

Ruth Dealy: In the Land of the Blind

The RISD Museum of Art
224 Benefit Street
Providence, Rhode Island
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By Michael Cochran

The important thought to keep in mind when first looking at Ruth Dealy's exhibition at The RISD Museum of Art is that it doesn't matter that these paintings were painted while she was going blind. Although this is the concept of the exhibition, she's a darned good painter and that shouldn't influence our experience of her work. Yes, she's showing eight five by five foot acrylic paintings completed while she was losing her sight several years ago. But, these paintings stand on their own without a personal narrative to explain their creation. And, that's how good art exists in the world, by not relying on rhetoric to justify or enhance its existence.

These eight paintings are bold impressions of the view of Regent Park through her studio window in the Mount Pleasant District of Providence. Painting sometimes on a specially-built large easel, sometimes on the wall or floor, Dealy works solely with water-based acrylics, for safety's sake, but sometimes mixes metallic powder into the pigment to give lustres that border on the sheen of oils. Her wide bold brush stokes define leaf and tree forms as implications of the natural environment. Within each stretched canvas world are the micro-images of her studio interposed with the macro-world of the adjacent park. It's how we all view our personal worlds, internally and externally, but she blends them so easily that there are no apparent distinctions.

Dealy's paintings can be experienced viscerally as well as intellectually and during a recent studio visit, she mentioned that she sometimes paints with her hands when brushes keep her too far away from the canvas. The excitement and passion of that process is definitely conveyed to the viewer and yet it is still carefully balanced with cerebral intent. Within each composition a tension is created between the defining one-inch brush stokes and the gauzy backgrounds that can be seen through the enigmatic shapes. There is a thoughtful placement of specific marks that punctuate these ethereal spaces. In Dealy's words, she's "striving to create movement from stillness," and she definitely succeeds.

The paintings can also be seen as large "windows" into a world where the balance between thought and feeling is manifested. While in her studio, it was possible to look through the same real windows and view the same images that created her impressions just as I had done many years before in Jackson Pollock's old studio on Long Island, New York. Impressions from their natural worlds were seen through windows, synthesized and presented on canvas for each of us to experience and interpret.

These paintings are definitely Dealy's worlds and we have a unique opportunity to see them as she did then; that's one of the many joys of looking into a painter's impressions. Her worlds are optimistic and full of hope. There is energy and movement, space and flowing forms that lead us easily into her realms. Yes, it's Regent Park but it might as well be called Dealy's Park, with her special playground and trees. These are eight wonderful windows to her world and each of us should value the viewing opportunity.