

Title - *Palm Canyon (Lyric Landscape)*, 1968

Artist - Edward Biberman

American, 1904-1986

Oil on Masonite

Gift of the Estate of Genevieve U. Gilmore;

Courtesy of Mrs. Martha Parfet, Mrs. Carol Boudeman and

Mrs. Jane Vojnovich

Spotlight Paper - Josie Gomez, 2019

Artist's Background Information:

Edward Biberman was born in Philadelphia on October 23, 1904. He died in 1986 at the age of 81 in the Hollywood Hills home he shared with his wife Sonja. Biberman was born to Jewish immigrant parents from Russia. His father, Joseph, left his homeland at the age of 18 to come to the United States seeking the "American Dream". By the time he was 30 years old Edward's father was a very successful businessman. Edward was the youngest of three children. He was 16 years old when he graduated from high school. He received a scholarship to the University of Pennsylvania and graduated at the age of 19 with a degree of Bachelor of Science in Economics. In 1924 at the age of 20 he enrolled as a full-time student at the Academy of Fine Arts in Pennsylvania. Edward was now fully committed to a life in art. Edward's father resigned himself to the fact that his youngest son would not take over the family business. In June of 1926 after graduating from the Fine Arts Academy he sailed to Europe, living in Paris from 1926-29 where he met many artists and writers. While he enjoyed his time in Europe he realized he wanted to return to America. His career as an artist was launched with an exhibition in Paris in 1927. (1)

In 1929 Biberman decided to return to New York not to Philadelphia. He planned to spend the summers of 1930 and '31 visiting the western part of the country. He was interested in seeing the indigenous people in their natural surroundings. He spent the summer in Taos, New Mexico painting alongside Georgia O'Keeffe. He fell in love with California while visiting friends there. By now his older brother Herbert was living in Hollywood and working in the film industry. Biberman visited his brother in 1935 and had his first exhibition in California at Stendhal Galleries on Wiltshire Blvd. In 1936 he left New York for good and moved to Los Angeles where he lived and painted for the next 50 years until his death in 1986. He found the slower pace in Southern California much to his liking.

While living in New York in the 1930's he met the three Mexican muralists; Orozco, Rivera and Siqueiros. (1) He observed them working on murals and learned their techniques. He began to design murals in open competitions with other artists from 1937-41. Some of the

mural designs were never realized for one reason or another. Some murals were investigated for “subversive content” during the “McCarthy Era” in the 1950’s. The murals were decreed free of leftist infiltration. (3)

Biberman’s work ranged from stylized portraits, landscapes, history-inspired murals, current events such as the Great Depression, WWII, issues of race and social inequality. In Los Angeles he became an essential part of the mid-century art scene. He left his mark as a California Modernist Painter even though he was not born here. (3) From 1938-1950 he taught art at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. He lectured on Art History for UCLA Extension. From 1968-70 he was the host for “Dialogues in Art” produced by KNBC TV- Los Angeles. The Palm Springs Desert Museum featured 60 pieces of his works in a retrospective exhibit in 1971. (6) He also did a series of Art History lectures for the PSDM around the same time period. His career never recovered once his politically charged paintings fell out of favor. He continued to paint, teach, and write until his death.

Over the course of his career his works were exhibited at more than 35 solo exhibitions in Philadelphia, New York, Boston, Chicago, Paris, Berlin and California. His paintings are found in the permanent collections of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas. In 1947 he painted a life-size portrait of Lena Horne, singer and actress that forms part of the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery.

Art Movement:

Biberman was not influenced or affected by vogues or trends in the art world. He pursued his highly individualistic style of painting. As a 19 year old living and painting in Paris in the 1920s he quickly decided that Cubism and Abstraction were not for him. (1) He embraced realism in his paintings even as abstract art became dominant in the art world. His work brings together various degrees of Modernism which we can observe in his paintings, especially in the landscape, *Palm Canyon, (Lyric Landscape)*, 1968. Biberman said in 1978, “*I would love to transcend the limits of this planet and find out about the cosmos. If that quality comes through in my paintings, I’m delighted*”. (5)

Analysis and interpretation:

The title of this painting was carefully chosen by Biberman. He was fascinated by the lyricism of nature and thought of himself as a lyric painter. Lyricism as applied to the visual arts means elusive, suggestive, and subtle. This painting represents Biberman's interpretation of Palm Canyon, Palm Springs, California. Palm Canyon, a fault created ravine, is 16 miles long and separates the Santa Rosa from the San Jacinto Mountains. It is believed that approximately 10,000 years ago the desert fan palm (*Washingtonia filifera*) arrived in the Southwest from the Baja Peninsula. Palm Canyon is the largest fan palm oasis in the world. About 3000 palm trees follow the line of the San Jacinto Fault for approximately 8 miles. (2) The Cahuilla Indians established villages in and around the canyons about 5000 years ago and remained there until the 1890s. Today one can hike the entire length of the canyon following in the ancient footsteps of the original inhabitants.

