HETAG Newsletter No. 57, September 2022

Texas Modernism(s): Houston/Dallas in the 1930s

An Exhibition at the Julia Ideson Building of Houston Public Library

August 27 to November 5, 2022

Exhibition Catalog Release Reception, Thursday, September 29, 5-7 PM

During the 1930s, even as the depression dug in and the dust bowl blew, art flourished in Texas, and Modernism, that most current of art movements at the time, made its way to the Lone Star State. But Texas is vast and varied, so the Modernism(s) that took root in the major cities and academic centers in the state was varied too.

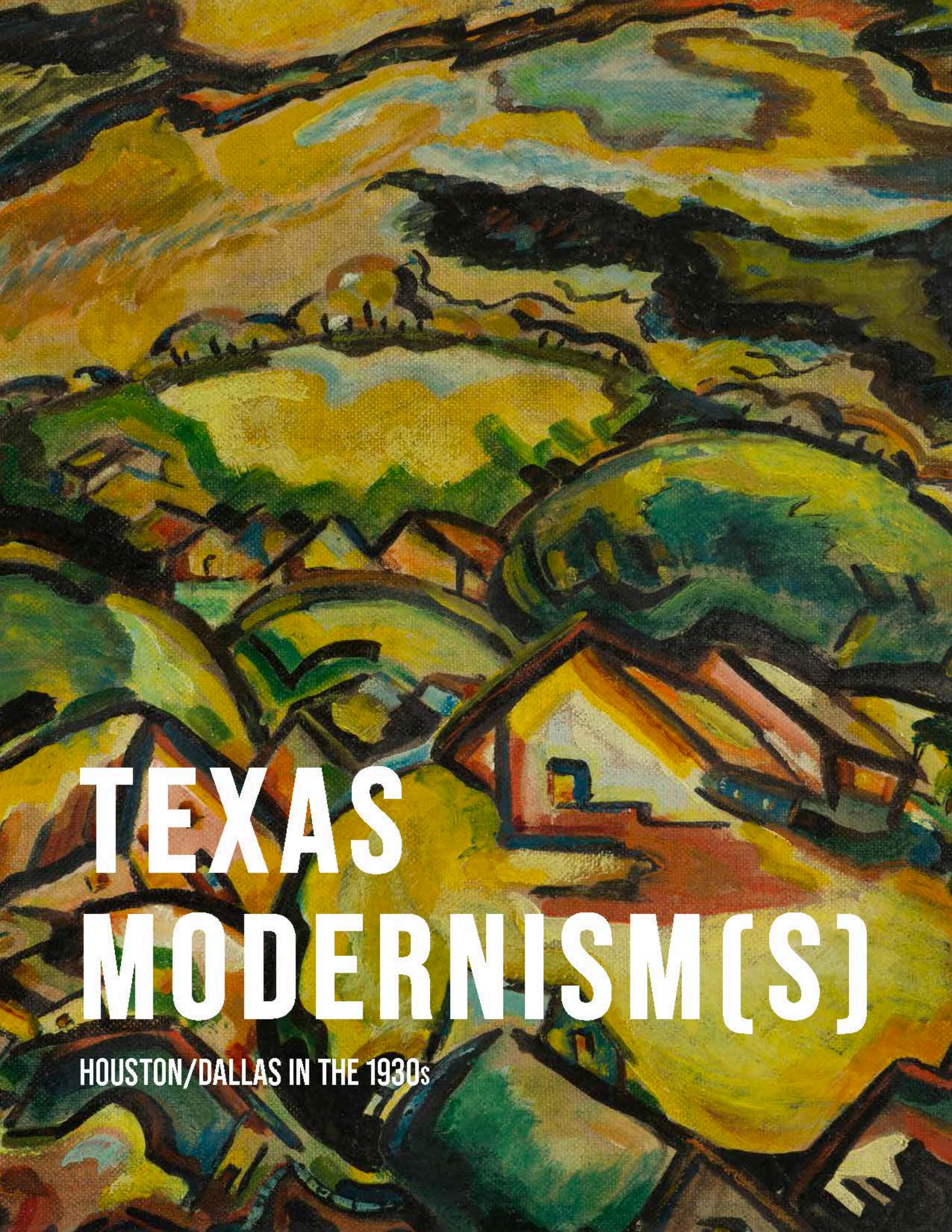
In Houston and Dallas, Modernism became the central focus for two small groups of local artists, made up mostly of youngsters, along with their forward-looking mentors – in Houston, the Cherry-McNeill Group, and the Dallas Nine up north. Though not even 250 miles apart, the approaches to Modernism of the two groups in the two cities were markedly

different, and were in some respects a microcosm of the different paths to Modernism on the national level.

Including over 70 paintings from private collections and The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the exhibition explores the looks and philosophical underpinnings of two seminal aspects of the art history of Texas, which strongly influenced later developments in their two cities, as well as the state in general. At the same time, the exhibition demonstrates that Modernism, when it came to America, was not limited exclusively to the art centers of the East and that it was not a single thing, even in a relatively contained region such as Texas. It was, rather a liberating force that could take its disciples along markedly different routes toward the shared ideal of creating a modern art for America and for Texas.

Following is an excerpt from the exhibition catalog (in press, publication anticipated by mid-September), which will be available for those who visit the gallery.

You can also view a talk about the early development of the show on Youtube:
Houston/Dallas Modernism(s) in the 1930s: So Close and Yet So Different



TEXAS MODERNISM(S)

HOUSTON/DALLAS IN THE 1930s

TEXAS MODERNISM(S):

HOUSTON/DALLAS IN THE 1930s

presented by

Center for the Advancement and Study of Early Texas Art (CASETA),
Houston Earlier Texas Art Group (HETAG)
and
Houston Public Library

August 27 - November 5, 2022

Houston Public Library
Julia Ideson Building
550 McKinney
Houston, Texas

Exhibition organized by the Houston Public Library and
curated by Randolph K. Tibbits, Tam Kiehnhoff, and Christina Wai Grubitz

TEXAS MODERNISM(S): HOUSTON/DALLAS IN THE 1930s

Randolph K. Tibbits

"The central issue, the central distinction, has to do with seriousness, with the allegiance art maintains to the pulse of lived experience." ... "For modernism denominates not a particular 'stance' or style – it is by disposition neither figurative nor abstract, for example – but rather a discipline: the discipline of truthfulness, the rigor of honesty."

Hilton Kramer, *The Triumph of Modernism*[1]

During the 1930s, even as the depression dug in and the dust bowl blew, art flourished in Texas, and Modernism, that most current of art movements at the time, made its way to the Lone Star State. In Houston and Dallas, Modernism became the central focus for two small groups of local artists, made up mostly of young people, along with their forward-looking mentors: in Houston, the Cherry-McNeill Group; and the Dallas Nine (plus) up north. Though not even 250 miles apart, the approaches to Modernism of the two groups in the two cities were markedly different and were, in some respects, a microcosm of the different paths to Modernism on the national level.[2]

In Houston, the Cherry-McNeill Group consisted of Emma Richardson Cherry, the doyenne of Houston art; her protégée, Ola McNeill Davidson; and Davidson's students, Gene

