

Houston's ambitious artists have embraced a world of ideas

Always modern-spirited, the city's art scene took many decades to develop

By **Molly Glentzer** Published 8:05 pm, Wednesday, July 6, 2016



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Installation view of This is Contemporary Art at the Contemporary Arts Association, 1948.

Emma Richardson Cherry had only lived in Houston for about a year when she curated the art show for the **Texas Coast Fair** in 1896. But she wasted no time opening others' eyes to the possibilities of a broader world.

The show would be featuring works of Impressionism by "artists who resented many of the old ideas" and "dared to make innovations and establish a new point of view," she told the **Galveston Daily News**.

Her spirit came to define an art scene that was ambitiously contemporary from the get-go.

Houston's first professional artist was a native of Illinois who studied in New York and Paris and landed with family in Houston out of financial necessity, after the Panic of 1893. By then Cherry had painted at Giverny, **Claude Monet**'s garden. Two decades later, she would be the only Texas member of **Société Anonyme** Inc., the modern art organization founded by **Katherine Dreier**, **Man Ray** and **Marcel Duchamp**.

Houston had no market for the modern art Cherry espoused. She made good income from portraits and flower paintings, but when she painted for herself, she was always pushing forward. Her Cubist and Abstract works, kept in her family for decades, have only come to light in recent decades.

More Information

Dorothy Hood

The Color of Being/El Color del Ser

When: Sept. 29-Jan. 8

Where: Art Museum of South Texas,
1902 N. Shoreline Blvd., Corpus Christi

Tickets: \$4-\$8, children under 12 free;
361-825-3500, artmuseumofsouthtexas.org

"Insistent Bells,"

By Dorothy Hood, ca. 1963.

Cherry also shared her zeal for the avant-garde with students, co-founding the **Houston Public Art School League**, the precursor to the **Museum of Fine Arts**, Houston, in 1900. Her protégé **Ola McNeill Davidson** helped train the first group of home-grown Houston artists, who came of age in the 1930s and '40s.

Davidson, who encouraged students to find their own voices and attend major art schools, also set up one of the nation's first galleries devoted to abstract art in a converted garage she called Our Little Gallery.

Her talented bunch included **Robert Preusser**, who began exhibiting his work nationally in the 1930s, when he was still a teenager, and studied at the **Institute of Design** in Chicago. You might look at Preusser's paintings today and think they came from Europe. His abstract canvases have little in common with the figurative, regional work that took hold in Dallas and other American cities.

Preusser also taught at the museum school and worked there as a curator. In 1948, he co-founded the **Contemporary Art Association**, which later became the **Contemporary Arts Museum Houston**, with fellow artist **Frank Dolejska**.

But Houston's desire to become a "world class" city after World War II ultimately didn't bode well for local artists. Many didn't stay home long after returning from service in World War II - Preusser among them. He left in 1954 for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where his legacy is better known.

A worldly spark

One of the first of many Houston artists to find inspiration in Mexico was Preusser's contemporary, **Dorothy Hood**. She landed almost by accident in Mexico City in 1941, when a two-week vacation turned into a stimulating 19 years.

She joined a circle that included Chilean poet **Pablo Neruda**; the Mexican painters **Jose Orozco** (who gave her studio space and food) and **Frida Kahlo**; the Spanish novelist **Luis Buñuel** and Spanish surrealist **Remedios Varo**. Hood married the much older Bolivian conductor and composer **José Maria Velasco Maidana** in 1946.

"It was like Paris in the 1920s," said curator **Susie Kalil**, who has organized a long-anticipated retrospective of Hood's work.

Inspired by Surrealism, mythology, spirituality and nature, Hood made paintings that synthesized conscious and sub-conscious experience.

"Nobody was painting like her," Kalil said. "In so many respects she was way ahead of her time."

Art in America named Hood one of the country's top talents in 1957. But when Parkinson's disease forced Maidana to retire, the glamorous couple moved to Houston and a very different life.

Hood kept up her international contacts, showed her work at Meredith Long's gallery and taught at the museum school, but she had little use for the city's new, nascent and male-dominated modern art scene, which was led by painters such as Dick Wray and **Richard Stout** and sculptor **Jim Love**.

"Her art was more about calling than career," Kalil said. "She was kind of manic - she would teach all day, take care of Maidana, then paint all night."

She kept at it. But by the time Hood died in 2000, tastes in art had evolved, and Houston had emerged as an important "third coast" of American contemporary art.

A city for artists

By the early 1990s, three generations of artists were working "simultaneously and not in isolation," notes former **Houston Chronicle** art critic **Patricia Covo Johnson** in her book "Contemporary Art in Texas."

During the boom years of the 1970s and early '80s, Houston's scene was so vibrant, art world insiders spoke of a regional "Houston school" - an idea explored by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston's "Fresh Paint" exhibition in 1985.

University art programs were flourishing, keeping top artists employed as professors and churning out new graduates every year. The **University of Houston** spawned what is now the **Blaffer Art Museum** in 1973 and the regional-art focused Lawndale Annex (now Lawndale **Art Center**) in 1979.

The museum's program continued to grow, too, and became a magnet for international talent after establishing its Core Residency Program in 1982.

It didn't hurt that Houston was a city of entrepreneurs. Artists, like everyone else with big ideas, acted on them and created a number of institutions that help to form the scene's backbone. The **Houston Center for Photography** and DiverseWorks, a hub for performance art and experimental work, launched as artist-run organizations in 1981 and 1983, respectively.

Photojournalists Fred Baldwin and Wendy Watriss co-founded Fotofest with dealer **Petra Benteler** in 1983. Now a leading international biennial of international photo-based art, FotoFest encompasses shows, lectures and performances at dozens of venues across the city.

Project Row Houses, founded in 1993 by **Rick Lowe** and other African-American artists, has become a national model for social sculpture. In the 21st century, it's hard to keep up with all the other artist-driven activities at "alternative" spaces such as GalleryHomeland, Box 13 and large studio compounds in Houston, where new talent is always waiting to be discovered.

Some of today's technology-driven art might shock even Cherry, but she'd be amazed by the size and scope of the scene.

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