

Transcription

In Conversation: Jean Stern and Erin Stout

A virtual conversation about selected works in the Spring – Summer 2021 exhibition, *Radiant Impressions*.

Erin Stout:

Hello everyone. Thanks so much to those who are joining us for this virtual conversation. I am Erin Stout. I am a research and curatorial associate at the University of California, Irvine Institute and Museum of California Art. I am joined of course by Jean Stern, former senior curator of California Impressionism at IMCA and curator of the exhibition *Radiant Impressions*. This afternoon we will be discussing some selected works included in the exhibition *Radiant Impressions*, which we are looking forward to for Spring to Summer 2021. If COVID-19 guidelines prohibit the museum from reopening to the public, a virtual presentation of the exhibition will be available. For more information about the exhibition, you can visit imca.uci.edu.

Thank you so much, Jean, for joining me in this virtual space.

Jean Stern:

It's my pleasure. Thank you for inviting me.

ES:

Of course. I am sure many of our viewers know who you are. But for those who do not, Jean Stern is a nationally recognized authority on California Impressionism. He was the founding and sole director of The Irvine Museum, which was a small California institution collecting the California Impressionist style. Jean Stern has been the recipient of multiple lifetime achievement awards. In 2017, notably, he received the prestigious Chevalier of the Order of Arts and Letters from the French Ministry of Culture. Jean has extensive experience as an author, curator, and lecturer. Welcome, Jean, and thanks so much for being here. It is a true pleasure.

JS:

Thank you, Erin. Thank you.

ES:

I would like to start by framing our conversation in terms of the central premise of the exhibition, which is the role that light plays in conveying a sense of meaning, emotion, and depth of feeling in scenes of everyday life and landscapes. The exhibition is organized around chapters that explore genre scenes that depict people at work and at play, landscapes that convey specific places at particular times of the day, and portraiture. It brings a number of different styles and subjects together in order to consider this larger question about how artists have engaged light—for its optical qualities but also as a constant factor in determining our emotional responses to these images and the meanings we ultimately take away from them. Over the course of our conversation, we will be looking at four paintings from IMCA's permanent collection that represent the content explored in the exhibition's four chapters including an Impressionist landscape by Guy Rose, an interior domestic scene by Elanor Colburn, a subdued portrait of a young woman by Belle Baranceanu, and finally an interior scene by George K. Brandriff that in some ways just defies categorization.

I know from working with you on the exhibition that one of the things you were emphatic about from the very beginning was the importance of Guy Rose as a central figure in the formation of California Impressionism. The image we see on the screen is a painting by Rose that is included in the exhibition titled *Laguna Eucalyptus* and dates to around 1917. It's the earliest of the four works that we'll be talking about today and I think it is a really nice one to begin with. Jean, I know you have probably engaged with this painting dozens upon dozens of times. Would you like to describe the work for folks who are perhaps listening or cannot see the painting?

JS:

I actually saw this painting about 42 years ago. When I was an art dealer it came through my gallery. I went ahead and sold it to a collector and then eventually it worked its way into the museum collection. It's a very California scene because of the eucalyptus. The eucalyptus is of course Australian, and it was brought in by the railroad with the hopes that it would make railroad ties, but the wood was not stable enough for railroad ties. It's a fast-growing plant that takes over wherever it is planted, and it has become a symbol for California art in many ways because it has a very elegant sway, and it is typical of Southern California.

Guy Rose, of course, was one of only two artists in a period called California Impressionism who was actually born in California. He was born in San Gabriel and studied in San Francisco, then went to Paris, studied in Paris in the late 1880s and turned to Impressionism. He was trained as a classical painter. When he does portraits or people in a setting, the skin, the tones of the face, of the hands, are perfect and very much in the French classical tradition. But the background is very likely to be fully Impressionist. It's an interesting combination and again he was trained to do both. He was a first-rate artist. He stayed in Europe for a good part of his life. He lived in Giverny and became a friend of Claude Monet, who was the big artist that lived in Giverny. He returned to California in 1914 and lived the rest of his relatively short life—he died in 1926, but he had a stroke in 1922 and could not paint afterwards. This particular painting is one that was done in Laguna Beach. Laguna Beach was a strong magnet for artists or plein air or outdoor painters because there was beautiful light. A very intense, clear light. It came off the ocean. It created a lot of intense colors which the artists loved, especially the Impressionist-trained or Impressionist-inspired artists who are always looking for color. This, to me, is a wonderful painting. As you come in it, you come in it through a bare area in the landscape that allows you to come in and you confront the trees and work your way up. It is a very inspiring and very spiritual painting, and it goes up to the sky. It's a really unique painting in terms of the power it has and the fact that it was painted very early on in Laguna Beach. Laguna Beach was an artist colony starting in the 1890s, but it didn't organize until 1917 as the Laguna Beach Art Association. He was one of the very early artists that painted there.