1 Hilton Kramer T*he Triumph of Modernism*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006, pp. xi-xii.

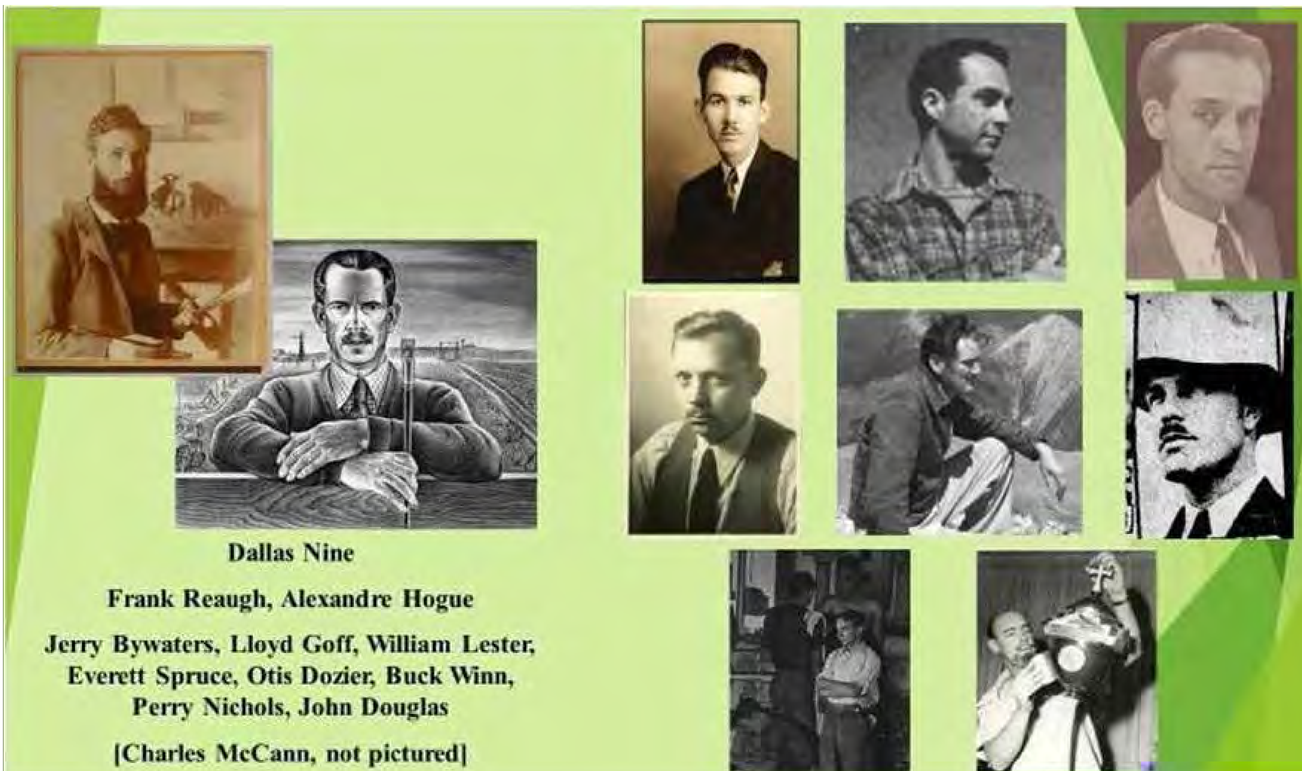
2 The essential work of scholarship on Texas Modernism is Katie Robinson Edwards, *Midcentury Modern Art In Texas*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014. Edwards considers Modernism as it developed in various centers around Texas over the decades of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, with glances before and after. The curators of the current exhibition and catalog are deeply in debt to her in the conception of our project, and hope only that we may be able to add a few details to her sweeping story.

Charlton, Carden Bailey, Nione Carlson, Maudee Carron, Robert Preusser, Frank Dolejska and Dean Lee, along with Forrest Bess and one or two others who sometimes worked and exhibited with them. Davidson herself named the group in a 1950 letter to Cherry, recounting what they had been able to accomplish as teachers and students developing avant-garde art in the Bayou City: "Cherry McNeill group! … that thing we accomplished while active with them [her younger Houston students] flows on and on – it is a chain with you the biggest link …"[3]

The Dallas Nine originally included Jerry Bywaters, John Douglass, Otis Dozier, Lloyd Goff, William Lester, Charles McCann, Perry Nichols, Everett Spruce and Buck Winn, along with a few others who worked and exhibited with them through the 1930s. The Dallas Nine may have been named almost by accident in 1932 by a non-Texan, but it is a name that has resonated through the decades.[4]

3 Ola McNeill Davidson, letter to Emma Richardson Cherry, [August 16, 1950], Emma Richardson Cherry Papers, Harris County Heritage Society, Houston, Texas, b1, f6.

4 The first use of "Nine" as a descriptor of the Dallas group appears in "Young Texans, All under 30, Show in Dallas," *Art Digest* 6, no.12 (March 15, 1932), p. 8. (Thanks to Ellen Buie Niewyk for sharing this source.) Some scholars find "Dallas Nine" as an identifier problematic, since it derives from a brief mention of a single exhibition, which included only nine young men who chose to show together at that time. But the name has taken on a life of its own, so to ignore it now, or even eliminate it, would not be possible. Also, the fact that those young men did choose to show together in 1932 has some metaphorical significance to the story of the course of Modernism in Dallas during the period of this exhibition, at least to this author. While it is true that the numbers and names of the Dallas artists working in a Regionalist mode through the 1930s fluctuated, and while there were also some women Regionalists at work there (often as sculptors rather than painters, though Florence McClung was an important painter in the movement), even the rhetoric of the movement in Dallas was decidedly male oriented. Additionally, it is worth noting that late in the decade, Dallas



A comparative look at Houston's Cherry-McNeill Group and the Dallas Nine of the 1930s makes for a provocative case study of some of the different paths taken by artists who all thought of themselves as seekers of the modern.[5] There is sometimes a tendency to think of "modern" art as synonymous with "abstract" art, described by one scholar as art "distilled from natural sources for purposes of emphasis and expression through clear, bold forms," – or even as what was often called in the 1930s, "non-objective" art, characterized by "a total invention of forms."[6] By either name, such art built on the innovations of early 20th Century European artists - Picasso, Braque, Kandinsky and others – as well as a few American early adopters, mostly in the eastern United States.[7] This radical new art made its first broad assault on American sensibilities through the seminal International Exhibition of Modern Art (The Armory Show), which opened in New York in February, 1913, and then traveled to Chicago and Boston. Once rooted in American soil, this new art began to spread – like an unwelcome weed, some might have said – but, beyond a few early patches, it "took root in the United States only during the late 1930s."[8] Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, one place in which abstract/non-objective art found a home at the time was the smallish, Gulf Coast city of Houston, among the members of the Cherry-McNeill Group.

women formed their own printmaking group, the Printmakers Guild, because they were excluded from the all-male Lone Star Printmakers. Throughout the 1930s and into the 1940s (and even today), the names most often discussed as leading exponents of Regionalism in Dallas are already on that 1932 list, with the addition of Alexandre Hogue.

5 There were certainly other enclaves of Modernism in mid-Century Texas later on – the group loosely known as the Fort Worth Circle; the innovative faculty and student women at Texas Women's University; some members the University of Texas at Austin art faculty – but it was in Houston and Dallas that Modernism found its earliest outposts in Texas. See Edwards, *Midcentury Modern Art In Texas*.

6 William C. Agee, *Modern Art in America*. London, New York: Phaidon, 2016, p. 14.

7 The work of many of these American early adopters of Modernism is explored through the exhibition *At the Dawn of a New Age: Early Twentieth-Century American Modernism*, Whitney Museum of American Art, May 7, 2022 – January, 2023. Accessed June 20, 2022: https://whitney.org/exhibitions/dawn-of-a-new-age

8 Agee, p. 14.

But it was not the only strain in the "modern" art of the 1930s. Figuration persisted, and in fact flourished in the general culture, through the work of Thomas Hart Benton and other American "Regionalist" artists. They rejected abstraction and European domination in art, while striving for an American Modernism based on their distillation of the unique American-ness of American places and peoples. Theirs was an art umbrella that covered a vast expanse, including the Midwestern Regionalism of Benton and others, as well as a more general American Scene Painting, and the specific Texas variant that flourished in Dallas, among the Dallas Nine and their circle.[9] In fact, with a revival of interest in this "Lone Star Regionalism" in the 1980s, following a long post-World War II period in which interest in it mostly languished, some have tended to see Lone Star Regionalism as the only truly Texas modern art of the time.

