



BAKERSFIELD, CA
“Roland Petersen: A Retrospective”
at Bakersfield Museum of Art

Roland Petersen’s work proves to be a curious exercise in Modernist contradictions. Born in 1926, and still active today, Peterson was among the pioneers of the Bay Area Figuration movement, alongside such figures as David Park and Nathan Oliveira. His subjects are charmingly casual genre scenes, inviting the spectator to pull up a chair and join the lounging picnickers. It is not, however, his subjects that draw the viewer into these paintings. His brushwork reaches out to us literally. While some areas of the canvas merely evidence the occasional drips of an active hand, other regions are so heavily-laden with oil paint that they extend out as much as two inches. Mixing the energetic brushwork of an expressionist with the carefully constructed compositional play of a formalist, Petersen’s paintings are at once hot and cool, combining the best of 20th-century painting.

This current retrospective at the Bakersfield Museum of Art includes more than 30 works from 1950 to the present, showcasing not just his signature gestural style with its heavy impasto, but also a dynamic push/pull of spatial depth. Among them are works from his colorful *Picnic* series. While a few compositions group multiple diners together, most feature a solitary figure in a heavily shaded foreground. Despite our proximity to the lone woman in works like *Tree and Flag* (1970), our attention is pulled to the background where sundrenched, cultivated lands are made clear with discreet patches and stripes of bright color. Laid out in academic linear perspective, including a line of trees that

illustrate perfect diminution, he simultaneously establishes and negates spatial depth. The perspective pulls us in, but the color jumps out to meet us. That brilliant, Pop-colored background refuses to dissolve into atmospheric distance. Attempting to resolve this spatial enigma, the viewer’s attention alternates between looking *into* as well as *at* the painting.

An especially intriguing compositional device utilized in several paintings is the single, silhouetted object that fills the picture plane. *Palm Sunday* (1966) includes a massive palm tree that vainly tries to pull our attention away from the gorgeously colored landscape in the distance. It is simultaneously our focal point and a source of frustration as we attempt to look past it. Similarly, in *The Cut Tree* (1968), the sheer size of the tree pulls it into the foreground; yet, it is pushed back into the middle ground by two tables in front of it. That there are two figures in this space is delightfully arbitrary.

—REBECCA WELLER

“PALM SUNDAY,” 1966
Roland Petersen
OIL AND SYNTHETIC RESIN ON CANVAS
72" x 68¹/₈"

PHOTO: COURTESY THE DE YOUNG FINE ARTS MUSEUM
OF SAN FRANCISCO, GIFT OF ROLAND PETERSEN
AND THE BAKERSFIELD MUSEUM OF ART