

the world of art

Debra Yates: Modernist with Latin Colors

By Joel Blair

We too often assume that modern art is difficult. Yet Hogarth's cartoon-like narratives are grounded in a culture distant in both time and place and therefore much more inaccessible. And most Renaissance art requires considerable knowledge of myth and history with which most of us are unfamiliar. Modern art simply requires an attentive eye and an honest response to what you see. And the attentive eye can be cultivated by experience.

One of the simplest and most significant techniques in art of the 20th century is the gesture (a strong line, usually black), exemplified perhaps most effectively by the work of Franz Klein and of Robert Motherwell.

I remember saying to a friend: "I don't understand what Klein's work is about." The friend said: "What do you see when you look at one of his paintings?" Tentatively, I said: "I suppose, power, strength." He responded: "Well?" So the problem with Klein was solved.

The gesture, a bold line from which the rest of the painting emerges, is a major motif in Debra Yates' work. The large double canvas pictured here has three long black arcs (in oil, the other colors are acrylic) and strong, wide, white arcs repeat two of the black ones.

The painting's drama results in the contrast of the orange-red ovals enclosed in black circles and in the variety of the varied juxtaposition of the other colors:



Untitled diptych by Debra Yates.

position of the other colors: brown, green and blue; the blue defines the right and left horizontal edges of the work. Note that the greens and browns are also a series of curved, thick gestural arcs. The two vertical, yellow lines of linen, which are painted yellow, work with

the blue to define the two edges of the compositions.

Most of Yates' paintings are in fact collages. She uses paper, metal, wire mesh along with strips of bamboo as elements that diversify the piece and also enliven the work's texture.

The distinctive element

in these modernist paintings is her use of strong, vivid colors. These result, at least partially, from her youth spent in Key West, close to the influences of the Caribbean. Yet her mentor and friend was Roberto Burle Marx, a painter and great landscape architect. His Brazilian palate of rich colors clearly was a significant influence on his own work.

Most of the works in the exhibit at The Studios of Key West are large. But there are several smaller pieces, about 1-by-3 or 4-foot horizontals. In these, Yates has less complex action than in the larger work and there is a lyricism in them that is very appealing.

The exhibit at the Armory Building, 600 White St., extends until March 15.