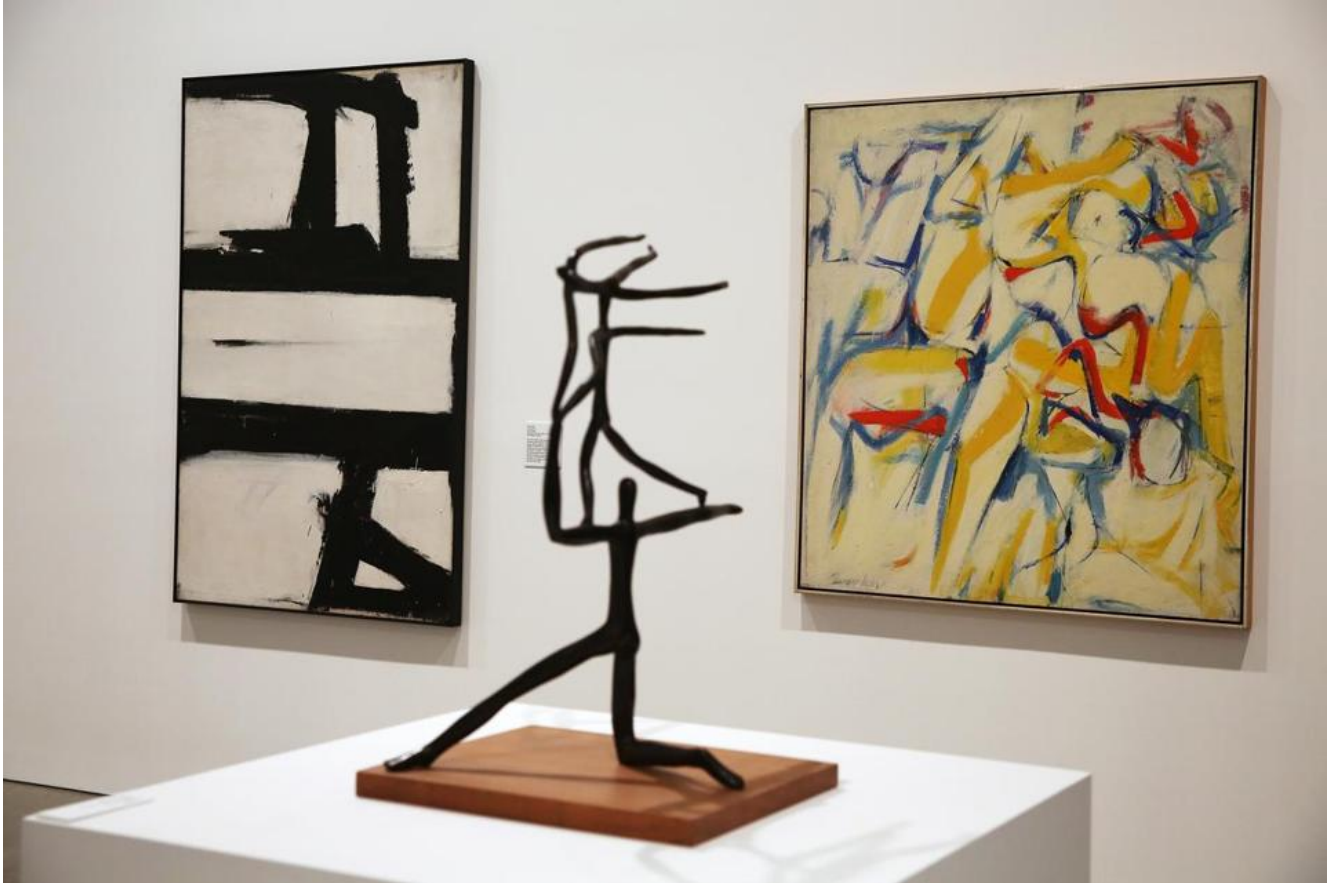


ART REVIEW

Genius abounds in landmark ICA exhibit



PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

From left: Works by Franz Kline, Mary Callery, and Jack Tworckov in “Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College 1933-1957” at the Institute of Contemporary Art.

By Sebastian Smee | GLOBE STAFF OCTOBER 13, 2015

“Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College 1933-1957” at the Institute of Contemporary Art is a show not only every art-school student in this region but every artist, every student, every teacher, and every former student will profit from seeing. I imagine that accounts for everyone.

