

ROBERT JAMES ANDERSON

1934–2016

A Selection of Paintings





ROBERT J. ANDERSON, ARTIST

Robert Anderson was born in Chicago in 1934, in the depths of the Depression. Money was tight, and even as a young teen Bob worked at various jobs, including a paint factory and a hospital laundry. His favorite job each year was selling Christmas trees on a Chicago street corner. He loved going on Boy Scout camping trips and dreamed of building a boat or raft and piloting it the length of the Mississippi River. That never happened, but I think it was the beginning of his love of building things.



Two untitled paintings, oil on canvas, c. 1960s.



Commuters, 1998.
Oil on canvas, 23" × 35".



Untitled, undated. Oil on canvas, 54" × 39".

After high school he had only one goal: to become an artist. He was accepted at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he studied for two years. He lived in downtown lofts with other art students and supported himself by working as a guard at the Field Museum of Natural History. Walking the halls of that great museum was an education in itself: he was especially fascinated by the art and artifacts of African countries, the South Pacific islands, and the Northwest Coast of the US and Canada.

At the Art Institute he immersed himself in the masterpieces of European and American painting and sculpture; many of his figure drawings from that time



Untitled, c. 1990s. Oil on canvas, 30" × 36".



Mechanism I, 1994.
Oil on canvas, 34" × 36".

show the influence of Cézanne and Matisse. He also explored abstraction, and in 1957 his abstract oil-on-tissue collage won the Art Institute's Logan Prize, a high honor for a student. With his prize money, he traveled to the Yucatan, living with a Mayan family for several months. Drafted into the army, he spent two years in Germany. On his leave time he traveled all over Europe, visiting the great museums of Paris, Barcelona, and Rome. Back in Chicago after his discharge from the army, he took a job at the Field Museum, designing exhibits for the Botany Department. But his after-hours work was always painting.

In the early 1960s his large, figurative oil paintings featured men wearing fedoras, blocky shoes, and oversize striped neckties, and women in low-cut sexy dresses and chunky high heels, all crowded into tight spaces: a couple in a boat with oars and a crumpled American flag; a man and woman in a small apart-



Steel Derrick, 2005. Oil on canvas, 36" × 36".



Eclipse, c. 1998. Oil on canvas, 25" × 31".

ment with bombs dropping; people drinking coffee; a mother and son reaching out to each other, with stars and stripes and waves in the background. One of his favorite motifs was the “broken running man,” a figure fleeing across the canvas with arms and legs bent at impossible angles. Some images from that period defy categorizing: vaguely human arrangements of geometric shapes, an earth with facial features reaching toward the disk of a sun, bird-people. His colors were intense acid yellows, earth tones, vivid reds, blues, greens. He exhibited at the Hyde Park Art Center, known for showing the Chicago Imagists, and had a short-lived one-man show at Crown Hall, Mies van der Rohe’s landmark glass building at the Illinois Institute of Technology.



Continuum, 2001.
Oil on canvas, 34" × 34".



Chorus, c. 2001. Oil on canvas, 32" × 50".



(right) *Fractal*, 2006. Oil on canvas, 40" × 48".



His work in that period shows the strong influence of the German Expressionists, particularly Max Beckmann. But Bob absorbed art from many eras and areas of the world: El Greco, Picasso, Max Ernst, and Francis Bacon, as well as H.C. Westermann, Philip Guston, Leon Golub, and David Smith. One continuing component of his style was the portrayal of human figures as structural, almost geometric forms. One early sculpture began with a real park bench, which he transformed into a reclining man with a sun looming over him. In later works, seated people merge with the furniture. Two bent-wood sculptures from the 1990s, *The Director* and *Wheel Chair*, are notable examples.

When we moved to New York in 1964, Bob continued to make large figurative paintings, going against the grain of the styles that were popular at that time: Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, and Op Art. He seemed to have an innate understanding of working with wood, and in the New York years he worked as a carpenter and loft renovator, learning the skills he later put to use in building

Requiem (After Mozart), 2004. Oil on canvas, 30" × 80".

our house in Rockport, as well as in designing furniture and making frames for other artists.

