Beyond Propaganda and Realism in the New Deal Era: Modernist Negotiations of Artistic Style and Social Engagement in the Work of Northwest Women Artists Rapp, Helder, and Morgan

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A thesis submitted

in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

University of Washington

2023

Committee:

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Art History

University of Washington

Abstract

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New Deal work relief programs empowered women, like Seattle-based artists and friends Ebba Rapp, Z. Vanessa Helder, and Blanche Morgan, to pursue art careers. These artists occupied unique subject positions that have been marginalized from the art world (as women, as queer, as Seattleites), but their work overtly supported a limited idea of liberalism and racial equality that protected whiteness. Yet, their work also reveals how artists across the United States were affected by circulating conversations about modernism, art's role in society, and an "American" cultural identity, as well as controversies with New Deal politics and projects. Though histories of modernism often focus on abstraction, their figurative works demonstrate formal experimentation corresponding to the aesthetic debates of their time while also depicting relevant subject matter. This study reorients our perspective to examine how these women artists contributed to their region's artistic legacy and engaged in conversations that cut across geographic boundaries and, ultimately, offers a more nuanced understanding of modernism across the nation, beyond a singular

male-oriented definition of Northwest art. By paying attention to previously overlooked artists like Rapp, Helder, and Morgan, we can better understand the compromises between New Deal politics and aesthetics, and the identity factors and categories that have limited and shaped the canon of American art.

At the Northwest Annual Exhibition of 1939, artist and curator Kenneth Callahan remarked that "it seems strange that art should be so impervious to the world-wide calamity that threatens us all today. So impervious that, from the greatest number of works here shown, there emanate a gay lighthearted mood, and a picture of pleasant scenes, objects, and people pleasantly occupied."[1] He wasn't the only observer of this phenomenon. Seattle journalist Virginia Boren also commented that there was "little contact with the problems of the world today. The show is aloof, remote…The show concerns itself rather with the pleasant things of life, pleasant people, pleasant occupations. It's Life with a whimsical smile."[2]

The twenty-fifth annual exhibition of Northwest artists in Seattle in October 1939 came just weeks after Germany instigated World War II by invading Poland, and the United States declared neutrality. The only work that dealt with the threat of oncoming war, singled out by both critics, was *Blue Mood*, a semi-nude portrait of a Black woman sitting on a red chair, smoking a cigarette, accompanied by a newspaper that reads "War Extra" (fig. 1). Of the 144 works of painting and sculpture displayed, only this one by Ebba Rapp (1909–1985) touched on a social and political reality instead of exploring more pleasant or more abstract subject matter. Though the painting only seems to mention this reality briefly, it garnered attention at the Annual for making a timely statement against the war. Rapp's decision to paint a Black woman, the accomplished Seattle dancer Syvilla Fort, in a figurative mode also speaks to other prominent topics for artists in the United States and the Pacific Northwest in the late 1930s, including modernist debates about form and function, racial equality, and the changing relationship of people to their government and one another.

[1] Kenneth Callahan, "The Art Museum," *Seattle Sunday Times,* October 29, 1939, 2.
[2] Virginia Boren, "Northwest Artists Exhibit at 25th Annual Show: At an Art Preview," *Seattle Times,* October 5, 1939, 17.

At this moment, art was becoming much more visible to the American public, partly due to the New Deal, a series of programs and policies implemented by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt from 1933 to 1939. New Deal agencies focused on employing citizens and rehabilitating the economy during the Great Depression. One facet of this was providing work for artists and bringing art to a larger audience. Rapp, a young white woman from Tacoma, Washington, benefitted from government funding in 1933 from the Public Works of Art Project, the first national work relief for artists. Rapp's art and ideas developed alongside and through exchange with her friends and fellow artists Z. Vanessa Helder (1904–1968) and Blanche Morgan (1912–1981), all University of Washington graduates who had received federally funded arts positions. The three were lifelong friends and artistic influences to one another, and at times, Morgan and Helder were also lovers.[3] All three's careers were bolstered by the support of government art programs in the 1930s as they were thinking through questions of social and political engagement in their art.

By 1939, when *Blue Mood* was displayed in Seattle, Rapp had exhibited at least eight works at the Northwest Annuals and also received national recognition when she was selected to show a sculpture at the New York World's Fair exhibition of *American Art Today*.[4] Reflecting the New Deal's aspirational investment in art for all, the Fair's catalogue purported that art had "unquestionably" expanded beyond the limits of the museum and private collection to become a "part of the pattern of our everyday life" and was returning "to the place it occupied in ancient

[3] Curator David F. Martin has conducted extensive research by interviewing family members and friends of these artists, many of whom testify to Morgan's open bisexuality, Helder's atypical gender performance and relationship to her partner Jack Paterson, and Morgan and Helder's romantic involvement with one another, as well as continuing friendship. David F. Martin, "Lucid Dreams: Z. Vanessa Helder and the Rendering of Reality," in *Austere Beauty: The Art of Z. Vanessa Helder* (Tacoma: Tacoma Art Museum, 2013), 23, 33-34, 54 fn 31-32.

[4] The show selected 1,200 artworks out of 25,000 submissions, purporting to represent the full range of artistic activity in the United States. A. Conger Goodyear, "Preface," in *American Art Today, New York World's Fair* (New York: National Art Society, 1939), 15.

Greece or Renaissance Italy."[5] This statement invokes the way that the government and artists were actively seeking a unique American cultural identity that defined their young nation and could equal and exceed European artistic heritage like Classical antiquity and the Renaissance.[6] With government programs that made art more accessible in public spaces, authors and artists also sought an aesthetic that would speak to the average American citizen, not just elite patrons, in what they depicted and how. Artists, critics, and the public debated if art should reflect contemporary, everyday issues in a more realistic style, or function as "art for art's sake" that explored technical experimentation and abstraction.

Critical questions in American modernism during this period have primarily been staged in New York City and the Midwest and focused on debates of abstraction and figuration between Alfred Stieglitz's gallery circle and Regionalists surrounding Thomas Hart Benton and Thomas Craven. However, as my research will show, other regions and communities were also engaged in these conversations and took them in directions that challenge the binaries of abstract and figurative, urban and rural, radical and conservative. Even before the New Deal ushered in this era of public art and governmental art funding, Seattle already had a strong arts community with diverse practitioners who were immersed in these discussions and looked to foreign aesthetic influences as much as they mined local, regionally specific inspiration.

This thesis presents a focused perspective on issues of race, gender, and politics in American modernism by drawing together Rapp's, Helder's, and Morgan's works from this period around the end of the New Deal and the start of World War II. By looking closely at their artworks

[5] Goodyear, "Preface," 15.

[6] Many art historians of American art discuss these debates surrounding and following Van Wyck Brooks's "On Creating a Usable Past," *The Dial* (April 11, 1918), 337-341. See the introductions of Jacqueline Francis, *Making Race: Modernism and "Racial Art" in America* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012), and Wanda M. Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

and lives from the framework of microhistory, we can connect their unique situations to national conversations.[7] Elaborating on their microcosm in the Northwest and their particular experiences as white women can allow us to see both their individual and general circumstances with the understanding that they may not (and do not) fit neatly into existing frameworks. As I will show, Rapp, Helder, and Morgan worked mainly with a figurative style to depict contemporary social issues relating to race, labor, and government oversight at an early point in their careers, opting to work in an accessible aesthetic, yet still exploring modernist styles and themes in their work. Their art, read alongside their biographies, demonstrates the fine line between participating in relevant, socially engaged exchanges and seeking strategies for a successful art career, particularly as women navigating a patriarchal, heteronormative field and society. Further, their participation in these national projects and aesthetics raises questions about their complicity with the state's marginalization of those deemed "other" and the ways that artists approached these issues in their art. Ebba Rapp's *Blue Mood, Z*. Vanessa Helder's watercolor depictions of the Grand Coulee Dam, and Blanche Morgan's work for the Federal Theatre Project perform white normativity while grappling with complex issues of race and belonging ingrained in New Deal cultural policies and projects.

Though Rapp, Helder, and Morgan have been marginalized by both their contemporary art world and art historical accounts due to their identities as women, as queer (for Helder and Morgan), and as Seattleites, their ability to survive as artists was much more privileged than others due to their whiteness, certainly more so than the people of color they depicted or chose not to depict. These women were financially stable and socially empowered by their inclusion in

[7] Thomas V. Cohen, "The Macrohistory of Microhistory," *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 47, no. 1 (2017), 53–73; John Brewer, "Microhistory and the Histories of Everyday Life," *Cultural and Social History* 7, no. 1 (2010), 87–109.

government relief programs as artists. They produced work that adhered to the biases and standards of white citizenship that had been extended to them, usually taking outwardly neutral stances on topical issues. While it is tempting to search for signs that these artists might have acted in solidarity with other less privileged groups from our present-day awareness of intersectionality, in many ways, these women upheld hierarchies in their journeys of seeking their own freedoms.[8] At times, artists crossed race, class, and gender lines to depict other communities and issues, as Leftist Japanese American artists, Eitarō Ishigaki and Hideo Noda, and white women artists, Alice Neel and Isabel Bishop, did.[9] The strong political beliefs of those artists motivated their art, but Rapp, Helder, and Morgan did not have these convictions. Ultimately, their choice to represent social issues or focus on form was a privilege of whiteness. Conversely, audiences expected and understood minority groups to always be representing their "other-ized" identity in their art.[10] This paper attends to these artists' positionality as white women, bringing their identities to their artworks to make whiteness visible and problematize discussions of art history and modernism that have tended to neglect this.[11] I recognize a contradiction in this approach. Artists who identify as women often have their identity and femininity read into their work in ways that male artists do

[8] Queer theorist Cathy Cohen has rightfully pointed out that we cannot assume disadvantaged groups across race, class, gender, and sexuality lines will be allies, but there is a potential for shared politics to emerge when this positionality is made evident and identity categories are destabilized instead of reinforced by nationalist white, heterodominance. Cathy J. Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3, no. 4 (1997): 459-60.

[9] ShiPu Wang, *The Other American Moderns: Matsura, Ishigaki, Noda, Hayakawa* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2017), 6. Andrew Hemingway addresses Leftist artists, focusing on New York City, in *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement 1926-56* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002).

[10] Francis, *Making Race: Modernism and "Racial Art" in America,* 7.

[11] I refer to visual culture scholar Richard Dyer's idea that whiteness has been the presumed default for the universal human in a Western perspective, while racialized subjects are questioned and problematized. Whiteness has been considered the absence of difference, while being "raced" or racial admits a presence. Richard Dyer, "On the Matter of Whiteness," in *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self* (New York: International Center of Photography, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 2003), 301.

not, as artists of color often have their race read into their work.[12] I am calling attention to their positionality, as white and as women, not to further pigeonhole "women's art" but to look critically at how norms of race, gender, and sexuality shaped their art in their particular time and place.

Along with abiding by the status quo in their politics and subject matter, their art also plays it relatively "safe" in its representational style. Yet, figurative art of the 1930s was still imbued with modernist tendencies in its aesthetics and its social commentary. Histories of modernism tend to focus on abstraction and more extreme stylistic changes, while figurative work was also adopting interesting innovations. Instead of operating at one extreme or another, Rapp, Helder, and Morgan show the perspective of a middle ground; they were not radical nor conservative in terms of politics or art, but demonstrate the ways that many artists who fell in the middle were looking at these issues and succeeded with this approach. As women too, they seem to temper these styles further to ensure their palatability, knowing that their social position would impact the understanding and salability of their work. Rapp's, Helder's, and Morgan's work is not propagandistic, gritty, truth-telling realism, or cutting-edge abstraction, but a negotiation of formal experimentation and social engagement reflective of the myriad ways the artistic community responded to a larger American identity and economic crisis.

Rapp's *Blue Mood* opens and closes this dialogue because it elicits the modernist discourse surrounding politics, propaganda, and aesthetics, and how that affected these women's career choices. As one of Rapp's only works that directly addresses race, *Blue Mood* indexes Blackness as a prominent topic of New Deal politics, even in a majority-white Seattle, and also exemplifies how whiteness allowed Rapp, Helder, and Morgan the freedom to depict social, political, or racial

[12] See scholarship **t**hat highlights the gendered expectations and interpretations applied to women modernists, such as Anne Wagner, *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O'Keeffe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); and Anna Chave, "O'Keeffe and the Masculine Gaze," *Art in America* 78, no. 1 (1990).

content, or not. Helder, removing people from her landscapes of the Grand Coulee Dam in eastern Washington, forgoes observing social dynamics and race in favor of exploring formal concerns and the relation of humans to the built and natural environment. These absences in her work express Helder's distance from more propagandistic views of the project but also replicate New Deal priorities that ignored the controversies surrounding the dam, including the people, Native and settler, dislocated from this area. Likewise, Morgan's work with the Black community of the Federal Theatre Project visualizes both the paternalistic New Deal agenda for racial policy and the Black community's recently expanded role on the cultural and political stage. Rapp, Helder, and Morgan were not ardent advocates of these New Deal projects or policies, and their art demonstrates how they, along with the U.S. government, fostered a limited idea of liberalism and racial equality that still supported whiteness. For this paper's comparison of artworks around 1939, Rapp, Helder, and Morgan capture the contradictions and complexities of New Deal policy as it related to Black and Native constituents in Washington, revealing the ways that these women were socially engaged and conscious, though not embodying radical politics in their art.

This analysis, toggling between national and local issues of governmental projects and race, also aims to observe gender and how artistic styles and labels have not worked to benefit these women artists. Corresponding with the existing canon of U.S. modernism, the few modernist women artists with widespread renown today (i.e., Georgia O'Keeffe, Lee Krasner, Helen Frankenthaler, Alma Thomas) resemble their male counterparts who focused on formalism over political content. Likewise, Northwest modernism has also paid greater attention to male abstract artists like Kenneth Callahan, Morris Graves, Guy Anderson, and Mark Tobey, despite the many

women artists working in figurative and abstract styles during this time.[13] This study moves the story of Northwest modernism away from familiar regional and cultural lenses; it reorients our perspective to examine how these women artists contributed to their region's artistic legacy and engaged in conversations that cut across geographic boundaries and, ultimately, offers a more nuanced understanding of modernism across the nation, beyond a singular male-oriented definition of Northwest art. By paying attention to previously overlooked artists like Rapp, Helder, and Morgan, we can better understand the compromises between New Deal politics and aesthetics, and the identity factors and categories that have limited and shaped the canon of American art.

American Cultural Identity in the New Deal

To better understand these three artists' situations, I will first outline the broad strokes of New Deal measures and art world debates that impacted Rapp, Helder, and Morgan and artists across the country. One of the most significant changes for all Americans during this period was President Roosevelt's New Deal. In the wake of the financial crash of 1929, Roosevelt positioned the New Deal as an ideal American society that could transcend the troubles of the Depression, end social antagonisms, and regulate capitalism for the better of the people. The government adopted regulatory, interventionist policies, and the American people began to see it more as an arbiter in

[13] A feature in *Life* magazine marked a pivotal moment for recognition of Northwest artists. See "Mystic Painters of the Northwest," *Life*, September 28, 1953, 84–89; Curator Patricia Junker speaks more on these artists and their circle and particularly the way women contributed to these men's careers, though she does not highlight work by women artists in *Modernism in the Northwest: The Mythic and the Mystical* (Seattle: Seattle Art Museum, 2014). Women in the United States have long been affiliated with and influential in the arts, if not as artists, then as leaders, administrators, and patrons. This was especially true in the Northwest where women formed their own professional affiliations, founded and led arts institutions, and exhibited their work frequently. See Laura Brunsman and Ruth Askey, eds., *Modernism and Beyond: Women Artists of the Pacific Northwest* (New York: Midmarch Press, 1993); Patricia Trenton, ed., *Independent Spirits: Women Painters of the American West, 1890-1945* (Los Angeles, Berkeley: Autry Museum of Western Heritage with University of California Press, 1995); David F. Martin, *An Enduring Legacy: Women Painters of Washington, 1930-2005* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, Whatcom Museum of History and Art, 2005).

their lives.[14] Though Roosevelt at times appealed to socialist or communist sympathizers and a broader range of the electorate that included racial minorities, the people were not treated as a force for revolutionary social change but instead, as citizens and subjects meant to co-opt the state's goals and policies.[15] Along with implementing work relief programs that materially improved people's everyday lives, Roosevelt's administration harnessed cultural policy to appeal to the people and link them to the New Deal as citizens.

Newly established work relief programs included allocations for the arts, the first time the U.S. government supported the arts on a national level. At its peak, the New Deal spent $30 million to hire 40,000 dancers, writers, actors, musicians, and artists throughout the country.[16] Through various programs, artists created public works of art like murals, produced original works in their medium of choice, and participated in generating broader cultural appreciation, education, and access to art. Administrators saw arts programs as essential to helping the nation morally, culturally, and economically recover from the Great Depression.[17]

Rapp, Helder, and Morgan all participated in projects throughout the 1930s that gave them the opportunity to work as professional artists during a tenuous time and prepared them for the intersection of politics and aesthetics when creating work for a broad public. In 1933, Rapp worked for the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), a short-lived venture that paid artists to create works in various media. Her work was displayed in Washington D.C. at the *National Exhibition of Art by the Public Works of Art Project* in 1934, giving her a strong career start from this governmental

[14] Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture: the Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 20.
[15] Ibid, 21.
[16] Sharon Ann Musher, "Art in a Time of Need," in *New Deal Art in the Northwest: The WPA and Beyond* (Tacoma: Tacoma Art Museum, 2020), 20.
[17] Sharon Ann Musher, *Democratic Art: The New Deal's Influence on American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 1.

patronage when she was twenty-four years old. Rapp's known PWAP paintings play with a stylized, almost cartoonish approach to figures, exploring scenes of animals, mothers, and children that she continued to revisit throughout her life.[18] Rather than canvases intended for gallery spaces, Helder designed two mural maps of Washington state for the Public Lands Security Building in the capital city of Olympia around 1938. These murals have since been lost, but they showed the state from a bird's eye view, visualizing natural resources and county lines.[19] Helder also taught at the Spokane Art Center, part of the Works Progress Administration's (WPA) efforts to bring arts education to smaller towns across the United States.[20] In another facet of governmental relief, Morgan worked as a costume and set designer for the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) from 1937 to 1939. The FTP sought to provide jobs for actors, directors, technicians, and designers, and to bring professional theatre to communities around the U.S., not just the main urban centers of New York and Los Angeles. These free programs ranged from drama and comedy to musicals and children's programs. The FTP supported Black companies in some cities and Morgan worked on at least four shows with the Negro Repertory Company (NRC), as well as with other departments.[21] This unprecedented funding for the arts in all arenas—visual arts, theatre, writing, dance— produced a flourishing art scene despite the country's economic downturn.

Even with the government's support, or perhaps because of it, the value and role of art were fiercely contested in public opinion in this period. The New Deal administration saw the

[18] One such work is held at Seattle Art Museum: Ebba Rapp's *The Lambs,* 1933, accession number 33.226. I have not been able to locate others but have seen photographs of three other works at University of Washington, Special Collections, "Works Progress Administration Artists photograph collection", circa 1935-1943, PH0571.
[19] Images of these murals are reproduced in Martin, "Lucid Dreams," 27.
[20] The Spokane Art Center was particularly successful, at one point attracting over a thousand students from the community and supported by just six instructors, including other Seattle artists like Carl Morris, Hilda Deutsch, and Guy Anderson. Musher, "Art in a Time of Need," 24.
[21] The FTP established seventeen Black units across the country, including Boston, Cleveland, Chicago, Hartford, Harlem, Los Angeles, and Seattle. Kate Dossett, *Radical Black Theatre in the New Deal* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 6.

cultural sphere as an area that could engage artists as citizens and, as a result of their artistic output, also engage the public as citizens.[22] Yet, it was not an oppressive propaganda program, as it also seemed a genuine opportunity for artists to experiment and develop their individual aesthetics.[23] Generally, artists appreciated the New Deal opportunities and felt encouraged to experiment with techniques, including modernist ones, not merely reproduce conservative styles.[24]

This artistic experimentation and the abundance of styles in the 1930s operated within broader developments of modernism. Modernism, fiercely debated from the late nineteenth century to today, here refers to both formal techniques that move away from mimesis and representation toward abstraction, as well as artistic reactions to modern life—defined by urbanization and land development, changing modes of production and labor, and the suppression of certain peoples in processes of colonialism and capitalism.[25] Considering modernism as a flexible term without reinforcing hierarchies and marginalization can allow us to see the complex issues of race and gender that Americans were working out alongside politics and style. Rapp, Helder, and Morgan align with elements of different styles, but these women also integrate local concerns and formal innovation that defy easy categorization. Their work belongs within discussions of modernism because it mediates contemporary aesthetic debates and socio-political issues from their perspective as white, middle-class women.

