

**FIVE WEST COAST ARTISTS:
BISCHOFF, DIEBENKORN,
NERI, PARK AND THIEBAUD**
Yale University Art Gallery – New Haven

The Sting of Art Education

By Jon Seals



David Park, The Model, 1959, oil on canvas, 66 ½" x 59" x 2." Yale University Art Gallery, partial promised gift of Karen, Lawrence, and Ellen Eisner, in memory of their mother, Anita Brand Eisner; gift of Laila Twigg-Smith, by exchange; and purchased with Charles B. Benenson, B.A. 1933, Fund; Walter H. and Margaret Dwyer Clemens, B.A. 1951, Director's Discretionary Fund for the Yale University Art Gallery; Leonard C. Hanna, Jr., Class of 1913, Fund; The Lola S. Haverstick Fund for American Art; The Heinz Family Fund; Katharine Ordway Fund; Joann and Gifford Phillips, Class of 1942, Fund; George A., Class of 1954, and Nancy P. Shutt Acquisition Fund. Courtesy of the Hackett | Mill, representative of the Estate of David Park.

"You're probably good at lots of things, art is just not one of them," my elementary art teacher once told me after class. I was crushed, and having been an art educator myself for several years now, I have since found that I am not alone in harboring the sting of such an experience. Many of my students have shared similar reports of early discouragement in the arts. I wonder now if our instructors viewed teaching as secondary to their art making and, struggling to locate their identity in the often-brackish waters of the artist/educator role, perhaps transferred their own crises of identity to their students.

The antithesis to such stagnation, of course, are artists/educators who resist pandering in the harbor. Like a rip current, they pull everyone and everything in their path far past the shore's safety and into the unknown expanse of the ocean.

David Park, Elmer Bischoff, Richard Diebenkorn, Wayne Thiebaud and Manuel Neri were of such a caliber of artist/teacher and are featured in a rare, East Coast exhibition, "Five West Coast Artists," now on view at the Yale University Art Gallery (YUAG) in New Haven, Conn. Each of these California artists found their success in both artistic production and teaching. All of the work in this exhibition is built on the paradoxical marriage of visceral mark with image. And the collection proves itself poignant within the context of the Yale University Art Gallery, an institution whose philosophy is that of a *teaching* gallery. Immersed among the 30 or so prints, drawings, paintings and sculptures on display at YUAG, I considered what lessons these great educators and their host school could teach me. I was struck in particular by Park's painting, *The Model*. The signature signs of his work are

here: His famously bold figures are situated within the juicy, painterly, stroke and scrape of the brush. Pictured is the artist's model in the studio and, in the foreground, her representation on canvas. Both painted figures gaze back at me. Park has invited the viewer to co-create with him, as a good teacher would. This painting and exhibition are a reminder of certain kinds of artists/educators who, in their passion for creating, stir in others a passion to create. Unlike my elementary school teacher, who dissuaded my artistic ventures, Park incites a very different type of "sting." He and his kindred spirits provoke and provide models for the best kind of educational process, the challenge to take risks, both measured and spontaneous. So much about academia is calculated risk and so much about making art is, well, just risky. These West Coast artists resisted the image-free rage of abstract expressionism led by Greenburg and his minions.

Putting the object/figure back into the guts of expressive paint in the 1950s and 1960s was both precarious and deceptively radical. The figures in Park's painting encourage us to challenge the status quo, to imagine new and exciting ways to respond, and to bring others along with us in discovery. *That* is the kind of art education we can all learn from. ■

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