

Birds of a Feather—The Miami School

By Bruce Helander

Nearly a decade ago, I discovered a solo exhibition of works by J. Steven Manolis at the celebrated Paul Fisher Gallery in West Palm Beach. I immediately was struck by his vivid, innovative constructivist paintings as well as his quest for creative perfection. I learned that he had wanted to be a painter early in life and had studied with the great colorist Wolf Kahn. Five years later, Manolis was invited to exhibit in a solo show at the Coral Springs Museum of Art, where he was discovered by legendary art critic Donald Kuspit and British writer Anthony Haden-Guest, both of whom wrote enthusiastically about his work. Years later, based on the positive response for his art and community encouragement, he founded Manolis Projects, his eponymous gallery. My chance encounter with the artist developed into an exciting, long-term professional relationship and coincided with the launch of Manolis Projects, where later I served as a guest curator for many of his exhibitions. I also continued to write about his work as well as the innovative emerging artists that Manolis was able to discover, assemble and showcase. As the gallery's reputation grew, a synergy of styles and hues by South Florida artists began to materialize, which evolved into the Miami School of painting. Like the evolution of the Hudson River School, led by Thomas Cole and Frederic Church, which had noticeable evidence of aesthetic character and common compositional elements, which often included romantic scenes, waterfalls and mountains accented by cloud formations. This historic "school" was a mid-19th century American movement embodied by a distinguished group of landscape painters where their collective vision was influenced by Romanticism. Like the Miami School that accented its graphic personality with dramatic light and tropical pastel colors, the Hudson River Valley and its surroundings became a common denominator of recognizable style and interpretation.

Manolis currently showcases some of the best innovative talents in South Florida and his openings are among the most exciting and well attended in Greater Miami. Now that the term Miami School has become known and compared with other accepted "schools" of art, the first formal group exhibition of Miami School participants is currently being curated and will soon be widely known as an established style which will be quite evident in the upcoming inaugural exhibition.

The phrase "birds of a feather flock together" has been used for centuries to describe the personification of similar interests often connected to a group that maintains a professional common denominator: a special interest, a source of inspiration, demographic, or inventive connection. This term is especially appropriate in the world of art where shared pursuits are a natural magnet for gathering diverse talents that strengthen a certain sense of camaraderie. A school of fish, for example, travels together for safety and social reasons that unify and reinforce their graceful movements and positions. A school of Miami dolphins, for example, are perhaps the most identified as a highly intelligent ensemble that stays together for enjoyment and security.

The School of Paris refers to the French and emigre artists who worked in the City of Lights in the first half of the 20th century and denotes the importance of Paris as a center of Western art in

the early decades of the 20th century where Post-Impressionism, Cubism and Fauvism took root with artists such as Pablo Picasso, Marc Chagall and Piet Mondrian. The arrival of the railroad in 1873 made Provincetown, Massachusetts accessible to tourists and artists attracted by the incredible light and colorful landscape. Painters could stay in inexpensive boarding houses and rent studios for \$50 per year! The Provincetown School was a loose-knit collection of young artists who shared a love for invention and innovation, with Mark Rothko, Franz Kline, Helen Frankenthaler and her husband Robert Motherwell providing historic artistic contributions that were strengthened by a sense of community and the atmosphere at the very isolated tip of Cape Cod. I had the true pleasure of directing for several summers Provincetown's Fine Arts Work Center, a former lumberyard on Pearl Street that initially was founded by Hans Hofmann in 1935.

The Black Mountain School was a private liberal arts college in Black Mountain, North Carolina. It was founded in 1933 by John Andrew Rice and was organized around an educational philosophy that emphasized holistic learning and the study of art as central to a liberal arts education in a private green backdrop. Many of the college's faculty and students would go on to become highly influential in the arts, including Josef and Anni Albers, Walter Gropius, Ray Johnson, Dorothea Rockburne, Cy Twombly, Robert Rauschenberg and Willem and Elaine de Kooning. The school closed in 1957 after twenty-four years, but its exceptional history and legacy are preserved and extended by the Black Mountain College Museum located in downtown Asheville.