Modernism then can account for changes in figurative art, not just developments toward abstraction. Art historians recognize Social Realism and Regionalism as the two main camps of

[22] Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture*, 9.
[23] Musher, *Democratic Art*, 3.
[24] Musher, "Art in a Time of Need," 24.
[25] Here I draw from Francis, *Making Race*; ShiPu Wang, *The Other American Moderns: Matsura, Ishigaki, Noda, Hayakawa* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2017); Wanda M. Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); and Alejandro Anreus, Diana L. Linden, and Jonathan Weinberg, *The Social and the Real: Political Art of the 1930s in the Western Hemisphere* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006).

figurative art during the 1930s. Social Realism, a term not used in its time but applied by art historians, usually indicates a "critical interpretation of reality," in contrast to the perceived bourgeois elitism of the avant-garde that refrained from depicting contemporary events.[26] Social Realism, though figurative, had no unifying visual approach and synthesized elements from Cubism, Fauvism, and Expressionism. Similarly opposed to avant-garde elitism, American scene painters like Thomas Hart Benton, Grant Wood, and John Steuart Curry were grouped as Regionalists in their time, signifying a stylized, realistic, often nostalgic mode of depicting labor, rural life, and local histories with a purportedly apolitical bent.[27] Regionalists rejected what they perceived as imported, European avant-garde styles of modernism in pursuit of a truly accessible American aesthetic. Regionalism and the unprecedented governmental support of federal art projects both drew complaints of nationalistic propaganda amid accounts of Nazi censorship and sponsorship of certain art styles. Regionalism and Social Realism alike had political undercurrents in the 1930s as American artists debated the style and content appropriate to counter the rise of fascism in Europe leading up to World War II.[28]

However, these two philosophical alignments of Social Realism and Regionalism were not always distinct since they did not have strict stylistic guidelines. Style and subject matter were not always clearly encoded. Government projects also muddle these categories because some commissions had particular aesthetic and content guidelines while others did not. Often, artists accepted the given limits, but at times, they resisted, wanting more creative freedom.[29] Some

[26]Anreus, Linden, and Weinberg, *The Social and the Real*, xiv, xvii. Often Social Realism has Leftist leanings, but is not to be confused with Socialist Realism, which is explicitly communist and related to official Soviet art styles.
[27] See Lauren Kroiz, *Cultivating Citizens: The Regionalist Work of Art in the New Deal Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018); and Erika Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
[28] Cécile Whiting, *Antifascism in American Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989) offers a comprehensive look at this subject.
[29] Musher, "Art in a Time of Need," 24.

cultural productions pictured nationalistic goals and norms, while others perpetuated harmful narratives and exclusionary practices, especially related to race, gender, and colonization.[30] While plays, music, and other art funded by the government could express progressive perspectives, historian Karal Ann Marling has argued that the "now" was often missing from New Deal murals placed in government buildings; instead of depicting the present reality, imagery "polarized sharply into wishful projections of a wondrous tomorrow and wishful reminiscences of a serene yesterday"—either retelling colonial histories or valorizing labor and technological progress.[31] Many artworks produced by New Deal efforts fall into these categories, but others express degrees of dissent and critique with a variety of artistic techniques.

As I will elaborate on later, Helder's series on the Grand Coulee Dam, the largest construction site of its time, counters the typical positive imagery of government projects. In contrast to heroic murals of laboring men and women and industrialization painted by other Northwest artists like Kenneth Callahan, Ambrose Patterson, and Carl Morris, Helder's depiction of laborers is much less enthusiastic, showing workers at ease on the job site, leaning on their tools rather than visibly toiling or straining. Ambrose Patterson's post office mural for Mount Vernon, Washington, *Local Pursuits,* exemplifies the typical visual presentation of the working man: the men's shirts are rolled up to their biceps, revealing bulging forearm muscles as they execute their factory and agricultural tasks (fig. 2). In Patterson's painting, all the hands depicted are chiseled and detailed while engaged in motion. New Deal art often showcased exposed bodies and musculature to aggrandize physical labor done for the public good, but neither of Helder's images of workers adopts this symbolism.

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[30] Margaret Bullock, "Conclusion: Looking Back, Looking Forward," in *New Deal Art in the Northwest: The WPA and Beyond* (Tacoma: Tacoma Art Museum, 2020), 211-12.
[31] Karal Ann Marling, *Wall-to-Wall America: A Cultural History of Post Office Murals in the Great Depression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 20.

The men in Helder's *Construction Crew* (fig. 3) are all slim with undefined arms, while in *Jackhammer Crew* (fig. 4.), the workers' bodies are hidden under their gear. In *Construction Crew,* five men wearing hard hats occupy the foreground, one carrying a wooden board while the others appear more passive. One man sits with his legs crossed, and another looks out over the vista, resting his elbow on his knee. The metal pipes and wooden materials that should be the focus of their attention are merely decorative elements, almost patterns that move around them. The rolling green hills and dry peaks in the background take up the upper half of the composition and seem the real focus. Even the large puddle in the foreground, a solid gray-blue sheet that dampens the earth around it, seems to interest Helder more than the men.

Jackhammer Crew focuses on the gray hoses that snake around the rocks in elegant loops, while the workers are props who must be present to operate them. The thick, gray, serpentine tubes and craggy rocks cast dark shadows, leaving mysterious voids and crevices throughout the foreground. The figures here are similarly uninvolved with their work—one man to the left seems to be operating his jackhammer, but the other three workers to the right lean on their tools, or even sit on them. Bodies are only depicted in these two instances in Helder's series of twenty-two images of the dam, and, when they are shown, they seem lazy or inactive—not signaling vigorous, heroic labor. While this was not a government-commissioned project for Helder, she demonstrates the way that art was not monolithic despite the nationalistic forces at play. Artists held a range of views that they brought to their interpretations of work relief projects, and Helder's position will be explored further later in this paper.

Cultural programs and public art carried the threat of cultivating propagandistic ideals, like Patterson's post office mural, which reiterated gender roles in the workforce. While the New Deal was motivated by an aspirational foundation of democracy and equitable work programs,

opportunities were limited for non-male and non-white participants. Work programs were mainly composed of white male workers, followed by Black men, white women, Black women, and all other minorities, demonstrating the racial hierarchy of workers and citizens that the administration recognized and served.[32] Still, these programs allowed a greater number to become professional artists who had previously not been able to support themselves as such.

In these programs mainly catering to white men's employment, women were only allowed to take one-sixth of the positions at the WPA, given they could prove eligibility as the head of their household.[33] WPA reports cited "a desire to put some brake upon women's eagerness to be the family breadwinner, wage recipient, and controller of the family pocketbook" and "a desire to protect the WPA program against possible public criticism from employing 'too many women.'"[34] In this period, women's presence in the workforce was seen as a temporary necessity until they eventually married and left the ranks of laborers.[35] Nationally gaining the right to vote and greater social, economic, and sexual freedom in 1920, women were often targets of hostility during the Great Depression. Society blamed women for taking jobs away from men, for not taking care of their families, and for the excesses of overconsumption in the 1920s.[36] People of color faced similar and worse roadblocks with enrolling in work programs and receiving pay.[37]

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[32] Statistics on participation by race and gender were evidently not gathered in the first six years of New Deal programs. In February 1939, the WPA calculated that 74.4% white men, 12.1% Black men, 11% white women and 2.1% Black women made up their employment rolls, as cited in Nancy E. Rose, "Gender, Race, and the Welfare State: Government Work Programs from the 1930s to the Present," *Feminist Studies* 19, no. 2 (Summer, 1993): 325. This data comes from the Works Progress Administration, Final Report on the WPA Program, 1935-1943 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1947), 45. See also Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture,* for more information on federal art projects.

[33] Nancy E. Rose, "Gender, Race, and the Welfare State," 324.

[34] Donald Howard, *The WPA and Federal Relief Policy* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1943; New York: Da Capo Press, 1975), 279.

[35] Barbara Melosh, *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 1.

[36] Ibid, 227. See Melosh's assessment of gender in the Treasury Section of Fine Arts that highlights many issues for women artists and existing records of them, including administrative imperatives or implicit preferences to work in masculine subject matter and style that reinforced gender roles discriminated against women, even as it also presented more progressive New Deal politics.

[37] Rose, "Gender, Race, and the Welfare State," 324.

However, white women like Rapp, Helder, and Morgan found jobs with New Deal programs allowing them to postpone or avoid the social pressures of marriage and child-rearing in favor of supporting themselves and pursuing careers and creative ambitions.[38] As single women, their eligibility for work relief perhaps incentivized them to resist the social and economic pressure of marriage. But Congress abruptly terminated federal arts funding as the second world war advanced. War manufacturing jobs replaced relief jobs. This end of government arts funding and the start of the war coincided with (or perhaps necessitated) Rapp, Helder, and Morgan all marrying men between 1941 and 1943 when they were in their thirties, exceeding women's median age of marriage, twenty-two.[39] None of the three had children, and all continued working as professional artists, differing from the social expectation to return to domestic life and be mothers and homemakers.[40] Despite these patriarchal biases against women, Seattle was an encouraging environment for women artists. Rapp, Helder, and Morgan were members of the Women Painters of Washington, which planned exhibitions and lectures, and they had their work bought by institutions like the Seattle Art Museum.

The national effects of New Deal arts programs and policies certainly affected these artists in their training and work in Washington in the 1930s, but, from here, I will look more closely at the local and microhistorical. While only Morgan's work is part of a federal project, these artists

[38] Martin, *Enduring Legacy*, 20-21, suggests that New Deal projects gave WPW members unique career opportunities and the end of this funding caused some women to reconsider how they sustained their livelihoods.
[39] "U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Censuses, 1890 to 1940, and Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplements, 1947 to 2022." This chart shows a slight increase in women's marriage age from 1930 to 1940, but still at a median just under 22 years of age.
[40] Helder allegedly married artist and architect Robert John "Jack" Paterson in 1941 or 1943, according to letters she wrote, but no marriage documents have been found, according to Martin, "Lucid Dreams," 33-34, 54 fn 31-32. Rapp married lawyer and photographer Jack McLauchlan by July 9, 1943, according to the *Seattle Times* issue of that date. Morgan married Luther Losey by April 25, 1943, according to the *Seattle Post Intelligencer* issue of that date. While Paterson and McLauchlan seemed supportive of their wives' careers, Martin alludes to Morgan's "conflicted identity [as bisexual] and abusive marriage" that may have hindered her ambitions. See David F. Martin, "Women Painters of Washington," History Link, February 14, 2006, https://www.historylink.org/File/7644.

worked under and with this patronage system; they knew the complexities of making art to appeal to the public and the government. White women like Rapp, Helder, and Morgan, included in and empowered by their government-commissioned work, were primed to adopt white citizenship and see themselves within a collective of American workers and artists. Because of these factors of New Deal employment and their identity as women, all three artists monitored how much they interacted with social and political issues and experimented formally. They relied on figuration to negotiate these boundaries, express ambivalence toward the national ideologies they observed, and make work suited to their audience and community in the Northwest.

Neighbors among Nature in Helder's Unpeopled Landscapes

As established, artists often had nuanced views about government projects even while receiving federal funding. Z. Vanessa Helder's Grand Coulee Dam series offers an opportunity to see how government patronage, alongside considerations of American landscape traditions and contemporary stylistic debates, manifested in her art. Helder visually documented the construction of the largest man-made structure in the world, but her images of the dam do not invoke conventional iconography like the heroic workers discussed earlier.[41] Yet, she still ensured that her work was palatable to mainstream audiences and official venues by appealing to the white majority rather than critiquing it. In limiting her depiction of human figures to only two out of the twenty-two images in this series, Helder largely circumvented the fraught issues of observing and depicting the many people involved in and affected by the dam's construction. On one level, these empty scenes speak to the common settler mentality of developing land that Helder upheld, but her less enthusiastic representation of this place also transmits disagreement. In terms of her style,

[41] Victoria Grieve, "Celebrating 'Progress'?: Art, Ambivalence, and Vanessa Helder's Grand Coulee Suite," *Western Historical Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (Autumn 2013): 248. Grieve discusses painters and photographers employed by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation that demonstrate this iconography including William Gropper.

she chose to remain figurative with certain tenets of Regionalism and Precisionism toward an "American" aesthetic, rather than European modes of modernism. Though Helder's series overtly supports the national apparatus that favors white citizenship, she also seems to have some concerns about the way the government is developing land.

As a white woman who worked on government projects and had garnered her own public success by this point, Helder had the freedom to work as an artist and choose her subject matter, particularly with this series that lacked a patron or intended buyer.[42] These watercolors came out of Helder's personal interest in the project while, and after, she worked nearby at the WPA's Spokane Art Center. After only a few months teaching watercolor, oil painting, and lithography at the Art Center, Helder fulfilled the maximum allowance for artists to be on the WPA payroll and instead occupied herself by making sketching expeditions to the dam.[43] In 1941, *Life* magazine selected some of Helder's watercolors for a feature on the dam, but it was ultimately canceled when the attack on Pearl Harbor delayed the dam's official opening date.[44]

Despite recognition from a major national publication, her work does not explicitly endorse the project. Through her clean-lined, exacting watercolor technique, Helder paints her landscapes with minute detail that equally emphasizes the importance of the natural landscape, machinery, and human habitation. The natural world is not overtaken or overpowered by manufactured materials. Instead, it cohabitates and even impedes development at times. By removing figures

[42] Helder had her first solo show at Seattle Art Museum in 1939 and had gallery representation at Grant Studios in New York and later Macbeth Gallery in 1940.

[43] Helder gained permission from the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation on account of her reputation as an artist, so perhaps there was some potential of them buying her work. However, she was not employed by them and they did not buy the works. She kept the group of watercolors together as a series to exhibit, but eventually sold and gifted the whole series to what is now the Northwest Museum of Art and Culture in Spokane. Grieve, "Celebrating 'Progress,'" 251-52. Martin, "Lucid Dreams," 49 reports on Helder's attachment to this series and that she kept it until 1954 before releasing it to the museum.

[44] Grieve, "Celebrating 'Progress,'" 253-54. Martin mentions that Helder and Macbeth Gallery had planned for these works to be printed for *Life*, which ultimately never came to fruition. I have not seen other evidence of Helder's intended audience for this series. Martin, "Lucid Dreams," 32.

from these views, her paintings aestheticize geometric shapes in nature, excising the labor and messiness of living to elevate form more than enact social critique. Helder is more concerned with human presence in nature, marked by architecture and engineering rather than their actual bodies.

Beyond documenting the construction itself, Helder also depicts the town of Coulee. Some residential structures seem at home among the desert-like terrain of eastern Washington, like *Hooverville,* where a shanty-like structure is nestled among the green shrubbery cushioning it and the hills in the background (fig. 5). Though titled with the Depression-era name for improvised towns for people experiencing unemployment or homelessness, the house at the center is depicted as neat, clean, and pleasant with sunflowers growing tall to the left of it and a tricycle sitting out front. Slight hints indicate poverty—the ominously darkened windows, the cardboard box in the driveway, and the printed material covering the house on the left for insulation. Other structures seem rejected by this landscape. In *Hilltop House,* a steep dirt driveway leads to a precariously balanced wooden house with a leaning stovepipe. The lower level garage is dangerously wedged against a dusty, cracked hillside, ripe for a mudslide (fig. 6). At the bottom of the driveway, a "for sale" sign fails to entice any visitors or buyers. Deep crevasses cut open the hill, unwelcoming to pedestrians or cars, despite the tracks in the lower left foreground. Helder observes class among the homes here and the economic conditions of this boom town, even as she avoids directly characterizing its people.

This vision of supposed civilization and progress ironically is missing and dismissing the people who live there and the workers who are so intimately involved with its construction and realization. The settlement is shown as empty and unproductive in the face of a solid, resistant desert landscape; it is a place altered by human presence but not entirely transformed by it. Instead of focusing on the people, Helder engages this philosophical quandary of what it means to

intervene with nature and who belongs there. Her painting titled *Neighbors* seems to refer to neighbors not just as the occupants of the three overlapping homes in this frame, but also as the large industrial tanks behind them and the beige, stratified hill beyond that (fig. 7). The pebbles in the foreground are strategically scattered with ample distance between one another as if neighbors too. The presence of fences in this painting, in *Hooverville,* and others from the series draws attention to the divisions of space even in a vast landscape. Which unseen humans and natural resources are being divided and separated in this broad expanse of nature that continues far beyond her picture plane? These images seem to ask why fences matter in this place devoid of people and with so much space within sight.

The abandoned appearance of these places also recalls older tropes of empty land, pristine wilderness, and unutilized, untapped resources that were employed to justify taking Indigenous land over the centuries of westward expansion in the United States.[45] As with that myth, we know that beyond this frame of vision, many people lived in this area, settlers and Native alike, who are not shown. The dam employed thousands of people and attracted many more to support this industry, from housing and service jobs to prostitution, taverns, and entertainment, none of which are depicted in Helder's observations.[46] Besides not illustrating the construction workers and townsfolk whose presence is implied, the dislocation of Native peoples eludes visibility too. Treaties from 1872 for the Colville peoples and 1881 for the Spokane peoples created reservations, causing numerous splits and dislocations for their communities, and by the 1930s, their land rights had continued to be eroded and ceded to the government and settlers by acts of Congress.[47]

[45] Alan C. Braddock and Karl Kusserow, *Nature's Nation: American Art and Environment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Art Museum, 2018) provides further research on the landscape tradition in American art and its foundations in Romanticism and colonialism.
[46] Grieve, "Celebrating 'Progress,'" 261.
[47] Trisha Johnson, "Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation: A Brief History," Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation, June 16, 2021, https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/bb31cd48d0284fa59d6f454cafabe962.

Somewhere between 3,000 and 4,000 people, Native and settler, and whole towns were forced to relocate due to flooding from the dam and few property owners felt that they had been properly compensated.[48] The vital salmon runs and fishing grounds from the Columbia River to the Pacific Ocean were destroyed by the Grand Coulee Dam, ending the centuries-long relationship between Native tribes and salmon.[49] Concerns from Native peoples, farmers, utility companies, and taxpayers were published frequently in newspapers leading up to and during the dam's construction.[50] In the September 24, 1939 edition of the Spokane newspaper, the *Spokesman-Review*, a notice of Helder teaching at the Spokane Art Center was published in the column next to a story about the process of removing Indigenous remains from the new reservoir area created by the dam.[51] Besides frequent newspaper headlines in local and national papers, Helder likely would have been aware of the impact of the dam on Native residents from her fellow Women Painters of Washington member Lily Norling Hardwick who lived at the nearby Nespelem Art Colony, which focused on depicting Native culture and people.[52]

By the 1930s, artistic responses to the Western landscape had evolved to more critically consider the environmental impact of land development; Helder's attention to emptiness and absence of human figures hints at those concerns.[53] The dam was not a clear-cut unanimously-supported federal project and, beyond environmental effects, it had significant personal impacts on those whose problems were deemed negligible by the government. These acts of removal were

[48] Grieve, "Celebrating 'Progress,'" 265.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid, 263-64.
[51] "Grave Removal Work Proceeds" and "Enroll Tuesday for Art Work," *The Spokesman-Review*, September 24, 1939, 10.
[52] The Nespelem Art Colony was founded by Clyfford Still and Worth Griffin in 1937 for the purpose of inviting non-Native art students to live there and record Native culture. Grieve, "Celebrating 'Progress,'" 265. A short biography of Hardwick and examples of her portraits of Native peoples can be found in Martin, *Enduring Legacy*, 32-35.
[53] Braddock, "Man and Nature: Visualizing Human Impacts," in Braddock and Kusserow, *Nature's Nation: American Art and Environment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Art Museum, 2018), 199-241.

mostly complete by the time Helder visited the site, but depicting Native peoples and dislocation was not in her purview as a white settler with New Deal beliefs either. She depicts some vague concerns about this changing relationship to nature and resources but only from her inherited position as a settler—a position that was not named or questioned in her time. By not making reference to Native peoples or others removed, Helder confirms her positionality and relation to a national ideology that ignored these issues.

Helder's ambiguous attitude toward the dam can also be seen in the way she wields her style. Helder's subject matter and style seem in dialogue with Precisionists like Charles Sheeler and Charles Demuth who were depicting factories and industry on the East Coast, and to whom she likely would have been exposed from her time studying at the Art Students League in New York in 1934 to 1935.[54] With a similar technique of focusing on line and visibility, Precisionists like Sheeler tended to glorify the machine age and exclude the human presence that made technology possible, an aesthetic that commercial interests appreciated and co-opted.[55] As art historian Victoria Grieve argues, though Helder also removes people from her scenes, she seems to hold an ambivalent perspective that "depicts an ongoing struggle between machine and nature that implies the interdependence of the synthetic and natural worlds, but not the triumph of technology."[56] Helder's structures are not merely towering feats of industry, streamlined and gleaming, removed from their labor and environmental impact, but instead shown in scale to nature. Further, Helder notices domestic spaces, attending to human presence (if not the humans themselves) and their place in this ecosystem.