By the 1930s, being "modern" in art, as well as many other aspects of society, held a growing appeal for some Americans, though defining what modern meant was still a work in progress. The Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) we know today had just been founded in 1929 in New York City, as the institutional bastion of a version of "modern." Almost a decade earlier, in 1920, Katherine Dreier, Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray had founded the *Société Anonyme*, Inc., also in New York, with the idea of creating their own Museum of Modern Art – a project that was never realized as a permanent institution. Emma Richardson Cherry joined *Société Anonyme* in the fall of 1920, probably at the suggestion of Marsden Hartley. She met and received painting pointers from Hartley in Gloucester, Massachusetts, that summer. She was the only Texan among the fewer than 100 *Société Anonyme* members worldwide, placing her in the company of Hartley, Duchamp and Ray, as well as Joseph Stella, Elie Nadelman, Florine Stettheimer and many more of the foremost early luminaries of Modernism in America. Cherry became the direct conduit to Houston of those New York and Paris ideas of modern art at an early date in the life of American Modernism.[10]

Though perhaps not quite so direct, there were some early appearances of "modern art" in Dallas too, notably in 1921 when the Dallas Art Association invited New York art critic and lecturer, Forbes Watson, to curate its Second Annual Exhibition / American and European Art. The exhibition included the work of some of the stars of European and American Modernism, among them, Picasso, Matisse, and Derain – quite possibly the first appearance by these artists in Texas.[11] As we shall see, however, they would not be embraced later on in Dallas as they were in Houston. So by the 1930s, the question, at least for some who saw themselves as advanced artists in Houston and Dallas, and indeed elsewhere in the country, was not whether, but rather how to be "modern," and there was not one answer.

9 Rick Stewart, *Lone Star Regionalism: The Dallas Nine and Their Circle*. Austin: Texas Monthly Press: Dallas Museum of Art, 1985.

10 Randolph K. Tibbits, "Emma Richardson Cherry: Houston's First Modern Artist," in *Emma Richardson Cherry (1859-1954): Houston's First Modern Artist*. Houston: Houston Public Library, 2013, pp. 29-30. Catalog of an exhibition of the same title presented at Houston Public Library, February 1 – May 4, 2013.

11 *Second Annual Exhibition American and European Art*. Dallas: The Dallas Art Association, 1921.

Two Texas Cities, Two Groups of Texas Artists, Two Texas Modernisms

Before considering the differences between the two Texas groups, it is illuminating to look at some of their similarities. The most obvious was that both groups were located in Texas, a place remote from what were then the centers of Modernism in the eastern United States and Europe. In addition, both groups had their own three generations of artists working over decades in their respective cities; both could trace their origins to the same mid-western state, where their founders had been born only a year, and 200 miles, apart; and the members of the youngest generation of both became the art stars in their respective cities during the 1930s.[12]

At the same time, there were some significant, perhaps even determinative, differences. Based on Cherry's own long training and broad art interests, stretching back into the 19th century and coming forward to the most advanced art of her day, the Cherry-McNeill Group brought a "scientific" approach to art (as Cherry described it in 1920,[13] and Davidson reiterated in 1937[14]), concerned as much, or maybe more, with the way art is made as with the subjects depicted. Cherry drew her inspiration from extensive study in Paris and New York, and contact with such artists as Hartley and Andre Lhote. She enthusiastically embraced the Modernism current in Europe and New York, bringing it to the Texas Gulf Coast to share with other Houston artists who also found it compelling.[15] In fact, Cherry had seen, and taken serious note of, ultra avant-garde art such as the work that caused a national sensation in the 1913 Armory show even before it reached New York, on visits to the Salon d'Automne in Paris in 1912.[16]

"Not our thing!", said the artists to the north, though not in exactly those words. Bywaters, an articulate spokesman of the Dallas group, expressed their shared conviction "that art, to be significant, must be a reflection of life; that it must be understandable to the layman; and that it must be a part of a people's thought." These were lessons he'd learned at the side of Diego Rivera in Mexico City in 1928. Rivera, before his return to Mexico in 1921, and his recommitment to Mexico in his Modernism, had been as much a Parisian Modernist as Picasso, Braque or Juan Gris. But by the time Bywaters visited with him in Mexico City, Rivera had reembraced his Mexican heritage, with a modern thrust. What the young Texan saw there – particularly the vast murals by Rivera and his Mexican contemporaries – was art meant to support and shape the re-formation of society following collapse and revolution, art with a grand social purpose, intended to change the lives of the people, not just the lives of the artists. Heady stuff to see and hear discussed, by a young man searching for his direction in art.

12 This three generation construct, in addition to being somewhat catchy and amusing, does provide a useful frame for illuminating some of the differences that played out as Modernism developed in the two cities. Admittedly, in Houston the three generations actually had a feeling of connection with each other through their art as well as their personal attachments, while that may not have been true in Dallas where some of the younger artists declined to claim any link to the legacy of Frank Reaugh. A leading Reaugh scholar even expressed his surprise that I would suggest any connection between Mr. Reaugh and Modernism. I assured him that I intended no disrespect.

13 Untitled article, *Houston Post*, Society Section/Editorial Section, January 4, 1920, p. 25.

14 "Cluttered Studio Pleases This Artist Who Talks of Youth and Newer Ideas," *Houston Press*, June 18, 1937.

15 Randolph K. Tibbits, "Emma Richardson Cherry: Houston's First Modern Artist," in *Emma Richardson Cherry (1859-1954): Houston's First Modern Artist*. Houston: Houston Public Library, 2013. Catalog of an exhibition of the same title presented at Houston Public Library, February 1 – May 4, 2013.

16 Dorothy Cherry, Travel diary for her European grand tour, 1911/12. The Heritage Society, Houston. In the entry for Sunday, October 12, 1912, Dorothy says: "This morning to the "Salon D'Automne". Certainly the new things are queer but interesting. **The Cubist** – how queer! The lovely furnished rooms were exquisite."

The Dallas Nine artists looked for art-making guidance not only from the Mexican muralists, but from the so-called Italian "primitives," landscape artists and even Surrealists. But the subjects remained all important, and those subjects needed to be the land and people of their own region. They actively rebelled against European domination of American art, against artistic "bootlicking" and "the blemish of pseudo-European cultural influence."[17]

17 Gerald Bywaters, "Diego Rivera and Mexican Popular Art," *Southwest Review* 13, no.4 (July 1928), p. 480.

The Dallas group worked in concert with other American Regionalists to find what they considered a truly American Modernism growing out of, and speaking directly to, their own region. Bywaters and the other Dallas Regionalists viewed as fellow travelers—even trailblazers—the Midwestern Regionalists Thomas Hart Benton, Grant Wood and John Steuart Curry, along with American Scene painters, and even easterners like John Sloan and Reginald Marsh, among others. And though they sometimes ignored his influence, they even shared basic values with the older Dallas artist, Frank Reaugh, who took the life and landscape of Texas as his only valid subject from the beginning of his career, in the 1880s.

Three generations toward Texas Modernism(s)

In an interesting historical parallel, both Emma Richardson Cherry (1859-1954) and Frank Reaugh (1860-1945), the oldest generation in the three-generation artistic lineage leading to Modernism in the two cities, were born in Illinois, making their way to Texas later, Reaugh in 1876, and Cherry in the mid-1890s. Their paths could have crossed even before Cherry got to Texas. In 1888/89, they both studied in Paris at the *Académie Julian* – though perhaps a Paris acquaintance for the two is unlikely, since classes for men and women were separate. In any event, both benefited from the same rigorous academic training, given by some of the foremost Parisian teaching artists of the day, and both would have partaken in the thrilling art milieu in what was then the art capital of the world, especially thrilling perhaps for young student artists from remote America. That both returned to America with Impressionism – the "modern" art of the day – in their artists' toolkits is not surprising.

18 For a more detailed look at the careers and influence of the two artists, see Tibbits "Emma Richardson Cherry ..." op. cit., and Michael R. Grauer, *Rounded Up in Glory: Frank Reaugh, Texas Renaissance Man*. Denton, Texas: University of North Texas Press, 2016.

