

Echoes of Perception

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Note to Teachers

UCI Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art (Langson IMCA) aims to be a resource to educators and students by offering school visits, programs, digital tools, and activities designed for grades 3–12 that contribute to the development of strong critical-thinking skills, empathy, and curiosity about art and culture. When students are encouraged to express themselves and take risks in discussing and creating art, they awaken their imaginations and nurture their creative potential. School visits, whether in-person or virtual, offer opportunities for students to develop observation and interpretation skills using visual and sensory information, build knowledge independently and with one another, and cultivate an interest in artistic production.

This Teacher Resource Guide includes essays, artist biographies, strategies for interdisciplinary curriculum integration, discussion questions, methods for teaching with objects, a vocabulary list, and activities for three works in Langson IMCA's collection that are included in the exhibition, *Echoes of Perception: Peter Alexander and California Impressionism*.

About the Exhibition

In 2019, artist Peter Alexander was invited by Langson IMCA Museum Director Kim Kanatani to curate an exhibition of California Impressionism from the Museum's collections. Prior to his death in 2020, Alexander had begun identifying works that he felt exemplified the California Impressionists' profound connection to the light, space, and natural phenomena of California and the similar influence they had on his own work. In honor of Alexander's commitment to the project, a team of curators consisting of Kevin Appel, Julianne Gavino, Kim Kanatani, Curt Klebaum, Claudia Parducci, and Bruce Richards expanded the exhibition into a dialogue between the early modernist painters and Alexander's own work, forming a fluid exchange between generations equally influenced by the atmospheric light of the Golden State.

The passages in this exhibition follow phenomena experienced over the course of a day—from dawn to dusk to the depths of night. Alexander and the featured California Impressionist painters echo one another in their pursuit of capturing, from mountain peaks to ocean floor, the ineffable sensibility of place and space.

Featured Works

Peter Alexander, *Cloverfield I*, 1988, Oil, wax and acrylic on canvas, 72 x 84 in. The Buck Collection at UCI Institute and Museum of California Art, © The Estate of Peter Alexander

Elsie Palmer Payne, *Laguna Coast*, circa 1925, Gouache on paper, 11 x 16 in. The Buck Collection at UCI Institute and Museum of California Art, © DCM Trust/Dewitt C. McCall III

Peter Alexander, *Palolo, Catalina Series #5*, 1984, Mixed-media collage on velvet, 48 x 53 in. Lent from The Estate of Peter Alexander, © The Estate of Peter Alexander

Granville Redmond, *Untitled – Moonlight Marsh Scene*, early 20th century, Oil on canvas, 26 x 43 in. UC Irvine Institute and Museum of California Art, Gift of The Irvine Museum

Peter Alexander, *Blue Black Bar Triptych (12/5,8,12/14)*, 2014, Urethane, 77 x 24 x 1 in. Lent from The Estate of Peter Alexander, © The Estate of Peter Alexander

Hanson Duvall Puthuff, *Mystical Hills*, circa 1922, Oil on canvas, 26 x 34 in. UC Irvine Institute and Museum of California Art, Gift of The Irvine Museum

Learn More

For questions about scheduling a school visit, please contact the Education Department by email at imca@uci.edu or register online at imca.uci.edu.





© The Estate of Peter Alexander

About the Artist

“I like things that glow...”

—Peter Alexander¹

Born in Los Angeles in 1939, Peter Alexander (1939–2020) grew up in Newport Beach, a coastal city in Orange County. What is today a dense and bustling area of the country was then still pastoral, dotted with orange groves and cow pastures. Alexander’s family centered their lives around the area’s natural beauty—the ocean, sunsets, and palm trees. His father sailed and Alexander and his brother swam and surfed. Alexander “internalized” this natural beauty, wrote museum director and curator Naomi Vine: “His work is essentially of and about California.”²

Alexander told several stories from his childhood that he felt captured its essence. He recalled the summer of 1945 when his parents woke him in the middle of the night to watch a large meteor shower “burn and fall” from the sky.³ He also remembered seeing World War II fighter pilots from a nearby air force base conduct practice maneuvers over the ocean near his family’s home. Several times, he observed them crashing into the waves, creating a stark contrast between the bright flames and the deep, dark water.

Even as a child, Alexander was an excellent draftsman and it may have been those drawing skills that led him to study architecture. In 1957, he enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania but soon transferred to school in London where he absorbed mid-century popular culture while being exposed to old master paintings in venerable European art institutions. He said:

“I went to the Prado where I saw Goya and Velazquez, and I was dumbfounded. I didn’t even know what a painting was at the time, but it was one of the most seminal experiences I’ve ever had.”⁴

By 1964, Alexander had decided architecture was not for him. He felt the field required its practitioners to compromise for clients and budgets. Alexander instead enrolled at UCLA in the art program, where he focused on etching and engraving the human figure.

