

# DOLBY CHADWICK GALLERY

**Terry St. John**

*Figures, Landscapes & Still Lives: Six Decades of Painting*

June 1–July 1, 2017

Dolby Chadwick Gallery is honored to present a retrospective of the art of Terry St. John, opening June 1, 2017. St. John is among the most celebrated artists working in the style of Bay Area Figuration. This exhibition features paintings created over the course of sixty years, from the mid-1950s to today.

St. John was born in Sacramento, California, in 1934. By the time he entered the University of California, Berkeley, in 1954, artists such as David Park, Richard Diebenkorn, and James Weeks were experimenting with a style of figurative painting heavily influenced by Abstract Expressionism. Although St. John earned an undergraduate degree in the social sciences, he became immersed in the fine arts scene during his senior year and, in 1960, went on to study at the California School of Fine Arts under Weeks, who would have a lasting impact on his process. Several years later, he enrolled in the MFA program at the California College of the Arts and Crafts, now called the California College of the Arts.

St. John's earlier works feature strong lines and clearly demarcated patches of paint. In *Uncle George* (1956), for example, he uses, albeit sparingly, a series of clean strokes to create further definition in faces and around the curvature of bodies and edges of clothing. Such delineation becomes less prevalent throughout the 1960s, and, in 1969, St. John creates the masterful painting *Self-Portrait*. In this work—which shows the artist seemingly looking out at the viewer, when, in fact, the mirror indicates that he's looking back at himself—light, form, and volume are rendered as a puzzle of colorful, interlocking shapes. Lines never completely disappear in his art, but rather become integrated into a looser aesthetic that prizes color modulation and achieves structure, first and foremost, through the jockeying of planar relationships.

In the 2000s, St. John's paintings take on a more tonal quality, with an emphasis on greens, blues, and purples. Colors also intermingle with increasing frequency and drama, especially in his landscapes, in which different pigments thread together in a manner reminiscent of tapestry. *Berkeley Marina Beach* (2012), for example, comprises a patchwork of passages bearing evidence of a brush loaded with, and pulling through, various and at times unexpected colors. The nude, which St. John paints in a style similar to that of his landscapes, also emerges as a primary interest. Working from a live model—positioned among furniture, plants, and other domestic objects within a studio setting—the artist seamlessly merges her body into the larger composition: no one form is given greater weight or treated differently than another. Rather, each element is part of a patterned whole. In *Aunyarat by Window* (2016), the flesh tones and mauve shadows used to

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articulate the model on the left are echoed in what appears to be a sofa draped with a blanket on the right; these forms are then held together by way of a succession of networked shapes.

St. John always starts his works the same way: he first executes a line drawing with paint, picking out shapes that closely parallel those apparent in the scene set before him. Only then does he put down colors, enabling him to begin exploring the painting and making decisions that might lead to drastic divergences between the actual and painted scenes. Regarding color choice, he explains that he “always takes a clue from what’s there—what’s there suggests something to me. I then use those cues to paint, but I don’t force it too much. That’s not the point.” This approach of taking in and then breaking down a scene allows him to construe the world as a constant process of becoming: “I can be almost done with a painting and then, at the very last moment, I take it in a different direction.” This is also the mechanism that has pushed him, over the course of his career, to take his style in new, often provocative, directions.

Terry St. John was born in Sacramento, CA, in 1934. He earned a BA in sociology from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1958, followed by an MFA from the California College of Arts and Crafts in 1966. From 1970 until 1990, St. John was curator of modern painting at the Oakland Museum of California; he then served as the chairperson of the art department at Notre Dame de Namur University in Belmont, CA, for six years. His art can be found in the permanent collections of the de Young, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; Oakland Museum of California; San Jose Museum of Art; and Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento.