

Roy Boyd Gallery



**The Grand Example of
La Grande Jatte:
Seurat and Chicago Art**

May 18 – June 17, 1986

Curated by Mary Mathews Gedo

Opening Sunday May 18, 1986

**739 North Wells
Chicago**

2:00 – 5:00 p.m.

642.1606

The Grand Example of *La Grande Jatte*: Seurat and Chicago Art

This small exhibition has a two-fold purpose. First and foremost, it celebrates Georges Seurat and his masterpiece, *Sunday Afternoon on the Isle of La Grande Jatte*, 1884-86, which made its debut exactly 100 years ago at the eighth Impressionist exhibition held in Paris, May 15 – June 15, 1886. Second, it explores the impact of this picture's long Chicago residency on the kind of painting produced in the city for *La Grande Jatte* has spent nearly two-thirds of its public existence at the Art Institute of Chicago, where it has been on exhibition almost continuously since 1924, offering generations of Chicago artists the grand example of painting elevated to the level of sacred ritual.*

That *La Grande Jatte* and, by extension, all of Seurat's oeuvre, should have a profound impact on Chicago art and artists can scarcely surprise. From the beginning of his public career, Seurat's revolutionary new artistic style and scientific theories dazzled his contemporaries, winning far more converts to his method than he wished to attract. His influence, increased geometrically during the decades following his premature death in 1891, shaped the entire course of Modern art. Indeed, Chicago artists interested in the master can observe numerous instances of the "Seurat effect" among paintings in the collection of the Art Institute. One might cite van Gogh's *Self-Portrait* of 1887, painted soon after his first exposure to *La Grande Jatte*,

and Picasso's *Man with a Pipe*, as but two examples of the response of other leading artists to Seurat and his Neo-Impressionism. Obviously, one could mount a much more extensive and ambitious exhibition exploring Seurat's impact on 20th century art in general rather than on Chicago painting in particular.

The central role that Seurat and his *Grande Jatte* have played in shaping Chicago art has been strongly reinforced by Art Institute events and acquisitions of a drawing and a painted study for *La Grande Jatte* that underline the unique importance of this canvas as *the* most precious jewel in the museum's crown. Nor is it a coincidence that this exhibition features so many faculty members and graduates of the School of the Art Institute (the SAIC), including three senior professors in the Department of Painting and Drawing: Richard Loving, Robert Skaggs, and Ray Yoshida. In my opinion, the SAIC has been the primary instrument through which the Seurat effect has been disseminated, and in some instances, probably even diffused. (For a further discussion of these ideas, see M.M. Gedo, "Chicago Artists Celebrate *La Grande Jatte*," the *New Art Examiner*, March, 1986.)

But *La Grande Jatte*'s special impact on mid-western art extends beyond the bounds of Chicago proper affecting artists who have never studied at the SAIC and who live several hundred miles from the city. Thus, the present exhibit includes paintings by Michigan artist Gregory Constantine, Wisconsin resident Dennis Nechvatal, and southern Illinoisian Robert Paulson. In addition, it features one work each by Robert Natkin and Vincent Arcilesi, both ex-Chicagoans who attended the SAIC.

Archilesi's canvas, *Wedding on the Isle of La Grande Jatte*, was created especially for the 1968 Chicago exhibition, "After the Afternoon," organized by Don Baum, Roland Ginzel, Ellen Lanyan and Alice Shaddle as a joint homage to Seurat and Kathleen Blackshear, a beloved SAIC faculty member who has consistently directed the attention of students to the French master during her long tenure in the school. Artists who participated in the show produced works directly inspired by *La Grande Jatte*. Vera Klement's canvas, *Sunday Afternoon in the Park without Dots* was also created for that exhibit, as was Ed Paschke's *Winging*, both included in the present exhibition as a part of the Chicago-Seurat history.