Organized by Helen Molesworth (who left the ICA last year to become curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles) with assistance from the ICA's Ruth Erickson, it is one of those rare great shows that is not overburdened with great art.

There are, it is true, some very special pieces, including breakthrough works by Elaine and Willem de Kooning, Robert Rauschenberg, and Cy Twombly, and a masterpiece by Ruth Asawa. But it's not, in the end, a show that's particularly interested in masterpieces. "It is not our ambition to fill museums," said Black Mountain College's legendary instructor, Josef Albers; "we are gathering experience."

Instead, the show is about a bunch of young artists coming into their own. More than that, it's about the fate of an ideal, and the coming-into-being of a new relationship between art and its public.

As an experiment in education, Black Mountain was not only touchingly optimistic and poignantly fragile; it was also profoundly generative. (In all three senses, I suppose, it was classically American.) Its impact on the aesthetics of the postwar period, up until today, has been massive in ways that, given the small size and all-around tenuousness of the endeavor, can still seem hard to credit.

It's for that reason, more than simply because so many of the biggest names of postwar culture passed through Black Mountain — people like Rauschenberg, Twombly, Asawa, the de Koonings, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Anni and Josef Albers, Jacob Lawrence, Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Shoji Hamada, Buckminster Fuller, Aaron Siskind, and Franz Kline — that it deserves our attention.

Situated for most of its life on the aptly named Lake Eden, in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, Black Mountain College was a utopian experiment that coincided with a global descent into madness and a slow, scarred reemergence from catastrophe. These outside circumstances affected the intimate spirit of the place profoundly.

Black Mountain was not an art school. It was a small, experimental, and frequently embattled liberal arts college. It was a place, as the artist John Chamberlain put it, where “people were more interested in what they didn’t know than in what they did.”

It opened in 1933, after a maverick teacher, classics professor John Rice, was sacked from Rollins College in Winter Park, Fla. Rice decided to start a new college. He was supported by former students and faculty at Rollins, including physics teacher Theodore Dreier, nephew of the wealthy art collector Katherine Dreier, who had cofounded the Societe Anonyme with Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray. (Duchamp’s spirit can be felt as a kind of subterranean trickle in the early work of such Black Mountain alumni as Cage, Cunningham, and Rauschenberg.)

Dreier’s family connections secured a commitment of \$10,000 from the Forbes family. Thus fortified, the college opened with 22 students on the grounds of a former Christian summer camp. (It moved to Lake Eden eight years later.)

Rice knew nothing about art, which makes it all the more astounding that he insisted on art having a permanent place not on the fringe of the curriculum “but at the very center of things.” When Rice told Philip Johnson, then the curator of architecture at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, about the new college, Johnson suggested he try to appoint Josef Albers, a well-known teacher from the Bauhaus in Germany.

Famous for its communal idealism and its attempts to weld together art with design and everyday life, the Bauhaus had recently closed because it refused to accept Nazis onto its teaching faculty. Albers didn't speak English. But he and his wife, Anni, a pioneering modernist weaver, were game.

When they arrived at Black Mountain, Josef's lessons hinging on the building blocks of art (drawing, color, material, form) were translated into English by Anni, who soon established the college's influential weaving course.

Spread throughout the first part of the show are paintings, prints, and pedagogical aids by Josef (including a wall of his famous demonstrations of the relative properties of color) and textiles and jewelry by Anni.

We quickly get a sense of the college's belief in the importance of immersing the students in fundamentals: careful observation of the natural world, understanding the properties of materials, making do with scarcity (Anni's necklace made from bottle corks and Josef's colored-paper demonstrations are both great examples), and "learning by doing" (a mantra of the philosopher John Dewey).

In the mythology of Black Mountain — and there is no end to it — Josef Albers's reputation for Teutonic discipline has always rubbed up suggestively against the college's reputation for radical freedom, its youthful romance. But Albers, too, was committed to an egalitarian ideal and to the imagination's free play. Although he hated "self-expression," he does not seem to have cramped the college's lively spirit at all. His stern pedagogical persona probably helped to anchor its more wayward tendencies.

Subsequent sections focus on Fuller and experimental architecture (Fuller invented his famous geodesic dome at Black Mountain), on modernist painting and sculpture, on music, dance, poetry, and pottery.

To the strains of recorded music — a constant accompaniment to life at Black Mountain — we also take in large numbers of brilliant photographs. Many are by the marvelous Hazel Larsen Archer, who studied under Josef Albers before becoming a teacher and administrator at the college.

