

CHARLES DESMARAIS

Art

De Forest show errs on side of cuteness

New exhibition
in Oakland tries
too hard to push
later, lesser work

Everything about the current exhibition at the Oakland Museum of California should add up to a winner. A beloved Bay Area artist with a solid track record. A top-notch curator and catalog author. A spiffy installation. A respected museum that cares deeply about its audience.

So, why does "Of Dogs and Other People: The Art of Roy De Forest" end up seeming a lost

Of Dogs and Other People: The Art of Roy De Forest: 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Wednesdays-Thursdays; 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Fridays; 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Saturdays-Sundays. Saturday, April 29-Aug. 20. \$10.95-\$15.95. Oakland Museum of California, 1000 Oak St., Oakland. (510) 318-8400. <http://museumca.org>

opportunity? The show, which opens Saturday, April 29, and continues through Aug. 20, tries to do far too much with material that can't stand the weight of our expectations.

Guest curator Susan Landauer is an accomplished art historian with a well-deserved reputation for shining new light on California artists who have undeservedly fallen into the shadows. She worked on the presentation with in-house curator Christina Linden, who told me that Landauer's in-

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**Roy De Forest, Untitled
(1962-63)**

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

A conflicted presentation of the aspects of De Forest

Desmarais from page E1

volvement in the project spanned more than 10 years.

That effort shows, particularly in the catalog. It is a major book, a deeply researched biography of De Forest and an analysis of his art and career. It is also — perhaps understandably, in light of that investment — an attempt to polish De Forest's somewhat tarnished star.

De Forest (1930-2007) was a big name in the art world of the 1970s and '80s, particularly for a Northern California artist. By his early 40s, he had been appointed to the faculty at UC Davis, then a closely watched hotbed of so-called Funk art, and his paintings were being collected by major museums. In 1974 his work was

the subject of a nationally traveling retrospective exhibition, organized by what is now the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

That seems to be about the time that his art, always colorful and intensely energetic, became rather more hyperactive than complex, and the whimsy evident in early work took a turn toward the fawningly adorable. Landauer takes pains in her book to rebut critics who called the artist a "Marx Brothers Fauve" making "cute" work. She, in contrast, perceives "a nuanced spectrum of experience."

Yet, starting with the title, the exhibition "Of Dogs and Other People" focuses precisely on the saccharine aspects of the art. It's almost as if the

show and book were directed to completely opposing ends.

It is De Forest's early work that is still the toughest and most rewarding. That body took two principal directions. One comprises map-like abstractions that bring to mind Australian Aboriginal painting (though he may not have known such work) or abstract Surrealists such as Wolfgang Paalen and Lee Mullican (work that he surely did know).

Among these abstract paintings is the extraordinary "Autobiography of a Sunflower Merchant" (1962-63), which could be a satellite image of an alien garden, a cryptic war map or a view through a microscope at a particularly insidious viral battle.

The second early path led him to shamanistic emblems of interlocking figurative and ornamental forms exemplified by "Who, Who" (1968), that can be read simultaneously as flat patterns and as windows onto chaotic worlds.

An exhibition that less slavishly tried to represent the artist's entire output would prune from the late, repetitive, self-consciously kooky period. That is the time during which he produced, alas, his best-known pictures — of garishly colored men and women in funny hats and hairdos, smiling horses, stoic rabbits and,



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Roy De Forest, "Painting for Pedagogues" (1962).

most of all, dogs of all shades and sizes. A more rigorously critical assessment might have rescued the legacy of the artist. What we get, instead, is De Forest playing crazy old Roy De Forest.

Worst of all, the exhibition tries much too hard to be a family affair. The labels were written at an eighth-grade reading level, Linden told me. There are several "listen-

ing stations" throughout the show where one (actually, everyone — there are no earphones) hears "interpretations of De Forest's paintings from a variety of people including a sword swallower and a dog trainer." And at the center of the exhibition is a large room built by the exhibition designers to resemble a walk-in De Forest painting, where one can stick felt forms

Two concurrent Roy De Forest exhibitions, both with free admission, are also being staged in San Francisco.