I found no recorded details of the artist's working methods. I have no way of knowing if he visited the canyon on more than one occasion and painted what he saw at different times of the day or if he worked from photographs in his studio. This painting is part of the *Lines in the Sand* exhibit in the McCarthy Gallery which focuses on landscapes and artists associated with the Light and Space Movement that flourished in Los Angeles during the 1960's. These artists were interested in the desert's brilliant light and atmospheric conditions.

Modernist sensibility is evident in the simplification and reduction of forms and the emphasis on color and mood. Biberman was interested in the structure and architecture of what he painted. He felt that every form occupied its appointed space in his compositions. He sets out to evoke a mood, rather than a likeness. He eliminates all of the nonessential details.

A close examination of the painting reveals a masterly application of paint. The limited color palette captures the essence of the desert and the idea that light and color are the real basis for representation. Interwoven ribbons of brilliant blue sky are seen through the palm trees and illuminate the foreground of the painting. A sense of endless sunshine, space,

solitude, silence, infinite distance, and opportunity await. He invites the viewer to travel into the canyon.

The composition of the painting follows traditional principles and practices. It is a highly organized and idealized composition, the design relying on the vertical and diagonal elements, and the use of linear perspective. The phenomena of aerial perspective is at a minimum, distant colors have almost equal strength to those in the foreground. The horizon line and the single vanishing point are very low and occupy the lower third of the painting. The vanishing point is slightly to the left of center and keeps the work from appearing too rigid and static. The meandering pathway that leads the viewer into the canyon serves to create a sense of distance, provides energy, rhythm and variety. There is a contradiction between surface flatness and illusionistic space in the painting. This creates a surface tension which I find very appealing. Some of the shapes are not clear cut and others blend into one another. This expresses the denseness of the forest of giant palm trees.

Biberman uses light as a formal and symbolic element. The entire landscape is bathed in light, ensuring unity in the composition. There is a spiritual and ethereal quality in how the light surrounds you when you view the painting up close. On the right side of the painting a light filled form hovers in space and assumes an active directional character pointing downward and leading the viewer to the path that points the way into the canyon and beyond, perhaps suggesting a window of illumination. This leads the viewer to a door-like opening, perhaps a portal into another reality or dimension. A small tree in the distance is highlighted by the blue sky and beckons the viewer, it seems to be telling us there is hope and opportunity.

Brilliant sunshine is coming from the left side of the composition. This is a hot, beautiful early morning in late summer. The shadows are long and wrap a few of the tree trunks almost entirely in bright sunlight. Biberman contrasts this with very dark shadows to create a dramatic effect. This also serves to add solidity to the composition and helps anchor these massive trees in time and space, and to define the ground plane on which they have stood for hundreds of years in a canyon that was and continues to be a sacred place for the Cahuilla Indians.

Compare and contrast Artwork:

I chose *Vertical Section*, by American artist De Wain Valentine, born 1936. The laminated glass installation is next to the Biberman painting. It is a very large piece, 96 x 144 x 12 inches. The Biberman painting is approximately 36 x 48 inches by comparison. Both artists explore perceptions of color, light, form and space in their respective pieces. Valentine's piece is made of commercial, plate-glass sheets that are bonded to each other with silicone. Eight vertical sections are individually attached to the wall. Each section is separated from the section next to it by approximately six inches of empty space. Reflections and shadows cast against the wall change depending on the time of day, the amount of light available and the position of the viewer. Valentine's work is abstract, transparent, cold, slick and glossy, while the Biberman piece is inviting, warm, luminous and timeless. Both artists demonstrate a preference for simple, linear, and vertical elements in their respective pieces.



