his imagination," Coe writes in an essay in the nicely done catalog that accompanies the JSMA exhibition. "His talent was fully matured when I first met him."

I've known Coe and Clarke for years, and I have always admired both them and their work.

What was strange on entering the gallery where their art is being shown is to see familiar paintings by two people I know, though Clarke died in January 2016, elevated to the exalted status of an art museum show. Walk around the corner to the next gallery and you can see works by million-dollar names like Marc Chagall, Damien Hirst and Chris Ofili. We're in the big leagues here.

This isn't Clarke and Coe's first time in these halls. In 1967 the couple had their first show together at what is now the Schnitzer, but was then simply the University of Oregon's Museum of Art, *Mark Clarke and Margaret Coe: Paintings*. That was half a century ago —



MARK CLARKE. ORANGE SKY, 1993-94. ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 36 X 24 INCHES. COLLECTION OF COLLETTE DOMAN

they were practically kids then.

The current show contains mature work by both artists, whose paintings, watercolors and drawings are clearly distinct from each other's while sharing a broader artistic background.

Though he worked in a number of mediums, from watercolor to printmaking to sculpture, Clarke was best known for his dreamlike landscapes, done in acrylic on canvas or panel, from the Willamette Valley and the Oregon Coast.

As years passed, he increasingly chose precise mood over depiction of particular physical detail. Occasionally his landscapes include human figures or, more likely, just shadowy hints of their presence.

In Clarke's 2007 painting "Missing," for example, the title gives significance to an empty boat in the foreground of a seascape. And "Red Shed (Memory of My Dad)" offers only the barest outlines of a building and a human figure in its large expanse of color.

Coe's work is more representational. Some of her early works in the show are portraits, of Clarke and of herself, most notably a 1966 self-portrait she did in the studio showing a confident young woman glancing away from the easel as though the viewer had interrupted her work.

Besides UO art professors David McCosh and Jack Wilkinson, Coe has been heavily influenced in her career by such regional 20th-century artists as Clayton S. Price and Carl Hall.

Most recently she's been traveling to Italy to paint, and some of her best work has grown out of the landscapes and cityscapes of Venice and Rome.

My favorite is a triptych composed of three large paintings — "Mirage," "The Unattainable" and "Foreboding" — all views from her window in Venice.

The titles alone hint at the touch of mysticism that's been showing up in Coe's work in recent years, especially since the death of her young grandson, Marcus, in 2011.

The darkest painting in the show is a large square canvas titled "The Frailty of Fortune"; it's one of a seldom-exhibited series Coe painted in Portland while Marcus was battling brain cancer in a hospital there.

The show is superb, if more limited in scope than I expected. Billed as a retrospective of two artists, it offers only 40 works to trace two enormous careers. I could have seen many more and still been left wanting.

That's a small criticism, though. *Our Lives in Paint* is beautifully chosen and presented, and offers a worthy tribute to two very fine local artists.

Eugene Saturday Market's 2017  
**Holiday Market**

**TWO WEEKENDS LEFT!**  
Handcrafted Gifts, Sold By Their Makers  
International Food Court  
Live Music

Dec 16<sup>th</sup> - 17<sup>th</sup>  
Dec 22<sup>nd</sup> - 24<sup>th</sup>\*!

10 AM - 6 PM  
\*10 AM - 4 PM, Dec 24<sup>th</sup> Only  
**FREE ADMISSION & FREE PARKING**  
Lane Events Center  
13<sup>th</sup> & Jefferson, Eugene  
www.HolidayMarket.org 541-686-8885

3170 West 11th  
M-W 10am-9pm  
Th-Sa 10am-9:45pm  
Su 10am-7pm

**Mary Jane's Pot Shop**  
EUGENE OREGON

**Holiday Specials!**

- FREE** stocking full of presents!  
Starting Dec 20th. No purchase necessary. While supplies last.
- EVERY** purchase enters you in a drawing to win one of 10 awesome prizes!  
Drawing on December 23rd
- 20% off** gift cards over \$50!  
Through December 31st

Do not operate a vehicle or machinery under the influence of this drug. For use only by adults twenty-one years of age and older. Keep out of the reach of children.