One day while using **resin** to repair a surfboard, he noticed that the material had formed a translucent disc in the bottom of a paper cup.



Peter Alexander, 1942, Newport Beach and Balboa Bay, CA (Balboa Island in the background). © The Estate of Peter Alexander

Fascinated by how it appeared both solid and liquid and how it refracted light, he immediately imagined possibilities for larger sculptural works made of resin. He began to cast the material in wooden molds, making cubes, wedges, and then larger pieces. He experimented with color and added interior bubbles. His first versions were like “little rooms” that one could enter by peering beyond the surface.⁵ His sculptures brought to mind clouds or waves, referencing again his childhood immersed in nature. They were so different from what he had seen in European museums that he felt freed from the old masters’ looming traditions. The lack of mark-making also set his work apart from **Abstract Expressionists**. Instead, Alexander was compared to **Minimalist** artists, such as Donald Judd (1928–1994) and Richard Serra (b. 1939), but the luminous quality of his work was closer to California’s **Light and Space movement**. By the late 1960s, Alexander was making resin bars he hung vertically in groups that seemed to float away from the wall. By 1972, however, he realized that working with the material was poisoning him and he soon abandoned it altogether.

Around the same time, he was also building a house for his family in the Santa Monica hills. At the end of each day of hard work, he watched the sun recede into the horizon. “The sunsets were fabulous,” he said, “but I didn’t know what to do with them. You can’t draw a sunset, it’s too dumb.”⁶ He captured them anyway, in series—first with photographs, then with colored pencils, later with pastels. Unlike working with resin, he could touch the velvety pastels and physically connect with the material.

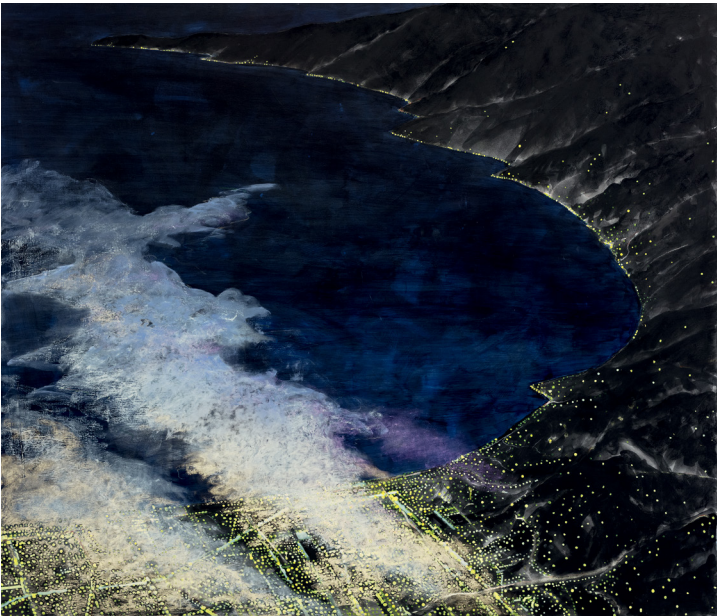
Alexander knew that depicting sunsets was considered **kitsch** by the art world, but rather than bow to art world pressure to focus on “serious” subjects, he dove in deeper. In the mid-1970s, he discovered a love for black velvet—a material that he had only seen used in art sold in Tijuana parking lots. To the velvet, he applied spray paint with homemade stencils, **appliqué**, glitter, sewn collage, and eventually, shiny fabric sequins. His velvet pieces were widely presented, including in an exhibition in Tijuana organized by a curator at Self Help Graphics & Art in Los Angeles, an arts community to which many Chicano artists belong. The velvet pieces were also highly praised, although there was little agreement on where they fit within the art historical canon. Alexander was not the only artist rejecting Minimalism’s simplified forms and pared-down materials or experimenting with so-called decorative or feminine materials. Artists such as Lynda Benglis (b. 1941), Lucas Samaras (b. 1936), and Miriam Schapiro (1923–2015) were also playing with the decorative and the kitsch, though their work varied widely and could not be bound together into one art movement.

Throughout his life, Alexander never stopped experimenting. He mixed together wax and oil pigment to make paintings with his hands. He made paintings of the Los Angeles grid at night inspired by helicopter rides above the city. He painted the chaos of the riots after four Los Angeles police officers were acquitted for beating Rodney King in 1992, based on grainy television coverage. He even revisited resin in the last 15 years of his life when he believed the material had become less toxic. He never fit the mold or a movement easily, but the power and beauty of his works could not be ignored. He never capitulated to trends, theories, or quests for stardom, as Vine argues, and “it requires courage” in the late 20th century “to respond to beauty without irony” and to “honor personal dreams and visions.”⁷ Until his death in 2020, Alexander did exactly that.