As one might anticipate, the exact nature of the lessons that artists have absorbed from Seurat and his masterpiece varies widely from person to person. Both William Conger and Barbara Rossi are especially insistent in affirming the relationship between their whole approach to picture making and the French painter's general artistic philosophy and specific procedures. Conger, calling Seurat's painting "an art of inspiration," cited the important role preliminary planning played in Seurat's work as in his own. Like Seurat, Conger always aims to achieve a tightly integrated effect: "If one were to imagine peeling away one shape from *La Grande Jatte*, or from one of my paintings, like my *Flora* [included in the show], the whole composition would come away with it." Many of Conger's landscape abstractions, such as *South Beach* and *Prairie Shores*, both shown here, portray the glowing sky and water vistas apparent from so many Chicago vantage points. He believes that the very setting of *La Grande Jatte*, which

* Purchased by Helen and Frederic Bartlett in Paris, the canvas was shipped directly to the Art Institute, where it went on exhibition as a work on loan shortly after its arrival on July 7, 1924. It was officially acquired by the museum in 1926, as part of the Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial Collection.

recalls that of our own lake-front parks, idealized, has especially endeared this canvas to Chicagoans – “like Seurat’s personages who mostly face the water, Chicago is spiritually oriented toward the lake.”

Rossi described *La Grande Jatte* as a picture that “tells us what a masterpiece is all about – what that accomplishment really is.” But much as she admires Seurat’s great canvas, she feels that his drawings have played a more crucial role in her own artistic development, and she underlined the fact that she always introduces them to her SAIC students. The three beautiful Rossi works on paper included in the exhibition, *Rill Roller*, *Lakeland*, and *Rapsodent II*, reveal her great skill as a draftsman. (Indeed, the distribution of forms in *Rapsodent* seems to me to recall that of *La Grande Jatte* itself.) Rossi’s earlier paintings on plexiglas, such as *Quick-N-Quack*, on view here, show a preoccupation with delicate mark-making that seems quintessentially feminine. These tiny marks have disappeared from the mirror-smooth surfaces of her more current pictures, such as *A Lady Waiting for Dinner*. However, these panels all feature painted frames as integral parts of the composition, a practice that probably also derives from Seurat.

Frank Piatek compares *La Grande Jatte* to a pearl growing in an oyster; through the years, it has assumed a larger and larger role in his artistic development, informing his ideas of process, and ultimately leading from the canvas itself to other aspects of Seurat’s oeuvre, especially his drawings. Although Piatek’s canvases, like *Mundus* reveal a concern for careful compositional development and the repeated use of tiny dabs of color to achieve a glowing



William Conger

Flora

1985, o/c, 48" x 44"

Collection of:

David and Mary W. Green

Front cover:

Georges Seurat

La Grande Jatte

Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago

surface – concerns that mirror those of Seurat – it is the Chicago artist's drawings that show the most striking parallels with those of the French master. The characteristics of the three untitled Piatek drawings included in the show illustrate the accuracy of his own observation: "Although Seurat flattens out form more than I would, we share the same concern for chiaroscuro, texture, and mark making."

Like Piatek, Robert Natkin found in *La Grande Jatte* not only a masterpiece, but a great storehouse of information about the process of constructing a picture far more accessible to him as a budding artist than the old master paintings in the museum that seemed to him to conceal so much of their method. Its contradictory sensualness and etherealness made the Seurat picture especially impressive. From *La Grande Jatte*, Natkin learned the secret of depicting light as color, color as light; this knowledge has informed his own working procedures ever since, as his 1986 version of *Soliloquy* reveals, with its films of glistening color and light-filled ambiance.

For both Richard Loving and Robert Skaggs, the major 1958 Seurat retrospective organized by the Art Institute proved a landmark experience. (The show featured 152 works, providing a representative cross-section of Seurat's brief career; see the catalogue, *Seurat; Paintings and Drawings*, ed. by D.C. Rich.) The exhibition included numerous preparatory studies for *La Grande Jatte*, ranging from quick sketches to the definitive oil study and *La Grande Jatte* executed in the artist's studio. Seurat's method (which, of course, really involved a return to the more traditional procedures abjured by the Impressionists during the 1870s) provided



Skaggs with concrete guidelines for the development of a composition, techniques not emphasized during his formal training. The series of works by Skaggs included in this show provides a history of the evolution of the canvas, *Rocky Branch*, a procedure that began with a series of studies on paper, including the definitive watercolor, executed before the motif, and concluded with the painting of the oil in his studio.

For Loving, the Seurat retrospective provided vivid evidence of the French artist's skill in building forms "atomistically," an ability demonstrated by the little painted panel studies for *Les Poseuses* depicting the nude bodies of the models as aggregates of thousands of flesh-colored dots. Loving resonated with the compression of energy and percussive force evident in the layers upon layers of tiny strokes so prominent both in these panels and in *La Grande Jatte* itself. The three paintings by Loving on view here, *Water Caught*, *Equational*, and *Crooked Hooker*, exemplify both his own exuberant approach to pointillism and his equal fascination with making the stitch-like strokes that also play a prominent role in *La Grande Jatte*.

