

Cultural Daily

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Rediscovering David Park, Bay Area Realist

Stephen West · Wednesday, November 18th, 2020

One of the best things museums do is to introduce you to an interesting or important artist you've never heard of, or just barely, through a full-scale presentation of a life's work.

That's what the [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art](#) has done with *David Park: A Retrospective*, documenting the evolution of Park's paintings and drawings in more than 125 examples. It starts with his early works in the 1930s, which remind you of social realist WPA murals and Picasso's neoclassical phase, then moves into his attempt at Abstract Expressionism in the 1940s. In about 1950, Park unexpectedly shifted back to realism, becoming a founding member of what's known as the Bay Area Figurative Movement.

Park (1911-1960) grew up in Boston, trained briefly in the classical style at art schools in Los Angeles and San Francisco, and became a painter and art teacher living in Berkeley while still in his 20s. He worked at times on public murals and other New Deal era government-funded projects, but mostly he focused on pictures of contemporary people in their environments.



David Park, *Mother and Child*, 1935, oil on canvas; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, bequest of Lydia Park Moore and Roy Moore; © Estate of David Park; photo: Katherine du Tiel.

Mother and Child of 1935 is one such early work, showing a young blond woman dressed in a blue sweater and skirt who sits in a wooden chair and stares off in space while her naked baby daughter reaches up to her mother's impassive face. The chunky figures and slightly Cubist rendering of the room remind you of Picasso as well as the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, who was working in San Francisco at the time and was another influence on Park. It's a Madonna and Child for the Depression era.

By the late 1930s, Park had married Lydia Newell and returned to Massachusetts. There he completed some impressive works such as *Self-Portrait Painting His Wife* of 1937, which crams Park, his artist's palette, Lydia, and his picture of Lydia all in a tight frame.

In the early 1940s, though, he eventually embraced Abstract Expressionism, the dominant style of "serious" artists at the time. The handful of works in the exhibition from this period show influences ranging from Picasso to Klee to Miro. As the work gets more abstract, the paint becomes more important. It's thicker, more gestural. Yet for Park it was a dead end.

By 1950, back in California, he shifted back again to realism, shocking his circle of artist friends

including Richard Diebenkorn and Elmer Bischoff (who later switched to figurative art themselves, at least for a while, and joined Park in weekly drawing sessions with live models to sharpen their skills).



David Park, *Kids on Bikes*, 1950, oil on canvas; Myron Kunin Collection; © Estate of David Park, courtesy Natalie Park Schutz, Helen Park Bigelow, and Hackett Mill, San Francisco.

One of Park's first works in the new style was *Kids on Bikes* of 1950. Filling the left side of the picture is a tightly cropped, close-up image of a boy in a striped T-shirt holding his bicycle handlebars. On the right, another boy in a white shirt rides away in the distance. The juxtaposition of the two creates a deep visual space, not the typically flat surface of abstraction.



David Park, *Brush and Comb*, 1956, oil on canvas; collection of Gretchen and John Berggruen; © Estate of David Park, courtesy Natalie Park Schutz, Helen Park Bigelow, and Hackett Mill, San Francisco.

While most of Park's later works focus on people — alone, in pairs, in groups, often nude — he also produced some striking still life studies. *Brush and Comb* of 1956, for example, depicts the two ordinary objects sitting on a wooden bureau or tabletop. The image is loosely painted, like late Impressionism, and the colors in the brush's bristles range from whites and yellows to dark reds and browns and blues. The dark wood below is also richly painted, and the entire painting almost seems to glow.



David Park, *Standing Couple*, 1958, oil on canvas; Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois on behalf of its Krannert Art Museum, museum purchase through the Festival of Arts Purchase Fund, Provost's Fund, and education grants; © Estate of David Park, courtesy Natalie Park Schutz, Helen Park Bigelow, and Hackett Mill, San Francisco.

By late in the decade, Park had evolved a mature style in his pictures of people, one that was radically simplified and increasingly somber. *Standing Couple* of 1958 shows a man and woman in bathing suits, staring straight at the viewer, both holding their left arms behind their backs as if they're fashion models. The colors are mostly limited to blues and grays and blacks against tan flesh, with dark blobs for eyes and a couple of vertical strokes of paint for noses. The background is a blue-green mist of broad, expressionistic brushstrokes.

Park was diagnosed with cancer in 1960 but continued to work until the end. In his final pictures, when he could no longer stand upright, he painted from a sort of lounge chair using water-based gouache on paper, rather than oil on canvas. In *Crowd of Seven* of 1960 (top image), he shows a group of men facing the viewer — or the artist — captured in a few strokes of dark colors and white highlights. It's a powerful image, and it's hard not to see them as angels of death come to visit.

David Park: A Retrospective runs through January 18 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 Third Street, San Francisco. Timed tickets are required, and all visitors must wear masks and observe social distancing. For more information, click [here](#). An extensive catalog is published by University of California Press.

(Top image: David Park, Crowd of Seven, 1960, gouache on paper; private collection; © Estate of David Park; courtesy Natalie Park Schutz, Helen Park Bigelow, and Hackett Mill, San Francisco; photo: JKA Photography.)

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