Key West also shares a commonality as an early academic art group that purposely gathered at the southernmost point of the Florida Keys and included Winslow Homer, John James Audubon, and writers Tennessee Williams and Ernest Hemingway. Many of these artists later became ad hoc members of the New York School of Abstract Expressionism.

In addition to the east coast, the "Golden State" produced the California School of Artists, which was a disparate crew of artists attracted by the coastal landscape's rare light and open spaces. Richard Diebenkorn, Wayne Thiebaud, Edward Ruscha, John Baldessari and Mary Chase are all world-renowned artists that are associated with the Los Angeles School.

Miami, which has become the third most important city for contemporary art and hosts the mighty Art Basel, follows the notable precedents of other historic communities that support a certain discernable vision and narrative that has become known as the Miami School. J. Steven Manolis, pioneering artist and art dealer whose expansive exhibition space in the Little Haiti community of Miami has brought together a distinguished assembly of talented artists. These individuals, who often have been motivated by the astonishing, vibrant sky, transparent water and tropical vegetation of their city, have formed a band of creative talents that continues to enliven the metropolitan art scene with a universal theme of vivid, dashing picture-making that has a strong attraction to this environment and the dynamic energy that propels originality. In the last five years, this set of painters gradually has formed an independent and perceptible style of art-making that is strongly influenced, as with other art centers, by its singular South Florida location and has evolved with a discernable technique that subliminally is affected by the remarkable light, inherent attractiveness and reflections of the surrounding coastal atmosphere.

In the latter half of the 1950s, Washington D.C. experienced a flourishing of abstract art that emphasized the form-making capabilities of pure color. Known as the Washington Color School, the loosely affiliated group of young painters involved came to national prominence with a thematic breakthrough exhibition at the Washington Gallery of Modern Art that included works by Kenneth Noland, Morris Louis, Anne Truitt, Howard Mehring, Alma Thomas, Hilda Thorpe, Gene Davis (best known for his blocks-long multi-colored streetscapes painted directly on the boulevard outside the museum) and the late, eminent colorist Sam Gilliam. Utilizing innovative techniques and spontaneity that expanded on Abstract Expressionist minimal experiments with color and paint applications, the D.C. color school evoked dynamism and linear tension. The fraternity of artists embraced the larger trend of color field painting into a modernist context.

Founding artists of the Miami School include:

Jill Krutick, who interprets the environment with inventive fusions of hues from nature and organic shapes, takes a cue from the tropical paradise of Dade County in an abstract expressionist context. “Coral Beliefs,” her current exhibition of Miami School abstract paintings, is on view at the Pyramid Hill Sculpture Park & Museum, Hamilton, Ohio, which follows other notable solo exhibitions at the Yellowstone Museum of Art, Billings, Montana; Coral Springs Museum of Art; The Longwood Center for the Visual Arts, Farmville, Virginia; and the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. She also exhibited a series of Miami-inspired paintings at the Art Miami Aqua art fair during Art Basel Miami Week.

Florida Artists Hall of Famer, Bruce Helander, has exhibited his work with Manolis Projects since 2018. Helander blends commercial imagery such as vintage highway billboard materials, historic photographs, Florida promotional brochures and antique travel posters into often humorous compositions. As a collage artist his work is in over fifty permanent museum collections around the world including the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Whitney Museum of American Art and The Metropolitan Museum of Art. He has had numerous museum solo shows in South Florida, including at the Norton Museum of Art, Boca Raton Museum and NSU Art Museum, Fort Lauderdale. As a writer his most recent books are on Hunt Slonem and Dale Chihuly (Abrams, Inc.).

Maite Nobo is a Coral Cables-based artist who produces brilliant, mystically minimalistic compositions of serene multiple layers of harmonious hand-blended color applications that inherently possess a magical magnetism. Nobo’s works also have a mesmerizing contemplative surface that invites the viewer to join in a magical visual dialogue. Born to an aristocratic Havana family, her father, who was an architect and builder, taught the young artist the basics of construction, which are evident in her many-layered non-narrative works. These paintings also contain an enigmatic concoction of disciplined pouring and aggressive refinishing until the completed smooth surfaces present a nearly impossible spirituality that glows.

