

*Peter Frank's*

# MUSEUM VIEWS

## PASADENA MUSEUM OF CALIFORNIA ART

### June Wayne: Paintings, Prints, and Tapestries

THROUGH AUGUST 31

June Wayne's importance to the art world – at least since she settled in Los Angeles in 1939 – has always obscured her importance to art itself. A leader in artist-driven political causes, a galvanizing figure in artistic feminism, and founder of America's first modern graphics atelier, Wayne had a profound effect on the way Americans think about, look at, and make art. But she thought of herself first and foremost as an artist, as well she should have – and this exhibition demonstrates that her art itself staked out plenty of new territory.

It is the very individualism of Wayne's art that make it rather less historically important than her art-world activity. It added to artistic discourse but did not change its course, as did her organizational efforts. The best known of her works, such as the color-litho sequence documenting her mother's life, serve more to underscore her extra-artistic contributions than break new ground of their own. (The "Dorothy" series may be a virtuoso demonstration of assembled imagery as color lithography, but, by 1976, its Pop-feminist nostalgia was common currency.) Conversely, the most significant works in Wayne's oeuvre, as displayed in this carefully balanced survey, either brilliantly summarize broader tendencies or exemplify an inimitable aesthetic individualism. Her Kafka series from 1948, for instance – arrays of peculiar, bug-like figures cavorting against flat backgrounds – reinterprets the impact of Europe's two defining prewar movements, Surrealism and Cubism, on mid-century American art. By contrast, her tapestries, grandly blanketing the walls, translate her already distinctive lithographic images to a whole other medium, and other scale, employing a rarefied process most other artists could not be so fortunate to exploit.

Finally, though – as the retrospective reminds us – we should admire artists first and foremost for their art, and the show makes its case for Wayne as an artist even more than it does for her as a historical figure. Wayne worked in distinct series, and the survey concentrates on those, whether paintings (e.g. the Kafka series), prints (the Dorothy series, among others), tapestries (probably her most glorious creations, here embracing the show's large back gallery), and her in-between explorations, notably the stony, textured monochrome abstract bas reliefs she built out of styrene



WAITING FOR NEWSPAPERS, 1936. OIL ON CANVAS, 25 X 22 INCHES. ©THE JUNE WAYNE COLLECTION, COURTESY LOUIS STERN FINE ARTS.

during her later years. One moves from grouping to grouping, increasingly impressed with Wayne's consistent ability to coax unanticipated shapes and effects from her materials.

A survey spanning 75 years (!) is not – and should not be – an exercise in uniformity, and this one certainly isn't. But it does reveal continuity in Wayne's sensibility, showing her to be a dedicated experimenter; a big fan of scientific inquiry (which she saw as parallel to artistic inquiry, and sought to portray in a non-illustra-



**DOROTHY, THE LAST DAY**, 1960. COLOR LITHOGRAPH PRINTED BY GARO ANTREASIAN AND PUBLISHED BY TAMARIND. LITHOGRAPHY WORKSHOP. IMAGE: 22 1/4 X 30 INCHES. ©THE JUNE WAYNE COLLECTION, COURTESY LOUIS STERN FINE ARTS

tive manner); and dependent throughout her career on texture, even grain. She could be an inspired colorist (especially in her lithographs), and her line was always deft, but what holds Wayne's whole show together is the optical, and sometimes actual, sensuousness of her surfaces, built out of myriad granules that give so much of her work a coarse effervescence. Of course, the nature of that texture changes, drastically, from medium to medium; the styrene bas reliefs buzz in a very different way than do, say, her early lithos based on John Donne poems. But touch is implicated throughout, and occasionally texture carries over between series and substances. (The tapestries, for instance, perfectly capture the grain of the source lithos by translating it into weave.)

Betty Ann Brown, co-curator of the show with Jay Belloli, published a book of discussions with June Wayne shortly after Wayne's 2011 passing. *Afternoons with June*, put out by Midmarch Arts Press, makes a great companion read to the show. But the retrospective's own catalog is where you're going to find reproductions of most of the items currently on display.

*For more information, please visit <http://www.pmcaonline.org>*