

## Petersen's later work loses enlivening human touch

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Saturday, August 7, 2004

It hurts to see an artist go off the rails soon after he gets rolling. But Hackett-Freedman's survey of Danish-born Northern California painter Roland Petersen's early work tells just such a story.

In several pictures on view made circa 1960, Petersen appears in his stride and confidently in step with the figurative expressionism already practiced hereabouts for several years by older contemporaries such as David Park (1911-1960) and Elmer Bischoff (1916-1990).

"Figure in Landscape" (1960) shows Petersen in full voice, reporting aspects of landscape and light through sure blasts of brushwork and color. Driving strokes from the upper-right corner create a pileup of receding horizons. Changes of direction in brushwork suggest light on water in the middle ground and perpendicular depth as well as recession.

Two impulses of the artist seem to contend in this show. One favors a tight interlock of forms, as in a canvas such as "Trees and Still Life" (1961), that puts the most distant objects and those in the foreground in touch. The other revels in unbound gestures like those that shudder "Figure in Landscape" and "Nude Bather Near Red Water" (1960) into life.

The two impulses collude to good effect most memorably in the small pictures in casein on paper, such as "Artist in Studio" (1959), which perhaps owes something to Larry Rivers' example.

Too often, though, when faced with a large stretch of canvas to fill or of terrain to describe, Petersen worked like a man with too much space on his hands. As in "Picnic With Dotted Bowl" (1960) his touch appears wandering even when it darts.

Petersen resolved the conflict of impulses in his work, especially in large pictures, in favor of a tight, stylized compositional geometry. Meanwhile, his color grew more arbitrary and edgy. The big surprise of the show is in seeing a later picture such as "Tree and Flag" (1970) foreshadow the play with incongruous vanishing points that marks Wayne Thiebaud's landscapes of recent years.

Human figures appear often in Petersen's early work, but nearly always as ciphers. His touch so enlivens paintings such as "Figure in Landscape" and

"Nude Bather Near Red Water" that they seem to shimmer throughout with human pertinence. The later paintings by comparison evoke the brittle reign of a geometer god.

Garrison drawings at Limn: No one can accuse San Francisco artist Sid Garrison of stinting on labor. His abstract drawings, on view at Limn Gallery, can take a month or more to make. He titles each piece by the date of its completion, as if to stop himself from working on it further.

The drawings develop by the accretion of many, many marks in colored pencil: That much we can see. But we cannot read back through the process, or even say with certainty how many layers of marks -- or how many colors -- cover a page.

A shadowy organic form spreads behind -- or is it upon? -- a finely mottled grid of dun, olive and yellow hues in "May 22, 2003." The drawing calls to mind a passage of time-tarnished classical Chinese painting.

In "January 21, 2004," rectangles of different sizes and colors float within a field of irregular dark-on-light-green whorls. Garrison apparently burnished or sanded the rectangles to make them appear woven into the grid that pulses, probably at more than one level, through the piece.

We can never know any artist's work quite the way he does, perhaps not even something as impersonal as a Carl Andre sculpture. But many of Garrison's drawings cause us to wonder whether we could ever know them better over time than at first glance, so tightly has he packed them with graphic information.

Many of them attain two seemingly incompatible extremes: of the objective and the cryptic.

Garrison practices drawing as materialization, which makes the sparest of the drawings on view seem falsely friendly. Then again, they may set more optical matter on the threshold of invisibility, or just over it, than the unpracticed eye can estimate.

The stifling density of Garrison's work can make the eye gasp for emptiness. One leaves the show wondering: What does he do for fun?