Civic Art Collection Focus: Roy De Forest: 11

a.m.-6 p.m., Tuesdays-Saturdays. Wednesday, May 3-Aug. 19. San Francisco Arts Commission Galleries, War Memorial Veterans Building, 401 Van Ness Ave., S.F. (415) 252-2255. <http://sfartscommission.org>

Man of Our Times: Drawings by Roy De Forest: 11

a.m.-6 p.m., Tuesdays-Saturdays. Saturday, May 6-July 1. Brian Gross Fine Art, 248 Utah St., S.F. (415) 788-1050. www.briangrossfineart.com

onto shaped wall elements.

I am all for art education. And I certainly understand, having worked in museums most of my life, the impulse to reach beyond museum regulars to those who have had little exposure to the pleasures of visual art. But with Landauer telling us that the work is more sophisticated than we might at first think, one wonders if the museum would give the same treatment to the art of, say, Bruce Conner or Clyfford Still. Or would their art be allowed to keep its bite?

Charles Desmarais is *The San Francisco Chronicle's* art critic. Email: cdesmarais@sfgchronicle.com Twitter: @Artguy1

PUZZLE ANSWERS

Crossword Puzzle

I	N	A	M	E	S	S	P	H	E	N	O	M	S	
C	O	C	O	N	U	T	C	R	E	A	M	P	L	E
I	M	A	G	I	N	A	R	Y	F	R	I	E	N	D
C	E	D	E	D	L	E	N	T	N	I	A			
L	A	I	N		M	E	A	N	Y	B	E	S	T	
E	T	A		L	E	A	S	E	L	E	Y	T	E	
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A	C	P	O	W	E	R		R	U	N	D	R	Y	
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N	A	Y	S		C	L	A	N	S		T	O	R	O
L	P	S		L	I	D	O		T	R	A	I	N	
A	L	T	E	R	O	N		C	O	U	R	S	E	
D	E	E	P	E	S	T	R	E	C	E	S	S	E	S
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New York Times Crossword

M	A	M	M	A	S		C	R	U	S	T		A	M	A	L	F	I			
G	O	R	I	L	L	A		S	H	E	R	E	E		L	A	G	O	O	N	
A	T	I	S	K	E	T	A	T	A	S	K	E	T		E	N	N	U	I	S	
L	E	O	S		C	A	B	E	R	N	E	T		B	E	G	U	I	L	E	
E	T	S	E	Q		Y	E	W		A	L	O	O	F		A	S	S	E	T	
S	I	N	U	S		C	A	R	P		O	F	F		D	A	D	S			
	D	I	W	I	T	R		C	O	N	S	U	M	E	R						
I	S	H		T	O	N		D	E	S	O	T		S	A	I	M	E			
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J	A	W	A	T		A	P	E		A	D	O	B	E		S	U	T	R	A	
E	L	H	I		L	A	D	Y		E	L	L	A		G	R	A	Y			
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P	H	O	N	E		H	O	T	D	O	G		N	U	T		G	M	S		
T	V	I	C	A	M	E	R	A		F	O	S	S	I	L	S					
A	I	G	H	A		D	U	I		L	U	S	T		T	E	A	L	S		
C	E	L	L	O		T	R	U	C	E	P	A	T		T	E	A	L	S		
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L	O	N	E	R	S		S	T	A	R	S		S	A	L	L	Y	S			

Sudoku Puzzle

2	5	3	1	9	7	4	8	6
4	7	1	8	2	6	3	9	5
9	8	6	3	5	4	2	1	7
6	2	4	5	3	9	1	7	8
5	9	7	4	1	8	6	3	2
1	3	8	6	7	2	5	4	9
3	4	9	2	8	5	7	6	1
7	6	2	9	4	1	8	5	3

Challenger

3	2	2	1	8
1	3	3	2	9
1	2	1	2	6
2	2	1	1	6
7	9	7	6	8

Chess

Simply 1. Re1!
(threatens f3)
[Bacrot-Vavrak
'09]