ES:

What are some of the key characteristics of California Impressionism, for those who don't know? I know folks are probably familiar with French Impressionism, but what are the distinguishing characteristics of California Impressionism as a regional school?

JS:

Southern California had a year-round Mediterranean climate, which meant that you could paint outdoors for most of the year, but it also had that intense light. Most of the French Impressionists started in Paris, eventually worked down south. Some went to Morocco, some

went to Algeria, but most of them settled in the southern part of France, again, because of the Mediterranean light. They loved to capture light. A lot of French Impressionism is centered on people and the city. Whereas in the California version it is almost all landscape. There was a beautiful undeveloped natural landscape that was perfectly lit, and it was a great attraction for artists. A lot of artists came to California because they were here for an exhibit or just traveling. They may have been portrait painters—many of them were portrait painters—but once they got to California, they became landscape painters. Because the landscape was so beautiful, and it was readily available for most of the year to go out and paint.

ES:

I am curious about how Rose is using color specifically to convey light and atmosphere in the painting. The play of light and color are very closely interrelated. How is Rose using color to convey light? How are the color mixtures, for example, producing the lighting effects that convincingly bring the scene to life?

Before you answer that I am going to zoom in a little bit. We might be able to see a little bit of this effect. These purple-y shadows. These reds and these greens mixed in here.

JS:

The interesting thing about this painting is I have seen, over the years, several versions of it, including the original small sketch, the plein air sketch. This is a 40" x 30" painting so it was done in the studio. But it was done off a series of plein air sketches. The first one was in bright sunlight and it had a completely different feel. The second one was very similar to this—an overcast, more spiritual light. I think the spiritual angle, the soft lighting and the fact that the trees are undulating towards the sky probably convinced Rose to keep this as an overcast and as a little more moody than a bright, sunny, and colorful painting. It is different in many ways because it isn't brightly lit. Most Impressionists would go out and get into that sunshine and paint. But Rose painted a lot of brightly lit paintings, but I think he was very moved by this arrangement of eucalyptus. It is supposed to be in a part of Laguna Beach called top of the hill [Top of the World]. In Laguna Beach there were a lot of eucalyptus planted because when they homesteaded a lot they had to develop it and the easiest way to do it was to just plant some eucalyptus and make it into a eucalyptus forest. You get things like Forest Avenue in downtown Laguna Beach. There's eucalyptus everywhere in Laguna Beach. It became a symbol very much for Laguna Beach and Southern California. Most artists came to Laguna Beach to paint the ocean, the beach, the sunlight, the intensity of the light coming at you from the ocean. If you look towards the hills, the hills absorb most of the light. But if you look towards the ocean, it bounces right back, right into your eyes. You get a real intense light as you were talking about earlier. I think that this is different because he was more into mood, into emotion, and it's a very powerful painting in its own right.

ES:

It really is. And the fact that it is not in landscape, it's in portrait mode. It is almost as if these trees are anthropomorphized. It is almost like a portrait. But a portrait of the California-growing eucalyptus.

JS:

Yes, that's very observant. That's exactly what it seems. It is a portrait of the eucalyptus tree

and it's a very soft and gentle and calm painting.

ES:

The next work we are going to look at is very different. It was painted by Elanor Colburn and it is titled *Bathing Baby*, done in 1930. It is an interior scene depicting a woman bent over a metal bathtub and in the tub is some cool blue water, a small child who is holding what appears to be a toy bunny rabbit. The woman has kind of rolled up the sleeves of her peach tunic and is cupping water in her right hand she is going to presumably rinse the baby with.

