

Sullivan Goss: An American Gallery

The Santa Barbara Art Institute – An (Almost) Lost Chapter Of Santa Barbara’s Art History

By **Jeremy Tessmer**, Exhibition Curator, Sullivan Goss / Special to CASA

CHICAGO HAS A RATHER FAMOUS ART INSTITUTE. San Francisco’s Art Institute is perhaps a little less famous, but still well known.

Santa Barbara’s Art Institute is hardly known at all. Wait a minute, Santa Barbara’s Art Institute?

The school originally opened as the Santa Barbara Fine Art Center on April 3, 1967

at 200 Alameda Padre Serra, in the building that had once housed the predecessor schools to UCSB. Founded by James Armstrong, Ray Strong, Douglass Parshall, Joseph Knowles, and John Gorham, and dedicated to helping artists interested in developing solid fundamentals in an atelier atmosphere, the Santa Barbara Fine Art Center enrolled 85 students in its first year. It offered courses in landscape, still life, design, sculpture, head drawing and painting, oil and watercolor painting, and life drawing.

Seeing the success of the young institution and yearning to integrate a fine arts program into their curriculum, the center’s neighbors at Brooks Institute suggested a merger after the first year. The founders were wary, but access to capital and accreditation proved irresistible. Plus, Brooks was offering to pay salaries and health insurance. In April of 1968, The Brooks Institute School of Fine Arts was born. The new school boasted an expanded offering, with new classes in printmaking, ceramics, architectural arts, and diorama. Later, classes in graphic communications and design, art history and aesthetics, and glass were added. Despite its inclination towards the teaching of traditional fundamentals, the school’s faculty and students produced a body of thoroughly Modern and contemporary art.

It may surprise some to see that the dominant mode of art in the late 60s in Santa Barbara was Modern and contemporary. Nevertheless, these artists rooted their work in the life of Southern California: for Parshall and Knowles, this meant celebrating the body. For Gorham and Armstrong, it meant the myth and reality of the great Western landscape.

Over time, the marriage between the two art schools soured somewhat. The old Fine Art Center was trying to operate as a non-profit institution within a for-profit school. Money was also a problem, as Brooks

struggled with expenses during an early 1970s economic slowdown. Students of the era also remember a certain culture clash, with the more conservative Brooks Institute finding the dress and mannerisms of its art school students a bit... questionable. In the spring of 1971, the

two institutions separated and the Santa Barbara Art Institute came into being.

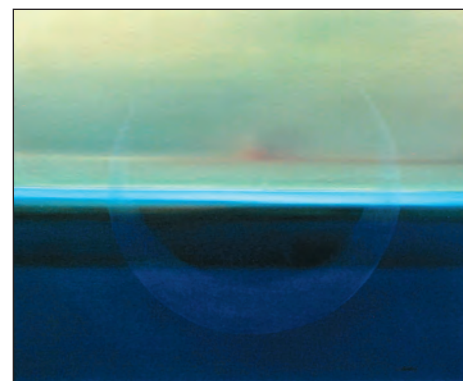
By then, the faculty was 20 strong and the students numbered 200.

Three years later, the Santa Barbara Art Institute was

forced to close its doors. Although its popularity and enrollment showed a steady increase with every passing year, financial difficulties



The Founders **John Gorham, Douglas Parshall, Ray Strong, James Armstrong, and Joseph Knowles**



Untitled II, 26 x 31 inches | oil on canvas over board by **James Armstrong** (1937-2014)



Bicycle Race #2, c. 1972, 30 x 40 inches | oil on canvas by **Douglass Parshall, NA** (1899-1990)



Disintegration, Sierra Series, West Cloud Meets East, 24 x 36 inches | acrylic on canvas by **John Gorham** (1910-1985)



Coastal Inlet, 47.75 x 59.75 inches | oil on board by **Ray Strong** (1905-2006)

Photo by Priscilla or SantaBarbaraSeen.com



A check presentation took place during 1st Thursday. **Frank Goss**, SG Gallery Owner; **Leah Hardin**, SG Gallery Intern; **Michael Redmon**, SBHM Director of Research; **Jeremy Tessmer**, SG Curator; **Earl Armstrong**; **Leslie Armstrong**; **Warren Miller**, SBHM Interim Executive Director

eventually proved to be too great.

It is the fate of the old school to be forgotten, remembered, and then revived and even revered. Some of the artists in this show are still much discussed. Others are great new finds for me: Jim Armstrong and John Gorham, in particular, are great new finds.

The last living founder, Jim Armstrong, died on January 6th of this year.

His work, along with works by each of the five founders, are currently on display at Sullivan Goss downtown in an exhibition called *Santa Barbara Old School*. The original wood sign and selected ephemera from the school are also on display.

On 1st Thursday in



Female Nude, 1960, 24 x 30 inches | oil on canvas by **Joseph Knowles** (1907-1980)

March, the gallery presented James Armstrong’s archive of materials and ephemera from the Art Institute along with checks for \$2,000 to the Santa Barbara Historical Museum. Interim Executive Director Warren Miller and Director of Research Michael Redmon were on hand to accept the archive and the donation.

Festivities included a band playing the hits of the era and a special presentation by gallery intern, Leah Hardin, about the history of the school.

The exhibition will be on view through March 30th. Sullivan Goss: An American Gallery is located at 7 E Anapamu St. and is open daily 10am to 5:30pm. Reach them at 730-1460 or visit online at www.sullivangoss.com



Courtesy of the Armstrong Archive of the SB Art Institute

SB Art Institute Gallery circa 1971

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