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[54] Martin, "Lucid Dreams," 19. Other sources further address Helder's relation to Precisionism: Brittany Fiocca, "Z. Vanessa Helder: Innovative Formalist Realism in the Grand Coulee Dam Paintings (MA diss., American University, 2016), 32-34; Grieve, "Celebrating 'Progress,'" 252-54.

[55] Sharon Corwin, "Picturing Efficiency: Precisionism, Scientific Management, and the Effacement of Labor," *Representations* no. 84 (2004): 139–65.

[56] Grieve, "Celebrating 'Progress,'" 253.

Precisionists, like Regionalists, were often philosophically aligned with a mission of defining an American aesthetic in their art—one that was modern in its subject matter and style and did not borrow too much from European artists.[57] They might be opposed to Clyfford Still's 1936 image of Grand Coulee Dam, which seems influenced by Paul Cézanne in its sketchy, overlapping brushstrokes and blending of foreground and background space (fig. 8). Still, later known as a leading Abstract Expressionist, observed the unique shapes and patterns in this scene of ongoing construction with an expressionist pattern of brushwork, full of energy and movement quite different from Helder's quiet and desolate scenes. Meanwhile, Helder's *Coulee Dam Looking West* captures the same view a couple of years later and crisply defines and orders all shapes within her view (fig. 9). Her technique hides her brushstrokes as she follows the variety of forms in this environment. Both nature and industrial structures pose opportunities for observing line and shape. Water pours through the dam, creating misty clouds at the base and dissolving into an emerald green along the edges of the water. Electrical poles jut through the scene in cross-like shapes, though not yet connected by wires. The foreground buildings, though clearly defined, almost pile on top of one another from her elevated perspective and they cast confusing patterns with their shadows. The upper third of the painting could almost be a separate scene with its focus on the hills above the dam, rendered in careful shades of beige, sand, green, and violet. Though realistic, the scene is not illusionistic, allowing some flattening of perspective and shadow.

Considering the politics of legibility and accessibility to American audiences, this choice of realism explored in a Precisionist way seems an apt strategy for Helder's need for broad marketability. Recognizable landscapes of local venues had been within Helder's repertoire around Seattle and, by removing people from these scenes, she also removed the potential for audience

[57] Wanda M. Corn, "Home, Sweet Home," in *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 293-337.

disidentification. In this clear Precisionist style, Helder ensured that her work would be understood, at least on a surface level. Still's impasto technique leaves room for visual ambiguity and uncertainty in what is being depicted, while Helder's clean lines convey accuracy and a degree of "truth" in her observations of perspective and architecture. This realism would appeal to American audiences on several levels: artists and leaders had long considered the American landscape a unique and integral factor of American identity and culture.[58] Capturing it in this "truthful" way, alongside the dam as a symbol of American industrialization and technological advancement, would appeal to this sense of national pride. Likewise, this legible figuration would be accessible to all Americans, especially those without exposure to modernist styles.

Despite the Americanness inherent in the subject and style explored here, Helder's scenes of construction and what should be rapid movement are rendered still and silent, almost empty with the lack of human activity. We cannot see the dam's function or product, nor the project's value in providing jobs. We only see the geometric shapes of human refuge and machines among the bright desert light and sparse landscape. Helder's series bypasses overt engagement with social issues by eliminating her depiction of people, both the workers and the communities they brought with them, and the Native people whose ancestors had lived on this land long before any settlers arrived. Though humans are integral and implied in these scenes, she does not dwell on physical bodies so much as the interplay of natural and built environments. This minimization of the human body outwardly avoids social commentary and upholds New Deal settler citizenship, but her quiet rendering of this place of industrialization belies her potential critique or doubts relating to the project. This type of outward neutrality toward her subject allowed for Helder's work to be considered a "positive" view of the Grand Coulee Dam project by contemporaries and maintained

[58] Braddock and Kusserow, "Introduction," *Nature's Nation.*

her ability to grow her career without offending potential patrons. Despite her efforts toward balancing these factors, Helder kept the series until 1954 when Spokane's Grace Campbell Memorial Museum (now Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture) bought twenty of the watercolors, then she donated two others to keep the series together.[59] However, many of these works were exhibited in the 1940s, including at the Museum of Modern Art's *Realists and Magic Realists* exhibition in 1943, demonstrating her appeal as an American artist exploring the possibilities that realism and figuration still had.

Visualizing Blackness in Morgan's Theatre Work

Like Helder's multivalent representation of the Grand Coulee Dam, there are likewise ways that Blanche Morgan's work with the Negro Repertory Company (NRC) conformed to the expectations of New Deal citizenship, but also reflected unresolved questions of American identity, including art and policy relating to Black, queer, and female constituents. Functioning under the expectations of white citizenship and within the intertwined debates of aesthetics and politics, Helder and Morgan outwardly upheld some New Deal values while also quietly questioning others. Morgan's work demonstrates the paternalistic racial politics of her time but also captures the increased representation and access to the arts that Seattle's Black community seized in this moment of governmental funding. Her identity as queer, though not signaled in her art, provides us another data point for understanding her positionality to those also outside the bounds of white heteronormativity.

Though Morgan and Helder never identified themselves directly in writing as queer and society at large discouraged homosexual behavior, they were interested in women and romantically

[59] It is still unknown how many total works Helder created of Grand Coulee Dam but these twenty-two are often considered the complete series. Bullock, "Master of her Medium," 73.

involved with one another at some points in their lifelong friendship. From my research, Ebaa Rapp was heterosexual, but gladly supported Morgan, Helder, and their other gay male friends. While it is ethically fraught to project queerness onto figures who were not openly "out" and did not necessarily align with contemporary understandings of sexuality, some surviving evidence points to this reading.[60] Archival records do not work in favor of proving sexuality for these artists or a larger contingent of queer artists, partly because a homophobic culture discouraged them from open identification. Washington state was hostile to gay people, holding anti-sodomy laws that existed until 1975, and university, city, and social leaders frequently voiced their disapproval.[61] Moreover, typical gender roles were reinforced in the content of many New Deal public art projects, making clear the expectation for citizenship revolved around heteronormative families, men's manual labor, and women's domestic service. While I find it probable that Morgan and Helder were queer, my analysis is not centered on reading this identity into their art. I simply wish to acknowledge these details and recommend future research in this area as a potential site for exploring women's queer history in Washington.

Homosexuality was not something the government would admit into civil rights discourse for many more decades and artists did not visualize queerness openly, but at this time the Black

[60] Martin has published that Morgan was openly bisexual, based on oral histories told by friends and family of this group who spoke of her relationships with women, including Helder herself, and others that continued after her marriage to Luther Losey in 1943. Though Helder claimed to be married in 1941, she has no marriage record to her name, and in letters to friends, was ambivalent about marrying architect and artist Jack Paterson. Martin cites that friends of Helder's and Paterson's voiced a belief that one or both in the couple were gay. Friends described it that "Vanessa was the man and Jack was the woman," and Helder often dressed in men's clothes—which does not necessarily point out queer relations, but at the least unconventional gender roles. Their friendship circle, composed of other women artists and gay designers from the Seattle community, seems a possible hub for acceptance of these attitudes, especially when Seattle was still outwardly very hostile to homosexuality. Martin, "Lucid Dreams," 23, 33-34, 54 fn 31-32.

[61] See David F. Martin, *The Lavender Palette: Gay Culture and the Art of Washington State* (Edmonds, Washington: Cascadia Art Museum, 2020) for an account of gay, mainly male, artists in Washington state in the late 19th to 20th century. Don Paulson and Roger Simpson, *An Evening at the Garden of Allah: A Gay Cabaret in Seattle* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996) was also helpful for filling in information about gay history in Seattle, but there is still plenty of research to be done.

community was a dominant demographic that President Roosevelt addressed and artists like Morgan and Rapp depicted.[62] African Americans were increasingly visible in politics and society, partly due to advocacy by Democratic politicians promoting antilynching and anti-poll tax bills. Democratic New Deal measures ensured higher degrees of employment equality and gradually gained the vote of many Black communities.[63] Cultural policy through federal art projects also advanced this agenda of racial democracy.[64] Despite these intentions, federal art projects with their tedious bureaucratic processes and need for congressional approval wavered between sharing progressive and racially charged viewpoints.[65] There was a level of official control over these policies, but there was also the unintended or unpredictable sanctioning and amplification of previously marginalized voices, including those of African Americans.

The Federal Theatre Project, formed in 1935, was one of the more incendiary programs of the federal arts projects because their productions actively sought to portray racial and social issues. The FTP's director Hallie Flanagan envisioned the program as a professional theatre that could speak to everyday people, their communities, and their problems. The FTP was one of the first art projects to end in 1939 when Congress abruptly disbanded it amid accusations of communism from politicians and censorship from performers.

The Seattle FTP employed Morgan from at least 1937 to 1939 as a set and costume designer. Her drawings in the University of Washington Special Collections include concept designs for at least four productions by the NRC, some of which distinguish light and dark skin

[62] Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff, *Black Culture and the New Deal: The Quest for Civil Rights in the Roosevelt Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 17.
[63] Ibid, 22. Public Works Administration legislation required employing African American laborers to match the 1930 census numbers of national demographics.
[64] Ibid, 32.
[65] Ibid.

and depict stereotypical racialized facial features.[66] From what remains in this archival collection, Morgan's role is not clearly described and it is difficult to ascertain how much control she had over the designs of the productions she worked on. She was one of several designers and other creative leaders may have dictated their vision and preferences to her. Another factor that may have shaped Morgan's artistic decisions is the nature of performance and stage visibility, which often amplifies visual features so the audience can perceive them. Her designs operate within the functions and parameters of these larger artistic productions rather than gallery or museum settings like Helder's and Rapp's works.

