

“Portraying the Inherent Vitality of Nature”:

an interview with Ben Norris

by Esther Mürer

This interview with Ben Norris, whose work is currently on display at Friends Center, was adapted from the May 1997 newsletter of Central Philadelphia Monthly Meeting, where Ben is currently a member.

Ben initially joined Honolulu Monthly Meeting in 1949, and was clerk of that meeting when the boat Golden Rule came to Hawaii ten years later. Ben has long been active in peace work, including the Alternatives to Violence Project. The present article focuses on Ben Norris the painter.

Ben Norris grew up in California. Upon graduating from Pomona College in 1930, he was awarded a 3-year scholarship, which was cut short by the onset of the Depression. After a year of graduate study at the Fogg Museum at Harvard and 11 months at the Sorbonne in Paris, he returned to California to pursue a career as a landscape painter.

In 1936 Ben went to Hawaii to be the first art teacher at the Kamehameha School for Boys. After a year there, he was invited to teach at the University of Hawaii, where he stayed until his retirement in 1976. In 1940 he was invited to exhibit a piece in the Chicago International Watercolor Show. He was honored and pleased to be in the show, and to be mentioned in a national art magazine; the critic wrote, “Norris’s watercolor is hung with the academicians, from which it differs in its emphasis on the inherent vitality of nature.” Ben feels that this comment sums up his landscape painting.

Pearl Harbor destroyed any momentum which this show might have given to Ben’s career. For the next several years it was impossible to ship his work to be shown anywhere. After Pearl Harbor Hawaii was under martial law; the University was closed, and all of the population had to be fingerprinted. Ben ran two fingerprinting stations. When the University reopened the following semester, there were hardly any students; so Ben took courses in printmaking from a colleague.

In 1946 Ben became chairman of the Art Department, which then had 2½ faculty members. By 1955, when he left to spend a year as Fulbright professor in Japan, the faculty numbered fifty.

As a large frog in Hawaii’s little pond Ben met artists he would never have had a chance to meet in New York or Paris. He brought visiting artists to Hawaii--among others the surrealist Max Ernst. “Max was totally charming,” says Ben. “He saw with what was going on in his head more than what was really there. He gave me my first contact with surrealism and abstract art, and

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introduced me to the approach of interrogating materials. ‘What are you painting? I don’t know, I haven’t finished it yet.’ That’s surrealism.”

In 1993 Ben was honored with a retrospective show of his work in Honolulu. The show stops in the early fifties, when Ben was just beginning his explorations of abstract and surrealist techniques. “It seems to take about 50 years for works to become collectors’ items,” he says. The paintings which have been selling of late are those which fall into the niche “California landscape painters of the 30s and 40s”. Collectors are now beginning to show an interest in the niche “Americans exploring abstract painting in the 40s and 50s.”

After his retirement in 1976 Ben moved to New York, and thence to Stapeley in Germantown in 1993. Around that time he came as close as he ever has to a “high- voltage” spiritual experience when a voice in a dream said , “Ben, buy a computer!” The result was a 350-page memoir—an invaluable spiritual exercise, but not for publication.

Since then Ben has resumed painting. For reasons of space he has decided to stick mainly to watercolors. He is currently working on a series of a dozen or so large watercolors done from photos taken in the Manoa rain forest on Oahu. Many of them show trees being captured by vines. One has been accepted for exhibition in Springfield, MO.

Until very recently Ben has not had words to describe how his painting meshes with his Quakerism. He has never felt the relevance of painting on pious themes. He has long been attracted to the spiritual disciplines of Zen Buddhism, the mindfulness sutra of Hinduism, and Brother Lawrence’s “practice of the presence of God.”

An article by Sallie McFague in the Spring 1997 issue of *EarthLight* (published by the Unity with Nature Committee of Pacific YM) brought the relation between art and spirituality dramatically into focus for him:

To love something is to perceive it and one can be helped to see it, really see it...through art. We cannot love what we do not know— know in itself, for itself. Art stops, freezes, frames bits of reality and by so doing, helps us to pay attention...

Simone Weil wrote, “absolute attention is prayer.” She does not say that prayer is absolute attention but that absolute attention is prayer. By paying attention to some fragment, some piece of matter, in our world, we are in fact praying.

“I live my Quakerism by paying close attention and responding to nature, looking at differences and treating them nonjudgmentally. I have only very recently found these words for what I do with painting.”

This insight has helped Ben come to terms with the conflict he feels between his social leadings and the acquisitiveness, competitiveness, and conspicuous consumption which characterize the

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art world. Rather than fret about the conflict he can now accept it as a mystery. “I pay attention to the mystery just as I pay attention to the transparencies,” says Ben.

Examples of Ben Norris's work may be found on the website of the [Childs Gallery, Boston](#).

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