About the First Pairing

Peter Alexander
Elsie Palmer Payne

Cloverfield I
Laguna Coast



Peter Alexander, *Cloverfield I*, 1988, Oil, wax and acrylic on canvas, 72 x 84 in. The Buck Collection at UCI Institute and Museum of California Art, © The Estate of Peter Alexander



Elsie Palmer Payne, *Laguna Coast*, circa 1925, Gouache on paper, 11 x 16 in. The Buck Collection at UCI Institute and Museum of California Art, © DCM Trust/Dewitt C. McCall III

About the First Pairing

“What’s magic about it is the metamorphosis, from night to day, with clouds and the lights and the air. It’s so dramatic. Suddenly there’s no Alhambra. There’s no El Monte. There’s no Venice. It’s all the same stuff.”

—Peter Alexander on his helicopter rides above Los Angeles⁸

In both of these paintings, the subject is the California coastline and its archetypal repeating curves. From the cut-out groove of the beach to the undulations of the waves, the artists have rendered the formal shapes and

lines in similar ways. Claudia Parducci, an artist, widow of Peter Alexander (1939–2020) and manager of his estate, explained that her late husband had a “very particular style” and the “squiggly, white water line was a signature mark.”⁹ The mark was possibly associated with his **dysgraphia**, a learning disability that affects a person’s ability to write. People with dysgraphia often struggle with motor skills (a condition known as developmental coordination disorder) and Parducci believes that is connected to Alexander’s tendency to hold his art-making tools in atypical ways. Alexander’s mark is similar to the one that Elsie Palmer Payne (1884–1971) used to depict the water in her landscape.

Yet these two paintings diverge in significant ways. Alexander’s large painting on canvas (approximately 6 ft. by 7 ft.) is based on photographs taken during nighttime flights above Los Angeles in a helicopter. He then combined these photos, made preparatory sketches, and experimented with different horizons and perspectives. Payne’s small painting on paper (approximately 12 in. by 16 in.), on the other hand, was observational, from the ground, and most likely painted *en plein air*.



Elsie Palmer, circa 1905. Elsie Palmer Payne by Jean Stern and Evelyn Payne Hatcher Petersen Galleries, 1990

Payne and her husband, Edgar, settled in Laguna Beach in 1918 where they were founding members of the Laguna Beach Art Association. She exhibited with the organization for over 30 years. She was known for her “solid forms” and an “active, elegant line,” according to curator Jean Stern.¹⁰ This painting, *Laguna Coast* (circa 1920–1929), is made with **gouache**, an opaque form of watercolor, that she used to avoid comparison to her husband’s work, according to Stern. Alexander’s painting is painted with a mix of oil, wax, and acrylic. He first worked with pigment mixed with wax by applying it directly with his hands to the canvas, but in this work he was more conventional. He used a brush.

Alexander’s *Cloverfield I* (1988) is part of his *LAX Series*, which he began in 1987. Each painting in the series depicts Los Angeles’ neighborhoods from a distance at night in large scale with colors ranging from black and white to yellow, purple, and red. “In all of these images,” according to curator Naomi Vine, “the orderly lattice of light is disrupted: the shoreline eats into the regular grid of lighted streets, a cloudy mist obscures part or all of the view.”¹¹ This haze reminds the viewer of the earthquakes, fires, and pollution that haunt this area of the country.

View and Discuss

View and Discuss

Challenge students to observe these paintings by sketching them. Give them two small pieces of paper each and ask them to make contour sketches by following the lines of the paintings with their pencils. They should continue to refer to the paintings as they draw.

Working in pairs, encourage students to share and compare their drawings. What is similar or different about the forms or lines? Referencing the Alexander and Payne paintings, ask them to identify what they emphasized in their sketches. What did they leave out? How do other elements (not captured in the sketches) compare, such as, color, brushstroke, size, and scale? In order to compare size, encourage students to read the dimensions.

Tell students about the differences between the two paintings. Elsie Palmer Payne's is made with a water-based paint called gouache while Peter Alexander's is made with pigment mixed with wax. Payne's is made from observations (*en plein air*) of Laguna Beach whereas Alexander's is based on photographs he took on helicopter rides above Los Angeles. Ask students how they think these differences—as well as the eras in which they were made—influenced how the artists approached similar subject matter.

Artist Claudia Parducci has said that for her husband, Alexander, "It was about how that view felt." "He cared more about the way something felt than about capturing its likeness," she said. "He was dyslexic and put enormous trust in his instinct. He had lots of very well-developed sensory relationships and responses to the world."¹² Ask students to write a list of 10 words for each painting to describe how the view feels. Then collect these words into two lists, one for each painting, and share with the class. How do the lists compare?

Activities

Activities

Drawing and Lines

According to Curt Klebaum, Peter Alexander's longtime studio manager, the painter had a "quiver." "He vibrated," said Klebaum. "He could draw a straight line, but it would still have a vibration in it, a tremor."¹³ Alexander helped select artwork for this exhibition and it may be that kind of vibrating line, used to render the white-capped waves of the ocean, that drew him to Payne's painting.

For this activity, encourage students to explore lines and mark-making. How do they naturally hold their instruments (for example, pencils, pens, etc.)? How do the types of instruments influence the lines they draw? How could they experiment with these instruments or materials to develop a "signature" line? Distribute colored pencils and oil pastels (a favorite material of Alexander's) and ask students to draw a six-inch horizontal line in at least 10 different ways. They might experiment with thickness, straightness, energy, or emotion. After reflecting on the lines as a class, encourage students to pick one type of line and use it to make an entire drawing.

Painting and Environment

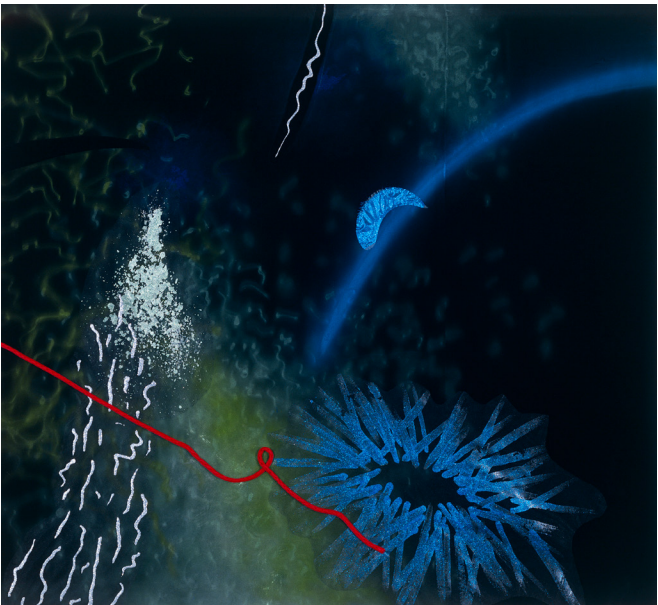
Painted approximately 60 years after Payne's, Alexander's image must reckon with the contemporary environment. As curator Naomi Vine wrote: "Never clearly defined as smoke, smog, or fog, the haze is a disturbing reminder that the Los Angeles Basin, for all its breathtaking beauty, exists in an uneasy truce with earthquakes, brushfires, landslides, and atmospheric conditions that regularly conceal the view and alter the topography."¹⁴ For this activity, encourage students to make a landscape painting that reckons with the environmental issues of today's world. What images, colors, perspectives, lines, materials, methods, and scale can capture or wrestle with these issues?

Photography and Perspective

To make this painting and others in his *LAX Series*, Alexander took helicopter rides above Los Angeles at night and photographed the city from above. He then combined and recombined these photos, experimented with perspective, and made preparatory drawings. For this activity, either provide disposable cameras or ask students to use their smart phones (or a family member's or care giver's smart phones) to photograph one subject from several perspectives. Print the resulting photographs, collage them, and create drawings either by tracing the photographs or drawing freehand. Students can add color with colored pencils or watercolor and marker. Ask them to reflect on what they learned about how different perspectives or points of view can alter our perception of a subject.

About the Second Pairing

Palolo, Catalina Series #5
Untitled – Moonlight Marsh Scene



Peter Alexander, *Palolo, Catalina Series #5*, 1984, Mixed-media collage on velvet, 48 x 53 in. Lent from The Estate of Peter Alexander, © The Estate of Peter Alexander



Granville Redmond, *Untitled – Moonlight Marsh Scene*, early 20th century, Oil on canvas, 26 x 43 in. UC Irvine Institute and Museum of California Art, Gift of The Irvine Museum

About the Second Pairing

“I did it out of arrogance, I did it for all kinds of reasons, I did it with enormous trepidation, without much confidence. I did it because it was so beautiful to me, and I felt there must be some way to overcome the material so it didn’t sound like bad Wagner” [compositions from the 19th century German composer Richard Wagner].

—Peter Alexander, on his use of black velvet as artistic medium¹⁵

In both of these artworks, the glow of light in a nighttime scene takes center stage. In Granville Redmond’s (1871–1935) large oil painting of a mountainous marsh at night, the striking spotlight of the moonbeams illuminates an otherwise dark scene of moody blacks and blues. In



Granville Redmond in his studio, circa 1917. Collection of Paula and Terry Trotter, Trotter Galleries

Peter Alexander's (1939–2020) collage on velvet, creatures of the sea gleam under the surface of a deep black ocean.

