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Missoulian

EDITOR'S PICK

Anne Appleby's art represents nature's color and form

Cory Walsh

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Anne Appleby stands with her exhibit, "A Hymn For The Mother," at the Missoula Art Museum.
TOM BAUER, Missoulian

Anne Appleby thinks color “enhances our experience” of the world. Her paintings often include panels of seemingly single colors with titles that allude to plants or trees.

“If they realize it’s a lilac or a ponderosa pine, or whatever, they talk about leaving the gallery and walking outside and seeing the world totally different, because they’ve slowed down enough to see it a different way,” she said.

Her exhibition at the Missoula Art Museum, “A Hymn to the Mother,” includes many different facets of her work, from the minimalist paintings to newer gray-scale landscapes and video that allude to our relationship with nature and, in turn, the climate crisis.

Working in solitude

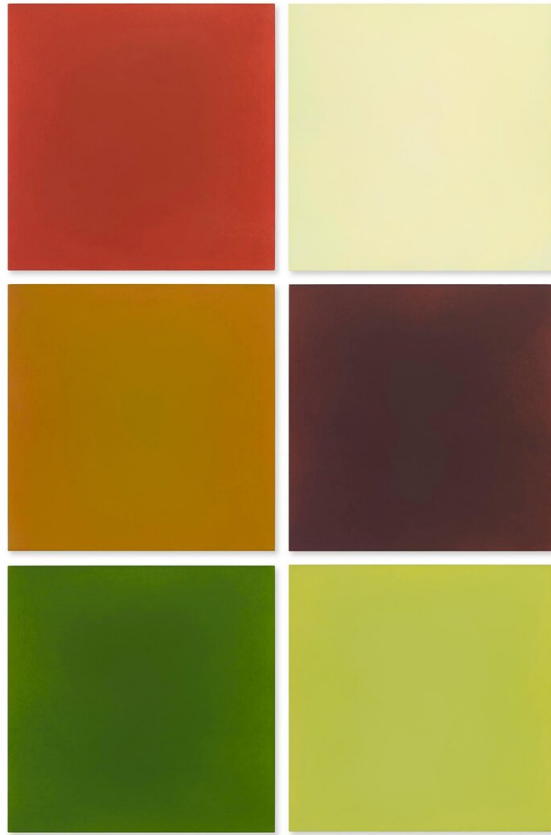
Appleby is based out of Jefferson City, just 20 miles south of Helena, where she’s lived for nearly 40 years. A University of Montana graduate who studied under Rudy Autio and Peter Voulkos, she spent eight years in San Francisco including graduate school and lived in the New York City area for two years before returning to the Treasure State.

She exhibits her art regularly at galleries in N.Y. and California, but her house here, designed around a large studio, is home.

Appleby calls her work “reductive,” rather than minimalist or color field painting. She’s been working this way since the end of the 1980s, always using tones sourced from nature with references to cardinal directions or flora.

When she was in San Francisco she’d been working in a loose abstract expressionist style and then one day just painted over another work. “I

sat on a futon in my studio and looked at it for like two weeks,” she said.



Anne Appleby, "Chokecherry," 2019, oil and wax on canvas.

Artists like Mark Rothko and Ad Reinhardt produced abstract paintings with a limited (or severely) limited palette in pursuit of various philosophical ideas, such as transcendence of the material world or reaching a “more neutral or spiritual or Buddhist-type space,” she said.

She wanted to slightly buck against that notion by drawing people toward the physical world. She believes the emphasis on colors derived from nature can have a rejuvenating effect on viewers’ appreciation for the world outside the gallery.

