

Abstract: Art apart

Decades ago: Charles Seliger painted his 1944 work "Confrontation: Scorpion and Tarantula" when he was "just phasing out of the Surrealist period" at age 18.



Artist Seliger reflects on roots of organic style

By Ann Hicks
ARTS WRITER
ahicks@greenvillenews.com

"I knew them all," says the compactly built man with the large dark eyes. "Pollock, Tobey, Mondrian, Tanguy, Hofmann, de Kooning, Gottlieb and Ernst."

The names drip like viscous paint off Charles Seliger's palette.

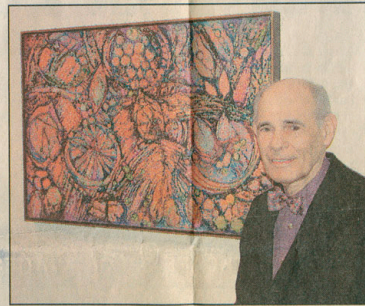
Into his seventh decade of life and sixth decade of painting, Seliger is the last remaining member of an elite group of New York artists who reached acclaim in the 1940s and '50s.

They were the Abstract Expressionists, or more appropriately the American-style painters.

Early in his self-revelatory interview, Seliger talks about his boyhood idols.

When he was about 13 or 14 years old, he says, his heroes were lawyer Clarence Darrow, scientist Albert Einstein and Belgian poet Maurice Maeterlinck.

During a painting-to-painting walk with him through his 40-piece retrospective currently on view



American-style painter: Charles Seliger is the last remaining member of an elite group of New York Abstract Expressionist artists who won acclaim in the 1940s and '50s.

WANT TO GO?

- **What:** "Charles Seliger: Six Decades of Abstraction"
- **When:** Through June 22; museum hours are 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday, 1-5 p.m. Sunday
- **Where:** Greenville County Museum of Art, 444 College St.
- **Tickets:** Free and open to the public
- **Information:** 271-7570

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This Century," at the time the leading gallery for new art in New York.

And, he was not much older when he exhibited alongside Jackson Pollock, Max Ernst and Adolph Gottlieb. He says he was the youngest artist Guggenheim had ever shown.

As an interesting aside, Seliger mentions being asked to contribute personal knowledge about the Abstract Expressionist era to actor/director Ed Harris in 2000, when the latter filmed his biographical movie "Pollock."

Like his contemporaries, Seliger's early work reflects the influence of the Surrealists and Cubists.

Standing next to his 1944 work titled "Confrontation," with its insect-like forms in black, maroon and fiery orange, he says, "Here you see when I was just phasing out of the Surrealist Period in 1944 at age 18."

Turning away from his preceding interest, he plunged into the concept of automatism.

That technique allows the mind of the brush to move without too much direction.

Accidents and whatever happens with the paint itself are welcome, he says, adding that he began to discover the unexpected territory beyond the obvious.

"I started to work with the paint and it began to have a quality that one saw in nature — the organic nature of Nature," he says. "And it coincided with my reading Lucretius, the Roman poet, who spoke about atoms and the particles in sunlight that fascinated him."

Although it is good to know what goes on in the creative mind of Seliger, it is just as great to simply stroll through this astonishing exhibit that in many ways reminds one of the inside-the-body molecular-sized travel in the 1987 movie "Innerspace."

Seliger loves to dwell at the sub-atomic structure of things. His canvases loom covered from edge to edge in purple, blue, green, azure, red, orange and white.

They shimmer and squirm with tiny, wiggly, worm-like forms alongside millions of painstakingly drawn circles and dots.

You get the feeling that left to their own devices, these atomic particles would slide off the canvas, and crawl under the electron microscope. Or, board spaceships to distant planets from where they originally escaped.

You feel the urge to come close, nose-to-nose, to see how he builds paint upon thick paint then, deconstructs his fantastic palette of colors with various scraping tools.

Sometimes, he attacks the surface with sandpaper to get at the

innards of the form within the form.

It's a treasure hunt.

Seliger says the painting will work from a distance but it will release more and more information the closer you get.

"They pop-out at you."

Not so his signature.

It is very tiny, and the whimsy is to try to find it, he says, peering hard into his work trying to locate it.

"Here it is!" he shouts delightfully.

His works wear names like "Hidden Skeleton" (1945), "Confrontation: Scorpion and Tarantula" (1950), "Enchantment" (1971), "Murmurings" (1986), and "Alchemy" (1991), "Crystal Garden" (2001) and "Boundless Worlds" (2001).

Boundless, it is. Also, it is timeless.

"My art reflects a new landscape," he says standing at peace and looking over his six-decade oeuvre.

Two things have influenced his art, Seliger adds. One is the microscope, and the other, the airplane.

"Much of modern art looks as if life was viewed through microscopes or as an aerial view of the earth below — those are the influences of our century.

True.

And as far as Seliger knows, they will be the influences for centuries to come.