

Look: ‘Rediscovery,’ channeled

Spaulding’s local ties are only part of story

By Josef Woodard

NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

In “**The Rediscovery** of Selden Spaulding” show at the Patty Look Lewis Gallery, what you see isn’t all you get. Beneath the sumptuous surfaces and alternately dense and cellular imagery, the viewing experience is composed of layers of history – personal, artistic, and local.

Spaulding’s work – represented in this show by pieces from the 1960s and ’70s – swerves in restless patterns, but nonetheless

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‘THE REDISCOVERY OF SELDEN SPAULDING’

When: Through Oct. 27

Where: Patty Look Lewis Gallery, 25 E. De la Guerra St.

Gallery hours: Noon to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday

Information: 965-2525, www.pattylooklewis.com

shows the markings of artistic evolution. He worked with a personalized mode of post-abstract expressionist painting, with a drip style suggesting Jackson Pollock mixed with Georges Seurat. But out of that phase, Spaulding moved toward paintings of tranquil semi-landscape reflections and biomorphic-looking forms floating above white ground.

This is one of those rare shows that can be appreciated as art for art’s sake, as well as a slice of local history. Those with roots in the local art scene might recall Spaulding’s participation in the admired Esther Bear Gallery in Montecito in the late ’60s and early ’70s. Delving deeper into his biography, one learns Spaulding was born in Santa Barbara in 1922, and his father was the founding headmaster of Laguna Blanca School – where part of the proceeds of this show are pledged. After studying art at Princeton University, Spaulding got his first taste of Europe as an officer in World War II, and after a short stint back in Santa Barbara, he moved to France.

In France, Spaulding began his own version of drip paintings, akin to the “action painter” action back in the United States. He ended up back in Santa Barbara in the mid-’60s, and then headed to San Francisco in the ’80s, where he died in 2005, at 83.

His current show, according to Patty Look Lewis, is Spaulding’s first exhibition in town since a show at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art in 1969, which involved an epic work: a huge canvas snaking across the walls of two gallery spaces. The art in the Look Lewis show – underscored by Spaulding’s local back story – manages to be at once immediate and a bit nostalgic. It has something to do with the peregrinations of a free-

wheeling creative spirit in the mid-20th century. If existential angst was part of the message for Pollock and his abstract-expressionist contemporaries, Spaulding was a more lyrical sort. Clearly, color was of importance in his densely mottled abstract paintings, whose titles “Pale Green,” “Yellow” and especially, “Red” are more than idle, paint chip-like descriptions.

Even the punctuation in the title “Green/Rose,” circa 1962, works as description. On this canvas, horizontal bands sweep across the composition; a green, vegetation-like central area is framed, above and below, by dusky rose areas.

In the early ’70s, Spaulding moved inward – or pulled outward, depending on one’s interpretation – with his notions of structure and content. Fluid, vaguely organic shapes take over from the visual thickets of earlier paintings, and mysterious impressions of landscape move in the direction of stylized natural settings, as in the gauzy “No. 11,” reminiscent of Milton Avery’s work.



Though the name is simple, “Red/Blue/Black” is a Spaulding piece worth a look.

For all the styles found in this show, the standout painting is one that falls somewhere between the artist’s phases. In 1968’s “Red/Blue/Black,” the title, again, implies the subtle drama found within the manipulation of rugged geological forms and color harmonies, connected by some inef-fable gracefulness of expression.

As is often the case, the most impressive achievements in art transcend the details of history or the certainty of theory and explanation. The best art just works, and on its own stubborn, slippery terms. ■

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Selden Spaulding's "No. 23 orange" (1970), an example of the artist's later work demonstrating his interest in abstract geometric forms and halo effects.

The Auroras of Emotion

The Rediscovery of Selden Spaulding. At Patty Look Lewis Gallery. Shows through September 29.

Reviewed by **Charles Donelan**

Selden "Denny" Spaulding's work of the 1960s ought to spark a widespread revival of interest in one of Santa Barbara's most original abstract artists. Spaulding was educated at Laguna Blanca School where his father, Edward Selden Spaulding, was the first headmaster, and at Princeton, where he majored in art and archaeology. After serving in World War II, Spaulding relocated to the French countryside in 1950.

By the early 1960s, he had discovered a technique of drip painting that put him in between the "action painting" of Jackson Pollock and the delicate, multilayered luminosity of late-period Monet. The canvases on show this month at Patty Look Lewis Gallery fall into three groups: "dark-period" abstractions that revel in the viscosity of brown and black oil paints and waxes; middle-period canvases based on a single color that have an all-over surface and were produced using the drip method; and later abstractions emphasizing the liminal effects of layered, loosely geometric forms.

Once seen in any quantity, Spaulding's abstract work is instantly recognizable. The surfaces and shifting figure/ground relations of the middle-period paintings suggest the evanescence and multiplicity of sunlight on water, an effect the artist achieved by carefully dropping thousands of tiny paint globs onto linen from a height of 30 feet while working inside an old French barn. In such paintings as "Red," from 1963, stacked bands of subliminal color create the physical sensation of pictorial space without requiring a visible horizon line.

At once radical and sincere, bold and sensitive, Spaulding's work radiates a single-minded devotion to the highest aesthetic and social ideals of the 1950s and '60s. Upon returning to Santa Barbara in 1969, Spaulding staged a memorable one-man show at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art in which he wrapped two entire galleries in canvas so that he could paint an all-encompassing environment — an early and remarkable instance of avant-garde art activity on State Street.

His paintings of the later 1960s are characterized by halo effects — places where colors bleed free at the edges of larger shapes. Spaulding, who died in 2005, spoke frequently of his desire to indicate in his art the fleeting nature of emotional experience, and the lovely, fluttering lines at the edges of these works are likely traces of that impulse. They reveal the powerful emotions of a singular life as auroras of pure color and light glimmering around the central shadows of an outstanding imagination. ■

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