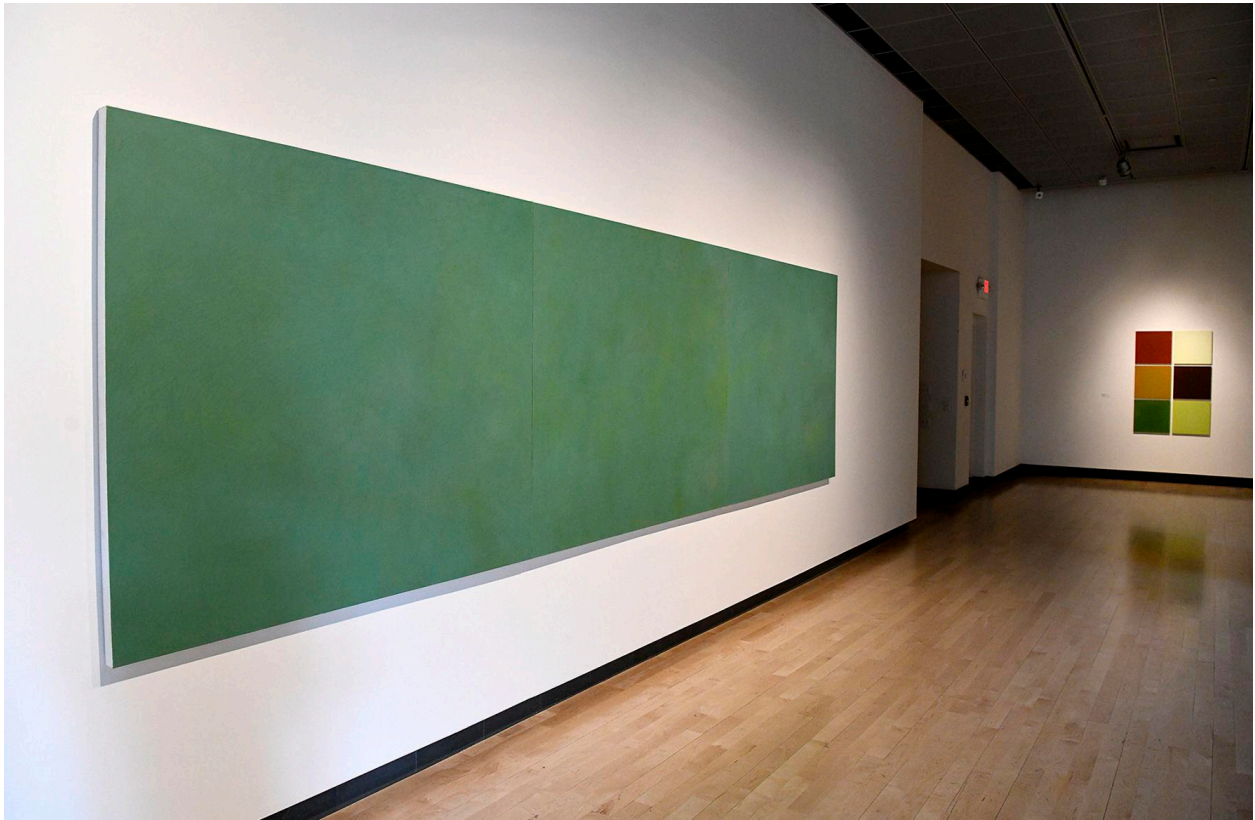
Nature “offers a very similar experience if we give it time, if we can actually be with it,” she said.

Two sides to the show

The show begins in earnest with a close-up photograph of chokecherries, which is unusual for her to include in an exhibition. Then there’s an intentional flow clockwise after you enter the galleries, with pieces proceeding from natural color toward grayscale landscapes, a reference to Ojibwe traditions about people who’ve died sudden deaths wandering in a world devoid of color until the living ask the Creator to hold them in the light.

“The River” is a triptych some 5 by 18 feet of watery green and nothing but, with a layered but smooth surface that implies subtle fluid motion via a palette rather than a brush.

A close-up photograph of chokecherries on the bush is revisited later in a set of six panels, 26 by 26 inches each. “It’s more of a reference to the annual cycle of the plant,” with a light green for a new spring leaf, then through the blossoming and ripening of the cherry, and then darker tones as frost hits. While each panel appears to be “monotone,” they have 30 layers of color and sometimes the entire cycle of the plant.



Anne Appleby, "The River," 2013, oil and wax on canvas.
TOM BAUER, Missoulian

Representational landscapes

The two large-scale representations of forests are black and white — a palette that’s familiar from outdoors photography but feels deliberately reduced in painting, where more often than not artists heighten and dramatize rather than discard. She’s keen on everyday landscape scenes, too, rather than grand vistas.

“I think we’re living in a time where most people on the planet have lost their connection to nature,” she said. Rather than seeing themselves as a part of it, it’s an “other,” for better or worse.

In Montana’s parks, for instance, the outdoors has become “entertainment” rather than a place for contemplation or regenerative experiences.

“The Forest,” a sprawling diptych at 5 feet tall and 12 feet wide, again feels unusual in comparison to traditional landscape painting. Rather than a full scene observed from a distance, it appears to be an eye-level vantage of a forest as though you were walking on a trail.

She wanted to follow the edict that a painter should try to include all five senses — she aimed to conjure a pine forest smell, with the heat, a fear that it might be so dry it burns. All that adds up to "the illusion, which is the painting" to be more convincing.

Pale light pokes white holes into the canopy, but the ashy middle grays throughout recall forest fire smoke or imply film sequences. The same effect emerges again in “The Pond,” a 70-by-80-inch oil. The rendering of the trees across the water is often crisp, with white highlights dotting the leaves, but suddenly drops out of focus toward the background.

Her reductive pieces are revisited with a somewhat somber overtone:

Two sets, four paintings each 26 by 26 inches, bookend one wall of the gallery: “First Light” and “Last Light.” Each square is a variation of gray with bare implications of a “golden grass,” or green, intruding on the outer edges, each painted during a different month. She wanted to capture the two times of day, a “tiny little moment” that occurs twice a day.

A video plays on loop with kids splashing around at Blue Bay on Flathead Lake. Much of its effect is adding a layer of sound to the paintings, which she felt could be somewhat gloomy. The noise reminds her of birds, and “a kind of joyful abandon that we lose as we get older.”

They also allude to the future, “if we get our act together,” she said.

IF YOU GO

Anne Appleby's "A Hymn to the Mother" is on view at the Missoula Art Museum through Dec. 31. MAM's normal hours are Tuesday-Saturday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m., but they'll be closed Nov. 25-26 for the holidays.

JOINT BOOK SIGNING

The MAM is producing two full-color catalogs related to recent exhibitions, Appleby's "Hymn," and Jon Lodge's "Fracture." The two artists will be in town to sign copies on Dec. 15 from 3-5 p.m.

Clarification

A reference to an Ojibwe belief has been amended to include the Creator's role.