JS:

The most interesting part of this painting is that it has two points of view. We are looking at mother washing baby and we are right next to her. We are sitting in a chair watching them do that. But then you notice that thing to the left which looks like an old Volkswagen tail light and that is the soap dish. So we are also looking straight from the ceiling down. We are looking at a pyramidal view of mom's head and then the lines spreading out. There is the point of view of being right next to her on the same level and a point of view of looking down. She created that mostly by tipping that bench she is on and putting the soap dish as if it is glued to the wall or something. This painting is a very good example of what was happening in the 20s, 30s, and 40s, in American art. It had to do with a system of composition called Dynamic Symmetry, where the composition was uniquely formed and dominated by lines and angles and mathematical proportions.

If you look closely at this painting—you have to be right next to it—but you can see pencil lines all over the painting. Every line is drawn from the center, bottom, from the side, middle—lines that interact in every direction. If you see the line of the fireplace screen, it's a very angular line, and it is picked up by that line behind it where the towel is and the top of it what looks almost like a chair. And in the background, that stuffed chair. There are all sorts of angles in this painting. It is pre-composed with mathematical awareness. It is an attempt that was very popular by many artists who did this in the 20s and 30s to create what was a more perfect, more scientific composition. It didn't last long, this idea of doing this because it was very difficult. It also robbed the artist of spontaneity. It had to be done within a certain line and configuration and no, you couldn't just express yourself. You had to follow the line. Interesting painting. It was done in 1930. Ruth Peabody was Elanor Colburn's daughter. The two of them had been artists. Colburn had been trained by William Merritt Chase, so she was developed as a fully Impressionist painter. Then, like most artists, they start to grow. They start to evolve. And they see things coming from Europe and they see things coming from other artists and they get very experimental. They get very inventive. This does not look like her earlier work. It looks quite different. She had a daughter who was also an artist, Ruth Peabody. Both of them were divorced so they decided to live together in Laguna Beach, and they were very active in the Laguna Beach Art Association. They brought a much more modern approach to art than, say, Guy Rose or Edgar Payne or William Wendt. It's special because it was not done for a long time and it is very carefully composed and very restricted. Again, this is the type of thing that artists said, "no this is just too complicated and I'm not gonna do it. I am gonna try something else." When you do come to the exhibit, look carefully and especially at the center bottom. There are all sorts of radiating pencil lines that have not been covered up because they are on the edge of the painting. So, a kind of scientific approach to painting which was rather short in its duration.

ES:

You mentioned that Colburn started out as an Impressionist painter, which I get the sense is much more spontaneous, as you described. Do you think what kind of drove Colburn to make that change was an experimental spirit?

JS:

She was one of several. Perhaps the most famous California artist who did this and did it for a long time was Maynard Dixon. When you look at his landscapes, there are just intersecting long lines and they are very carefully composed. They are not nearly as detailed as this painting would have been. But he was a very important artist, and he was probably the best known of the California artists in terms of national basis, especially in the Southwest. There were a lot of other artists who tried it. It's like in Europe when Georges Seurat developed what we call Pointillism, which was actually Divisionism. It was a scientific approach to color. A lot of artists tried it and said no, it's too complicated, so they just used the paint application called Pointillism whereas the theory, Divisionism, was much too complicated. But they liked the idea of all the little dots. A lot of artists picked up on that. Very few of them actually did what Seurat actually did. And this is the same here. This is an approach to composition which is very, very restrictive, very well defined. And again, it is very time-consuming, and it is restrictive, and the artists just didn't like it. It is a very emotional painting. The colors are soft. The colors are not jarring. They don't confront you. They are comfortable colors, and they portray the meaning of this painting, which is that baby is perfectly safe. Baby is completely loved, completely surrounded. Nothing is going to harm that baby. They are going to have to go through mom and mom looks like she is pretty able to do something about it. The hand, the arm, the head—everything is surrounding this baby. The baby, he or she, is the spotlight of the painting. It is where most of the light is directed.