Along the way, we learn of the importance of the summer classes, which began in 1944, and to which many of the college's most famous teaching alumni were invited. Willem and Elaine de Kooning, for instance, came to Black Mountain to teach summer classes in 1948, joining a legendary cast including Cunningham, Cage, and Fuller. Both de Koonings executed vitally important work while there.

These summer sessions, explains Molesworth in the catalog, “consolidated Black Mountain’s identity as an art school, even though it was not one.” They “permitted an extraordinary form of cross-pollination.” Subsequent summers focused on different media: photography, for instance, in 1951; pottery in 1952.

I cannot praise the show’s beautiful and accessible catalog highly enough. It will have a long life, and will ensure that “Leap Before You Look” will be looked back on for years to come as the landmark event that it is.

But the genius of the exhibition proper is that its complex web of stories are told not so much through long-winded wall labels as through objects placed judiciously beside one another.

A loom used in the weaving workshop set up by Anni Albers, for instance, is installed in the vicinity of a grand piano prepared for compositions by Cage. Both mechanisms, the piano and the loom, have foot pedals and strings; both have percussive elements; both occupy positions of importance near the center of Western culture. One, with its glossy surface and expensive curves, evokes old Europe; the other American pragmatism and making-do.

Already, then, these two objects begin to encapsulate much of what was special about Black Mountain. But it is only a beginning. The same room includes, among other things, a hanging textile by Lore Kadden Lindenfeld, a hanging wire sculpture by Asawa, a sculpture by Chamberlain that weaves together bent wire and crushed car parts, and a painted assemblage by Rauschenberg.

Regarded by many as his first “Combine,” the Rauschenberg called

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Minutiae, was made as a stage set or backdrop for a dance of the same name choreographed by Cunningham, whose dancing can be seen on a giant nearby screen, beside photographs by Archer of Rauschenberg himself dancing.

Elsewhere in the show, poems are displayed beside pottery, letters beside drawings and photographs, architectural models and plans near jewelry, and textiles and paintings near pedagogical exercises and sundry experiments.

Does it sound like a jumble? It’s not. Rather, it’s both precise and deliberately open-ended.

As a historical show, “Leap Before You Look” is, on the face of it, an unusual experiment for the ICA, which prefers to engage the present. But the ideas and approaches pursued at Black Mountain did so much to set the conditions for art-making today that the show is as relevant and timely as anything the museum has put on. In its focus on dance, textiles, and the conversation between different artistic disciplines, the show is also a natural follow-up to earlier ICA shows such as “Dance Draw” and “Fiber: Sculpture 1960-Present.”

In many ways, the ideas and energy coming out of Black Mountain marked the end of what Molesworth describes as “a utopian culture of anodyne art-for-art’s-sake” and the beginning of a more engaged and cosmopolitan view of art that has a role to play “within a community of shared and competing interests and desires.”

Put like that, art-for-art's sake can sound suddenly more appealing. And yet of course Molesworth is right. The driving emphasis in contemporary art on process over product, on the relationship between artworks and viewers, on theory, on pedagogy, on institutional structures, all seem to point back in some way to Black Mountain (although of course so much of this was coming anyway).

What happens to the strangeness, the mystery, the unaccountable self-sufficiency of the singular work of art, I wonder, in this new, cosmopolitan, community-minded context? Does it have any purchase?

I believe it does, in part because it can speak to us of things that are otherwise ultimately incommunicable and therefore beyond community. Death, for example. Death is the great counter-utopia, the big anti-Eden. Many of the artists and poets who attended Black Mountain, including Twombly and Olson, came to grasp this.

It's perhaps fitting, then, that the final works in the show are a dazzling set of drawings by Stan VanDerBeek, a student at Black Mountain from 1949 to 1951 (and later a pioneering experimental filmmaker). Titled "A Book of Ours," after the Christian devotional "Book of Hours," they show crudely drawn skulls and Picassoid figures banging up against one another or cutting each other's hair, with obscurely related messages such as "THERE ARE NO LAWS ABOUT TIME" scrawled alongside.

It's haunting work, and it lends the optimism and bright energy of this exuberant show a necessary counterweight.

LEAP BEFORE YOU LOOK: Black Mountain College 1933-1957

At Institute of Contemporary Art, through Jan. 24. 617-478-3100,
www.icaboston.org