19 Op. cit., Davidson to Cherry, [August 16, 1950].

Cherry and Reaugh both had a formative influence on the art cultures of their respective cities through their own work, but also as teachers and civic organizers.[18] As teachers they had a direct impact on what might be characterized as a middle generation of the artists included in the present exhibition: Cherry on her student and life-long friend, Ola McNeill Davidson (1884-1976); and Reaugh on Alexandre Hogue (1898-1994), the slightly older associate of the Dallas Nine. In their respective cities, Davidson and Hogue made the bridge between their founding mentors and the brash youngsters of the two groups, though the enthusiasm with which the two embraced the mentors differed markedly.

20 Carden Bailey and Gene Charlton, post card to Emma Richardson Cherry, October 14, 1937. In the collection of the author.

Davidson prized not just the friendship, but also the artistic mentorship of Cherry. Davidson drew from the "modern" art ideas the older artist was continually bringing back to Houston, both for her own work (see Cherry's *Dull Day on the Cove* 1920 and Davidson's *Edge of Wood* c.1925, above), and in her teaching of young Houston artists. Even as late as the 1950s, Davidson reassured Cherry that "without you and the showing of the way there would be no Robert [Preusser], Carden [Bailey], Gene [Charlton], Harley [Brubaker] and a number of others on their way to tops in their field ..."[19] In fact, in Houston even the youngest generation of the Cherry-McNeill Group embraced Cherry, the founding elder, and what she had to share with them, from her art to theirs. Writing from Venice in October, 1937, Carden Bailey and Gene Charlton enthused, "Mrs. Cherry – How we wish you were here now & perhaps out on the grand canal [sic] – We think of you all the time."[20]

opposite left Emma Richardson Cherry, *Flying Prisms*, c. 1919.
Oil on board, 14 x 28 inches. Collection of Randy Tibbits and Rick Bebermeyer, Houston.

opposite right Frank Reaugh, *Margaret's Peak*, 1909.
Oil on canvas, 15 1/2 x 33 1/2 inches. The John L. Nau III Collection of Texas Art, Houston.

Emma Richardson Cherry, *Dull Day on the Cove*, 1920.
Oil on board, 17 x 14 inches. Collection of Randy Tibbits and Rick Bebermeyer, Houston.

Ola McNeill Davidson, *Edge of Wood*, c. 1925.
Oil on board, 20 1/2 x 15 1/2 inches. Collection of Randy Tibbits and Rick Bebermeyer, Houston.

By contrast, Hogue, who traveled with Reaugh on his summer sketching trips to West Texas in the early 1920s, "maintained that he wasn't affected by the older artist's style."[21] Perhaps not, though clearly he mastered that style in producing his own tiny pastels in the Reaugh manner (see Hogue's *Looking to Mexico* 1922). Reaugh and his Impressionist vision, even though squarely focused on depicting Texas and the Southwest, was not embraced by the Dallas Nine artists. In fact he was effectively rejected by them as old fashioned – so thoroughly rejected that he was not even asked to show in the art exhibition of the Texas Centennial in Dallas in 1936.[22] (In another interesting slight to that oldest generation, Cherry did show in the Texas Centennial, but her entry was listed in the official program with an incorrect title – an error for which Jerry Bywaters wrote her a letter of apology.)

21 Susie Kalil, *Alexandre Hogue: An American Visionary – Paintings and Works On Paper*. College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2011, p. 19.

22 Grauer, p. 288.

Frank Reaugh, *Untitled [River Bend with Cattle #2]*, early 20th C.
Pastel, 3 x 6 3/4 inches. Collection of Tom and Tam Kiehnhoff, Houston.

Alexandre Hogue, *Looking at Mexico*, 1922.
Pastel, 4 x 8 1/4 inches. The John L. Nau III Collection of Texas Art, Houston.

Here Versus There

Yet another difference in the two cities, no doubt influencing the art of each—as well as civic atmosphere more generally—was a very different orientation of each vis-à-vis the world beyond. As we shall see later in this discussion, in 1936 Hogue noted that "temperamentally" Houston belonged "to the old South." Perhaps there was something to his observation in the early 20th Century, though less so as the city's port and energy industry economies brought influences and people from around the world. But conceding at least some credence to Hogue's observation, it might also have been said that "temperamentally" Dallas belonged to the Mid-West, certainly to an America-centric imperative as a source for models and aspirations in art as in other aspects of society.

As might be expected, the differing attitudes toward "here" versus "there" as places, and the art of "here" versus "there" as valid inspirations and models for artists in their own places, played out differently in Dallas and Houston for the artists of the two groups. After Reaugh's time in Paris and Holland in the 1880s, where he drew inspiration from the Dutch artist (and Van Gogh relative), Anton Mauve, especially his paintings of cattle which Reaugh encountered in The Hague and Amsterdam, he never returned to Europe. Reaugh found his subject and style early—the land and longhorns of Texas painted in an Impressionist manner—and he remained consistent with both throughout his career.

By contrast, Cherry heard her work criticized because she did *not* stay with a style. "They say my work has never been marked by any definite style. That is exactly what I am striving to avoid."[23] She spent years of her life in Europe, especially Paris, where, as late as the 1920s, when she was nearing 70, she devoted most of a year and a half expressly to learning Cubist technique from painter/teacher, Andre Lhote, and Dynamic Symmetry through study at Parsons Paris. Even though some see her only as a lady painter of flowers and portraits, while in Paris at that time she painted what seem to be the first Cubist paintings by a Texas artist—and possibly the first Cubist paintings by any artists that actually came to Texas when she brought them back with her in 1926.[24]

Davidson, who was constrained by family circumstances (a husband who may not have been fully supportive of her art career, two children, an elderly aunt who needed considerable care), made her single art tour to Europe in 1937, a trip she paid for with a legacy from her recently deceased father. Her teenaged son and her students Gene Charlton and Carden Bailey traveled with her. It may have been her only visit to Europe, but the travel diary she kept shows that she relished the experience and was fully ready to absorb the flood of art and experiences she and "the boys" sought out.

23 "Dean of Houston Painters Counts Day Lost Unless Something Put on Canvas," *The Houston Press*, Books-Music-Art Section, April 16, 1937.

24 From their titles it is unclear exactly which Picasso works appeared in the 1921 show in Dallas, so some of those may have been Cubist works, though by that date Picasso was no longer painting in a Cubist mode.

Hogue spent four years in the 1920s working in New York City, no doubt also looking at the art all around. And he has the distinction, among the artists of both the Dallas Nine and the Cherry-McNeill Group, of having had an important work—his *Drouth Survivors* of 1936—purchased by the French government out of the Paris International Exhibition of 1938.[25] But even with so much time in New York, and such validation in Paris, Hogue looked to neither as sources for his art through the 1930s.

Bywaters, who found his eureka inspiration in the work of Diego Rivera that he saw in Mexico City in the 1920s, also spent time in New York City, the art colony in Old Lyme, Connecticut, and Europe. But he did not find any of those places, nor the art he encountered in them, to his taste—which he made satirically, almost derisively, clear in a series of newspaper articles distilling his travel adventures in the late 1920s.[26]

Gene Charlton, on the other hand, who came from a family of professional musicians with long-standing ties to New York, spent the better part of three years in that city in the early 1930s, studying theater and interior design. At almost the same time, his fellow Cherry-McNeill artist and partner-to-be, Carden Bailey, studied for two years at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, in Philadelphia. The Houston artists were Texans no less than their Dallas contemporaries, but they also saw themselves as artists of the world—embraced that role, in fact—in ways that the Dallas artists consciously rejected. For the Dallas group, Texas—or even just North and West Texas—was world enough.

25 Long thought to have been destroyed in a fire in the 1940s, the painting was saved, restored and exhibited at the Centre Pompidou as recently as 2014.

26 In New York, Bywaters's troubles started with the language, and went bad from there: "Since I got to New York (the greatest American city), I have not heard good English (or even English) spoken. If I ask for directions to the Pennsylvania Station, some swarthy-skinned young man would answer "Yah!" and I would be given detailed pointings and grunts, which, when followed out to the letter would end me up ten yards beyond the end of the piers in Lower Manhattan." Jerry Bywaters, "Gay Gotham Welcomes Dallas Lad: Sailing for Europe Is One Grand Gravy Train Provided You Can Find Some One in New York Who Speaks English and Not Colloquial Pekingese, Says Jerry," *Dallas Morning News*, July 24, 1927.