After coming to Cape Ann in 1969, we bought a parcel of land off Granite Street that included the abandoned granite-block foundation of Edmunds Hall, a meeting place for Finnish quarry workers. Bob designed a house and art studio to fit on the old foundation and enlisted an artist friend from New York to help build it. The decade of the 1970s was not his most productive period as an artist: finish-



ing the house and working as a carpenter and cabinetmaker took most of his time. Harold Bell hired him to oversee the renovation of the West End buildings that now include The Bookstore and other businesses. In those years people knew him mainly as a carpenter rather than an artist; he didn't feel he could call himself a painter if he wasn't doing it full-time. But he never gave up on his artistic visions and would get up in the middle of the night to work in the studio.

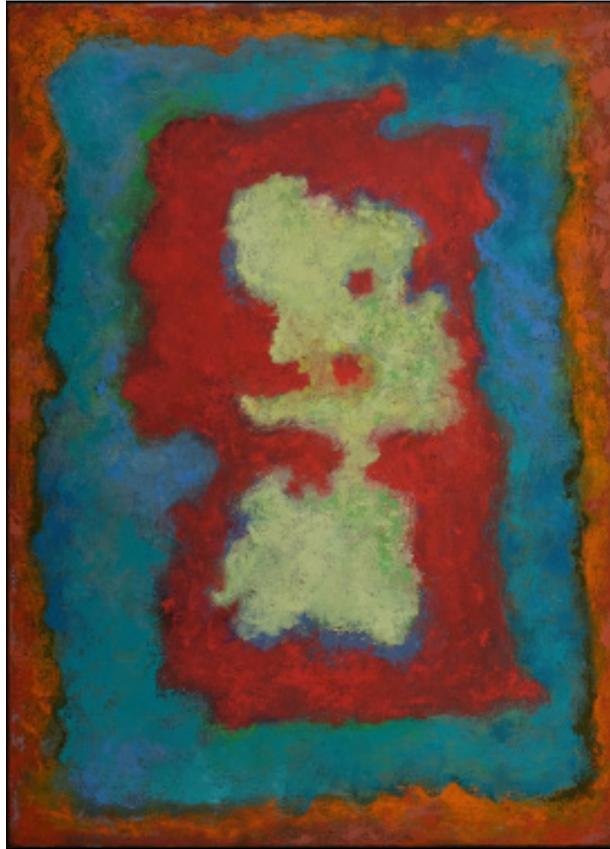
In the 1980s and 90s he turned more and more to

Concentricity, 2006. Oil on canvas, 42" × 60".

abstraction in his paintings, often playing off the forms of Cape Ann's rocky landscape as well as machine parts and hand tools. His sketchbooks, though, were filled with often fantastical and humorous figure drawings in ink. He loved to explore new techniques. He printed silkscreen designs on fabric and created sculptures using bent wood, carved concrete, cement-coated paper, and found objects.

Bob became part of a loose group of Cape Ann artists that included Roger Martin (whose studio he helped build), Oliver Balf, Ralph Coburn,

Joy Halsted, and Bernard Chaet. They would meet for lunch and then go to one another's studios for informal critiques. Bob exhibited in Boston at the Orphanos Gallery and the Boston Symphony Group Show, as well as at the School Street Gallery in Rockport, the Silvermine Artists' Guild in Connecticut, Montserrat School of Art in Beverly, and the Acacia and Flatrocks galleries in Gloucester. He had one-man shows at the West End Gallery in Gloucester, the Creative Arts



Embrace, 2006. Oil on canvas, 42" × 30".



Workshop in New Haven, and posthumously, at Flatrocks in the fall of 2016.

Today his studio holds a wide variety of paintings, mainly richly colored abstracts, but now and then he'd return to figures: commuters and pigs waiting for a train, sunbathers at the beach, dancing or strolling women, an anguished face, the occasional tail-wagging dog. Everywhere one turns, there's something to catch the eye, something to ponder.

— Peg Anderson, March 2017
Married to Bob in 1961

Totem, 2004. Oil on canvas, 20" × 48".

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