Alexander “loved Granville Redmond,” according to his wife and fellow artist Claudia Parducci.¹⁶ “As an artist, he was impressed with what Redmond was able to do with color and paint and the materials he had. He felt he really made something special happen.” Redmond’s **impressionistic** depictions of California’s landscapes ranged from introspective to dramatic, though his most beloved paintings were of fields of poppies bursting with color. The artist preferred his more contemplative moonlit scenes, like this one, but not everyone agreed. “Alas,” Redmond said, “people will not buy them. They all seem to want poppies.”¹⁷ As an artist constantly seeking ways to represent the night, Alexander would have agreed with Redmond. “He would have loved this pairing,” said Parducci.

Alexander’s own search for ways to depict the night led him in the late 1970s to experiment with black velvet. A material associated with kitsch, Alexander had only ever seen it used in art sold in Tijuana parking lots, but he couldn’t resist its visual appeal. He thought, “This is the most beautiful black I’ve ever seen.”¹⁸ According to curator Naomi Vine, the material was especially suited to the subject matter he wanted to depict. “Black velvet absorbs light without refraction or reflection, so it was an ideal material to use to depict the density of night and the enigmatic world beneath the ocean’s surface.”¹⁹ Alexander described a moment of discovery aboard a fishing boat at midnight: “There was no moon, it was pitch dark, and I was up on the top deck looking out into the blackness when they shined a bright light down into the water to attract the squid. The squid moved into the light and

Alexander’s own search for ways to depict the night led him in the late 1970s to experiment with black velvet.

underneath them was a school of glistening pink fish, and deeper still were sharks, who were swimming up to get the squid. The water was phosphorescing, and there were two whales outside the arc of light blowing **phosphorescence** like fireworks. There was so much going on,

and I knew right away what I wanted to do with the velvets, because of the blackness.”²⁰

In his earlier experiments, he had already explored a new process using velvet as canvas. He began by using spray paint and stencils to create the background, then pinned and rearranged shapes cut from other fabric before permanently sewing them to the velvet. Then he added more layers to the collage using shiny fabrics, glitter, sequins, and metallic paint. In the end, the artwork looked like an inky black ocean glowing with phosphorescence and small life forms from the depths of the ocean.

View and Discuss

View and Discuss

Ask students to write down any words or phrases that come to mind when they look at these artworks by Peter Alexander and Granville Redmond. Gather the words or phrases into a shared list for the class. What types of words emerged? Are they related to art elements, process, materials, nature, or emotions?

These two artists worked many years apart. Redmond died four years before Alexander was born. But they are both artists from Southern California with an interest in depicting its beauty and, in this case, its beauty at night. Alexander loved Redmond's paintings and the Impressionist's use of color. Ask students, What do these two depictions of the night have in common? And how are they different?

Alexander's collage was inspired by a dark, black ocean illuminated by a light from a fishing boat to reveal creatures glowing below the surface. Ask students to look again at his collage and talk about what they see now that they have that information.

Then tell students that Alexander's materials are unusual. Instead of painting on paper or canvas, he painted and collaged on stretched black velvet. First, he spray-painted with stencils, then he arranged cut-out fabric pieces and sewed them down, then he applied glitter, sequins, and metallic paint. Ask students how the artist used these materials to depict his subject matter. What materials would they use to depict a nighttime scene and why?

Then tell students that, as a toddler, Redmond contracted scarlet fever and became deaf. The silent film star Charlie Chaplin, his friend and supporter, said of his work, "Sometimes I think that the silence in which he lives has developed in him some sense, some great capacity for happiness in which we others are lacking." Chaplin saw this happiness in his work. Art historian Scott Shields also commented on Redmond's deafness, writing that the artist's introspective moonlit paintings "elicit a quiet calm that has much to do with his contemplative nature, his need for solitude, and, perhaps, the silent world in which he lived." What do students make of these statements? Do they think a person's deafness might affect how they feel about and depict the world? And, if so, how?

Activities

Activities

Nontraditional Materials

Peter Alexander continually challenged ideas about what so-called “fine art” could be. He initially thought he couldn’t make art from black velvet because it would be considered gauche.²³ But he did it anyway. He wanted to “challenge the idea of velvet as kitsch,” according to his studio manager, Curt Klebaum.²⁴ He didn’t even want to use a paintbrush because it was old-fashioned. In fact, even his depiction of sunsets was radical because celebrating natural beauty was looked down upon by the art world.

Ask students to contemplate these stories. What do they think about these separations between so-called “fine art” and traditional craft or “kitsch”? What do they think about the idea that sophisticated art should not celebrate beauty? What, if anything, do these separations have to do with class, race, and gender? Stage a debate in class about how values are placed on certain materials and processes and subject matters in the art world and the problems with doing so.