Nione Carlson, *Crossroads Landscape*, c. late 1930s.
Pastel, 3 x 6 3/4 inches. Collection of Tom and Tam Kiehnhoff, Houston.

Charles Bowling, *After the Storm*, n.d.
Pastel, 4 x 8 1/4 inches. The John L. Nau III Collection of Texas Art, Houston.

Houston art more often seen in Dallas than Dallas art in Houston

In light of the latter day perception of Dallas Regionalism as THE quintessential Texas art of the inter-war years, it may be something of a surprise that at the time gallery goers were more likely to see Houston art in Dallas, than Dallas art in Houston. In part, this was due to the state-encompassing shows mounted in Dallas, such as at the Texas Centennial Exhibition. There was nothing comparable in Houston until the Texas General Exhibitions began touring the major cities of the state, including Houston, in 1940. Also, a few lively gallerists made showing some Houston artists in Dallas part of their mission, particularly the Yunt Gallery, which had earlier Dallas connections, but had relocated to Houston by the later 1930s. There was no comparable effort to exhibit Dallas artists in Houston.

Emma Richardson Cherry did include work by Frank Reaugh, along with a few other Texas Impressionists, in the exhibition she curated for the Texas Coast Fair of 1896, in Dickinson—an exhibition she explicitly intended as the introduction of Impressionism, the modern art of the day, to the state.[27] According to newspaper accounts, Reaugh's work also appeared for sale in Houston a few times through the 1920s, and the Science and Arts Club heard a talk in 1937 with the title "Frank Reaugh the Greatest Painter in the World."[28]

Alexandre Hogue had a one-man show of 33 paintings, many done in New Mexico, at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, in 1929.[29] Otherwise, Hogue's work is little mentioned in the Houston newspapers, even though he served more than once as a juror for Houston Annual Exhibitions.

Even the work of Jerry Bywaters, in some ways the prime exemplar and spokesman for the Dallas Nine, was hardly seen in Houston, though he too served as a juror for the Houston Annual Exhibition, in 1936, when he was identified as "art critic, *Dallas News*."[30] The first Bywaters painting exhibited in Houston seems to have been his *Where Mountains Meet the Plains*, a prize winner in the Texas General Exhibition which reached Houston in February, 1940, on its tour of the state.[31] Otherwise, the work of Dallas Regionalist artists in Houston, before 1940, seems to have been limited to one traveling exhibition of prints by the Lone Star Printmakers mounted at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, in December 1938.[32]

The work of E.R. Cherry appeared from time to time in exhibitions in North Texas, including the Texas Centennial Exposition, along with 18 other Houston artists. Yunt Gallery mounted one-woman Dallas exhibitions for Ruth Pershing Uhler (1937) and Grace Spaulding John (1938)—neither of them Cherry-McNeill artists, but both prominent in the Houston art community at the time. The State Fair art exhibition for 1937 included Cherry-McNeill Group

27 "Art Department," *Galveston Daily News*, November 8, 1896, p. 5.

28 "Science and Arts Club," Society Section, *Houston Chronicle*, January 28, 1937, p. 19.

29 "Painting at the Museum: Dallas Artist's Exhibit in Houston Is Described by Letter to Art Digest," Music and Fine Arts Section, *Houston Chronicle*, March 10, 1929, p. 9.

30 "Local Artists Exhibit Will Open on Jan. 12," [Arts Section], *Houston Chronicle*, December 29, 1935, p. 5.

31 "Texas artists had an inning ...," Art Gravure Section, *Houston Chronicle*, February 4, 1940.

32 [In Gallery C the Museum ...], *Houston Post*, Section E, December 4, 1938, p. 15.

members Cherry, Davidson, Charlton, Preusser and Dean Lee.[33] Even earlier, in 1935, in what was billed as a head-to-head matchup of the local exhibitions of Dallas, Houston, and Fort Worth, Dallas viewers had the opportunity to see work by Cherry-McNeill Group members Davidson, Charlton and Bailey, along with a number of their Houston contemporaries. Assessing that matchup as critic, and at the risk of being "impolite," Bywaters wrote in the *Dallas Morning News* that he found the Dallas offering to be "the best of the three"—not surprising, perhaps, since his own art appeared with the Dallas group.[34]

Two Texas Art Cities, Why Such Different Approaches?

Why such a lack of reciprocal interest in the art being made in two Texas cities, geographically so close, and both so very far from what are generally thought of as the advanced art centers of their day? There were likely many factors at work, but one of fundamental significance was the differing views in each city as to the important goals for art to accomplish. Some members of the two groups directly addressed their respective convictions about those things that were essential to valid art exploration, and which artists were the ones most likely to create significant art. As mentioned above, for Bywaters—and by extension for his Dallas co-workers—art that was important, or even valid, had to be understandable reflections of life that were part of "people's thought." He could hardly have been more clear.

Alexandre Hogue, in his 1936 commissioned essay on "progressive" Texas art of the mid-1930s, in the Texas Centennial issue of *Art Digest*, made clear his own view that the truly important Texas artists of the day were young men working in Dallas: "A group of ten painters in Dallas can exhibit alongside the best anywhere without suffering in the least by comparison. These *men* [emphasis added] are young and they are going places."[35] In the same essay he does acknowledge that: "The most progressive artists in Houston today, and the least appreciated, are two youngsters in their early twenties. Carden Bailey and Gene Charlton since they were small children have had the sympathetic and broad-minded guidance of McNeil [sic] Davidson, herself an artist."[36] So in Hogue's view, even in Houston it was men who were making the art worth noting (in the case of Bailey and Charlton, men who had been a committed couple for a number of years, and would remain such for a decade more, a partnership unnoted and probably unknown by Hogue), while he viewed "McNeil" [sic] Davidson as a teacher of men, who was also, but an afterthought, "herself an artist." No mention at all of Emma Richardson Cherry.

33 "Houston Artists To Be Represented In Fair's Art Exhibit," *Houston Chronicle*, May 9, 1937.

34 "Genial Sport of Comparing Allied Shows," *Dallas Morning News*, April 28, 1935, p. 16.

35 Alexandre Hogue, "Progressive Texas," *Art Digest*, 10, no.17 (June 1, 1936), p. 18. Hogue's Dallas Ten were Everett Spruce, Otis Dozier, William Lester, Thomas Steel, Harry Carnohan, John Douglas, Jerry Bywaters, Perry Nichols, Charles Bowling, and Alexandre Hogue.

36 Ibid.

Clearly he had no sympathy, perhaps little understanding, for what the Cherry-McNeill artists were trying to do:

> Temperamentally Houston belongs to the old South. Her older artists still cling to a bastard form of Impressionism. By doing Cézannesque [sic] still lifes they whistle a tune that is fashionable in most Southern cities, and because the orchestration requires heavier instruments we see no coastal plain, no bayou, no deep piney woods. Consequently a valuable regional scene within easy reach goes unappreciated and unused.[37]

For Hogue, no "regional scene" equaled no good, or at least definitely not modern.

Jerry Bywaters, writing about the Texas section of the Centennial art exhibition in the same issue of *Art Digest*, under the title "Against Narrowness," gave a quick overview of the short (and disappointing) history of art in Texas, and observed: "But if the past was abbreviated and precarious the present and future of Texas art have great promise as is shown by the Centennial Exhibition." He continued, "Among the leaders in the ranks of the 'more modern' contemporary Texas artists represented," were 16 Dallas artists, including all of his fellow Dallas Regionalists, but only six in Houston (none of them Cherry-McNeill artists), one newly transplanted to Houston from Dallas, and another from Tulsa.[38]

Meanwhile, down in Houston

As a response to these less than appreciative comments from Dallas critics, Cherry-McNeill Group artists seem simply to have paid no attention at all to the art goings-on in North Texas. In Houston at the time, compared to Dallas, there was a strong interest in non-objective art. In fact, that strong interest motivated a small group of Houstonians, McNeill Davidson and her students, and their like-minded Houston contemporaries, to found their own gallery in 1938. Their explicit purpose was to provide a venue "for the exchange of ideas and work among painters," and the exhibition of the work of "young [Houston] moderns who fashion their technique after the patterns laid down by the abstractionists and non-objective artists."[39] This was in the downstairs gallery; the upstairs gallery was to show traveling exhibitions, including the work of Davidson's friend, New Orleans Modernist, Will Stevens, and an exhibition of German Expressionist prints.

