Louis Bunce (1907-1983)

Louis Bunce, a major painter and printmaker beginning in the 1930s, is considered a legend in Oregon modernism. Known for variations on Surrealism in the 1930s and 1940s, nature-based adaptations of Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s and 1960s, and geometric compositions related to Minimalism in the 1970s, he created a body of work that resonates with international modernism. He influenced many artists in the Pacific Northwest, including those who studied with him at the Museum Art School (now Pacific Northwest College of Art), where he taught from 1946 to 1972.

Louis Demott Bunce was born in Lander, Wyoming, in 1907 and moved with his family to Portland in 1920. He studied at the Museum Art School in 1925-1926, where he became friends with fellow student William Givler. Both enrolled at the Art Students League in New York; Bunce studied there from 1927 to 1931.

In Oregon, Bunce worked with the Public Works of Art Project in Portland in 1934 and later collaborated on Works Progress Administration (WPA) murals for the St. Johns and Grants Pass post offices, and for Bush Elementary School in Salem. From 1937 to 1939, he was a teacher and then associate director for the WPA's Salem Federal Art Center.

In 1939, Bunce returned to New York and worked as a WPA muralist and easel painter. Living in New York for two extended periods and visiting almost annually for many years thereafter helped him establish links between the art communities in Portland and New York, where he knew Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, and other key figures in American modernism.

During World War II, Bunce worked as illustrator and tool designer for the Oregon Shipbuilding Corporation. In 1946, Givler, by then dean of the Museum Art School, hired him as a faculty member. Bunce and his wife Eda established the Kharouba Gallery in 1949, the first Portland gallery devoted to showcasing experimental avant-garde art by artists working in Portland and farther afield. Bunce’s abstract mural for Portland International Airport created controversy in 1958, when the debate between “modern” and “traditional” artists was at its height in Oregon.

Bunce’s figurative Surrealism of the 1930s and 1940s gave way to complete abstraction in his paintings, drawings, serigraphs, and lithographs of the 1950s, but references to landscape, human figures, or still life are nearly always present in his work in understated ways. The Oregon coast, the Columbia Gorge, and Portland—all were attractive to Bunce, and many of his works involve subtle effects of light, space, and natural textures.

Bunce exhibited in numerous exhibitions in the Pacific Northwest, California, the Midwest, and on the East Coast, including “American Painting Today” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1950), Whitney Museum of American Art annuals (1951, 1953, 1955), and “Art of the Pacific Northwest,” organized by the Smithsonian Institution’s National Collection of Fine Arts (1974). He was long affiliated with the Fountain Gallery of Art in Portland, and his works are in the collections of the Portland Art Museum, Seattle Art Museum, Reed College, Henry Art Gallery (University of Washington), Whitney Museum of American Art, San Francisco Art Institute, and many other public and private collections.

Louis Bunce died in Portland on June 11, 1983, at age seventy-five.

Written by Roger Hull

Further Reading:

Allen, Ginny and Jody Klevit. *Oregon Painters, The First Hundred Years* (1859-1959). Portland: Oregon Historical Society Press, 1999.

Harmon, Kitty. *The Pacific Northwest Landscape: A Painted History.* Seattle: Sasquatch Books, 2001.

Rosenfield, Rachel. *Louis Bunce, A Retrospective.* Catalogue for an exhibition at the Portland Art Museum (Nov. 21-Dec. 30, 1979).

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