



STILL LIFE
Marianetti's
Abandoned
Shoes.

INTO THE MYSTIC

LOUISE MARIANETTI AT BERT GALLERY; PLUS, BRIAN KNEP AT RISD

BY GREG COOK

⊙ The starved woman in Louise Marianetti's 1942 painting holds a copy of the libretto to Verdi's *Aida*. Her blonde ringlets are decorated with flowers, a pair of blue birds, and a veil. But what sticks with you how she stares with her eerie blue eyes.

"The Magical Realism of Louise E. Marianetti" at Bert Gallery (540 South Water Street, Providence, through March 19) resurrects the career of the artist who was born in Providence in 1916. She studied at RISD and the New York Art Students League, where she picked up the egg tempera technique of the early Renaissance. Marianetti returned to her family's home in North Providence in the early 1940s and often wore a black beret.

Paintings from the late 1930s and early '40s use bright reds, blues, and golden browns to depict children studying art or at a fair. Another tempera depicts a nude green nymph lounging with the fish at the bottom of the sea.

The high point of Marianetti's career may have been her 1949 exhibits at the Newport Art Museum and Boston's Vose Gallery (the inspiration for the Bert show). By then, her paintings had turned gloomy, prompting the *Boston Herald* to report that she "seems to be a brooding and mystical creative spirit."

You can detect the influence of the 1930s Social Realists mixed with Surrealist mystery. Marianetti's tempera painting *Abandoned Shoes*, a detailed still life of decaying shoes amidst scraps of cloth, dandelions, and autumn leaves, can bring to mind Ivan Albright's brooding eccentric paintings of tired people and rotting scenes. But her work here is more modest and the results more uneven than Albright's. It doesn't approach his mordant, rueful, astonishingly obsessive vision.

Bert Gallery owner Cathy Bert says Marianetti may have been moved by the struggles of New York poor that she learned of through Catholic service groups. But I can't help thinking of the aftermath of World War II when I see her 1949 painting *Survivors*, with a bunch of heads crowded into the picture around a weary, grimy, haunted-eyed woman in a hood and cape who holds a sleeping child to her breast. Marianetti paints the woman's face with lots of short brushstrokes that make it look as if her skin is falling apart.

At the Vose show, according to family lore, she met Everett Marshall, a baritone who made his debut at New York's Metropolitan Opera in 1927 and starred in the 1935 Busby Berkeley film *I Live for Love*. After a decade of courtship, Marshall and Marianetti married in Texas in 1959. After his death in 1963 in California, Marianetti returned to Rhode Island, where she lived until her death in 2009.

Marshall may be the white-haired dandy smoking a pipe behind Marianetti's self-portrait in *At the Opera*, which Bert dates to 1948. Marianetti has long flowing white hair and is dressed in a witchy broad brimmed hat and long cape. She paints upon a board held up by a gaunt, gray figure wrapped up like a mummy. At first it



HAUNTED Marianetti's *Survivors*.

seems like an allegory about the artist, powerful men, and death. But the title's reference to opera suggests that it's a goth performance too.

⊙ Brian Knep of Cambridge, Massachusetts, is one of the most interesting digital artists in the region, and perhaps the country, because he pays as much attention to the tech (1991 master's in computer science from Brown, a stint developing special effects for the film *Jurassic Park*) as to meaning.

"Exempla" presents four of his recent interactive digital projections of communities of doodled figures (actually a three-year-old's drawings) at the RISD Museum (224 Benefit Street, Providence, through March 6). In *Embark*, the characters float inside lozenges at left or right. Press a red button on either side, and some rush into a bubble that drifts to the other lozenge. In *Excel*, the characters spin around a circle (faster or slower depending on how you press a floor pedal) until they vanish into a bright light at the center. Turn on the timer of *Expand* and the figures swarm a bright circle of light. If they squeeze in, they inflate and drift back to down. Repeat.

The interactions are simple — more on and off than actually guiding the characters — but the simplicity helps them read like metaphors, or case studies, or little poetic fables. They speak of cycles of life, and human purpose, and fertility, and the desire for transcendence. ☉

Read Greg Cook's blog at gregcookland.com/journal.



SELF-PORTRAIT Detail from *At the Opera*.