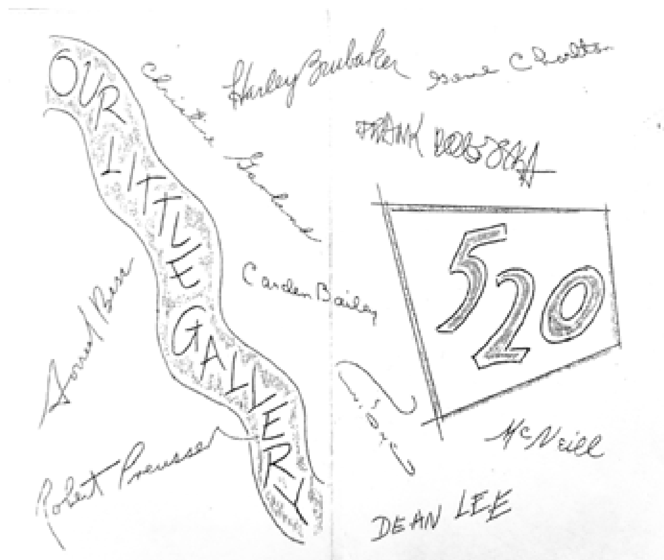
They called their gallery, located in a garage at 520 Branard Street, "520-Our Little Gallery," likely in homage to the famous early 20th Century avant-garde New York gallery "291" of Alfred Stieglitz, also named for its street address.[40] Davidson had already articulated the tenets that led to the gallery in a 1937 newspaper profile, not

37 Ibid.

38 Jerry Bywaters, "Against Narrowness," *Art Digest*, 10 no 17 (June 1, 1936), p. 19. The Houston artists Bywaters listed were Frederic Browne, W.J. Houliston, Jr., Ron Blumberg (formerly of Tulsa), Bob Crabb, Dorothy House and Ruby Stone (formerly of Dallas). From Dallas he listed Hogue, Stell, Spruce, Nichols, Lester, Dozier, Carnohan, Bowling, along with Arthur Niendoroff [sic], J.O. Mahoney, Jr., Lloyd Goff, James Brooks, Allie Tennant, Dorothy Austin, Virginia Russ and Mike Owens.

39 Ione Kirkham, "Gallery's Fate Will Be Decided Soon," *The Houston Press*, Books-Music-Arts section, October 28, 1938.

40 Randolph K. Tibbits, "Our Little Gallery of Abstract Art in Houston, 1938," reprinted in: *HETAG Newsletter* 20 (Feb. 2018), accessed online May 23, 2022, Portal to Texas History https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth1223299/?q=our%20little%20gallery



FIRST EXHIBITION at 520 - Our Little Gallery
OPENED FRIDAY, MAY 18, 1938.

BAILEY, CARDEN

15 McNeill

BESS, FORREST

9 Green Landscape

BRUBAKER, HARLEY

10 Block One
14 Block Two
3 Abstract One
5 Abstract Two

CARLSON, NIONE

20 Flower Form

CHARLTON, GENE

6 Collage No. One
2 Collage No. Two
4 Collage No. Three

DAVIDSON, McNEILL

22 Sea Night
16 Miriam

DOLEJSKA, FRANK

12 Three Forms
11 Revealed- Self Portrait
13 Anatomical Forms

GARLAND, CHRISTINE

21 Hillside Placement
23 Tree Placement

LEE, DEAN

1. Beyond Earthless Peace
7 Fusion One
8 Fusion Two

PREUSSER, ROBERT

17 Crucifixion
18 Texture In Absolute
19 Absolute Speed

Catalog for the opening exhibition of 520-Our Little Gallery, May 18, 1938.

long before she, Charlton and Bailey left for their several-months European tour to see, and learn from, the most advanced art being made at the time in Paris and beyond—the very art rejected as models by Bywaters and others of the Dallas Nine. In the profile, Davidson said:

> Youth is changing the standards of our art, keying it to modern times. Many people do not like it because they can't understand it. Yet it is simple. It is the scientific approach to painting.
> Young artists are interested primarily in design. And their designs are composed of things that make our world today, things that are balanced with precision both in color and in form.
> The academics are left behind in this change – pitifully far behind. Even the medium of the young painter expresses the trend of the moment – gleeful, rushing, vivid water color in place of the more profound oil.[41]

In light of Davidson's comments, it was fitting that one of the first exhibitions in the downstairs gallery of "520-Our Little Gallery" showed several watercolors by Gene Charlton, among works in the "abstract and non-objective mood" by several of Davidson's students.[42]

Charlton and his partner in art and life, Carden Bailey, were becoming known as "among Houston's most radical moderns."[43] In their own joint newspaper profile, the two reinforced Davidson's views as they commented on aspects of the art they were making. Charlton said, "My work is obviously abstraction. ... But Carden has abstraction in his portraits, too." And Bailey added, "Our main idea is arrangement of color, line, form and light."[44] Bailey's statement almost seems like a fusion of the titles of some of Cherry's paintings

41 "Cluttered Studio Pleases This Artist Who Talks of Youth and Newer Ideas," *The Houston Press*, Books-Music-Art Section, June 18, 1937.

42 "Abstract Works Put on Display," clipping misidentified as *Houston Chronicle 1938*, pasted on a sheet titled "Robert Preusser Participation in 'Our Little Gallery'," *Robert Preusser Papers*, Archives of American Art.

43 Cora McRae, "From Houston Artists' Exhibit Brilliant Coloring, Many Abstractions Exhibited At Houston Artists Show," *Houston Chronicle*, March 6, 1938, p. 33.

44 "Two Young Houston Painters to Use Pictures as 'Tickets' for Europe," *The Houston Press*, Books-Music-Art section, June 4, 1937.

which she grouped together in what she dubbed her "Modernist Group" for exhibitions at the museums in Houston, Denver and San Antonio from 1925 to 1927, or works she created while studying with Andre Lhote in Paris in 1925/26, titles including *Arrangement*, *Color Sequence*, and *Sequences in Form and Color* (which seems to be the painting of hers on which Marsden Hartley literally demonstrated his Modernist ideas "in [her] wet paint" during a visit to her studio in Gloucester, Massachusetts, in 1920[45]).

How different from art which "must be a reflection of life" and "understandable to the layman" to be significant, as Bywaters said. Though Hogue lamented that Houston painting showed "no coastal plain, no bayou ..." and that "a valuable regional scene within easy reach goes unappreciated and unused," for the Cherry-McNeill artists, as Charlton said of their work, "It's conjured up by subject matter ..."[46] —no less true when the "subject matter" was music, light or line, than when it was the "reflection of life" of the Dallas Nine.

In fact even for Dallas Nine artists, the art they made was not a reflection of their *own* lives. They were not themselves the farmers, ranch hands, roughnecks, and construction workers they so often depicted. And their works were purposeful abstractions (if not "abstract art" as popularly understood), shaped by their goals, preconceptions and ideals, just as might be said of the works of their young Houston contemporaries, which drew more heavily on music, dance and the trappings of urban (and, yes, Eastern and European) sophistication. A measure of validation for that Cherry-McNeill stance came in 1941 when London and New York gallerist, Duncan MacDonald, on a visit to Houston, purchased one of Charlton's still-life paintings out of his studio. It was a painting in the same series as

45 For more on Cherry's 1920 encounter with Marsden Hartley see Randolph K. Tibbits, "Houston Art History Notes: Mrs. Cherry Paints With Marsden Hartley," in *The HETAG Newsletter*, no.14 (June 2017), p.7. https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth1223385/m1/7/ accessed June 13, 2022.