Collage on Fabric

For this activity, invite students to experiment with Peter Alexander’s process and materials. Provide cloth scraps from old clothes, upholstery, rugs, or anything that can be donated. Ask students to cut out a surface for their collage. Then offer them paint, paintbrushes, and stencils (or materials to make stencils). Encourage them to create a “ground” with these materials. After this layer has dried, offer them scissors to cut fabric pieces, as well as pins, sewing materials, and glue to attach them. Encourage students to arrange and rearrange before they decide on their final collage composition. Finally, offer students glitter, sequins, and metallic paint for a final layer. What kinds of subjects did students depict? Were they entirely abstract or did they reference the real world? How did the materials dictate the subject? How did it feel to use these materials?

Pantomiming

Granville Redmond was not only a painter, he was also an actor. After World War I, when his landscape paintings were not selling, he began to pursue roles in Hollywood. His friend, Charlie Chaplin, cast him in several small roles. Having lived his life with deafness, he had become good at pantomime and his skill was appreciated by those making silent films.

For this activity, students will create their own “silent films” using the artworks as backdrops. First, ask students to think about each of the artworks as a setting and brainstorm a scene prompt for each one, noting each on a slip of paper. Collect the scene prompts and put them in a container. Invite one student at a time to select a prompt and act it out in front of the selected backdrop. Ask other students to guess what the student is acting out. This can also be done with pairs or small groups. Discuss the kinds of stories that can emerge from these artworks.

About the Third Pairing

Blue Black Bar Triptych (12/5,8,12/14)
Mystical Hills

Peter Alexander
Hanson Duvall Puthuff



Peter Alexander, *Blue Black Bar Triptych* (12/5,8,12/14), 2014, Urethane, 77 x 24 x 1 in. Lent from The Estate of Peter Alexander, © The Estate of Peter Alexander



Hanson Duvall Puthuff, *Mystical Hills*, circa 1922, Oil on canvas, 26 x 34 in. UC Irvine Institute and Museum of California Art, Gift of The Irvine Museum

About the Third Pairing

“In those first resin pieces I wanted frozen water, because growing up in Newport Beach, on the beach, the water was always the most magical place for me. This is what enchanted me about Vermeer, the sense that you were voyeuristically in a world that felt as if you were underwater—the absolute silence and emptiness in this very full, frozen atmosphere. So, the resin pieces were surrogates, I guess, but they weren’t surrogates for other art.”

—Peter Alexander²⁵

At first glance, these two artworks do not have much in common. Peter Alexander’s (1939–2020) sculpture, *Blue Black Bar Triptych* (12/5,8,12/14),



Hanson Duvall Puthuff at DeBrabant House. Courtesy of Tracy Conrad

is over six feet tall and made of urethane, a compound most often used as an industrial coating, adhesive, or sealant and is resistant to water, oil, and oxidation. The Hanson Duvall Puthuff (1875–1972) artwork is a more traditional oil painting, depicting a desert in the foreground and sunlit mountains in the background.

But upon closer inspection, these two artworks share essential elements. As Claudia Parducci, an artist and Alexander's wife, commented, "Peter was very interested in the edges of things and the way objects evaporate into atmosphere."²⁶ These pieces are connected by "the way the

atmosphere in the painting makes everything fuzzy around the edges where the mountains meet the sky."²⁷ That same fuzziness around the edges can be seen in Alexander's sculpture.

Puthuff was born in Missouri in the late 1800s and studied at the Chicago Art Institute and University of Denver. He fell in love with the California countryside after he settled in Los Angeles in 1903.²⁸ With an impressionistic painting style and attention to light and color, he painted the La Crescenta area near his home, as well as the Sierra Nevada. The rays and columns of light falling in front of the mountains in this Puthuff painting echo the lines in Alexander's **tripych**.

Both pieces also celebrate beauty. Parducci described Alexander as a "real believer in the senses.... There wasn't any irony in what he did." He loved beauty. His studio manager, Curt Klebaum, agreed. "The *plein air* paintings he looked at were not ironic at all. That's one reason he liked them so much. He respected how they captured what they saw."²⁹

Alexander began making his resin bar sculptures in the late 1960s, after having experimented with making resin cubes and wedges. Different from the earlier works, the bar sculptures were thick, opaque, and intensely saturated with color; Alexander hung them vertically in groups. They tapered to nothing and as they did so, their color faded at the edges

Different from the earlier works, the bar sculptures were thick, opaque, and intensely saturated with color; Alexander hung them vertically in groups.

and blurred. Museum director and curator Naomi Vine called works like this one "almost hallucinatory: after a moment the bars seem to float away from the wall and all sense of depth vanishes. The work generates its own space independent of the laws of physics and even appears to radiate its own light."³⁰

Alexander had to stop making these pieces in 1972 after he became aware that the resin was poisonous. He resumed the series in 2005 substituting polyurethane for resin.

