Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist opens at the Nasher

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Staring at the viewer from his 1933 "Self-Portrait (Myself at Work)" is Archibald J. Motley Jr., a painter who here, donning a navy beret, long triangular mustache and thick tan bohemian jacket, paints a nude woman. His room has a few relics: a small cross on the wall, an elephant statue, a small bottle of alcohol and a palette spotted with bold and blended paints.

This is Archibald Motley, whose boldly colored Harlem Renaissance-era paintings chronicled the African American experience of the Jazz Age. Yet despite a 40-year span of significant artwork, Motley is one of the least visible artists of the 20th century. For the first time at the Nasher Museum, "Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist" will be on display, with works dating from 1919 to 1960. The exhibition will also incorporate historical documents and audiovisual components, including a documentary commissioned by the Nasher.

Motley's paintings are modern and jazz-influenced, navigating pieces from familiar—sometimes voyeuristic—portraits to depictions of wild Saturday nights. His 1924 "Mending Socks" captures a rustic image of his grandmother in an orange shawl, working in a rocking chair next to a table with a bowl of fruit. "Brown Girl After Bath" (1931) features a woman—with a distinctly more Modern-looking face—wearing nothing but hoop earrings, red lipstick and dance shoes. She looks into a mirror; not at herself, but at her viewers, questioning traditional representations of race, sexuality and art's engagement with its audience. In and the much more stylized cultural scene, "Barbecue" (1934), the canvas is filled with movement, conversation and a night sky that blends into the orange background.

The work represents, in a radical and vibrant way, the communities Motley grew up in. Much of his most notable work is centered upon Chicago, particularly upon a neighborhood termed the "Black Belt" by outsiders and acclaimed as "Bronzeville" by its predominately black residents. Motley's depictions of Chicago scrutinize both poor, overlooked workers from the South and the African American elite; yet throughout, there is a reimagining—a lauding of ambition. Here was a community in the midst of becoming, moving forth through modernity, forging black cultural and economic self-determination; and here was Motley in the middle of it all.

The palette in "Bronzeville at Night" (1949) is mostly blue, with highlights in red stoplights, gauzy windows and women's dresses. There's a mixture of romance and nervousness, leisure and labor. Thin lines of orange paint create neon reflections and highlights on the bodies of Motley's subjects. And there was the Stroll, a town square of sorts, home to the "Bohemia of Colored Folk" and "the black man's Broadway and Wall Street." These powered Motley's cityscapes of black diversity, who himself, of multiracial and middle-class origins, lived with his white wife in a predominately white Chicago neighborhood.

In "Street Scene" (1936), a woman wails in song, arms lifted and high-heeled feet spread wide apart. A dog howls, three women chorus with trumpets, one man blows...
into his trombone. The onlookers look more uncertain, more suspicious. A white police officer gares out of the corners of his eyes, and a small child cocks her head and watches. Motley’s work captured “black expression” while it was being cultivated and expanded. There were nighttime trumpet players, a rowdy nightclub, a Negro cabaret, picnics, cocktails, cards. A social outsider who looms and watches, absorbing the vibrancy and the energy. Each painting has this sort of observer, cementing Motley as someone caught up in the very center of this frenzy, as an outsider looking in, as a re-imaginer.

When Motley visited Paris, where African American artists had come to thrive (think Duke Ellington and Josephine Baker), he painted the blues, the idyllic Parisian streets and the Jockey, a café frequented by artists. When he visited Mexico, he continued with his pattern of over-the-top portrayals, following the same hint of mocking dark humor as in his “Hokum” work.

But his work as a modernist artist, held its foundation in America, where he maintained that “the Negro is part of America and the Negro is part of our great American art.” Motley’s modernity entailed the Jazz Age in all its rhythmic splendor, and it meant capturing a time when “these moderns,” to quote Duke Professor Richard J. Powell, were African Americans, too...with their rainbow fashions and complexion—possessing an inherent visuality, a spectrum of socioeconomic functions and an inexhaustible will to perform.”

“Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist” is on view at the Nasher Museum of Art from Jan. 30 to May 11. For more information, visit the Nasher’s website.