46 "Two Young Houston Painters to Use Pictures as 'Tickets' for Europe," *The Houston Press*, Books-Music-Art section, June 4, 1937.

Gene Charlton, *Untitled*, c. mid 1930s.
Oil on canvas, 5 1/2 x 7 1/2 inches. Huebner Family Collection, Bay City, TX.

Emma Richardson Cherry, *Untitled [Sequences in Form and Color]*, c. 1920.
Current scholarship suggests that this painting, now lost, is the Cherry painting on which Marsden Hartley painted.

Purchased From Houston Artist

A small still life (8 by 10 inches) in oil, purchased by Duncan Macdonald, London representative of the Bignou Galleries in New York and London, from Gene Charlton, Houston artist, is shown above. Only a portion of the wide white painted frame is shown. The paint quality is exceptionally good in this picture. Mr. Charlton is known for this quality, also his imagination and sensitiveness to color.

the three that would win the Museum of Fine Arts Purchase Prize in the Houston Annual Exhibition of 1942 (included in the exhibition). By this time Charlton had turned away from the non-objective, perhaps inspired by the art of Matisse and Bonnard he likely saw on his 1937 tour to Europe.[47]

But even with their differences, all the members of both groups were Texas artists, either by birth or adoption, dedicated to making Texas art in a "more modern" mode for a modern Texas.[48]

Gender/sexuality made another difference

Another crucial difference between the groups was the fundamental difference in the gender/sexuality makeup of the two. Both Hogue and Bywaters wrote clearly about the *men* who were making names for themselves in art—or were certain do so shortly.

A look at the photo-collages of Cherry-McNeill and Dallas Nine artists makes immediately apparent this major difference between the two: in Dallas the members were mostly men, while many of the Houston group were women. It is not apparent from the photos that several of the men (though not all) in the Cherry-McNeill Group appear, from existing evidence, to have been gay or bisexual; while the only documented gay member of the Dallas Nine, Lloyd Goff, left the city for New York early in the 1930s, only occasionally returning to Texas. How this difference may have played out in the different Modernisms of the two cities is a subject for deeper research.

47 This is a contact that Charlton was able to follow up just a couple of years later, while stationed in England with the United States Army during World War II. In a 1944 letter to his partner, Carden Bailey, who was serving in the US military in Florida, Charlton recounts his social and artistic interactions with MacDonald, then with Lefevre Gallery in London, including leaves spent in the city; encouragement from MacDonald, who he considered a supportive friend; and connections with other Lefevre artists, including the Scottish gay artist couple, Robert Colquhoun and Robert MacBryde—The Two Roberts, as they were known. Charlton tries to convey his excitement at these connections with Bailey, and his discovery of others he feels are working in parallel: "And they and we—are a movement—of some kind—whatever it is. They fit together in a way that you'd see immediately. Our pictures, and theirs—In the same way that Duncan reacted at our studio—They are being backed by him.—I see it so clearly now—and that is why I am so terribly impatient to work." Gene Charlton, letter to Carden Bailey, England, April 2, 1944. Original in possession of the author.

48 Against Narrowness" piece for *Art Digest* had listed his Dallas Nine colleagues as "more modern" artists.

Gene Charlton, *Oranges*, 1941.
Oil on canvas, 7 15/16 x 10 inches. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston,
17th Annual Houston Artists Exhibition, museum purchase prize, 1942, 42.8.

Gene Charlton, *Untitled [Still Life]*, purchased by Duncan MacDonald.

But undoubtedly Dallas Nine group artists, who could envision themselves in positions of leadership as a natural right, making observable impacts on the lives of their fellow citizens (visions in process of becoming reality), would have behaved differently, and had different concerns, than a Houston group, many of whose members were, by gender and nature, living and working in ways that ran counter to the socially accepted role expectations, and limitations, prevalent in Texas and beyond at the time.

By the mid-1930s, the men of the Dallas Nine were beginning to take prominent places in the art hierarchy of their city, a prominence that would be solidified when one of their own became director of the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts (today the Dallas Museum of Art). Jerry Bywaters, already an effective voice for the group as art critic for the *Dallas Morning News* and the *Dallas Times Herald*, frequent contributor on art topics to the *Southwest Review*, an artist himself, and a member of the SMU faculty, took the helm at the Museum in 1943, a position he held for two decades.

Aspiring to such a position of prominence in the Houston art establishment was not a reasonable goal at the time for the women of the Cherry-McNeill Group, even though, as the first director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, said decades later, historically "art in Houston was a woman's concern."[49] Perhaps that was true where art making was concerned, but not for such things as museum directing or organization heading—unless they were women's organizations.

49 James Chillman, Jr., "Houston," in *Texas Painting and Sculpture: The 20th Century*. Dallas: Pollock Gallery, Southern Methodist University, 1971, p. 14.

Carden Bailey, *Untitled [Ballet Scene]*, c. late 1930s.
Oil on canvas, 40 x 31 inches. Collection of Randy Tibbits and Rick Bebermeyer, Houston.

Jerry Bywaters, *Oilfield Workers*, 1940.
Oil on canvas, 36 1/2 x 30 inches. The John L. Nau III Collection of Texas Art, Houston.

Even the Houston Artists Gallery, active from 1930 through most of the decade, though largely founded by Grace Spaulding John and other Houston women artists, chose a male member, William Bulkley, as its spokesperson when attempting to lobby the Texas Legislature on an art matter in the runup to the Texas Centennial Exposition in 1936. Speaking for the predominantly female membership of the Houston Artists Gallery, Bulkley proposed that the art selection oversight board under consideration for the Centennial should be "composed of *men* [emphasis added] long identified with the best of public art interests."[50] The women artists may not have embraced the limitations their society tried to place on them, they may have resisted in many ways, but they knew that some compromises were unavoidable if they were to continue living and working within their society.

Even some of the Cherry-McNeill Group men found adaptations necessary. Writing to close friends in 1950, Forrest Bess boldly said, "I am a peculiar type of homosexual." From his letter it is clear that he did not find sharing such a secret easy, even with close friends, but it was something he felt he wanted, even had to say. Later in the same letter he continued: "I left Bay City [in 1938, after a friend had betrayed his confidence, revealing Bess's sexuality to mutual Bay City acquaintances, with predictably negative effect] and moved into Houston and there I found protection with people I thought were my own kind ..." In the same letter he recounts a gay bashing perpetrated on him a few years later, while he was serving in the military during World War II, and poignantly describes the impact the incident had on the way he lived his life and made his art:

... I swore the day I got out of the army that never again would anyone ever have the opportunity to use lead pipe—heels or blackmail against me for being homosexual. There was no reason to declare to the whole world that I was "queer" however should I be asked there would be no reason to lie or hide anything.

I do not think I can repress the sexual urge this time, enough to make a good officer [if called up for service in the Korean War] even though I am in the inactive reserves. It is going to be difficult to tell the examining board this. I have lot[?] of rank – major in the Engineers – to be "queer." The alternative is to blow my brains out and I am in no mood for this.

There has been no sex for me here [in Bay City] for the last three years because I do not intend hurting my fathers [sic] business. There too that would be one thing he couldn't understand at all. But I have knocked myself out working too hard many times – it is the only way release can be obtained.

I hope whatever action I take that I do not hurt anyone other than myself.[51]

50 "Art Board for Centennial is Suggested," *Houston Chronicle*, January 14, 1936. For a history of the Houston Artists Gallery see Randolph K. Tibbits, "The Houston Artists Gallery, 1930-1939," in *Planned, Organized and Established: Houston Artist Cooperatives in the 1930s*. San Angelo, Texas: Center for the Advancement and Study of Early Texas Art, 2017, pp. 10-19. Catalog of an exhibition presented at the Houston Public Library, August 12 – November 9, 2017.