From these artworks, Morgan's attitude toward race seems similar to other white liberals of her time—which was generally tolerant and positive toward African Americans, but still derogatory in a Seattle that was deeply segregated by redlining and racial covenants. Black citizens were the smallest minority in a predominantly white city.[67] Redlining and de facto segregation kept non-white communities to themselves, usually in the area south of downtown and Yesler Way.[68] Morgan had grown up in Olympia, Washington sixty miles south of Seattle, and studied architecture at the University of Washington where there were only eighty-nine Black students in

[66] Blanche Morgan drawings and watercolors, 1937-1939, collection Number PH0525, University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections. Several publications focus on Seattle's Federal Theatre Project specifically: Evamarii Alexandria Johnson, "A Production History of the Seattle Federal Theatre Project Negro Repertory Company: 1935-1939" (PhD diss., University of Washington, 1981); and Barry B. Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project: A Case Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[67] The 1940 census reports 4,039 Black inhabitants, among a population of 368,000 with 354,223 white, 8,951 Asian, and 222 Native American residents. James Gregory, "Seattle's Race and Segregation Story in Maps 1920-2020," *The Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History Project,* accessed December 10, 2022, https://depts.washington.edu/civilr/segregation_maps.htm. See also Quintard Taylor, "Black Urban Development: Another View: Seattle's Central District, 1910-1940," *Pacific Historical Review* 58, no. 4 (Nov. 1989); and Megan Asaka, *Seattle from the Margins: Exclusion, Erasure, and the Making of a Pacific Coast City* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2022), 10.

[68] Asaka, *Seattle from the Margins,* 12. Asaka's urban history of Seattle posits that the south side of the city became a stigmatized district for the city's diverse workforce while white families resided in the north, becoming more suburban. These areas near Pioneer Square became known as the rougher and bawdier parts of town with taverns and entertainment venues.

attendance between 1935 and 1941.[69] Morgan, as well as Rapp and Helder, lived close to downtown in the 1930s, and the friends often met in studio spaces in Capitol Hill, only a few blocks from Black and immigrant neighborhoods. They certainly would have interacted with these communities, even if they were contained in more insular circles. While the Northwest Annual exhibitions bear names of more diverse origins—Kenjiro Nomura, Kamekichi Tokita, George Tsutakawa, to name a few prominent Japanese American artists showing in the 1930s— the artistic milieu of Seattle was still mainly reserved for white participants.

As in the white-dominated fine art scene, even theatre units that empowered Black creatives were often controlled by white leadership in discriminatory ways. While often with purportedly good intentions, white leaders perpetuated paternalistic attitudes toward Black members and segregated Black creatives and performers from the "standard," de facto white FTP units. Burton and Florence James, a white married couple and founders of the Seattle Repertory Playhouse, ran the NRC as part of their vision of modern theatre that performed social commentary and social justice. The Jameses had previously worked with Black actors recruited from Seattle's African Methodist Church, had access to theatre space, and had the experience to convince the FTP to fund them in running a Black unit, winning out over Black community members who had submitted a bid too.[70] For the NRC's first production, the Jameses proposed *Porgy*, a tragedy about a poor, disabled Black man, but the cast and crew opposed this selection for its degrading roles and use of slurs.[71] The rights were ultimately not granted to *Porgy* and a different play was chosen,

[69] Taylor, Quintard. *The Forging of a Black Community : Seattle's Central District, from 1870 through the Civil Rights Era*. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), 144.
[70] Joseph Jackson, the first executive secretary of the Seattle Urban League, and Frederick Darby, a local union man, had applied to the FTP to run a Black theatre unit but were denied because they had not secured theatre space yet and could not provide an adequate number of professionals that needed work. Dossett, *Radical Black Theatre*, 64-65.
[71] Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project*, 67; Dossett, *Radical Black Theatre*, 67.

but from the outset, Seattle's NRC voiced their dissatisfaction and had a say in the decisions made by white leadership. While the Jameses worked to professionalize the troupe and trained the cast, they also perpetuated conceptions of what "authentic" Black theatre looked like and how it could be accomplished only under white supervision.[72]

One of Morgan's stage designs that exemplifies this tension between Black creative actors and a majority white city is a stylized watercolor painting titled *Voodoo* (fig. 10). The small, simplified figures in dark ink on the bottom left and right corners indicate the scale of the staging. They look up at a design approximately four times taller than them. This potential stage set would have been huge, marked by a central, nude female figure who bears her breasts as she sits on her knees, extends her arms upward, and tilts her head back with her mouth open, as if yelling or singing to the sky. Morgan outlines many nude figures in various shades of brown and black wash. They are evidently meant to appear African-esque by their exaggerated lips and darkened skin tones, as well as by the carved masks they carry or wear. On either side of her, male figures play drums, and more figures walk around the background in profile as if part of a rhythmic, spiritual procession. The bodies, depicted in a relatively realistic style but arranged in space without a clear relationship to the ground and recession of space, make this scene somewhat abstracted and removed from reality, more of a dream or vision. The figures move through the picture plane at all different levels with their exaggerated mask-like features highly visible to the audience.

Voodoo was a popular, exoticized theme in the U.S., exemplified by the Black New York FTP's extremely well-attended production of Shakespeare in 1936, referred to as "Voodoo Macbeth."[73] Morgan's drawing is for the 1938 production *Black Empire*, which dramatized the life

[72] Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project*, 70, 76-77; Dossett, *Radical Black Theatre*, 65-66.
[73] Wendy Smith, "The Play That Electrified Harlem," *Library of Congress*, originally published January-February 1996,https://www.loc.gov/collections/federal-theatre-project-1935-to-1939/articles-and-essays/play-that-electrified-harlem/.

of Henri Christophe, the Haitian revolutionary then emperor who tried to discourage voodoo. Morgan's design may have never been used as a backdrop in a production. Still, her larger-than-life Cubist imagining is significant for its allusions to primitivist imagery popularized by European avant-garde artists earlier in the century, like Pablo Picasso's appropriation of African masks. Morgan's image makes evident the sexualized, racialized conception of the Afro-Caribbean subjects of *Black Empire* that audiences conflated with the Black Seattle actors. The figures onstage would surely not be naked, but they would be associated with these background doubles as they played drums and replicated the cries and hand motions of voodoo onstage.[74] Voodoo as a theme and Morgan's modernist design with its Cubist influences would seem unfamiliar and exotic to Seattle audiences who had little direct contact with the Caribbean or avant-garde art in their everyday lives. While many American artists were searching for a homegrown style to call their own, these elements of fantastical, "primitive," and distant cultures held their allure too for their sense of difference. Morgan's work for *Black Empire*, though figurative, is not seeking audience recognition and identification, but rather provoking an unfamiliarity and strangeness that will pique their interest and evoke energy and sound. As was the case with many NRC shows, white Seattle audiences would be prone to assuming the authenticity of the performance and forming stereotypical views about these Black actors and Black culture overall.[75]

The visual, performative, and musical aesthetic of *Black Empire* cannot entirely be attributed to white appropriation and fascination when Black artists were also making significant contributions to the production. The NRC's resident composer Howard Biggs created the music, and Syvilla Fort, the sitter in Rapp's *Blue Mood*, choreographed the dances.[76] The modernist

[74] Johnson, "A Production History," 130-31, discusses the research and influences that the white director Esther Porter employed for *Black Empire.*
[75] Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project*, 76-77.
[76] Johnson, "A Production History," 130-31.

interest in African art and aesthetics, though adopted by white artists, was also a source of inspiration for African Americans seeking a uniquely Black aesthetic during this period.[77] Alongside debates about what distinguished "American" art and identity, African Americans were also having debates about their cultural identity and connectedness to the white mainstream art world. While this drawing of *Voodoo* contains some of the more troubling primitivist inclinations of modernism, it is also a manifestation of Black artistic voice too.

Yet, several of Morgan's other undated drawings in a sketchbook demonstrate problematic tropes of a white woman depicting Black performance. Within a notebook of many costume studies, Morgan shows only a few Black figures by shading their skin with diagonal pencil hatching. Two pages feature clown costumes composed of whimsical ballooned pants and extravagant collars and sleeves (figs. 11 and 12). The unshaded clowns read as white and seem to be wearing stage makeup with dotted cheeks and darkened lips, while the shaded, Black figures are not wearing makeup and instead have their faces and hands colored in with pencil lines. Both shaded figures' faces conform to stereotypical Black male features, but one has eyes dictated by quick slashes in an X-shape.

Even considering that most of the sketches in this notebook seem to be preliminary concept designs, the details from these clowns stand out as generalized descriptions of Blackness while white figures are more detailed and individualized. Morgan's clown images here verge uncomfortably close to stereotypical images of blackface and minstrelsy, exaggerating the size of facial features and aligning these figures with the "happy slave" trope. The FTP sponsored blackface minstrel shows in Chicago, New York, and Massachusetts even as it also funded Black

[77] Phoebe Wolfskill, "The Enduring Relevance of the Harlem Renaissance," in *The Routledge Companion to African American Art History* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 27-36, discusses the aesthetic debates that took place during the Harlem Renaissance. Alain Locke was one of the main advocates for looking to African art influences since that artistic training had been denied to African Americans due to the slave trade.

theatre units that produced serious and well-attended dramatic productions.[78] These longstanding visual tropes originating from the time of slavery certainly still carried harm with them, as demonstrated when the Seattle NRC actress Sara Oliver Jackson refused to dress in a red polka dot bandana to play a story-telling mammy character in their production of *Brer Rabbit*, which Morgan also designed.[79] Morgan's depictions draw from fantastical and exaggerated ideas of race intrinsic to her position as a white person in the U.S., even a liberal one who would collaborate with Black artists.

Morgan's theatrical designs document this state-sponsored project and its biases and demonstrate the tensions and complications of New Deal cultural programs. Though these arts programs facilitated a political desire to integrate Black subjects into the American cultural sphere under white standards and leadership, they also created a public, endorsed venue for Black creativity and voice to emerge. Morgan's work as part of a team that involved Black artists is simultaneously a stereotypical expression of Black America and evidence of a complicated web of motivations and compromises toward self-representation. As the company balanced portraying its concerns and values against the potential of censorship and cancellation, Morgan also balanced keeping her paid position as an artist and staying within the social and racial status quo of the FTP and her local Seattle community. These sketches—components serving larger theatrical productions and adopting the FTP's (white) audience-oriented goals—show less interest in developing a uniquely American visual aesthetic. Instead, Morgan and the NRC are synthesizing a confluence of styles and references that African Americans were grappling with as well, toward an understanding of their own identity. Morgan's depictions of Blackness resonate with New Deal

[78] Dossett, *Radical Black Theatre*, 7-8. Some digitized examples of other FTP costume designs that utilized racial tropes can be found on the Library of Congress website, including "Be Seated Aunt Jemima Mixed Minstrels," https://www.loc.gov/item/musihas.200218300/.
[79] Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project*, 95.

policies that recognized African Americans and granted them a degree of political and cultural representation, even while other minorities, like queer, Native, and Asian Americans remained unrecognized by the state and the public.

