Figurative Pioneers

David Park and Milton Avery are the subject of a new exhibition at Hackett Mill

Through May 31

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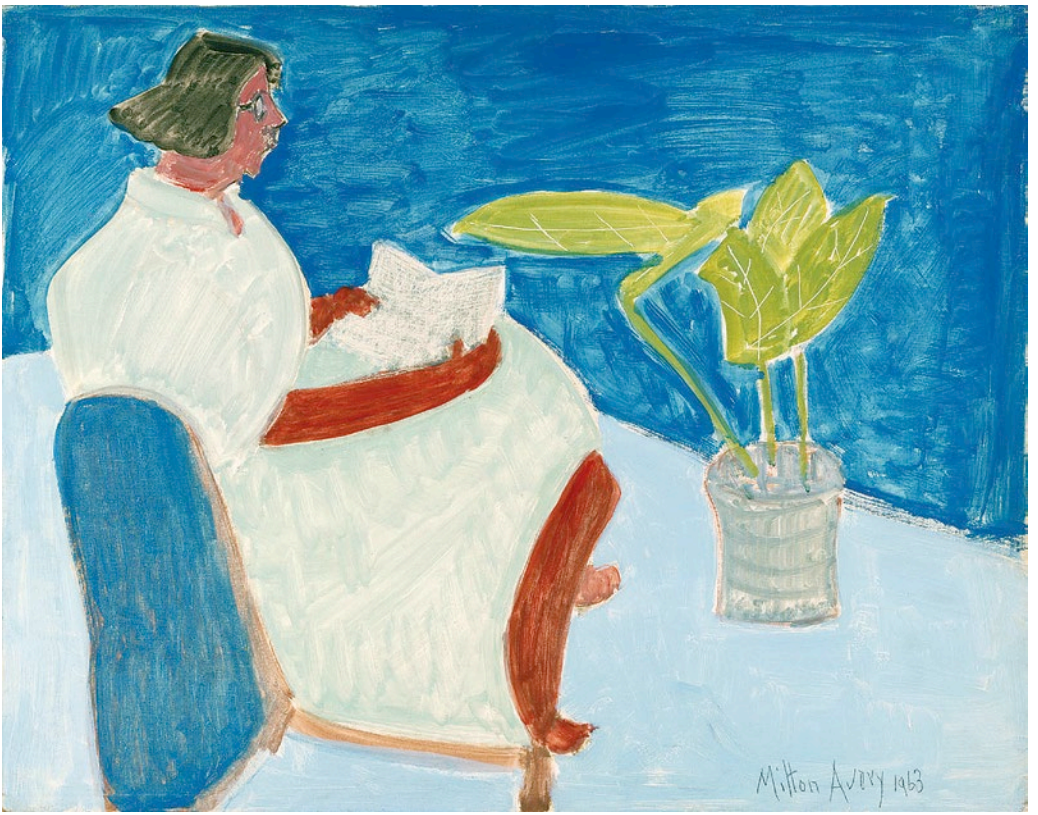
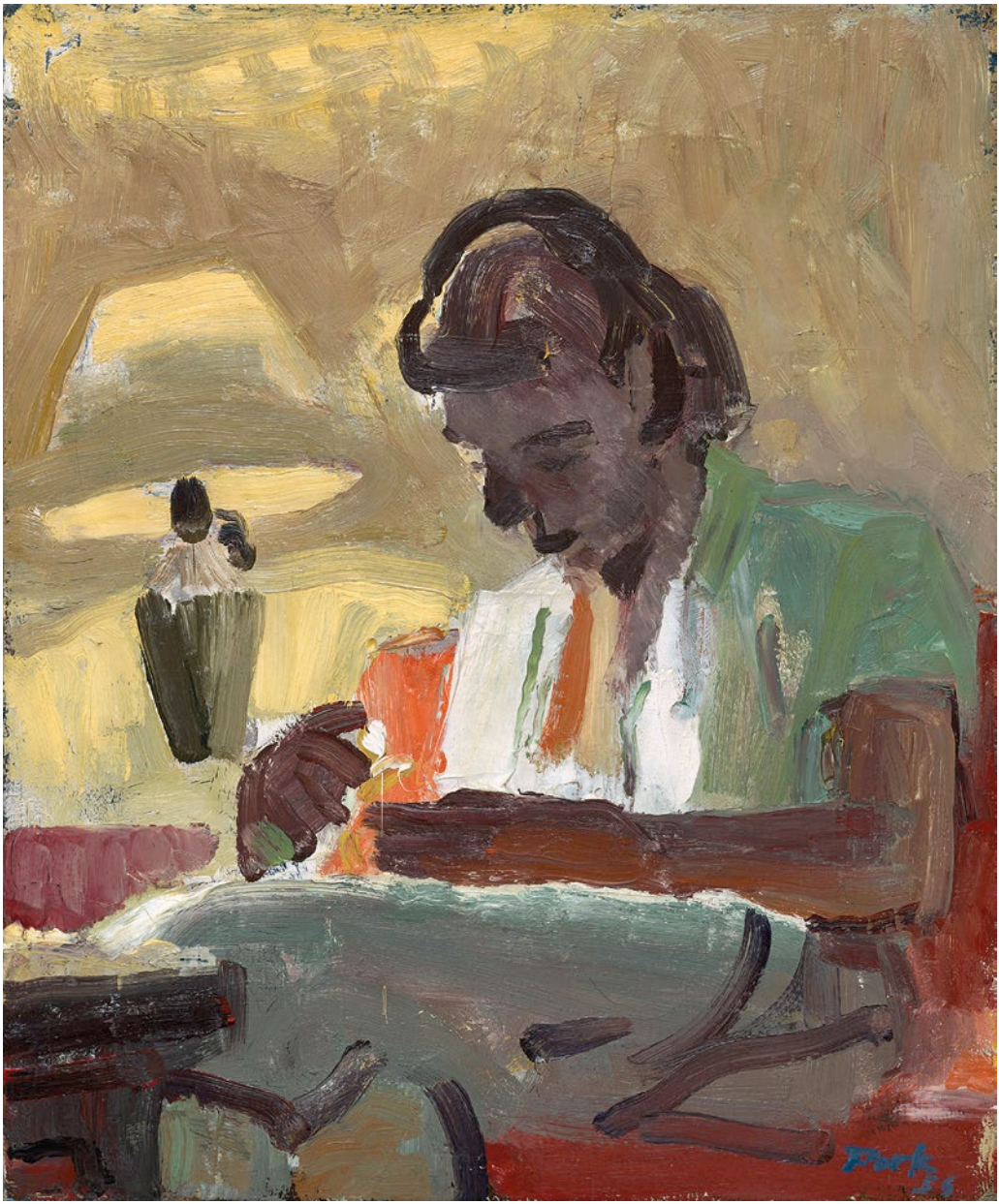
David Park and Milton Avery, the first exhibition to pair two of the 20th century's most influential figurative painters, is a thought-provoking and revealing exposition of two midcentury artists who resisted the objective abstraction of their time yet refined it for their own ends. It contains their paintings from the 1930s to the 1960s. Francis Mill of Hackett Mill in San Francisco explains, "Breaking conventions of historical categories, we juxtapose David Park and Milton Avery for the first time. Park pioneered figurative painting in 1950 when it was very unpopular, ultimately giving birth to the Bay Area Figurative movement. Avery introduced color as the true subject when gesture was paramount,



Milton Avery (1885-1965), *Reader with Plant*, 1963. Oil on canvas board, 22 x 28 in. (AVE-021-OC).



David Park (1910-1960), *Portrait of Lydia Sewing*, 1955. Oil on canvas, 24 x 20 in. (PAR-066-OC).

which gave birth to the American color field movement. Conventional thinking has kept each of these artist's dialogues separate. Together, we see why an artist's personal search for identity is of universal relevance."

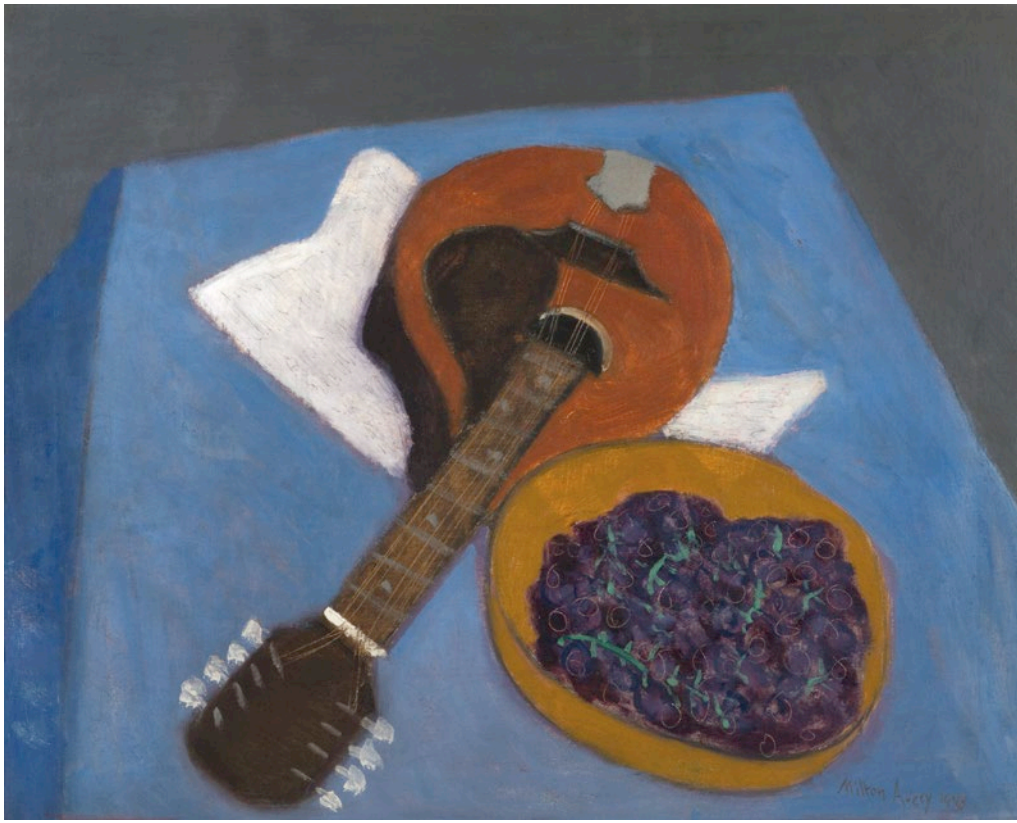
The exhibition continues through May 31.

Both artists had the tenets of abstract expressionism in their view and were concerned with the surface of the picture plane; Park (1910-1960) building up thick impastos of paint with scenes of domesticity and Avery (1885-1965) reducing detail to a minimum in

Milton Avery (1885-1965), *March Sketching (The Artist's Daughter)*, ca.1940-45. Oil on panel, 20 x 16 in. (AVE-059-OM).

his still lifes and figure paintings.

Roberta Smith wrote of Parks in a 1987 article, "His paintings are not often big but their brushwork always is. He walked the line between abstraction and representation with consummate skill, making extravagant use of paint and color, while keeping a close eye on the subject at hand."



Milton Avery (1885-1965), *Still Life with Mandolin*, 1948. Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in. (AVE-071-OC).

Portrait of Lydia Sewing, 1955, is Park at his best, painted only five years before his death from cancer at 49.

Avery's *Reader with Plant*, 1963, is a similar domestic scene paired down to its basic shapes and what he considered the real subject: color. Mark Rothko described Avery's subjects as "a domestic, unheroic cast…that often achieves the monumentality of Egypt." Rothko and Avery had worked together in Provincetown, and Rothko delivered the eulogy at Avery's funeral.

Working on the West Coast where he had moved from Boston when he was 17, Park attended the Otis Art Institute briefly before he gravitated toward the lively art scene in Berkeley that, at that time, was a hotbed of abstract expressionism. After WWII he realized how unfulfilling his abstract paintings were and took nearly all of them to the Berkeley dump. Helen Park Bigelow, in her book *David Park, Painter: Nothing Held Back*, quotes her father, "I was concerned with big abstract ideals like vitality, energy, profundity, warmth. They became my gods. They still are…but I realize that those paintings practically never, even vaguely, approximated any achievement of my aims."

Park, with his teacher Richard Diebenkorn, Joan Brown, Manuel Neri, Nathan Oliveira, Paul Wonner, Elmer Bischoff, Wayne Thiebaud and others made up the Bay Area Figurative Movement in the 1950s and 1960s.

For the early years of his life, Avery was obliged to work in blue-collar jobs to support his extended family. It wasn't until 1925 when he went to New York that he could concentrate on art. Even then, he worked nights to be able to paint during the day.

At the time of his retrospective exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1982, Barbara Haskell wrote, "Avery combined an engagement with purely aesthetic issues with a loyalty to the observed motif. In doing so, he bridged the gap between realist and abstract art. That he initially did this in the twenties and thirties, when subject matter and 'realist' painting were paramount and, later, in the forties and fifties, when they were suspect, attests to the independence of the vision which he sustained throughout his life."

The parallels between Park and Avery are an interesting subject to explore. ■