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ART

Abstraction Is in His Nature

Onetime Pop artist Joe Goode reveals another side in a survey opening the new Orange County Museum of Art.

January 26, 1997 | Hunter Drohojowska Philp | Hunter Drohojowska Philp is a frequent contributor to Calendar

In Joe Goode's studio in Mar Vista, rectangular canvases of tangerine, sapphire and onyx are wrapped in plastic, waiting for the truck to take them to the new Orange County Museum of Art. After a year of preparation, the merger of what was previously the Newport Harbor Art Museum and the Laguna Art Museum is being celebrated this weekend with the opening of a survey of 43 of Goode's paintings from the last 16 years.

Goode is one of a group of artists who helped establish Los Angeles in the 1960s as a significant art center. Because his early work was closely associated with the work of area Pop artists--notably lifelong friend Edward Ruscha, who shared an exhibition at Newport Harbor Art Museum with the artist in 1968--Goode has often been recognized as a seminal figure in the L.A. Pop movement. Even today, he is probably best known for his early '60s monochrome panels with painted glass milk bottles placed in front of them. But this latest survey reveals another side of the artist: This is a show of abstract paintings based on observations of nature that Goode has been working on since 1980.

Goode sees no division between these two bodies of work. He glances around his studio at both the early and the later work and says: "I will start a series of work that I feel has absolutely no bearing on anything I've done before. But in retrospect, I can always see the connection. This is what has encouraged me to go ahead and try new ideas.

"What changes is the pictorial image, but essentially what I'm trying to do doesn't change," he adds. "The idea of looking through something doesn't change."

Appearing owlish in his horn-rimmed spectacles, the sandy-haired artist, 60, is chatty and forthcoming. He recalls one change that did affect his art. In 1975, he moved to a small ranch outside of Springville in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada.

"I'd been going to Europe quite a bit, and I got burned out from all the running around. My girlfriend suggested Hawaii, but I thought 'for that money, I could buy a cabin in the mountains,' " he recalls. After a trial period of weekend visits, he moved there full time and soon after, in 1979, married his girlfriend, artist Natalie Biezer. (They were divorced in 1995; she still lives there.)

The earliest painting in this show, a diptych, is from 1980, and the story behind its creation reflects the changes brought about by Goode's move from Los Angeles and by his desire to explore different ways of looking.

"When I started hunting in Springville, my perception changed," he explains. "When you live in the city, you have a peripheral vision. But hunting, you are

always looking for movement, so you are very focused. I related the way you look when you are hunting to the way you look when you are seeing paintings."

One morning, Goode took one of his painted canvases into his backyard and pinned it to a clothesline behind his cabin. Aiming his 12-gauge shotgun at fairly close range, he sprayed the canvas with buckshot. He then returned the painting to its stretchers, so that its new perforations would reveal the many layers of color beneath the painted surface. Goode, who drolly titled the work "Must See to Appreciate," allows that art such as this red-and-white diptych could only be produced in the wilds--"you could never get away with shooting off a shotgun in L.A.," he laughs.

"They were painted in layers, the same way as my other paintings, but I was interested in the colors that existed up there," he adds. "I found that if I chipped off the top layers of paint to see the next, it was kind of like looking through trees, so I thought, I'll shoot them."

Another episode from mother nature determined Goode's subsequent series of paintings, done in 1985. Seated on his porch at dusk, he saw light coming over the mountains and expected a vast moonrise. Instead, he saw flames and smoke. The result was a series known as his "Forest Fire" pictures, which capture a sense of looking through the conflagration.

These were followed by three years of painting his "Tree" series, which attempted to portray a rebirth of the forest through planes of scumbled and mottled shades of green.

"It was the hardest series I ever did," Goode says now. "Walking on top of the hills in Springville, you could see the top of the trees but not the bottom. I wanted a sense of looking in and out, from above and below. I was trying to figure out a way to convey this in a painting."

By the middle of the 1980s, Goode thought that he might be missing out on the cultural renaissance spreading through Los Angeles. He began visiting the city, and soon after rented a second studio in Venice. There, he began his "Ocean Blue" series, marine-toned canvases attempting to capture the feeling of being underwater and looking up. Goode moved back to Los Angeles full time in 1987, and his return generated his 1990s series "Ozone," "Pollution" and "Sunspots."

"I'd been gravitating toward imagery from nature," he says, "but I find when I look back on my work, that it started out with obsessive, inside-the-house images and it went farther and farther out and pretty soon I was painting sunspots I'd never seen."