A National Body: Propaganda and Style in Ebba Rapp's *Blue Mood*

Ebba Rapp's portrait, *Blue Mood*, stands in contrast to Morgan's theatrical drawings, which capture tropes and types more so than individuals, and Helder's work that avoids depicting non-white subjects at all. Here, *Blue Mood* makes a Black woman the focus of this serious artistic study, gives the sitter personality and humanity, and employs her as an embodiment of the United States in the face of war. This recognition of a Black woman confronts issues of nationalism, whiteness, and politics. Despite this demonstration, *Blue Mood* is one of Rapp's only works that directly represents race, politics, or any form of social critique. The aesthetic and political debates of the 1930s made these issues pressing and relevant for artists to engage with, but none of these women chose to pursue especially politically or socially engaged art after this period. Beyond the figurative style and charged message of *Blue Mood*, Rapp's oeuvre on the whole favors abstraction and stylized figures. Looking at two of Rapp's other works exhibited around 1939 reveals the privileged strategy of focusing on form rather than social commentary, and how that corresponds with debates about modernism in Seattle.

Rapp renders her sitter as an individual, not a trope, retaining aspects of her self-presentation with her clothing—a black skirt that covers her thighs and black slingback heels that draw attention to her femininity and role as a dancer. *Blue Mood's* central figure is Syvilla Fort, the first Black student at the Cornish School in Seattle who went on to work with famed choreographers and dancers Katherine Dunham, Alvin Ailey, and Harry Belafonte. Rapp and Fort were both teachers at Cornish at this time, but it is unclear how much they socialized outside of

the school.[80] There seems to be a level of trust and agreement between the artist and sitter, particularly since Rapp made an additional partially nude portrait of Fort.[81] Other Women Painters of Washington artists, Margaret Camfferman and Ruth Kreps, also painted Fort, perhaps indicating that Fort was familiar with WPW, socially or professionally. Fort's expression with high eyebrows, large doe eyes, and full plum-colored lips seems far from a representation of a type, and more so a portrayal of an admired friend or colleague.

Though this work at a glance seems to be a straightforward nude or portrait, practicing the study of the body and exploring formal qualities, critics nonetheless flagged it as political. The model rests her head on one arm, and in her other hand, holds a dangling cigarette with smoke disintegrating in the background. The newspaper at lower left competes for attention, reading "War Extra," a headline published almost every day in the months following the September 1, 1939 announcement of Germany's invasion of Poland. Fort's languid pose and facial expression seem to relate to this latest omen of war in the news. The visible headline of the newspaper in this painting and the choice to exhibit it immediately makes the work explicitly about the present moment, September or October 1939. Callahan's review in the *Seattle Times* praised *Blue Mood* for the technique but critiqued the inclusion of text at all, saying:

> War is so uppermost in everyone's mind these days that anyone looking at this canvas immediately sees the very prominent words "War Extra" and one's attention is immediately turned inward, going over the many possibilities the present diplomatic maneuvering in Europe can mean: will America be drawn in, the neutrality pact, cash and

[80] A photo of the artwork and short blurb on *Blue Mood* is published in Martin, *Enduring Legacy*, 98. Other Women Painters of Washington artists, Margaret Camfferman and Ruth Kreps, also painted Syvilla Fort, perhaps indicating that Fort was familiar with WPW, socially or professionally.

[81] Ebba Rapp, *Nude study of Syvilla Fort*, ca. 1938, oil on canvas. Wolfsonian, Florida International University.

> carry, etc. It is almost impossible to get back to the painting itself, to realize the beauty and the quality it has. As such, it exists as propaganda.[82]

Though Callahan wanted to discuss formalism (the "beauty" and "quality" of the work), he found the newspaper prop and its allusion to politics too distracting. Callahan disagrees with what he interprets as Rapp's anti-war message: "The story it relates I would call propaganda—propaganda for a cause I hardly believe in—against war, but still propaganda."[83]

Though it sounds that Callahan was in favor of the war, many Americans did not support the U.S. joining the fighting in Europe at this early point. Though newspapers were reporting on the war daily, the government favored neutrality until the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 threatened U.S. citizens and soil. In a feature asking people to weigh in on U.S. neutrality in June 1940 in the *Spokane Daily Chronicle,* Helder said, "America should remain neutral because however much we pity the allies' plight we have our own defensive problems to solve. I think we should strengthen our position by supplementing our armed forces but at the same time there is no need for us to anticipate trouble by becoming so hysterical that we abandon our neutrality."[84] Within *Blue Mood,* Callahan detected this sense of reluctance and distance that many Americans had regarding the far-off war in Europe, an opinion that Helder and Rapp may have shared at this moment.

In the 1930s, propaganda was a loaded term to label art seen to be promoting a specific political creed. It was also applied generally to causes that could be classified as anti-war, anti-fascist, pro-democracy, and pro-United States. Artists and officials debated whether political messages in art were appropriate at all considering the way the Nazi regime censored and promoted

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[82] Callahan, "The Art Museum," 6.
[83] Ibid.
[84] "Majority Favor Neutral Stand," *Spokane Daily Chronicle*, June 8, 1940, 3.

certain art styles.[85] This split between American artists who endorsed propaganda and those who did not led to the historiographical binary that art historians are still unwinding today: critics and artists negatively dubbed figurative, political art "low art" and propaganda, while they praised avant-garde art as higher quality because it dealt only with aesthetic issues.[86]

Though by today's standards, *Blue Mood* may not seem especially political, Fort does seem representative of the United States in a way that could be taken as propaganda, or perhaps allegory, rather than only communicating information about Fort as the sitter. The colors of *Blue Mood* correspond with the red, white, and blue of the American flag—the red of the armchair, the white of the newspaper, and the blue of the background. The title of this work could also allude to blues music originating from African-American artists and known as a uniquely American musical tradition. Fort embodies the United States on multiple levels: as a liberated modern woman posing nude, as a Black person integrated into and accepted by the arts community of Seattle, and as a concerned citizen, imagining how war will impact her life.

What does it mean then for Rapp to depict a Black woman as a representative of Americanness to a majority white audience at this moment of political uncertainty? Though the newspaper critics were not openly hostile to Rapp's central figure (they were still sure to mention the picture as the one with the "Negro girl" and "colored girl"[87]), choosing a Black model to serve as this sort of symbol of the United States when American women were by default assumed to be white was a bold choice for Rapp to submit to the Northwest Annual. *Blue Mood* speaks to the increased visibility of Black culture, performance, and citizenship in this era while other marginalized communities, like the many Asian Americans who lived in Seattle, Native peoples

[85] Whiting, *Antifascism in American Art*, 5.
[86] Ibid, 5-6.
[87] Callahan, "The Art Museum," 6; Boren, "Northwest Artists Exhibit," 17.

across Washington, and queer communities, were ignored or dismissed by the government, remaining unseen in most visual arts. Though I do not have evidence from this portrait sitting or of the artist's intentions, I would like to think Rapp was not exploiting Fort for this provocative message, but that it was a mutual collaboration that they anticipated would make waves at the Northwest Annual.

As a counterpoint, Rapp painted a companion piece to *Blue Mood* that avoided markers of her contemporary moment and politics. The next year at the 1940 Annual, Rapp showed a portrait of dancer Merce Cunningham, also a Cornish School teacher, titled *Boy Brooding* (fig. 13). Stylistically, it resembles *Blue Mood's* visible brushstrokes and use of color. Its subject, Cunningham, is also posed in a contemplative, brooding mood, placing his book face down on the table as if too distracted to continue reading. The book with no identifiable title does not convey a message in the same way that the newspaper does and instead keeps the artwork about the study of the figure and the application of paint. Rapp explores formal modernist influences in this portrait with its loose brushwork, impressionistic color treatment, and skewed perspectival space. Here, with blurry, almost vibrating lines the setting and the sitter's body are infiltrated by splotches of pink light. The desk is strangely foreshortened and intrudes on the viewer's space, while the baseboard in the background slants at an unlikely angle. Though the subject remains clear and recognizable, Rapp was experimenting with these modernist painting techniques and seemingly avoiding the political connotation she advocated in Fort's portrait. Cunningham, known today as a gay man and a founder of modern dance, was not openly out, though he did meet his lifelong creative and romantic partner John Cage at the Cornish School in Seattle at this time. Rapp could have been aware of this, but even if not, the pairing of these portraits of two dancers who worked in a modern style that broke from conventions—one a Black woman and one a gay man—speaks

to Rapp's attunement to artistic experimentation and perhaps acceptance of difference. *Boy Brooding* is not solely about formalism, and, as a portrait, it conveys information about the sitter's identity, but it maintains a politically and socially neutral facade, in some ways mimicking the fugitivity that queer culture survived with.[88]

At this same moment, Rapp's sculpture *Pensive Mood* was also exhibited at the international venue of the 1939 New York World's Fair, showing a similar subject to *Blue Mood* explored in a less realistic style (fig. 14). In red terra cotta, Rapp presents a standing nude woman contemplating, signaled by her arm propping up her tilted head. Her other arm supports her elbow, interlocking at a ninety-degree angle that frames her spherical breasts. Her body is composed of geometric shapes, taking some inspiration from Cubism it seems, but stylizing the body to maintain anatomical accuracy. Some edges of the woman are sharp, like her left arm that forms a ledge, while her smooth, rounded thighs seem almost removable, as they leave a line where they join the waist.

Pensive Mood explores the female nude with a focus on form in an apolitical, non-realist way when compared to *Blue Mood* with its clear nod to the war in the newspaper and the inclusion of a Black woman standing in for America. *Pensive Mood,* as a foil, is a non-racial, non-specific symbol of woman, stylistically informed by Rapp's time working with the Ukrainian-American sculptor Alexander Archipenko at the University of Washington in the summers of 1935 and 1936 when he taught there.[89] Unlike the "home-grown" connotation of Precisionism and Regionalism for Helder and African American culture informing Morgan, Rapp's work more closely follows stylistic influences from European modernism, especially in sculptures like *Pensive Mood*.

[88]Jonathan D. Katz and David C. Ward, *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* (Washington, D.C.: National Portrait Gallery, 2010), 10-56.
[89] Martin, *An Enduring Legacy*, 25, 95.