Richard Loving

Water Caught

1983, o/c, 54" x 72"

Courtesy of

Roy Boyd Gallery

Several other painters included in this exhibition share Loving's fascination with Seurat as dot-maker. Robert Paulson's admiration for Seurat's pointillist technique recently culminated in the creation of the enormous "dot lady," *Montana*. Although this canvas also reveals his interest in achieving the scintillating visual impressions that Seurat's juxtaposed dots of complementary colors were meant to attain, *Montana* demonstrates above all Paulson's delight in the abstract patterns and spatial shifts that this technique produces.

Claire Prussian's most recent canvases reveal a similar preoccupation with laying down tiny dabs of bright colors. Although she believes that her art has always been informed by lessons about depicting light learned from *La Grande Jatte*, her earlier super-realistic works on paper do not suggest the same sparkling effect evident in current pictures such as *The Queen's Chamber* shown here. The free-form, pointillist carpet beneath the queen's feet, with its dots of contrasting pigments, recalls the rather similar abstract shapes formed by sun and shade in the grassy carpet beneath the protagonists of *La Grande Jatte*.

Sarah Krepp and Amy Sheng-Kohler, both emphasized the importance to them of aspects of *La Grande Jatte* that seemingly did not strike other Chicago artists so forcefully. Thus, Krepp linked a series of paintings she created during the early 1980s to her interest in the problems posed by Seurat's attempts to illustrate the laws of simultaneous contrast – an endeavor vitiated by the fugitive character of his orange and green pigments, that quickly faded and lost their scintillating character. Certain of Krepp's paintings from those years, such as #13-81, create an over-all

reddish appearance when viewed from a distance but reveal a myriad of other sparkling hues when studied from close range.

Seurat's skills in creating the marvelous spatial harmony of *La Grande Jatte* particularly impressed Sheng-Kohler intrigued by the "secret geometry" that seemed to inform his spatial intervals. Though she has neither copied Seurat's proportions nor worked out any formulaic determinants for her own compositional placements, she attributes her increased awareness of the importance of intervals and of solid-void interrelationships to the French master. *The Silence of Springs* reflects both Sheng-Kohler's subtle spatial solutions and her fascination with building glowing surfaces via successive layers of small marks.

Although Chicago artists often seem almost reverential in their attitude toward Seurat, the work of two non-resident painters included in the show, Dennis Nechvatal and Gregory Constantine, suggests a more tongue-in-cheek approach to the master. Constantine has made *La Grande Jatte* the basis for several witty re-interpretations that have introduced other well-known art figures (such as Sir Kenneth Clark) into the ambiance of Seurat's island on the Seine. The Art Institute's recent replacement of the picture's ornate gold frame with a simpler white one duplicating its lost original casing as closely as possible, stimulated Constantine to create representations of fictive "slices" cut through *La Grande Jatte*. Thus, *Georges' Sliver* portrays a slender wedge cut through the canvas from the edge of its new frame to the figure of the so-called nurse near the picture's center.

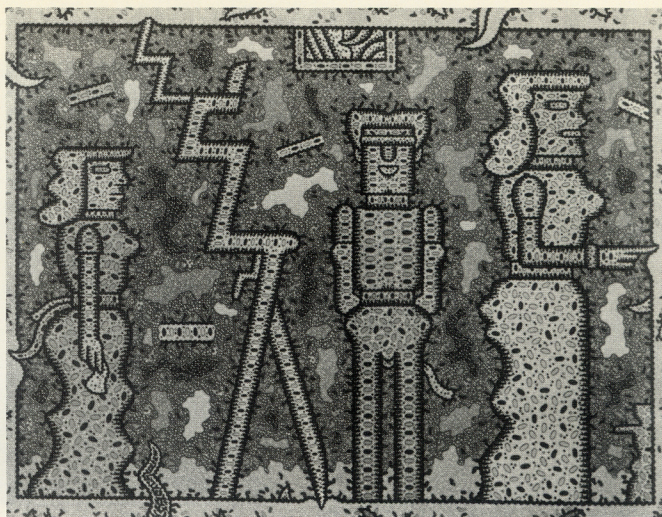
Dennis Nechvatal often employs Seurat-like markings and color contrasts to depict a world with an ominous, Boschian character that seems quite foreign to Seurat's own idealized world suggested by *La Grande Jatte*. However, the Nechvatal canvas included in the exhibition, *Pledge*, seems more witty than threatening. The face of the solemn protagonist (a modified self-portrait) is composed, à la Seurat, of thousands of tiny dabs in contrasting colors, with blue and red predominating, while the background is formed from bright yellow touches laid over blue, in strokes often reminiscent of the regular cross hatchings that underlie much of *La Grande Jatte*'s surface.