View and Discuss

View and Discuss

Look together at Peter Alexander's sculpture *Blue Black Bar Triptych* (12/5,8,12/14). Ask students what they notice about it. Ask them to observe elements such as color, shape, and material. Ask them to notice its dimensions.

Share with students that according to the artist's wife, Claudia Parducci, Alexander "put a lot of stock in authentic responses to art. It wasn't uncommon for him to ask kids to look at his work. He would ask his son to sit in front of his work and he would say, 'What does it make you feel?'"³¹ Ask students the question Alexander liked to ask: What does this sculpture make you feel?

Tell them that he made this sculpture out of a material called urethane, a chemical compound. One critic said about sculptures like these that the effect was "almost hallucinatory: after a moment the bars seem to float away from the wall and all sense of depth vanishes."³² Other pieces he made of resin and polyurethane reminded people of waves and clouds. Ask students what they are reminded of when they look at this one, and why.

In a statement about what mattered to him most as an artist, Alexander said simply: "I like things that glow..."³³ In five words, try to capture what you think his art is about based on this sculpture. (You can also look at the other artworks of his in this teacher resource guide to answer this question.) Ask students to complete the sentence for themselves: I like things that ____.

Now, compare the Alexander sculpture to the painting by Hanson Duvall Puthuff. Ask students what connections they can see between the two artworks.

Share that Parducci said that each had a fuzziness around the edges. Challenge students to make a drawing that captures this fuzziness around the edges.

Activities

Activities

Dioramas

Before Hanson Duvall Puthuff was a landscape painter he supported himself by painting signs, billboards, museum **dioramas**, theatrical backdrops, and set designs for movies. He even made the backdrops for habitat displays at the Los Angeles Museum of History, Science, and Art and the backgrounds for model displays of the Santa Fe Railroad.³⁴ For this activity, challenge students to make a diorama of their favorite natural setting. A diorama is a model representing a scene with three-dimensional figures. They can start with a box like a shoebox and paint the backdrop. Then they can add figures made out of painted paper cut-outs or polymer clay. Encourage them to think about the foreground, middle ground, and background by studying Puthuff's painting. They also should think about light and color by studying both the Alexander and Puthuff artworks. Share the finished dioramas and discuss which elements of the natural setting the students emphasized. How did their material choices influence how they depicted their settings?

Art Canon

Peter Alexander's resin (and later, polyurethane) sculptures were so different from artwork he had admired in European museums that he felt free to make them however he wanted. They were sometimes compared to art from the Minimalist movement (**Minimalism**) and **California's Light and Space movement**, but they didn't quite fit into either category. Then he began to paint sunsets and collage onto black velvet and was sometimes compared to artists in the **Pattern and Decoration movement**. In general, though, these materials and methods were so far from what most artists were making—and so far from what he had made before—that as Claudia Parducci said, it was a “radical thing he did and he paid for it” by not being taken seriously by the art world.³⁵ For this activity, have students work in small groups to research the art historical movements Alexander was sometimes associated with and make a slide show that presents an argument for how he fit into them (in particular with his resin sculptures, velvet collages, and sunset pastels) and how he did not.

Senses

When Peter Alexander was a small child, he would play with friends in the ocean. He said that he would often go between the rocks of a **jetty** and hide. He spent hours in these hideouts where he would just sit and stare at the ocean. “He absorbed life through his eyes and senses,” said Claudia Parducci, his wife and fellow artist. “He was a real believer in the senses. . . . It was real and important.”³⁶ That belief in the senses and in conveying the beauty of nature was why he loved artists like Puthuff, *en plein air* painters who appreciated beauty in an unironic, earnest way. For this activity, visit a nearby park, site, or even the schoolyard. Ask students to close their eyes and think about what they hear, smell, and feel. When they open their eyes, they can use pastels and pencil to capture what they heard, smelled, and felt. They do not have to draw in a fully realistic way but can use shape, line, texture, and other elements to express what they have perceived through their senses. Model one or two examples. A loud sound that fades can be represented by a dark line that becomes lighter. A smell that wafts by can be represented by a wavy, moving line. Create a “museum” in the classroom by displaying their works. Ask students to respond to the artworks by writing emotional and sensory responses on sticky notes and placing them next to the drawings.