Ron Burkhardt is a mixed message artist who communicates with the viewer in often coded geometric language by aggressively abstracting letter forms that are often an initial puzzle to be deciphered. He also experiments with language and phrases that he pulls from a weekly folded notepad of appointments and reminders into works labeled “Noteism.” His large-scale

“letterscape,” which was formed by sharp edge geometric alphabet forms cleverly spelling out MIAMI, was displayed recently at Manolis Projects in a show attended by the Mayor of Miami and several hundred local collectors.

Timi Ogundipe, who was born in Boston and of Nigerian descent, is an artist based in West Palm Beach who incorporates a meditative and repetitive circular design format that often appropriates the bright colors of the South Florida landscape. In many examples, Ogundipe often portrays a delightful arrangement of multiple circular shapes that may suggest bubbles rising from an underground spring that also adds an ambulatory element reminiscent of Miami’s jazz age during the art deco period. The repetitive spheres build an integrated pattern where lighter forms seem to sink to the bottom while the larger forms float to the surface.

Carol Calicchio, who maintains a spacious studio in Delray Beach near the ocean, paints engaging expressionist depictions of abstracted flowers that reveal bouquets of bright blooming compositions that seem to float in an out of the picture plane. Calicchio takes a prompt from the vast array of flora in South Florida, where tropical blooms offer imaginative encouragement and a unique goal to paint an explosion of natural color that is artistically balanced between realism and abstraction.

Annemarie Ryan, who resides in Georgetown, Washington D.C., has a penchant for painting melodic twists and turns as if a ribbon was pulled through the air, changing direction and velocity. Ryan’s innate ability to generate a meandering fluidity from solid forms is perhaps the most memorable trait of this dynamic artist. Some of her works, such as “Anemone,” show an extraordinary perspective on elevating a simple meandering line into a full-bodied undulating silhouette that also seems to honor modern masters such as Morris Louis and Helen Frankenthaler and Christopher Wool’s spray-painted abstractions. Ryan seems to possess an intrinsic aptitude for crafting a complicated composition with an uncomplicated number of lines.

Margert Neill, who lives and works in Brooklyn (now considered the heart of the New York artist community), combines an eccentric amalgam of paint applications that often appear to be washed, scrubbed, sanded and repainted. Neill is blessed with a gift that marries a sharp sense of simple gestures with a complex bag of inventive visual tools that differentiates her art with an individual quality of innate balance and proportion.

Alejandro Avakian, born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, has developed a new graphic language of painted abstract lines on white backgrounds that construct their own vocabulary through undecipherable calligraphic marks that, although spartan in their application, seem to fill up the canvas surface with meandering squiggles and odd ball symbols that one might find in an ancient cave. Henri Matisse, Paul Klee and Grace Hartigan come to mind as incentive for these appealing configurations that are a challenge to translate and a pleasure to read.

Camilla Webster, who resides in Manalapan and Islamorada (where former artist residents include Jules Olitski and Larry Poons), is an abstract painter/storyteller whose working “script” is laid down on gessoed canvas. Webster also enjoyed a successful career as a professional correspondent, CBS reporter and journalist for Time and Life magazines as well being a former moderator for the television show “60 minutes.” This unusual artistic hybrid of talents has

yielded glowing reviews as well as museum retrospectives and gallery exhibitions on the east coast. Often, Webster will dare herself to define and recreate a moment in time, which often presents as an early morning sunrise or sunset requiring split second decisions to paint before the horizon disappears. Webster stirs up a magical stew that adds art history, literature and pictorial poetry into her mix with a message accented by the air, water and sky of South Florida.

Ursula Schwartz is an emerging artist with a particular abstract expression style combined with a color-field sensibility. Many of her works are reminiscent of early abstractions by Philip Guston and Helen Frankenthaler. Her fusions of pastel-colored washes with powerful underpainting are an impressive achievement and are certainly appropriate for the Miami School fraternity of artists. For example, her 2023 oil painting “Lotus (3)” is a charming composition that keeps your eye on the move during an enjoyable journey of discovery.

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