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## News

# Brunswick art museum unveils a new 'Night Vision'



Walter Wuthmann

Wednesday, July 1, 2015 at 11:00 am

BRUNSWICK — Paintings by artists including Georgia O'Keefe, George Bellows and Albert Bierstadt have a new summer home in Brunswick.

An exhibition titled "Night Vision: Nocturnes in American Art, 1860-1960," traces the evolution of American night scenes from "the introduction of electricity to the dawn of the Space Age," according to Bowdoin College Museum of Art Curator Joachim Homann.

"Night Vision," which opened June 27 and will run through Oct. 18, is the first major museum exhibition dedicated to examining night scenes in American art, according to BCMA Co-Director Frank Goodyear.

Homann on Friday said the inspiration for the show came from noticing the popularity of two nocturnes in the museum's own permanent collection. He said visitors are drawn to two paintings in particular: Winslow Homer's 1893 "The Fountains at Night, World's Colombian Exposition," and Andrew Wyeth's "Night Hauling," from 1944.

People's reactions to these works made Homann and museum staff ask: "What is it about night scenes that attract so much attention? What do they say about our cultural attitudes?" he said.

"Night Vision" seeks to answer these questions.

Homann said nocturnes really began to change in the mid-19th century because new technologies transformed the way Americans saw the night. As electricity began to light up the night sky, artists' renderings of the night started to be "much more than pretty moonlit nocturnal landscapes," Homann said.

Instead, artists were pushed to find "creative visions of what the night can do ... conventions (began to) unsettle," he said.

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Photo: Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery

Beauford Delaney's "Untitled (Jazz Club)," painted in 1950, is the final piece in "Night Vision" at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art in Brunswick.

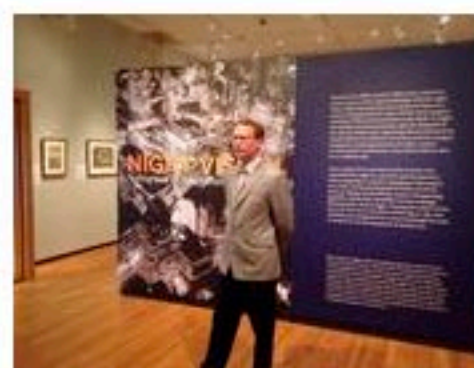


Photo: Walter Wuthmann / The Forecaster

"Night Vision," curated by Bowdoin College Museum of Art's Joachim Homann, is the first major museum exhibition dedicated to night scenes in American art.

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Homann placed Homer's "The Fountains at Night" as a starting point for the exhibit. The painting depicts three figures rowing through the fountain at the Chicago World's Fair, which according to Homann, was one of the first large-scale displays of electric light.

Homann painted the canvas in monochrome, the figures black against the glowing white water.

The other painting that served as an original inspiration, Wyeth's "Night Hauling," lies in the final gallery. In it, a lobster thief pulls a trap out of the ocean as water full of bio-luminescent algae pours out of its wooden slats.

Painted in the final years of World War II, Homann said the strange composition of the canvas – the light is in the water, not in the stars in the sky – reflects uneasiness about security in a "world turned upside down."

In the galleries between "The Fountains at Night" and "Night Hauling," the walls are lined with paintings building from realism to abstraction.

To pull it off, BCMA secured loans from institutions like the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Homann said the Bowdoin museum built a lot of momentum and recognition with its 2011 exhibition "Edward Hopper's Maine," which attracted a record 44,000 visitors.

BCMA has the "facilities, security and environmental requirements" to house high-quality art, Homann said, in addition to the support of the college's more than \$1 billion endowment, its museum membership and the contributions of private donors.

Two paintings Homann said the museum is "very lucky" to have for the new exhibit are a pair of works by O'Keefe, painted while she was living in New York City between 1926 and 1929.

"New York, Night" is a realistic depiction of the view of the city skyline from O'Keefe's apartment window. Even though it is representational, the moving electric landscape of the city challenged O'Keefe's ideas of representation, Homann said. She saw the cars driving Lexington Avenue as "little lights going up and down in a bottle."

Right next to it is another picture of New York night, although it's not obvious at first glance. "Black Abstraction" is purely abstract; it shows a ball of light riding a gray line that passes through a black circle.

Homann called "Black Abstraction" a "counter-argument" to the more realistic "New York, Night," displaying O'Keefe's struggle to find how best to create "resonate works" with the nocturne as a "reference point."

Homann, who has been at BCMA since 2011 and is originally from Germany, said curating "Night Vision" has changed the way he sees American art.

"Before, the image I had of American culture as a European is more bright," he said. He characterized the work of American artists as having a "progressive dynamic."

"The sense of urgency that speaks through these (night) paintings, though ... surprised me. (I saw) things I haven't been able to see before," he said.

Most paintings in the exhibition, because they are nocturnes, are dark. Light plays across the subjects as artists address what Homann calls the "sense of urgency" inspired by the night.

The last painting in "Night Vision," though, is a bright-colored rendering of a New York jazz club.

"Untitled (Jazz Club)," painted by Beauford Delaney in 1950, is "buzzing with life," Homann said.

Delaney, a black artist living in New York in a time of heightened racial tension, painted his night scene in color to display "how a community happens," Homann said.

People and light are colored yellow, pink, blue, and green to represent "integration." The jazz club was a private world where Delaney found comfort, Homann said.

Homann said he hopes other museums will focus on night scenes to explore movements and ideas in art.

"There's something about night," he said. "... Artists (were) realizing they could express themselves not by visual detail alone by a deeper basis for artistic expression."

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