Vocabulary

Vocabulary

(From merriam-webster.com unless otherwise stated)

Abstract Expressionist: an artistic movement of the mid-20th century comprising diverse styles and techniques and emphasizing an artist's liberty to convey attitudes and emotions through nontraditional and often nonrepresentational means

Appliqué: a cutout decoration fastened to a larger piece of material

Diorama: a scenic representation in which sculptured figures and lifelike details are displayed, usually in miniature, so as to blend indistinguishably with a realistic painted background

Dysgraphia: a learning disorder characterized by difficulty constructing meaningful expressive writing as well as weaknesses in spelling and punctuation that affect a student's capacity to express their ideas with clarity (from Dyslexia – SPELD Foundation <https://dsf.net.au/learning-difficulties/dysgraphia/what-is-dysgraphia>)

En plein air: from the French, of or relating to painting outdoors

Gouache: a method of painting with opaque watercolors

Impressionistic: of, or relating to, Impressionism, or a theory or practice in painting, especially among French painters of about 1870, of depicting the natural appearances of objects by means of dabs or strokes of primary unmixed colors in order to simulate actual reflected light

Jetty: a structure extended into a sea, lake, or river to influence the current or tide or to protect a harbor

Kitsch: something that appeals to popular or lowbrow taste and is often of poor quality

Light and Space movement (from *brittanica.com*): a variety of West Coast Minimalist (<https://brittanica.com/art/Minimalism>) art that was concerned with the visual impact of light on geometric forms and on the viewer's sensory experience of the work

Minimalism: a style or technique (as in music, literature, or design) that is characterized by extreme sparseness and simplicity

Pattern and Decoration movement (from *The New York Times*): an art movement in the mid-1970s that favored patterns appropriated from a global array of textiles, ceramics, and architecture, but also from previously disregarded Americana like quilting, embroidery, and cake decoration

Phosphorescence: luminescence that is caused by the absorption of radiations (such as light or electrons) and continues for a noticeable time after these radiations have stopped

Resin: any of a large class of synthetic products that have some of the physical properties of natural resins (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/resins>), but are different chemically and are used chiefly in plastics

Triptych: something composed or presented in three parts or sections

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- 2 Vine, Naomi. "Challenging Beauty." *Peter Alexander: In This Light*, Hudson Hills Press, 1999, p. 10.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid., p. 11.
- 5 "Peter Alexander: The Color of Light." *YouTube*, uploaded by Getty Conservation Institute, 26 Feb. 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=DDvVI9mNXNQ
- 6 Vine, Naomi. "Challenging Beauty." *Peter Alexander: In This Light*, Hudson Hills Press, 1999, p. 16.
- 7 Ibid., p. 30.
- 8 Hickey, Dave. "Coping with Paradise." *Peter Alexander: In This Light*, Hudson Hills Press, 1999, p. 36.
- 9 Parducci, Claudia and Curt Klebaum. Personal interview. 3 June 2022.
- 10 Stern, Jean. "Elsie Palmer Payne: 1884–971." *Laguna Plein Air Painters Association*, <https://lpapa.org/elsie-palmer-payne/>. Accessed 20 June 2022.
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- 17 Shields, Scott A. "Granville Redmond: The Eloquent Palette." *Crocker Art Museum*, 8 Jan. 2020, www.crockerart.org/oculus/granville-redmond-the-eloquent-palette
- 18 Vine, Naomi. "Challenging Beauty," p. 17.
- 19 Ibid, p. 19.
- 20 Ibid, p. 19.
- 21 Shields, Scott A. "Granville Redmond: The Eloquent Palette." *Crocker Art Museum*, 8 Jan. 2020, www.crockerart.org/oculus/granville-redmond-the-eloquent-palette
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- 23 Vine, Naomi. "Challenging Beauty." *Peter Alexander: In This Light*, Hudson Hills Press, 1999, p. 17.
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- 25 Hickey, Dave. "Coping with Paradise." *Peter Alexander: In This Light*, Hudson Hills Press, 1999, p. 36.
- 26 Parducci, Claudia and Curt Klebaum. Personal interview. 3 June 2022.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 "Hanson Puthuff." *Los Angeles County Museum of Art*, <https://collections.lacma.org/node/166744>. Accessed 20 June 2022.
- 29 Parducci, Claudia and Curt Klebaum. Personal interview. 3 June 2022.
- 30 Vine, Naomi. "Challenging Beauty." *Peter Alexander: In This Light*, Hudson Hills Press, 1999, p. 14.
- 31 Parducci, Claudia and Curt Klebaum. Personal interview. 3 June 2022.
- 32 Vine, Naomi. "Challenging Beauty." *Peter Alexander: In This Light*, Hudson Hills Press, 1999, p. 14.
- 33 "Artist Bios." *Mary Heebner Gallery*. <https://www.maryheebner.com/aboutmary/exhibitions/LAX-AGLArtistBios.pdf>. Accessed 20 June 2022.
- 34 "Hanson Puthuff." *Los Angeles County Museum of Art*, <https://collections.lacma.org/node/166744>. Accessed 20 June 2022.
- 35 Parducci, Claudia and Curt Klebaum. Personal interview. 3 June 2022.
- 36 Ibid.