Pleading the organizer's special privilege, I have chosen to include two Chicago artists in the exhibition, Roger Brown and Ed Paschke, who do not sense the close connection between Seurat's oeuvre and their own that I discern. (Both painters graciously lent works to the show anyway.) The ubiquitous Chicago obsession with depicting glowing light and making delicate marks – practices that may owe their genesis largely to Seurat's example – is nowhere better illustrated than in Paschke's series of seemingly non-representational paintings created during the mid-1970s. *Greenfield*, with its sparkling orange-green color contrasts, seems literally ablaze with light; perhaps by coincidence, it also suggests the luminosity that Seurat might have achieved had his orange and green pigments been more stable. In Paschke's more recent canvases, such as *Fiesto*, tiny dancing particles of light and color coalesce into electronic-like light waves that seem in process of disintegrating his protagonists.

Several of Brown's early pictures, such as *Fat Lady's Dream*, 1968, evoke associations to the Seurat drawings depicting the silhouetted heads of an audience as they watch some popular entertainment on a brightly-lit stage. Brown's more recent canvas, *My House in the Dunes*, 1982, with its setting on the water, its rhythmical recession into space, and its flattened, stylized foliage, also invites comparison with *La Grande Jatte*.

No Chicago artist has been involved in a more intense dialogue with Seurat than Ray Yoshida. This dialogue has intensified during recent years, as his palette has progressively brightened and his protagonists have assumed more human guises and behaviours. His exquisite facture, and the abstract patterns formed by his multiple layers of minute marks also evoke associations with Seurat.

Yoshida admires *La Grande Jatte*, of course, but it is Seurat the intimist artist – the creator of his opus of drawings and smaller canvases – that interests him the most. The relationship between Yoshida's *Growing Pains*, with its stage setting, foreground row of head shapes, and carefully painted inner frame and the similar features of Seurat's *La Parade*, 1887, seems especially provocative. Other recent Yoshida canvases, such as *In Touch With* and *Perplexing Predicament* strongly suggest that he has also been inspired by another Seurat painting in the Art Institute's own collection: the little painted study for *La Grande Jatte* selected by the museum in 1981 as part of the Block bequest. The woman with the bustle, who faces right in both Yoshida pictures, bears a strong familial resemblance to the similar figure in the Block panel. The gentle parody apparent in Yoshida's painted references



to Seurat seemingly invite us all to share in these light-hearted homages to the French master.

The last work to be considered, Barbara Aubin's *The 1986 Chicago Promenade*, is the only picture included that did not pre-exist the concept of this show. Rather, her delightful mixed-media work on paper was commissioned expressly for the exhibition as a kind of artistic logo. As commentary on *La Grande Jatte*, now one of the most reproduced pictures in the world, and certainly the only one to "star" in a Broadway musical, Aubin's collage with its many fragments of such reproductions, including a number generated by the Art Institute itself, constitutes a witty metaphor of the pictures's fame. It is a tribute to *La Grande Jatte*'s true greatness that it has not been trivialized by such over-exposure, and that it continues to inspire so many Chicago painters with its grand example.

Mary Mathews Gedo

Ray Yoshida

In Touch With
1982, a/c, 38" x 48"
Private Collection,
Chicago

Exhibition List:

Vincent Arcilesi

Wedding on the Isle of the Grande Jatte

1968, o/c, 70" × 80".

Collection of:

Richard and Elaine Copland

Barbara Aubin

The 1986 Chicago Promenade

1986, mixed media on paper, 28" × 39½".

Commissioned expressly for the exhibition.

Roger Brown

Fat Lady's Dream

1968, o/c, 12" × 12".

Collection of the Artist.

Courtesy of

Phyllis Kind Gallery.

My House in the Dunes

1982, o/c, 48" × 72".

Collection of the Artist.

William Conger

■ *Flora*

1985, o/c, 48" × 44".

Collection of:

David & Mary W. Green

South Beach

1985, o/c, 60" × 72".