51 Forrest Bess, letter to Rosalie and Sidney Berkowitz, August 9, 1950. Archives of American Art reel 3752.

The "people" he found in Houston in 1938, people he "thought were [his] own kind," were the members of the Cherry-McNeill Group. Over the next few years, Bess worked and exhibited with the Group. He joined them in the first exhibition at 520, their gallery of abstract art (see above). He showed the work of Carden Bailey, along with others, in the studio/gallery he opened in a converted stable;[52] he joined Charlton, Bailey, and others in an exhibition specifically devoted to art and dance;[53] he worked with Charlton and their mutual friend, Molly Huebner, on a movie theater mural in Bay City, his hometown.[54] Bess seems to have had a particularly close and long-lasting artistic and personal tie to Charlton—so long-lasting that in 1960, when Charlton made a visit to Houston for his mother's funeral, his first return to the city since the early 1950s, Huebner drove him to Bay City for a long night of drinking and art talk with Bess at his Chinquapin Island bait camp. She recounted the visit in a letter to artist, Jack Boynton: "Gene Charlton, a friend of mine is here from Italy, he has been living in Europe for about ten years, painting and teaching. He and I went to visit Forrest this past week-end. We had a wonderful time—he and Gene hadn't seen each other in so long they talked the entire time, all I did was mix drinks, cook, wait on the bait customers and listen."[55]

It is clear that at least some of the Houston people Bess thought were his "own kind," and with whom he found "protection," included members of the Cherry-McNeill Group, perhaps especially the long-term partner couple, Bailey and Charlton. In the absence of documentary evidence, such as Bess provided concerning himself in the letter quoted here, speculation about sexuality is simply speculation (though based on existing fragments of evidence begging interpretation). But it is indisputable that these Cherry-McNeill Group men, spending their personal and artistic lives together, as well as the women of the group, like Nione Carlson, who chose not to marry, were operating in ways that ran counter to the expected gender roles of the time—expected roles embraced by most of the Dallas Nine men for themselves and validated by the society in which they lived and painted. And it is reasonable to suggest that such a strong divergence between the two groups in areas so fundamental, could well have contributed to the very different ways they pursued their art.

Even for Emma Richardson Cherry who did marry and have a daughter, but who also determinedly pursued a serious art career, the path was not always easy. As she wrote to her husband, from Taormina, Sicily, in 1910, where she was at the beginning of a planned year-long art study tour in Italy: "Somehow, at home, there is so much to distract me. Here [in Italy] I have only myself. That's awfully selfish I know—and I am so ashamed of it at times that I am quite miserable over being so free. ... I feel as though it was hardly right to be so self centered [sic], where I have other claims."[56] Yet, true to her calling, she continued her art tour of Italy—as she had done years earlier, when,

52 "Stable Gives Way to Art as Studio Built," *The Houston Press*, September 30, 1938.

53 *Houston Chronicle*, January 8, 1939, Section F, p. 8.

54 "Concerning the Murals," *The Bay City Herald*, November 23, 1939.

55 Molly Huebner, letter to Ann and Jack Boynton, September 27, 1960. Archives of American Art reel 3458.

56 Emma Richardson Cherry, letter to Dillin Brook Cherry, Taormina, Sicily, February 20, 1910. E. Richardson Cherry Papers MSS.0027 Houston Metropolitan Research Center, b1,f4.

as a new bride she left her husband at home while she spent two years studying in Paris, in 1888/89; and as she would do in Paris again in 1925/26.

Davidson, also serious about her art and teaching, though perhaps not so steely as Cherry in pursuing them, felt even more stress and veiled disappointment: "Wish it were so I could desert my duties as mother, wife and caretaker to the dear old aunt and join Robert [Preusser] in his world of excitement [at the New Bauhaus in Chicago, where she had delivered him in 1939 for further study]. Alas! I am but the gang plank for the shore and boat—stretching myself full length that those on shore waiting may walk over my prostrate body and sail out to sea."[57] These were stresses that the Dallas Nine men could not have known—though they undoubtedly had stresses of their own.

57 Ola McNeill Davidson, letter to Emma Richardson Cherry, [September 1939], Emma Richardson Cherry Papers, Harris County Historical Society, Ms2, Cherry, b1,f7.

In Both Cities, things changed

After a spirited run of Modernism in both Houston and Dallas through the 1930s, huge changes lay ahead with the coming of the 1940s. Frank Reaugh died in 1945, and though Emma Richardson Cherry lived until 1954, when she died at the very advanced age of 95, she had long felt forgotten by the city whose art culture (and art museum) she had been so instrumental in founding.

For the Cherry-McNeill Group, the entry of the United States into World War II saw the literal removal from the city of most of the male members, as Charlton, Bailey, Bess, Lee, Brubaker and Preusser all joined the military, and were away for years. Though some did return to the city after the war—Charlton and Bailey, briefly, before moving together to New York, and then, Charlton without Bailey to Europe in the mid-1950s for the rest of his life;[58] Preusser until the mid-1950s, when he relocated to Cambridge, Massachusetts, to join the faculty at MIT—the group never re-formed. Davidson herself left the city when her husband retired, and the couple moved to Brazoria County, her childhood home, south of Houston.

58 Past 50, somewhat later than the norm, Charlton married and had two sons. For a look at his later career, in Italy, and his involvement in the vibrant early-1960s art milieu in Rome, where Cy Twombly also worked, see Kelly Montana, "*Torn Papers: Gene Charlton in Rome*," The Menil Collection website https://www.menil.org/read/articles/65-torn-papers-gene-charlton-in-rome accessed June 13, 2022.

Even before the war, the Dallas Nine had started to scatter. Lester and Spruce joined the faculty of the University of Texas at Austin in the early 1940s. In 1945, Hogue began a long career on the faculty of the University of Tulsa. And though Bywaters remained in Dallas, and remained a force there as director of the art museum, interest in the Regionalist movement in general declined with the tsunami of Abstract Expressionism, as was also the case with Regionalist art on the national level. It was not until the 1980s, with the rediscovery of "Lone Star Regionalism," that interest in the art that had seemed so vital in the Dallas of the 1930s, revived—a revival that has continued to the present.

Ironically, the innovative, unexpected Cherry-McNeill Group Modernism of the 1930s has been almost completely forgotten in Houston, even though it prepared some of the artists—namely Charlton, Bailey, Preusser and Bess—for careers in the larger art world of the post war years; and even though it laid a foundation on which Houston and the flood of new artists who came of age there in the 1950s and 1960s could build an art culture of national significance.

Conclusion

The current exhibition focuses on the two decades from the mid-1920s to the early 1940s, from the time when the member artists of both the Cherry-McNeill Group and the Dallas Nine began to develop conscious concepts of Modernism, continuing into the 1930s as that Modernism flourished in different ways in the art of both cities, and down to the World War II years and the disruption of both groups resulting from that conflict, among other factors. By showing the art of these Houston and Dallas artists side-by-side, artists all working seriously and contemporaneously as Modernists in Texas, the exhibition intends to explore the looks and philosophical underpinnings of these two seminal aspects of the art history of Texas. At the same time, the exhibition serves as a demonstration that by the 1930s Modernism in America was not limited exclusively to the art centers of the East, or to a group of artists in the Midwest, and that it was not a single thing, even in a relatively contained region such as Texas. It was rather a liberating force that would take its devotees along markedly different routes toward the shared ideal of creating a modern art for America, and for Texas.

Robert Preusser, *Elsewhere*, 1938.
Oil on board, 11 x 14 inches. Collection of Randy Tibbits and Rick Bebermeyer, Houston.

Otis Dozier, *Rooster and Grasshopper*, 1945.
Oil on Masonite, 17 3/8 x 23 1/2 inches. The John L. Nau III Collection of Texas Art, Houston.

The mission of HETAG is to illuminate Houston's art history by providing viewing opportunities for art, by supporting and doing research on the artists and art communities working in Houston through the years, and by spreading the word.

Back issues of the HETAG Newsletter are available via the
University of Houston Libraries Digital Library
and
The Portal to Texas History

Randy Tibbits, coordinator
HETAG: The Houston Earlier Texas Art Group
tibbits@rice.edu