How to tour this artwork;

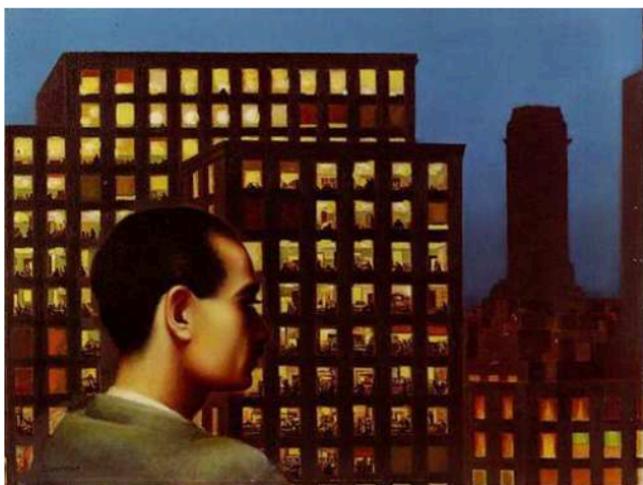
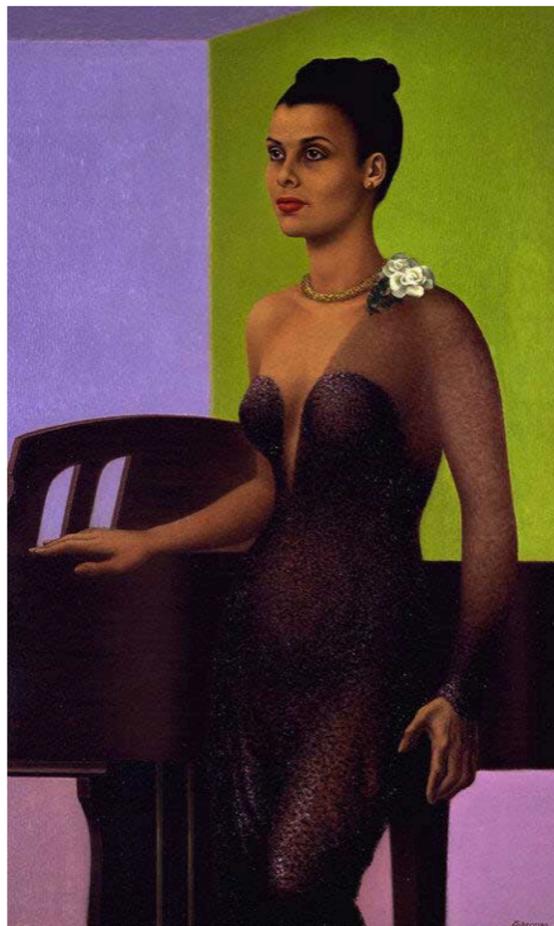
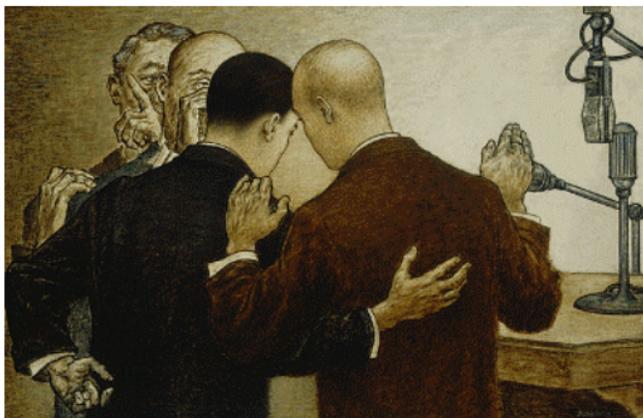
In order to engage the viewer I would ask them the following;

1. Has anyone hiked or visited one of the many Indian Canyons?
2. What about this painting takes you there?
3. What about this painting might make you think of the Indian Canyons?
4. Observe the painting from a distance.
5. Move closer to the painting. What is different?
6. Where is this? What do you see? Is this an imaginary place?
7. What time of day is it?
8. If you could walk into the landscape, where would you start your journey?

Bibliography / Sources;

1. Biberman, Edward 1968. *Time and Circumstance, 40 Years of Painting*
2. Cornett, James W. 2010. *Desert Palm Oasis*
3. Los Angeles Times, December 2003, Article by Emily Young, *A Place in the Sun, Catching up with Edward Biberman*
4. Oral History Interview with Edward Biberman, 1964, Archives of American Art
5. Oral History Program Interview, 1977 by Emily Corey, University of California, Los Angeles
6. Palm Springs Art Museum, Toor Library

Other Artwork by Edward Biberman:



“I have not known for many years how to separate my life from my work nor do I wish to now.” (6)