

Wait a minute, that ancient art looks modern

By Corinne Abatt
Staff writer

In the lexicon of modern art, terms such as "color fields" and "minimalism" are regarded as labels for progressive thinking and action. They are often tossed into conversations with a sense of pride in courage artists such as Barnett Newman, Sam Francis and Jules Olitski had in presenting their tradition-breaking works to the public.

Therefore, it's jolting, and at the same time, exciting, to discover that these daring, adventurous styles actually date back several thousand years.

Proof?
The show of feather textiles from the Nazca culture of pre-Columbian Peru (100 B.C. to 700 A.D.) at Yaw Gallery of Birmingham is full of examples of a contemporary approach to art. The articles on display, in a rainbow of colors created by attaching bird feathers to linen, were made as burial gifts. So, they remained in the desert-like climate, unused and well-preserved.

Having already discovered that Amish quilts predate the likes of Joseph Albers who paid homage to the square, it's doubly disconcerting to find the ideas were being used very effectively by pre-Columbians in Peru.

Two of the rarest pieces in the exhibit are long narrow rectangles (13 1/4 by 36 and 13 1/4 by 40 inches) of small chartreuse feathers from either a paradise tanager or a hummingbird.

ONE HAS A SINGLE scarlet feather centered about two thirds of the way toward the top of the piece. The other has a salmon rectangle at about the center and soft horizontal stripes of teal, gold, lime and salmon at the very bottom.

These are said to be the only two in the exhibit which were done as simply beautiful objects. Several are poncho fragments, one is a burial offering bag and the rest are pecheras, apron-shaped textiles found tied around the chest outside the mummy bundle.

They are about the size of a toddler's bib. Several have abstract, stylized bird designs, several more have designs which vaguely suggest landscape and several others are a wonderful completely abstract design in brilliant, lush colors.

One of the most outstanding of these, a poncho fragment, is clumps of salmon (Chilean flamingo), blue black (Muscovy duck), blue feathers with reddish undersides (scarlet macaw) and gold (blue and white macaw). What a knockout the full-sized poncho must have been, shimmering in the sun of arid, southern Peru.

The Nazca, known for their textile skills, developed separate techniques for attaching coarse and fine feathers. They had an extraordinary design and color sense which is both awesome and humbling.

The exhibit continues through the month. Hours are 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday, 550 N. Woodward, Birmingham.

No point in making just one gallery stop in the gulch strip along North Woodward. Edward Levine's oil paintings of California, on display at Xochipilli Gallery, 568 N. Woodward, are awash with color and excitement. While the roof dancers are a bit self-conscious, the figures in the other paintings seem to be part of their environments, although the person with the backpack in "Aloft of Alvarado" leaves the viewer with an unsettling feeling.

The girl in the gold jumpsuit, pop can in hand, in "Light Lunch with the Stars," exudes a compelling kind of youthful bravado that neutralizes

her surroundings including the marquee behind her with "Live Nude Show" in big letters.

Levine's landscapes or seascapes, complete with seaside condos, light poles and flowers are among the best works in this show which continues through April 2. Hours are 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday.

CANTOR LEMBERG GALLERY'S changing show of works by gallery artists is refreshing because of the diversity.

Local sculptors James Rutkowski and Arthur Snider are each represented by one work, Rutkowski by a painted metal piece and Snider by a charming wooden cat.

There's a large painting by Aris

Koutoulis, a sculpture by D.K. Semivan (more familiar as a printmaker) and works by Sam Francis, Eric Fischel, David Salle and Julian Schnabel. The gallery is at 538 N. Woodward, hours are 11 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

FRANCIS KUSHNER'S ETCHINGS at D&J Blitzer Gallery, 538 N. Woodward fit well with the gallery's focus on the Orient. Kushner's beautiful color etching, "Tondo" was inspired by Japanese oriental fabrics.

He does etchings and drypoints in small editions on beautiful handmade Japanese papers. The gallery is open 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday.

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