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CUMING, Beatrice Lavis

## New London's Quirky Individualist Left a Record of the City's Geometry

By William Zimmer

THE story has it that Beatrice Cuming was bound for Boston in 1934, when she jumped off the train at New London. She was attracted by the city's marine and industrial landscape, above all by its bold geometry. Miss Cuming used New London as her home port until her death in 1974.

Some 60 of Miss Cuming's paintings, drawings and prints have been tracked down for a retrospective exhibition at the Lyman Allyn Art Museum in New London. To one who has never before heard of her, she emerges as a significant artist.

Miss Cuming trafficked with many of the major art movements of the early 20th century, but her work bears a personal, quirky stamp. Discovering her is a delight. Miss Cuming was born in Brooklyn in 1903. Her father was an illustrator, and one of his paintings is included in the show. Father and daughter evidently shared a color range, mainly neutral or earth tones filled with lights. This exhibition is surprisingly luminous.

Her serendipitous landing in New London is substantiated by her rather Bohemian early artistic life. She spent time in Paris, and then came a plunge in Tunisia, where she learned the language and customs. A rather academic portrait, "The Arab," is an exotic note in this show of mostly spare forms.

The chronology of the exhibit has been roughly pieced together. Many of the paintings were not dated, so the curators, Barbara Zabel, an art historian at Connecticut College, and Cecile S. Tyl, who searched out most of the works, have arranged it in a sensible way, matching the works with art movements and historical events that Miss Cuming records.

Early circus scenes recall Charles Demuth, who was a major figure in the precisionist movement that monumentalized forms in the urban landscape. Miss Cuming's most clearly precisionist work in this show is "Fire House Stairway," a circular staircase into which is spun some of the visual complexity of Cubism.

A couple of works from the post-World War II period are in a similar vein of jaunty architectonics. "Impact of White" from 1951 depicts the broadside of the Block Island ferry; Stuart Davis might contenance it. The mysteriously named "Reality Principle" is a singular venture into almost pure abstraction; we concentrate on the openings of cylindrical conduits.

But Miss Cuming is prone to populate her paintings. A few figures plus strong midday light and the forms of the modern world can add up to a style known as Magic Realism.

Miss Cuming never conveys the anxiety that Louis Guglielmi does in paintings like "Terror in Brooklyn," whose title tells all. But in her "Railroad Overpass," Miss Cuming depicts a woman in a bright pink dress disappearing up a covered stairway. The artist concentrates on the rhythm of the architecture of the pedestrian overpass, so the scene's eerie quality is somewhat deflected. But the central focus of the painting, which is otherwise neutrally colored, is on the woman's bright pink dress.

In "Staircase, Custom House" a shadowy figure climbs the stairs, but attention is focused on the humble floor mop resting in a doorway. Miss Cumings gives us narratives but refuses to flesh them out. This is perhaps why we are grateful for a couple of canvases that provide a ripe slice of New London life. "Saturday Night" spotlights activity outside the Dutch Tavern, still extant, where Eugene O'Neill often went to write his plays. O'Neill's presence in New London might have encouraged Miss Cumings small dramas, but one cannot deny the full-blooded events in "State Street, New London," in which the ubiquitous sailors mingle with the young women of the city in full view of their parents, who had forbidden such mixing.

The zenith of Miss Cumings's career is without doubt the works she painted during World War II that focused on the submarine-building industry in New London. In these paintings, men are painted in complete harmony with forbidding, new technological shapes. Few of these paintings appear in the exhibition. Although Miss Cumings painted many such works, they were dispersed over the years and then lost.

Dr. Zabel makes the essential point about them: "Cumings heroizes the workers; however, though they may be heroes, their individuality is lost."

One is also impressed by paintings made on sojourns in the American Southwest, which are redolent of Georgia O'Keeffe in New Mexico. Although she lived near O'Keeffe, Miss Cumings never made contact with her.

Instead, she met up with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which suspected her of spying on Los Alamos, where the atomic bomb was being developed. One guesses that Beatrice Cumings shrugged this off as another colorful incident in an adventuresome life.