

## **Expectations**

By Patterson Jaffurs

As I walked into Santa Clara University's own de Saisset Museum, my mind was awash with expectations. I was unsure what exactly I would find there, but I had an idea that it would be modern art, and was therefore determined not to like it. I must admit that I am not a fan of what some call the "avant-garde" and others "modern art," thus my expectations for the day's art perusal were rather low. I expected total abstraction; I expected abominations of splattered paint, messes of shape and color without form. And yet, while what I found in the de Saisset was certainly modern art, it was of a kind that scattered my expectations to the wind.

Of the exhibits on display at the de Saisset currently, I elected to spend the majority of my time at *Creative in Common* (running through March 15th), a show devoted to the idea of family. Reading a placard just inside the museum, I found all of the information I needed about the show. It displays works from artists connected by some form of familial bond. This notion of family is drawn from blood and marriage, so the exhibit itself is designed to ask the viewer "what does family mean to you?" Ten artists are featured here: Fletcher Benton, Ashlie Benton, Enrique Chagoya, Sam Francis, Shingo Francis, Kara Maria, Harry Powers, Lynn Powers, Andrew Romanoff, and Inez Storer. I had never heard of any of these artists before, so I decided to give them the benefit of the doubt. Uncertain of what I might find within, I took the plunge and entered the gallery.

At first I simply walked, taking it all in, making cursory glances at the unfamiliar art. Mostly paintings, but a few sculptures are scattered around as well. The placards next to each work told me that artists connected by family were placed near each other to better draw comparison. It was modern art, that much was true, but certainly a different kind than what I had seen before. The first painting that drew more than a tentative glance was "The Open (Orange Blue)" by Shingo Francis, painted in acrylic on white canvas. Two horizontal lines of teal frame the center of the painting, with a few inches between them. And then comes the color. Swathes of orange break outwards from the

lines, twisting as they expand ever outwards, intermingled with reds, violets, and greens. As they branch out, more and more blue feeds into the color, bit by bit, suffusing hot color with cool, orange with blue. The colors become fainter too, more like over-wet watercolor, as the orange vanishes and only a few tendrils of clear blue remain. Between the initial lines lies a similar pattern, faint, but seeming to have bled rather than soaked. The two patterns above and below the lines seem to be mirrors of each other, though in fact are closer to echoes, similar, but not identical.

I stand before “The Open,” mesmerized, my mind following the paths of color. I know that it is modern art, for it is not a realist work, but I can see what it shows. In the context of the exhibit, I can see the family in it: families of colors, interwoven, with new colors where they come together. Is this what family is? Disparity joined and made alike, but altogether different? I look for more of Shingo Francis’ paintings, but find only one other. “Teal Green” is disappointingly similar to the other painting, so instead I looked to the *other* Francis, Sam Francis, Shingo’s father. Sam Francis’ paintings are older and thus feature a different style from his son’s. The elder Francis’ works are more like I would expect modern art to be, messy and chaotic, while the younger’s are cleaner, more refined. I find another family pair elsewhere in the room: Harry and Lynn Powers, respective painters of “Curved Time” and “Ajanta Dream.” Again I can piece together the resemblance. Both paintings are acrylic and feature a deep, swirling, almost metallic teal as a main color. But while Harry’s is an abstracted amalgamation of aquamarine and burnished orange, centered around what seems to be the Greek letter *phi*, Lynn’s is all leaves and stems, spaced with gold leaf and copper. The couple share colors and an abstract style, but overall remain distinctly themselves. I walk away from this room knowing that, on some level, I actually liked what I saw.

I enter the second room of the exhibit with significantly more confidence than the first, my apprehension faded into curiosity. From across the gallery I can see a pair of hands outstretched towards me, from a black canvas on the far wall. A placard tells me that this is none other than

Ashlie Benton's "Macrocosm," an encaustic painting in conjunction with oil and gold leaf on a panel. The hands that first grabbed my attention extend outwards, palms up, almost in a gesture of welcoming. Hands and sleeves alike are drawn in eerie white-blue line, highlighting a sharp contrast with the pitch black background. At first it appears simple, yet on further inspection one can see changing patterns flying up the sleeves (diamonds, chains, flames, squares, bands, all of purest white) and lines that remind me of old age marking the hands. Further still, dashed lines of gold leaf dangle from the painting's top and another set connects the fingers of different hands in broad parabolas. Some of the golden lines leap off the edge of the painting, perhaps bonding with other hands, yet unseen. There is something comforting in hands of light reaching out from the abyss, a stark beauty in the contrast. Yet Benton's other paintings lacked this sort of grounded beauty; each was cluttered with words, faces, and drips of paint, seeming more a mess than art to me. Her father, Fletcher, has a sculpture there as well: "Folded Square Alphabet O," a creation of red metal rings and cut squares, contorted into shapes that closely resemble the ordered chaos of his daughter's other works.

Turning away from the Benton family's art, I made my way around the rest of the exhibit and left the de Saisset. *Creative in Common* was not what I expected; it was a family apart from most of the modern art I had seen before: similar in base concept but entirely different in reality. Some of it spoke to me, some of it did not, but I hadn't disliked it. In some of the art I found an anchoring reality in a sea of abstraction that resonated with my tastes; in some of it I found beauty and comfort. I will say this: if you expect modern art to be ugly and formless, *Creative in Common* will shock your expectations to the core.