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Figuration/Abstraction: Fairfield Porter/Willem de Koonig

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The works of figurative art and abstract expressionism may seem to be eons apart for the average viewer, it was the premise of “Figuration/Abstraction: Fairfield Porter/ Willem de Kooning” to explore, in the words of curator David Leach, “a shared attitude regarding the creation of image making, the collision of realism and abstraction which highlighted a long period of East Coast painting characterized by these two major figures, Leach has seen a love of color and a strong interest in shape” as well as “a love for the fast-moving gestural mark.”

Simplification and search for the essence of his subject matter would seem to have been the prime motivating factor for much of Fairfield Porter’s work. Though part of the New York scene since 1939—when he met de Kooning—Porter remained committed to the expressiveness of the figurative image. This concern was shared by de Kooning who, throughout his career, returned to the human figure as inspiration, albeit in fantastically fractured aspects as attested to in his monumental “Woman” series.

Through the careful placement of adjacent works by these two artists, this exhibit achieved its quiet, didactic purpose. With just the tiniest wind blowing between the two, works of the lesser-known Porter, “Figuration/Abstraction” revealed the freedom of technique overlaying a vital concern for fundamentally common themes found in both artists. The common well of inspiration drew from both the great masters of the past and the pioneering figures of the early 20th century.

Porter’s figures and landscapes included Studies of Men (1939) in which carefully crafted pencil renderings of figurative details in multiple views recall Leonardo da Vinci’s sketchbooks. Also included is his study for Seated Man (Self Portrait), c. 1939, with its shaded modeling and suggested extremities. These are seen beside Porter’s Lizzie the Infant (1956-57) where the mingling light and dark projections of body and leg are surmounted by the head’s poignant eyes and articulated lips. De Kooning’s Acrobat (c. 1942) is the artist as acrobat in cubistic relaxation, momentarily free of the perils of e. e. cummings’ poet as tightrope walker who is cheered on by the crowds only as long as he holds his precarious balance.

The balance between recognizable image and formal composition hovers over the mysterious encounter of human emotion with the textural surface of reality. In de Kooning’s Untitled (Coastline, 1962), where dark and light pencil lines vie in the contrast of a curving coast and hidden houses, the dynamism of these lines is paralleled by the black and white photoportraits of Holocaust survivors, which can be seen even in such bold contrasts as the vibrant flesh pinks and voluptuous red curves of de Kooning’s Woman (1966), and the close-hatched, gentle lines and bright patches of Porter’s Untitled (Seated Woman Reading with Lamp).

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GAMBIER OH

“Portraits of the Holocaust”/Jeffrey Wolin/ Olin Art Gallery/Kenyon College/24 August-1 October

By Daniel P. Younger

Jeffrey Wolin’s black-and-white photographic portraits of Holocaust survivors, which incorporate the handwritten narratives of their subjects, may be understood as a part of an ongoing zeitgeist—an unprecedented and widespread cultural remembering of the horrors of the Nazi “Final Solution.” Wolin’s project embodies the imperative of our historical moment: we recall so that we may never forget.

Preceding the “Portraits of the Holocaust” series and his contacts with Holocaust survivors (primarily in the Indianapolis and Chicago areas), Wolin evolved a technique for writing on his images, alternately with silver or black pen, by means of blocking out broad positive and negative spaces of the photograph. Wolin photographed each of the survivors (some of whom were contacted initially through the Jewish Studies program at Indiana University) at the conclusion of his interviews with them. Many of the artist’s subjects, like Miso Vogel—the only survivor among a family of seven—poignantly and self-referentially display their tattooed prisoner numbers, pic-