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Woodmere show is more a Doris Staffel-and-friends tribute

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The event at Woodmere Art Museum organized around the paintings and drawings of Philadelphia artist Doris Staffel looks, feels, and reads more like a visual Festschrift than a conventional exhibition, which makes it a bit difficult to digest.

A Festschrift - a tribute to a creative artist, usually a writer, by friends - is certainly appropriate for Staffel, who will be 91 in two months, and who has been a prominent figure in the city's art community for decades, both as an artist and as a teacher.

In a show that, in the museum's words, describes the "arc of her career," she's the central figure, but only just. She's surrounded by an unusually large supporting cast of her teachers, students, friends, and professional colleagues.

On the walls, the exhibition breaks down roughly as 55 percent Staffel and 45 percent work by her influences and those she influenced.

This suggests that the show, guest-curated by painter Bill Scott, weaves together multiple themes. Perhaps the most prevalent is Staffel's impact as a longtime painting teacher at University of the Arts.

This comes through especially in the exhibition catalog, which contains brief essays by several former students - Joe Fyfe, Betsey Batchelor, Ron Rumford, and Stuart Shils.

The catalog also includes an extended interview with Staffel in which she recalls the famous painters who inspired and directed her, beginning in elementary school with Mark Rothko, who played the piano while his pupils drew and painted, and including Hans Hofmann and Philip Guston.

Mention of these modernist worthies encouraged Scott to include paintings by Hofmann and Guston, as well as Franz Kline and Philadelphians Franklin Watkins and Earl Horte.

This naturally prompts a viewer to search for evidence that Staffel absorbed bits and pieces from the famous. One finds it, perhaps, in a 1952 gestural abstraction (Hofmann) and several mixed-media works from her *Spirit Gate* series (Guston, perhaps).

The cameo appearances by friends, students, and mentors indicate that the exhibition is trying to tell several stories simultaneously. The main one, obviously, is Staffel's "arc," yet given the length of her career, which began at Tyler School of Art in 1939, that trajectory is somewhat fragmented.

Through the show and the catalog, we also brush against other narratives, such as the struggle for recognition by female artists, especially in Philadelphia; how teachers encourage young artists to develop distinctive voices; the position of abstractionists in an art community traditionally wedded to realism; and the general currents in American art since World War II.

This is why it's a bit difficult to concentrate on Staffel's work. One keeps wondering what all these other artists have to do with following the arc, which is what one always tries to do with a retrospective, even a small one.

The show tells us two things about Staffel. First, she has always worked abstractly, usually gesturally, at other times symbolically. Second, she has consistently expressed contours of the human figure in her work, particularly in later paintings such as a small 2007 acrylic in Woodmere's collection.

That said, a seemingly anomalous interval in the early 1970s stands out, in paintings such as *Lotus Throne* and an untitled canvas from the *White Tara* series, both acrylics, both precisely hard-edged and intensely focused on a central motif - realism without reality.

Staffel professes to be deeply influenced by Buddhist philosophy; if you seek obvious confirmation of that, these two paintings, and several smaller ones from the period, supply it. Both are contemplative, serene, and delicately balanced compositionally, and both contain shapes and symbols that suggest Asia, particularly Tibetan thangkas.

From these quasirepresentational images, Staffel moved in the opposite direction, into thickets of layered, colored strokes such as *Let Everything Happen*. These reminded me of Guston's "abstract impressionism."

Chromatic dazzle led in the 1980s to paintings like the *Spirit Gates* that were primarily, and more intensely, gestural. An untitled example from 1995, a melding of charcoal drawing on a white acrylic ground, is especially fine.

In her later years, Staffel has been making small, mostly linear abstractions, some monochrome, some colored, that demonstrate a determination in old age to push her creativity as far as she can.

This show, about three dozen works by Staffel augmented by two dozen or so from her chorus, is only a sampler. It would be nice to see her career arc projected in greater depth, especially in the decades of the 1970s and '80s when she seemed to be at the apogee of her talent.

In the catalog interview, Staffel doesn't talk much about the nuts and bolts of her painting. We hear mostly about the vicissitudes of her life. Alex Kanevsky, on the other hand, is one of those uncommon artists who can speak perceptively about how he works and what he's trying to achieve.



Alex Kanevsky's "Chelsea Hotel Landscape," oil on wood, 2011: An ethereally white interior space with a grassy landscape in which a nude reclines, a juxtaposition of improbable visions.

Kanevsky, who teaches at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, selected Woodmere's 71st juried exhibition, which will be up through Sept. 30. In conjunction with the juried show, the museum also has hung one gallery with some of Kanevsky's recent paintings and drawings.

Aside from their intrinsic interest, these serve as a benchmark against which visitors can evaluate Kanevsky's choices as juror.

The eight oils and eight large pencil drawings reveal an artist who works representationally, but not realistically. The paintings in particular stimulate or represent (depending on one's predisposition) emotional states by juxtaposing improbable visions.

For instance, *Chelsea Hotel Landscape* combines an ethereally white interior space with a grassy landscape in which a nude reclines. *The Interior* is similarly anomalous, a view through a doorway into a room that segues into an "exterior" that recedes into the distance.

The other major component of Kanevsky's work is multiple vision, drawings that, like those of Alberto Giacometti, are obsessive re-drawings that imply movement and, simultaneously, a search for the perfect line.

Leaving the imperfect lines records the process, but also the impossibility of achieving the definitive image. In the paintings, the sense of motion is more pronounced, and more beguiling, especially in paintings like *Bathroom With Motion*, the luminous *Academy*, and the fetchingly Ingresque nude titled simply *A.C.*