

metroactive ARTS



# Abstract Memories

**INCOMPLETE RECALL** Like a family's pre-digital photo albums, the scenes captured in 'Abstracts From Life' are blurry and nostalgic.

## New **NUMU** exhibit rounds up Bay Area figurative artists

BY JEFFREY EDALATPOUR

IS IT TOO soon to feel nostalgic for the 20th century? *Abstracts From Life: Bay Area Figurative Past and Present* at New Museum Los Gatos (NUMU) doesn't think so. The exhibit seamlessly joins the past and the present together. But it's easy to mistake the old for the new, and vice versa.

After a couple of turns through the galleries, "Little Edie" Beale's famous *Grey Gardens* quotation makes perfect sense, "It's very

difficult to keep the line between the past and the present."

She's referring to nostalgia—the mysterious feeling that floods your mind with memories, the poignant ones thought lost or temporarily missing, that suddenly return to overlap and interfere with your day-to-day emotions. The era of Bay Area figurative art's heyday, 1950-1965, informs the tone of NUMU's exhibit. The actual date an artist created the painting, though, is less important than the similarly shimmering palettes and human-centered narratives.

The stories on these canvases impact you the way a family's pre-digital photo albums do. The memories are blurred out, like the faces themselves, but you can still

recognize your mother in a miniskirt, or your brother's boyhood profile. It's the lingering influence of abstract expressionism that renders the figures anonymous, allusive or more universal with the messy medium of paint. These snapshots in time capture a particular moment, even if the details are fuzzy and hazed over in our preoccupied brains.

That moment is a caesura, when the world pauses and takes a breath. That's why these associations can occur, because the paintings live there, in an uncomplicated, or, at least, less complicated past. Technology is gloriously and radiantly absent. Alienation might still exist but it's happening outside, without a gadget pressed against the head. *Abstracts From Life* announces the arrival of summer, long days filled with sunny pleasures.

Mitchell Johnson's *The Man with Umbrellas* features a beach scene, with

a Speedo-clad man returning to his towel after a swim. His back is to the viewer, as are three brightly colored umbrellas tilted to angle against the sun. We don't know who he's with or the expression on his face. All we know is what we see and what we remember of being at the beach ourselves. The sunshine on our back, the water drying on the skin, the sand beneath our feet.

Jennifer Pochinski's *The Wonderful Race* takes a bird's-eye view of swimmers in a race. They're all wearing orange caps and spreading their arms out in the dark blue and green water. They are grouped together like a human school of fish or frogs, limbs like fins scrambling inside the motion of the waves. Pochinski's vision is ecstatic. She represents the body moving in unison with others. The race is wonderful because they all have the same taste of the sea in their mouths, the ocean current pulling them all forward with the same goal in mind: buoyancy.

Both Johnson's and Pochinski's works are dated from 2016. The shades of green in *Promenade Under the Trees #90* also give it the appearance of a recent accomplishment. The colors are shiny, almost wet. But James Weeks painted it in 1975. Born in Oakland in 1922, he was a "first-generation" Bay Area figurative artist. The father, mother and son in *Promenade* also have their backs to us, like the figures by Johnson and Pochinski. Are they contentedly holding hands or is this the moment before they had an argument?

Not seeing their faces excites the imagination. The lack of individual features unites the most arresting work in *Abstracts From Life*. In a nod to *Mad Men*, that TV show also steeped in nostalgia, each painting is like a slide from a carousel that lights up its designated place on the wall. The life you project upon them is as peculiar and strange as the one normally held dormant in your mind. When you visit NUMU, prepare for the return of memories, those once forgotten as well as those much longed for.

THRU SEP <b>10</b>	<b>ABSTRACTS FROM LIFE</b>
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