Collection of:

Elmhurst College, A.C. Buehler Library

Prairie Shores

1986, o/c, 28" × 26".

Collection of:

Lynda and Rick Strusiner

Gregory Constantine

Georges' Sliver

1985, mixed media, 82" × 19".

Courtesy of the Artist.

Seurat License Plate

1985, metal, 6" × 12".

Courtesy of the Artist.

Vera Klement

Sunday Afternoon in the Park without Dots

1968, o/c, 72" × 48".

Collection of:

Vera and Aristide Zolberg.

Sarah Krepp

#13-81

1981, o/c, 84" × 72".

Collection of:

Roy and Ann Boyd.

Amy Sheng Kohler

The Silence of Springs

1982, o/c, 42" × 54".

Collection of:

Mr. & Mrs. Virginio Ferrari.

Richard Loving

■ *Water Caught*

1983, o/c, 54" × 72".

Courtesy of

Roy Boyd Gallery.

Equational

1985, o/c, 36" × 62".

Collection of:

Howard and Judith Tullman.

Crooked Hooker

1984, o/wood, 30¼" × 24".

Courtesy of

Roy Boyd Gallery.

Robert Natkin

Soliloquy

1986, a/c, 62" × 62".

Courtesy of the Artist.

Dennis Nechvatal

Pledge

1985, a/c, 72" × 78".

Courtesy of

Zolla/Lieberman Gallery.

Ed Paschke

Winging

1968, o/c, 34" × 22".

Collection of the Artist.

Courtesy of

Phyllis Kind Gallery.

Greenfield

1975, o/c, 41" × 62½".

Collection of:

Diane and Robert Newbury.

Fiesta

1984, o/c, 54" × 36".

Collection of:

Margaret and Albert Lockett

Robert Paulson

Montana

1985, o/c, 86" × 86".

Courtesy of the Artist.

Frank Piatek

Mundus

1983, o/c, 87" × 87".

Courtesy of

Roy Boyd Gallery.

Untitled: Three Concentric Circles with Frame Extension: MUNDUS/Form Light

Vibration

1983-1985, Graphite/Acrylic Gesso/Charcoal and White Chalk, 64" × 53½".

Courtesy of

Roy Boyd Gallery.

Untitled:

1978, Silver Pencil on Black Paper, 28¾" × 40½".

Courtesy of

Roy Boyd Gallery.

Untitled:

1979, Graphite and Acrylic Gesso on Paper, 29½" × 22¾".

Courtesy of

Roy Boyd Gallery.

Claire Prussian

The Queen's Chambers

1984, a/o/c, 28" × 56".

Courtesy of

Hokin/Kaufman Gallery.

Barbara Rossi

Quick-N-Quack

1975, a/plexi, 30" × 44".

Collection of the Veronda

Estate.

Lakeland

1976, c/p, 30" × 40".

Collection of:

Joan and Peter Dallos.

Rill Roller

1976, c/p, 23" × 29".

Collection of:

Mark and Judy Bednar.

Rapsodent II – My Dentist's Dream – A Garden of Earthly Delight

1974-1983, colored pencil/pencil/collage/paper, 23" × 23".

Courtesy of

Phyllis Kind Gallery.

A Lady Waiting for Dinner

1983, a/masonite, 45" × 35⅞".

Courtesy of

Phyllis Kind Gallery.

Robert Skaggs

Initial Sketch of *Rocky Branch*, 1982, ink on paper (in the artist's sketchbook, double page), 3⅝" × 5⅝".

Collection of the Artist.

Rocky Branch I

1982, ink/paper.

Courtesy of

Jan Cicero Gallery.

Rocky Branch II

1982, ink/paper.

Courtesy of

Jan Cicero Gallery.

Rocky Branch

1982, w. c/paper, 18" × 23".

Collection of:

Richard and Joan Wason.

Rocky Branch

1982, o/c, 66" × 66".

Collection of:

Mr. & Mrs. Thomas Gottschalk,

Courtesy of

Jan Cicero Gallery.

Ray Yoshida

Growing Pains

1982, a/c, 38" × 48".

Collection of:

Mr. and Mrs. Larry Aronson.

■ *In Touch With*

1982, a/c, 38" × 48".

Private Collection, Chicago

Perplexing Predicament

1985, a/c, 36" × 50".

Courtesy of

Phyllis Kind Gallery.

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**Inaugural Exhibition
of the New Gallery**