PEOPLE HAVE BEEN CREATING THINGS ON THE HIGH DESERTS OF THE SOUTHWEST

mesas for at least fourteen thousand years. But we like to look at art in our own particular ways, focused paradoxically both on what is exotic and on who or what we feel affinity with. So scenes and legends arise. For at least a century, Santa Fe has attracted to itself creative modern people who have often stayed and participated in a shifting array of scenes, wheels within a larger wheeled universe, some overlapping in time, others in similar spaces at widely different times, or with persons traversing several scenes over time. Some artists need solitude while some need other people in order to keep their creative juices flowing. Alfred Morang (1901-1958) was clearly the latter type, taking an active role in a lively scene that, at the distance of over half a century, still intrigues us. On the one hand, the world has changed tremendously since then; on the other, some of these works have the freshness of something painted yesterday.

In the 1920s, Morang worked in Boston as an artist, illustrator, music teacher, and fiction writer, later marrying musician and artist Dorothy Clark and moving to Portland, Maine. He relocated to Santa Fe in 1938 after contracting tuberculosis, at first to the Sunmount Sanitarium, and in the same year he joined other artists in founding the Transcendental Painting Group, a collective influenced by Kandinsky and other abstract expressionists, who sought spirituality through non-objective painting. While realizing the pure arbitrariness of marks on a surface, Morang continued to subscribe to this quest for transcendence via the image; he operated (one could almost say danced) playfully and confidently, on the cusp of abstraction, like so many painters in the middle of the twentieth century.

Along with a good deal of his work and that of some associates and students, the Matthews Gallery retrospective Morang and Friends includes artifacts from his life—ordinary empty glass bottles made extraordinary by his vivid energetic hand-painting of them, the wooden sign for Maude’s Bar, his hangout, his violin and various other things found after the fire that killed him and destroyed much of the studio he had lived and worked in, which happened to be behind Maude’s Bar. Both bar and studio (buildings now vanished) were on the same block of Canyon Road as the gallery, which adds a poignancy and immediacy to this revisiting of a local legend. Drawing upon several collections, this exhibit shows us a painter’s painter. Particularly lovely are the small ink and watercolor landscapes, such as Adobe and Poplars, where Morang’s light touch echoes the ephemerality of life in the vastness of northern New Mexico. The Morangs loved cats and there are portraits of some of his cats, of which he always had several, as well as landscapes and portraits of people in various media. The watercolors show with a light touch how much he loved simply looking. A gemlike drypoint, Santa Fe Street, from 1946, shows how insightfully he could capture the ordinary.

A different side of this multi-faceted artist is revealed in his handling of paint, the intensity of color and texture suggesting an intense desire for experience. Many of his heavily worked oil paintings, usually on board or panel, evoke a drink- and smoke-laden Toulouse-Lautrec sort of nightlife, whether that lifestyle is hyperbolized or not. Morang liked to smoke and drink and stay up talking art late into the night. And if there were a few painted ladies about, they certainly appear in his paintings, such as The Women at Claude’s and Tuxedo, or Dancers at Midnight. There is a quality of cultivation in Morang’s self-image, his particular brand of eccentricity or bohemianism. Morang was a trained and talented violinist as well as a published writer of poetry and fiction. He seemed to need many outlets to convey the strength of his perceptions and yearning, as if he knew that his life would not be a long one. His ashes were spread along Canyon Road.

—MARINA LA PALMA

Alfred Morang, Red Roof, ink and watercolor, 16 1/2” x 13”, and Alfred Morang, Uncited (Lady of the Night), oil on panel, 32” x 25”, nd