Despite his 12 years in Springville, from 1975 to 1987, Goode never lost his identification as an L.A. artist. He'd moved here from his hometown of Oklahoma City in 1959, following in the footsteps of artists Ruscha and Jerry McMillan, with whom he'd gone to high school. The trio became roommates in Hollywood, together attended Chouinard Art Institute (now known as CalArts) and initially assumed they would become art directors for advertising firms. Goode recalls switching his major to fine arts after his first class with an instructor who quickly persuaded him that advertising was a miserable way to earn a living.

Even more profound an influence on Goode's work, though, was a then-young teacher named Robert Irwin, who now is known as one of the inventors of L.A.'s highly resonant Light and Space movement.

"Irwin really taught me how to be an artist, as a role model," Goode says. "He had a lifestyle that showed you how you could do it. When we were going to school, nobody made a living as an artist. For me, that is a really significant thing compared to what's being done today."

"Irwin projected the attitude of an artist. That was more important, that you had the dedication," he adds. "You could do anything you'd want to support this habit, but the habit was the most important thing. You'd gamble, steal paint, steal food. I would go with him to the racetrack, for a whole year between '63 and '64. What you got from Irwin was that if you pursued a vision, it was far more important than whatever happened or what it even looked like."

Art critic Michael Duncan, who contributed to the catalog for the Orange County museum show, believes Goode's paintings have more in common with Irwin, in terms of an unwavering concern with perception and light, than with the Pop movement, for which he is better known.

"In each of his works, we are caught just on the cusp of perceiving visual reality," Duncan writes.

Goode agrees. "I've always felt that I had more in common with those guys, the perceptual people, but I knew it never looked like it. It's only later that I realized, I never did a painting that had an image where you couldn't look through it. I am more interested in how we perceive light and space than in a particular psychological reference to an object or image."

"I wanted to make something as beautiful as Abstract Expressionism," he adds, referring to a style that had seemed overpowering in the art world of his youth.

In 1960, while still in art school, Goode married a fellow art student, ceramist Judy Winans. And though the marriage only lasted two years, it produced their daughter, Stephanie. When she was born, Goode didn't have the \$350 for the hospital bill. Artist Ed Bereal raised the sum by taking Goode's "money-bag" drawings and selling them for \$50 apiece to any takers along Gallery Row on La Cienega.

One day, coming home to his family's home in Highland Park, he saw several empty glass milk bottles at the top of the stairs to the house, and the image struck him as poignant, inspiring a series of monochrome canvases fronted with painted milk bottles. Even today, Goode says his favorite body of work is a group of sculptures he did of staircases leading nowhere, often with a milk bottle at the top.

Those paintings were what identified him as a Pop artist. "Basically, anybody doing paintings with a recognizable image put you closer to Pop art than Abstract Expressionism. I think [legendary L.A. curator] Walter Hopps created a category for me, saying they were paintings of the common object. I painted what was available," Goode says.

Goode's father dressed windows for a department store in Oklahoma City and later worked in the advertising department of a TV station. But art was his secret passion, and he encouraged his reluctant son. On Sundays, he took young Joe out to a nearby lake and told him to sketch the same log every weekend for a year.

"I was so sick of this log," Goode recalls, "but at the end of the year, he pulled out all these drawings and said, 'I want to show you how this log changed. Remember when we were out here and it had snow on it, and in July, how it was all dried out, and in spring, when it had moss?' It was pretty interesting. He was a strong influence, probably more than anybody else."

Since the early 1960s, Goode has felt moved by the Japanese aesthetic, but it is only in the last decade that he has explored it in his work. His 1989 "Waterfall" paintings show Japanese influences in both scale and color, while his 1992 "Tornado" series render on paper the massive twisters of his home state in black sumi ink.

Always interested in ceramics, Goode was given a potters wheel two years ago. Now his stucco bungalow, styled in the spare and modest manner of a Japanese house, is lined with examples of his tea and rice bowls, sake cups and plates. Goode says he has learned much about the culture from his partner of the last five years, Hiromi Katayama, who imports paper from Japan.

Such exotic concerns seem far from Goode's Southwestern origins. "To a large degree, it was just extraordinary luck. Some people do more with their good luck. A certain part is being in the right place at the right time. Had I moved to New York when [art critic] John Coplans encouraged me to, I could have been much more successful as an artist, but I don't think I would have done as good work. At least, I don't think I would have been as true to that work as I've been able to be here. By hook and by crook, I've been able to pursue a vision. That's the lucky part."

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* Joe Goode at the Orange County Museum of Art, 850 San Clemente Drive, Newport Beach, through April 13. (714) 759-1122.