

The California Son

The CCAA Museum of Art presents the illuminating work of Milford Zornes

By: Stacy Davies



The California Style watercolor movement began in the 1920s, originated by a bold young group of painters who depicted realist landscapes and the people who inhabited them in a vibrant style with minimalist sketching that would come to define the genre. James Milford Zornes was a part of that innovative group, studying with Pomona native Millard Sheets—the recognized leader and driving force behind the movement—and traveling the world as a soldier during WWII, recording his environment and its people along the way. Eventually settling in Claremont, where one of his New Deal murals still adorns the local post office, Zornes served as the art director of the Padua Hills Theatre for over a decade and taught painting workshops both at Pomona College and internationally for over 50 years until his death at age 100 in 2008.

During his years in Claremont, Zornes developed a special relationship with the Chaffey Community Art Association Museum where his works were often exhibited—and where some are placed into the permanent collection. The museum has recently been chosen by the Zornes family to be the premiere exhibition venue for Zornes' extensive collection of works each year. Curator J. Cheryl Bookout had a wealth of paintings to choose from for this inaugural show, and since Zornes' career was so lengthy and his paintings so numerous, with keen insight fittingly chose to arrange them in a loose chronology of his life and experiences. In her curatorial essay, Bookout highlights noteworthy moments in Zornes' career—like when Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt selected one of Zornes' watercolors to hang in the White House—and this additional knowledge of Zornes' life and achievements seems key to understanding the other layer of meaning in his work, something that goes beyond the exceptional artistic hand we see before us.

While all of the works in this exhibit have tremendous merit and beauty, one of the most striking pieces is the 1937 watercolor and ink, *Delivering the Mail*. It sounds regular enough, and the image of the black, rickety mail car stopped at a few tired mailboxes marooned alongside a vast rural road is stunning in its simplicity and sense of isolation. But is it a sad image? The year of its creation was indeed a perilous one, like most of the years following the Great Crash of '29, but 1937 in particular ushered in a second recession to an economy that had begun to slowly recover. This date consequently informs the image even further—what is the mailman delivering? A letter from a father

who's set off to find work where there is none, a son writing home to tell his mother he's fine, enclosing a quarter from his last 60-hour week cash cropping?

Likewise, *The Circus* and *The Campers*—both painted in 1932—might at first seem like lovely rural portraits; the first is of a rather colorless tent with no spectacular animals and a small boy in a cowboy hat meandering toward it with his father, and the other an amber-evening picnic in the forest with family or friends. But remember the dates and we wonder if the father had saved that penny admission for the circus for weeks just to see his son smile, and if the campers might really be *residing* in that forest, unable to find work or food. The same is true when we look at the lovely serenity of the uninhabited ocean of *Mid Pacific*, and are then reminded that it was painted in 1943 when Zornes was most likely on a navy ship or carrier, headed toward war.

His later works are equally striking. The choppy, dark waves in *The Sea at Shell Beach* and the stark and lovely—and only unclothed—woman on the beach in *Nude and the Sea* reveal the possible influence of the rebelliousness and free-thinking of the late '60s and '70s and shows Zornes was always in tune with his environment and the era.

But it's really his ability to both hide and show story that is the most striking feature about Zornes' work in this collection—what he saw in comparison to what really might have been there. All artists filter their environment, usually embedding message within it via shape, color, or title. With realist painters, sometimes the tragedy and harshness of the world are made plain, and, conversely, might be so sugar-coated that it trails off into the dreamy. Zornes had the ability to see whatever was in front of him—the horrors of the Great Depression and WWII, in particular—and show the innate truth of that picture; not necessarily what he *wished* to see, but what he *did* see, which was the simple, uncomplicated beauty in it all.

"The Art of Milford Zornes from Private Collections" at the CCA Museum of Art, 12467 Baseline Rd., Rancho Cucamonga, (909) 463-3733; www.ccaamuseum.org. Fri-Sun, noon-5PM. Free.