ES:

It really is. It's the brightest part. It is almost like if you follow that hand, it creates this spiral as if everything . . .

JS:

That's exactly what the composition leads you to. That arm is pointing all around and pointing right at baby. And baby is just safe and comfortable with this little rabbit. It is a motherhood type painting. It is mother's love. But it has been done with a very specific time period and style of art. The fact that you look at it from two points of view. If you look at it from the ceiling—you're looking down at the bench, and at the soap dish and at momma's head. And then if you look at it as if you were sitting next to them, you look at it in a different way. Also, the lines are specifically placed also to protect—they are all around baby too. There are no lines going off into a different direction. There is a spiral there. It ends with baby.

ES:

The next painting—we have another interior scene. This is a portrait depicting a woman who is seated in a chair. She wears a light blue robe decorated with white fans. Her hands are kind of crossed and lay casually on her lap. She gazes what I feel is kind of blankly out at the viewer and there is no real discernable light source. The work feels very muted and there are a lot of gray tones here. It was painted by Belle Baranceanu and it was painted around 1930 and is titled *The Johnson Girl*.

JS:

The subject is Miss Johnson.

ES:

Do we know who the Johnson girl is?

JS:

You know, I don't. I met Belle many, many years ago and we did a show of her work at the gallery I was directing in the 1980s—Peterson Galleries. I didn't ask her that question. My feeling is it's a neighbor person because they know the name and it isn't a model. Not like someone you would hire as a professional model. It looks like it is a casual portrait of an attractive woman, but it isn't someone holding a vase or somebody nude or some kind of a painter's model. So, I think it is a neighbor. Belle was never married. She had no children. Her real name, her birth name, was Belle Goldschlager. That was her father's name. She was a kind of rebellious daughter and she and her father had a terrible fight and she decided to adopt her mother's maiden name, which was Baranceanu. She was rebellious from the first. She studied in Chicago with some of the Modernist painters. Modernists, as opposed to the traditional painters, they look for different things. They look for new things. They play with color and form. They play with angles. They play with light. They want to create a much more emotional painting by using either form or color as opposed to using a directly narrative painting. She was very, very out there. She wanted to do different things and she matured at the Depression. She joined the W.P.A., the Works Progress Administration, and she painted murals. There are two of her murals in Balboa Park. She lived in San Diego. There are two of her murals still there in Balboa Park. Many of these W.P.A. murals have long since been destroyed or covered over. You could go and see them, and they are very much in this same style with a lot of angularity and a lot of soft muted colors.

ES:

I find that her style is very well-defined, that you can really recognize a Belle Baranceanu painting.

JS:

They all grab you. And if you have seen five or six of them, you'll know when you see any of her work because they are very similar in this approach that you see in *The Johnson Girl*.

ES:

I am just going to zoom in so that folks can see that cameo of the artist in the back. For me, I can tell that there is a particular type of light or modeling on the face—you can kind of see it around the cheekbones—that really draws me into that gaze and makes me as a viewer really want to know what the Johnson girl is thinking about. (laughter).

JS:

Thinking about something and it's not about posing for the artist.

ES:

Right, it's a very inward gaze. I just find it to be such an enigmatic painting and then that cameo of the artist hidden back there in the corner really deepens the mystery of this painting for me. I

just love it and I would love to know who the Johnson girl is. If there indeed is some sort of riddle going on here.

JS:

Google knows all, so why don't you just Google it. (laughter)

ES:

Maybe we could just Google it, maybe Google knows. (laughter)

The last painting is equally enigmatic I would say. And maybe also a riddle. And I believe, correct me if I am wrong Jean, but I think that this is maybe one of your favorites.

JS:

Yes, it is. It is one of my favorites. I have known this painting for many, many years. My brother, George, who is also an art dealer, sold this painting years and years ago to a very famous celebrity and it eventually ended up in the Buck collection, which eventually ended up at UCI. I have seen this painting on several occasions. I wish I could take it home.