Throughout Rapp's career, she reacted to aesthetic changes in the art world, but only minimally engaged with the political and social developments of mid-century America.

Callahan called *Blue Mood* propaganda for distracting the viewer from artistic concerns, arguing that the text in the newspaper forced the viewer to think about politics, rather than contemplate the art itself.[90] We can imagine, though, that his critique of *Pensive Mood* and *Boy Brooding* might take up the opposite position—that it fails to address anything of the present moment, as was his overall critique of the 1939 Northwest Annual that took place against the backdrop of distressing world events. There was no promised victory in these battles for public opinion regarding art's style, function, and necessity. Rapp, along with Morgan and Helder, seemed to be testing the waters, seeing what style and content would garner support. For Rapp, she seemed to identify that both highly figurative work and recognizable abstractions could help her succeed, as she continued to produce art in both veins throughout her life. For all three, their choices succeeded in garnering the support of their local communities, as they were selected to display work at the Northwest Annuals throughout the 1930s and 1940s, at times winning prizes and honorable mentions. In 1939, critics recognized Rapp's *Blue Mood* as important but the jury awarded the first honorable mention in sculpture to her *Young Girl*, and Helder's *City Gas Works* won the second honorable mention in watercolor the same year. With a level of privilege in their whiteness and social status, these artists did not have to depict or comment on contemporary issues to maintain their artistic careers and maybe determined that it would serve better not to depict reality or politics.

[90] Callahan, "The Art Museum," 6.

Perceptions of Modernism in Seattle Before and After the War

Looking at the conversations about modernism in Seattle in the years around 1939 and the later part of these artists' careers, we can see how public opinion about abstraction evolved, for better or worse, for modernists like Rapp, Helder, and Morgan. Almost a decade after *Blue Mood's* debut in 1939, Rapp wrote to gallerist Esther Robles in Los Angeles in 1948: "I have tried to select paintings that represent the variety of techniques in which I work…I can paint as good a 'horror picture' as anyone; excluding of course Picasso and other masters. Certainly there is an abundance of inspiration in this world for that sort of thing."[91] Seemingly referring to art that depicted wartime atrocities (perhaps Picasso's famous *Guernica*, which traveled around the United States during the 1940s), Rapp connects recent world events with the modernist style used to convey them—"horror pictures." She admits she can trade in such images though it is unclear what works in her oeuvre would fall under this category. By 1948, Rapp had created more abstract and Cubist-inspired paintings and sculptures, but I have not seen any of the war or more political subject matter than doves or still lifes.[92] However, in this letter, Rapp mentions the show's purpose in representing the "beauty of creation," perhaps now avoiding more serious subject matter since the war had wreaked havoc for Americans and Europeans alike.[93]

Rapp's classification of "horror pictures" aligned with the public perception of modernism. Debates over abstraction and modernism, which had begun in the early days of the century in Europe and New York, were also happening in Seattle and crystallized around 1939 and 1940. At the Northwest Annual of 1940, Mark Tobey's *Modal Tide* won the top prize, but received scathing

[91] Letter dated October 30, 1948, Dorothy Stimson Bullitt Library, Seattle Art Museum, Artist Files, McLauchlan Rapp, Ebba.
[92] One of Rapp's paintings shown at the 1942 annual was ominously titled *Tears of Blood Were Shed*, but I have not been able to track it down.
[93] Letter dated October 30, 1948, Dorothy Stimson Bullitt Library, Seattle Art Museum, Artist Files, McLauchlan Rapp, Ebba.

criticism in newspapers (fig. 15). The *Seattle Times* reported that "to a layman, 'Modal Tides,' the jury's choice, looks like nothing at all."[94] The work offers little representational subject matter, only overlapping modular shapes in purple hues with a faint reference to the horizon line and triangular mountain peaks in the background. As a show juried by artists and arts leaders, the works selected for the Northwest Annual reflected the tastes of the jurors, not necessarily a wider public. Alongside jury selections, the public also participated in a poll for the popular prize. The *Seattle Times* critic commented, "For twenty-six years, a blue-ribbon jury of art experts has been selecting the Pacific Northwest's best pictures. And for twenty-six years, the public has been making its own choices. They have never agreed!"[95] The popular prize in 1940 went to *Mere Man* by Russian-born artist Rudolph Franz Zallinger, a figurative work showing a small male figure facing a large sublime cliff and waterfall, a scene that resembles Asian ink wash landscapes more so than American or European influences (fig. 16). The dark, stormy view almost takes on a Surrealist or otherworldly appreciation of nature. This prize was noted as unusual in the *Seattle Times* where their critic wrote, "Oddly enough, the public's first choice isn't one of those pictures you can sink your teeth into either." Zallinger's subject and style reflect the fluctuating taste of both audiences and artists that was less conservative than we may have assumed of locales like the Northwest.

While the public accepted these modernist renderings of recognizable scenes, Seattle Art Museum leaders were compelled to write several defenses of abstract art, encouraging the public to be open-minded. Mrs. A.M. Young, the educational director, advised the public to visit "without the avowed intention of getting angry or disgusted at the paintings they do not like."[96] Expecting a volatile reaction to the more abstract works, Young claimed that "there are enough [artworks] to

[94] "Once More It's Art vs. People. Experts and You Can't Agree," *Seattle Sunday Times,* November 17, 1940, 11.
[95] "Once More It's Art vs. People. Experts and You Can't Agree," 11.
[96] A.M. Young, "Northwset [sic] Artists' Work on Exhibition," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer,* October 6, 1940, 7.

please the conservative, the progressive and the ultra-modern," if visitors would come with a sense of appreciation rather than anger.[97]

Dr. Richard Fuller, the museum's director, in a longer defense, invoked the success of the Museum of Modern Art in New York to justify these changing artistic standards. He also called upon the rhetoric of the poor, starving artist—that artists like Rembrandt were rejected by "the narrow-minded conception of their contemporary lay public who, by tradition, lack sufficient imagination to accept any change in style."[98] Though he had a somewhat belittling attitude toward the public's ability to understand art, Fuller admits that he, too, once was "irritated" by art that was exhibited at the MoMA, but discovered this was because of his ignorance and failure to recognize the artist's goals.[99] Despite this defense of modernism, Fuller still added a disclaimer "that many atrocities are committed in its name, and since the standards are more nebulous, mistakes in judgment can be made more easily both pro and con."[100]

Modernism and abstraction were being actively contested in the 1930s and, though it would soon become a baseline for art of the latter half of the twentieth century, it was not a guaranteed strategy for artistic success. A sense of elitism pervaded abstract art and modernist styles that some American artists, critics, and the public resisted, championing instead Social Realism, Regionalism, scene painting, and landscape tradition. Yet I argue that even these more figurative styles contain modernist elements and influences that belong in our discussion of American modernism, not just as antagonists to abstraction. Along this spectrum though, artists in the United States faced divisions among the public and the artistic community; selecting one approach over another could mean a career's demise. Some scholars attribute Helder's lack of popularity

[97] Ibid.
[98] Richard E. Fuller, "Dr. Fuller Discusses Modern Art," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, October 20, 1940, 7.
[99] Fuller, "Dr. Fuller Discusses Modern Art," 7.
[100] Ibid.

following World War II and the 1950s to her continued practice of Precisionist observations of nature and place that went out of vogue.[101] After several health complications that limited her art-making, Helder died days after her partner Jack Paterson died in 1963 when they were barely making ends meet in California, neither having much financial success with their art by that point.[102] Morgan adopted Helder's style at times, delved into Surrealist scenes, and made some entirely abstract, collage-like works through the 1940s. Yet, she did not pursue the gallery scene as eagerly as her friends and instead worked commercially as a designer in Seattle. Rapp, experimenting the most with style and abstraction, may be considered the most artistically successful among the three: she continued to exhibit and teach around Seattle, completed commissions for churches, and served on the Washington State Art Commission. While it is not abstraction alone that made Rapp's work popular, it seems to be a tool that served her.

Yet, the battle between figuration and abstraction was perhaps not as dire as it has seemed to scholars. Alejandro Anreus, Diana L. Linden, and Jonathan Weinberg in their historiography of Social Realism claim that "the supposed antimodernist quality of so much of the visual art between the wars has resulted in its neglect by an approach to art history that still favors formal invention over content, abstraction over realism."[103] The authors remind us that the dichotomy of abstract modernism and figurative antimodernism was not the end-all debate. Artists considered themselves modern because they were making art that responded to political and social issues of their time, even if not using avant-garde formalist styles.[104] Among the abundance of visual and

[101] Martin, "Lucid Dreams," 47-52 reports on the end of Helder's career. An undated clipping by Los Angeles gallerist Joni Gordon (1936-2012) on Z. Vanessa Helder in the Seattle Art Museum Library's artist file for Helder says: "She was caught between two art waves and suffered from persistent loss of personal strategy and failure of coincidence. She was extinct in her own time."
[102] Martin, "Lucid Dreams," 52.
[103] Anreus, Linden, and Weinberg, *The Social and the Real*, xiv.
[104] Ibid.

political philosophies in the 1930s and the pursuit of American cultural identity, many artists were working in figuration and should be considered in discussions of modernism. Artists exploring the possibilities of figurative art and integrating their contemporary concerns, rather than solely focusing on formal experimentation, contributed to the landscape of artmaking in the United States that is just as relevant for us to study today. Looking at artists like Rapp, Helder, and Morgan who exemplify white artists of a certain class allows us to see the ways that their work perpetuated, but also questioned New Deal policies, which were themselves alternating between liberal and conservative measures.

None of Rapp's, Helder's, or Morgan's works would be considered "horror pictures" or "atrocities" of modernism. They do not depict shocking content nor use a shocking style, but they were all engaging with modernism and these artistic discussions that defined their time. Escaping easy categorization, they played with different styles and subjects, seeking the way that women artists could fit into this system that revolved around New Deal policies and reactions to it, including sensitive issues of race, land, and cultural production. Their careers did not abruptly end when federal arts projects ended, when World War II concluded, or when Abstract Expressionism made its debut in the late 1940s, but they continued to work as artists, teachers, and designers in their local communities. With the privilege to explore these avenues as white women admitted to the professional artist ranks, but also with the limitations of what this acceptance meant for financial and social support, Rapp, Helder, and Morgan captured their reality and their "now" in bold and varied ways that must be factored into what we mean when we talk about the Northwest, modernism, and the New Deal.

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[Images removed from this format for copyright]

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