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Racine Art Museum Reopens With Hopeful Expectations

BY SHANE MCADAMS AUG. 11, 2020 8:44 A.M.

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COURTESY OF RACINE ART MUSEUM

If one's sense of seasonal chronology wasn't already in shambles due to the current Pandemic, walking into the Racine Art Museum this week to see the annual exhibition of Peeps-inspired artwork that was originally planned to coincide with Easter, will do little to recalibrate any ongoing temporal instability. But given that we're all already irredeemably destabilized, the chance to revisit the hopeful expectations we held before the woes descended, is refreshing...bordering on tasty.

The decision to mount the confectionary show underscores a dilemma around reopening a cultural institution: should it address the unavoidable discontinuity head-on with topical programming, or resume defiantly as if nothing happened? The Racine Art Museum splits it down the middle, presenting us with its show of Peeps candy alongside "From the Heart: Artist as Commentator," an intimate exhibition of work addressing traumas as divergent as the AIDS crisis, as seen in works by Ben Cunningham; racism, through works by Kara Walker and Warrington Colescott; and the Great Depression, represented in photographs by Dorothea Lange. These conceptually bookended shows, and the work sandwiched in-between (including a wonderful show of artists books) are elegant demonstrations of curatorial needle-threading in a turbulent moment.

I happened to be in Los Angeles two weeks before the world ground to a halt in March, and a hard-won ticket inside the Broad Museum on a Sunday morning led to a revelation weeks later that all those Jeff Koonses and monumental Mark Bradfords were mostly tentpoles holding up the sprawling polyester overhang of the art canon. It came to me as sparks of imagination often do in the transition of states of mind and body. This rupture in continuity has provided a great opportunity to reset and reevaluate our relationship to art and its outlets. My visit to RAM allowed me to delight in regional outliers like John Colt, Jean Stamsta, Lillian Elliott, and Gibson Byrd like I might not have in early March.

Knotty, Physical, Sensuous

Colt's pale and washy oil paintings retreat at first, lost somewhere between abstraction and naïve representation. Even upon continued inspection they avoid resolution and easy identification. There may be moths and seed pods lurking in them, but the scumbled organic forms against soupy fields of fading color are finally indeterminate, otherworldly, and totally engrossing. Colt's sunken colors converse dynamically with Elliott's nearby linear-contoured volumetric sculptures and Stamsta's earthy textile works, which spin the

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languages of biomorphic and geometric abstraction into tactile, knotty, and physically sensuous objects. A gallery over, Gibson Byrd's populated interiors land somewhere in-between Fairfield Porter, David Hockney, and a still from a lost John Cassavetes film. Especially "the Apartment Incident" from 1969, which with its bizarre and sour-sweet palette makes you wonder if he had access to rare pigments that have since become unavailable.

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Since our world's institutions began to hesitantly reopen, I personally have visited the Milwaukee Zoo and viewed a Bucks game on television, and they, like the rest of existence, are still only approximations of what they once were. They're not the same...we'll take them, but they're not the same. I've come to say that the current options for distanced and restricted reopened activities are a little like being thirsty for a soft drink and having someone hand you a boutique beverage flavored with herbal flowers and alternative sweeteners. Great on the tongue for a second but leaving an aftertaste. RAM and other art museums that are reopening these days, on the other hand, are unique in that they were always solemn and semi-private experiences; naturally socially distanced, never suffering the possibility for a sugar-free version of their originals. The Racine Art Museum is open again with no compromises other than arrows and suggestions to distance, giving us exactly what we were expecting five months ago: granulated sucrose, marshmallow, Yellow Number 5, and pucker.

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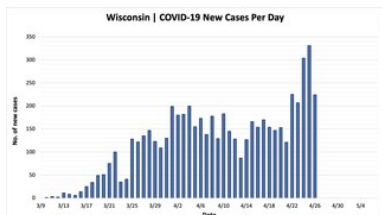


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