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Visual Arts

At the Frye: an amazing sculptor lost to time, plus 'action-packed' abstractions



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1 of 2 Alexander Archipenko, "Boxing" ("Boxe"), bronze, 1914. (Estate of Alexander Archipenko / Artists Rights Society)

Surprises galore: “Archipenko: A Modern Legacy” is teeming with abstract sculptures and has a bit of fun to it, too; the drawings in “The Pig Went Down to the Harbor at Sunrise and Wept,” by local artist Jim Woodring, were created with a 6-foot-tall drip pen.

By [Michael Upchurch](#)

Special to The Seattle Times

Just when it seemed that all the forgotten chapters of Seattle art history must have been uncovered by now, along comes Alexander Archipenko.

The Ukrainian-American sculptor (1887-1964) made only a few months-long visits to our town in 1935, 1936 and 1951. But he had a notable influence on the students he taught at the University of Washington, including George Tsutakawa and Everett DuPen, and he was influenced, in turn, by his contact with Native American art while he was here.

Archipenko’s itinerant life also put him in touch with Cubists in 1910s Paris and Bauhaus practitioners in 1920s Berlin, before he emigrated to the U.S. in 1923. All that background manifested itself in his work over the next 40 years, as he zipped around the country taking on projects and teaching gigs.

EXHIBITION REVIEW

‘Archipenko: A Modern Legacy’ and ‘Jim Woodring: The Pig Went Down to the Harbor at Sunrise and Wept’

11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays, 11 a.m.-7 p.m. Thursdays, “Archipenko” is up through April 30 and “Pig” through April 16, Frye Art Museum, 704 Terry Ave., Seattle; free (206-622-9250 or fryemuseum.org).

His story is told with splendid verve at the Frye Art Museum’s show “Archipenko: A Modern Legacy,” curated by Alexandria Keiser of the Archipenko Foundation in New York. While his work evolved over the decades, its through-line is strong. As Keiser notes, he was keen on

“working with the void as a sculptural element.” Airy openings and deliberate truncations are as much a part of his artworks’ dynamics as the bronze, aluminum, wood or ceramic materials that comprise them.


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From the start, he pushed figurative art in an abstract direction without ever quite abandoning the human form — especially the female form. “Dance,” an early bronze, is rigorously stylized, yet dazzling alive, in its

portrait of two dancers' derring-do action. Another early work, "Boxing (Boxe)," evokes tough body-blows while being artfully elusive in the way it envisages the male physique.

"Walking" conveys ambulatory actions with an oddly angular and hollowed-out approximation. Even in "Seated Woman (Geometric Figure)," there's a sashay in the way its subject crosses her legs.

All of Archipenko's work is so kinetic in sensibility that it's no surprise to find an actual rotating kinetic sculpture, "Revolving Figure (New Art of Reflections)," from late in his career. A marked Northwest Coast Indian art influence is evident, too, in the formline echoes of his ceramic sculptures from the late 1930s and early 1940s, especially "Seated Figure" and "Black and White Dancer."

Whether he's creating floating illusions in aluminum ("Torso in Space") or playing with the idea of "sculpture paintings" in "Cleopatra" (a wall-hung bas-relief made of wood, Bakelite, found materials and paint), he always seems to be having fun. In "Architectural Figure," for instance, a skinny, precariously tilting building seems to have come to life and gone for a stroll.

"The Bride," a highlight of the show, has a Seattle connection. It was privately purchased by Seattle Art Museum's founding director Richard E. Fuller in 1936, and is now part of SAM's permanent collection. The sharp, curved edges and abrupt displacements of mass in the rising, fluid female form ingeniously suggest bridal finery without spelling out a single detail.

Archipenko was an inventor as well as an artist, and his long-lost "Archipentura" — preserved now only in patent records and photographs — was a "moving painting machine" that worked a bit like a louvered billboard, only with enough images in play to re-create an entire striptease. The exhibit's photo essay on it is fascinating.

New work by Seattle cartoonist

“Archipenko: A Modern Legacy” is in good company with new work by Seattle cartoonist Jim Woodring. Many locals will be familiar with Woodring. But they may be surprised by the 10 large-scale ink drawings commissioned by the Frye for “Jim Woodring: The Pig Went Down to the Harbor at Sunrise and Wept.”

First surprise: The drawings were created with a gigantic dip pen, almost 6 feet long, built by Woodring himself and on display with the artwork.

Woodring describes his drawings as “action-packed abstractions,” and that’s the second surprise of the show. While his pieces may look, from a distance, as if they disclose some sort of intelligible narrative, they’re more in the spirit of frenetic, asymmetrical Rorschach tests.

A hell of a lot is going on in them: crashings, splashings, invasions, predations. But the nature or identity of the creatures engaged in this chaos remains a mystery.

There is a semblance of a baseline ocean horizon as the series starts out. But that reference point grows increasingly destabilized from drawing to drawing.

Still, there’s no denying that the turbulence, grotesquerie and conflicts engaged in by Woodrings’ imaginative figments strike an intuitive chord ... even if, to borrow a line from an old Jefferson Airplane song, they’re “doing things that haven’t got a name yet.”

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