ES:

You can come see it whenever you want. (laughter)

It is George Brandriff's *Sunday Breakfast*. I will describe it for those who are maybe just listening. It is another interior scene. This time it looks like we are in a small dining room and we are looking at a place setting on a round table. There is a white tablecloth that is bathed in what is presumably morning light coming through a window. There is a small glass of red juice, maybe tomato juice. There is a pair of silver salt and pepper shakers and a setting of silverware. We've got a fork on the left and a knife and two spoons on the right. And then there's a newspaper that is folded over to the comics page that is propped up against what kind of looks like maybe a decanter. The paper is very colorful. And then we, the viewer, are situated in a position of what I would call the breakfaster.

JS:

Yes, we are going to have breakfast soon.

ES:

It looks like the table is sort of set for us.

JS:

It is a Sunday, a day of rest. Supposedly, but an artist never rests. You are right. To me it looks more like the artist's studio because there is a painting faced against the wall and it is kind of a messy place. I don't know, but it could be his dining room or breakfast room. It does put the viewer as the unseen subject of the painting. We are going to have breakfast. We are already getting tomato juice and I assume that we are cooking our breakfast and we are going to come back and put it back in front of us. Brandriff, he was married, so if Mrs. Brandriff was cooking it, I think he might be in the painting. The fact is that it puts the viewer as the subject of the painting, indirect subject of the painting.

There are some very interesting things about Brandriff's background that add to the power of this painting. He was originally a dentist. He was trained at USC as a dentist. He became a dentist, opened up a practice in Hemet, near San Bernardino and Palm Springs. He practiced dentistry and then got interested in art. He began taking lessons in Laguna Beach under a very famous artist named Anna Hills, who is also one of the great teachers. He eventually gave up dentistry and became a full-time artist, which I guess was his first mistake. But anyway. It is very powerful work. He is a very good Impressionist in terms that he paints very quickly and there's some bright colors there. There are some very strong color harmonies. Sometime about his late 30s/early 40s he was diagnosed with cancer. He had a hard time. In 1946 I think it was, he committed suicide because the pain was so strong. He is a very tragic figure in many ways. His paintings are really unique. Again, this artist had a style even though he started out as a dentist. He developed a style. The use of the color is very distinctive. The use of the forms. The way he frames his subjects is also very distinctive. He did a lot of painting en plein air. He lived in Laguna Beach and painted a lot along the coast. He painted at Newport Harbor. His paintings are really marvelous. The last few years of his life he was focused on dying. He produced a lot of paintings of cemeteries, of people in black, of nuns in the cemetery. When I saw his estate, which was a long, long time ago, it was like, gosh, who would want this, and being an art dealer at the time I didn't buy any. It really made an effect on me. It showed that this artist was keenly aware of his life and the brief aspect of his life. Just a remarkable person and also a very, very good artist.

ES:

There is a kind of irony here that this can also be read as a lonely scene. As you mentioned we are not really sure.

JS:

As a viewer you do not have access to the information I just gave you, so you are looking at it directly. You are looking at an image and you are experiencing it and you are feeling the forms and you are feeling the light, you are feeling the colors. To me, there is a bit of a loneliness there because it is only for one person. It is most likely the artist who is making his own breakfast and then looks back and says, oh, I want to paint that. But there is also some disarray in the background. There is a painting turned face in. It looks like there may be a window in the background center, but the light seems to be coming from behind us. There must be a bigger window to the left and behind us because it is casting shadows to the right and to the background. But, again, it is a painting that you really need to feel. You need to look at it and then you need to decide what it means to you; what it is you feel. Maybe it is because I know the story of the artist, but I feel a pretty strong aspect of loneliness here because it is only breakfast for one. And it is in a workplace, to my mind, or a place that isn't really taken care of. It's a little bit of a sloppy area, which to me suggests a studio. These are meant to be experienced by the viewer and the viewer decides what it is. To get the extra input that you and I can give the viewer isn't there from the beginning. It is something that is added on later and they may never get this information. They may just encounter the painting directly and that's really the best way to see it.

ES:

Well, I think this is really a good one to end on. Thank you, again, so much for your insight. Unfortunately, this will have to conclude our program. Jean, as always, it has been a true

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pleasure. We do hope to see you there at *Radiant Impressions*. Don't forget to check imca.uci.edu for updates about exhibitions and museum closures. Thanks again, and we'll see you soon.

JS:

Bye, bye.

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