

# Tampa Bay Times



WINNER OF 12 PULITZER PRIZES

## Four shows at Tampa Museum of Art are worth a lot of your time



Lennie Bennett, Times Art Critic

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### TAMPA

Now would be a good time to become a member of the Tampa Museum of Art. Of course, I would advocate that any time is good for museum memberships but, because the current show will encourage several visits, now is an even better time.

You will likely need and want more than one visit to the Tampa Museum to absorb the avalanche of visual enjoyment found in four special exhibitions, and with a membership you may go as often as you like without paying admission. I spent more than four hours there taking in the exhibitions and would enjoy four more.

The shows are: "Fragile Waters," with 119 elegant black-and-white photographs, about one-third of them by the great Ansel Adams (the largest group of his work exhibited here since a Ringling Museum show in 2005); "Arp, Calder and Miro: Modern Masters From the Albright-Knox Gallery"; "Portraits From the Permanent Collection"; and *Sea of Tranquillity*, a mid-length film by Hans Op de Beeck (pronounced Hans Ob the Bake).

The least known show among the four is the 30-minute film by the contemporary Brussels artist. To my surprise, it's my favorite work in the museum right now, surprising since it competes with a large and beautiful photography exhibition and a strong collection of works by groundbreaking modern artists.



*Sea of Tranquillity* is, unlike many art videos, lushly cinematic, with the techniques and big-budget production values we expect in mainstream entertainment movies. It takes place on a sort-of futuristic cruise ship that is a hybrid between pleasure boat and battleship, with a huge, gray metal hood surrounding the entire bow. It's a computer-generated model but de Beeck constructed sets of the interior as backdrops for the actors populating the ship as guests and crew. It doesn't have a narrative that strings the brief vignettes of these characters and there is no dialogue. Most of the sound is a rumbling backdrop that sounds like the ship's engines. An ominous melancholy permeates the work as we wait for a catastrophe or epiphany that never comes.

*Sea* opens off the ship as the captain and his wife prepare for his departure at their home, and at the end she is shown there alone, playing solitaire, smoking and waiting. In the first scene, a man (who we will learn is the captain) stands in a shower beneath a cascade of water, lit so that the thousands of drops look like white glitter on his shoulders, sparkling before they become invisible as they move down his torso.

That image links to two more during the film, one in which a man exhales a trail of smoke (in the longest exhilaration scene ever) and one in which a widow watches as her husband's ashes are released at sea, another gorgeous lighting job.

De Beeck plays off the idea of a cruise ship as an experience in which a temporary community is formed, often along with artificial intimacy. On this ship, people, even when in a group, are solitary and isolated. The only words we hear are the lyrics performed by Australian pop singer Sandrine in a moody jazz ballad, also named *Sea of Tranquillity*, that has a catchy tune (written by de Beeck) belying its nihilist message. (As the film loops, the song wafts throughout other galleries in the museum and I cracked to a guard that he was going to be humming it for a long time. He replied that he already couldn't get it out of his head.)

"Fragile Waters" is the big show with 119 black-and-white photographs, about one-third of them by Ansel Adams. They are joined by works from contemporary photographers Dorothy Kerper Monnelly and Ernest H. Brooks II, who are also nature photographers. All have in common a commitment to place. For Adams it was the national parks; Monnelly has explored the salt marshes, tidal areas and islands of Massachusetts and Maine. Brooks takes stunning underwater images (and above the waterline, too). All the photographs in "Fragile Waters" reference water and the subliminal message of environmental alarm. But this isn't a strident or didactic show. Its intention is primarily aesthetic, a celebration of natural beauty with an assumption that it is to be treasured and protected.

The photographs are thoughtfully arranged to highlight complementary compositions. Prints by Monnelly, hung together, feature similar radiating patterns seen in kelp and sand, for example. Swirls of foam in a photograph of Yosemite's Mirror Lake, which call to mind a black-and-white interpretation of van Gogh's *Starry Night*, are echoed in the pinpoints of light scattered across a photograph of the Pacific Ocean by Brooks.

Adams' immersion in specific geographic areas (no one knew the great park areas of the American West better than he) is shared by Monnelly and Brooks. Her series of ice patterns illuminates the fragility and ephemeral life of the thin layer of ice briefly visible before it's covered by snow. Brooks, in his journeys to Antarctica, found the most eccentric and sculptural ice formations I have ever seen. The bubbles rising from a diver below him — called air bells — look like complex glass orbs in his photographs. His are also the only ones that have animals in them; the rollicking sea lions off the California coast glide, pirouette and blow bubble kisses.

Special inclusions are the two earliest known Ansel Adams original photographs, taken when he was 16 and 18, before he went professional, and lent by his daughter. The one taken of waves splashing against Helmet Rock in San Francisco in 1918 is a precursor to his famous Old Faithful erupting in 1942. A snowfall in Yosemite from 1920 is accompanied by a letter to his father, thanking him for sending money and sharing a mature-beyond-his-years vision of what he wanted his photography to be: "the representation of material things in the abstract or purely imaginative way."

The bright colors in "Arp, Calder and Miro" are a lovely counterpart to the elegant monochromes of "Fragile Waters." Fifty-two exuberant paintings, drawings and sculptures almost bounce around each other in friendly competition. The works are mostly later ones from the three artists, who were involved in the Dada and surrealist movements in the early and mid 20th century and were an important part of the early European modernist movement when Paris was the center of the art world.

Alexander Calder's mobiles and sculptures still delight and amaze in the fragile balancing act between his spare forms. An oil-on-canvas painting from 1947 is a good argument for his preference for water-based paints on paper. The painting looks stolid compared with the lighter touch of the gouaches that manage to be both loopy and restrained.

Unlike Calder, Joan Miro never completely lost his figurative bent no matter how abstracted his figures became. In *Women and Birds in the Night*, for example, the humans and avians become more interesting as their forms are attenuated and manipulated.

Jean Arp, like Miro, was adept at juxtaposition and unexpected combinations of forms. His art, even the works that aren't three-dimensional, have a tactile quality and the self-assured editing down of line we see in later works by Henri Matisse.

A group of works from the permanent collection explores the idea of portraiture. Chief curator Seth Pevnick gathered art from antiquities to the present in a small but intriguing visual conversation. It plays Chuck Close against a circa 100 B.C. sculpture of an Egyptian queen and a Cindy Sherman conceptual photograph against Jim Dine's iconic bathrobes, for example. As Pevnick noted, sometimes a portrait using things associated with a person is more telling than a literal representation.

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>>review

## Tampa Museum of Art

Fragile Waters

Arp, Calder and Miro: Modern Masters From the Albright-Knox Gallery

Sea of Tranquillity

Portraits From the Permanent Collection

120 Gasparilla Plaza, through Jan. 19. Hours are 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday through Thursday; 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Friday; and 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. Admission is \$10 adult, \$7.50 military and seniors, \$5 students and free for kids 6 and younger. Pay what you will 4 to 8 p.m. Friday. [tampamuseum.org](http://tampamuseum.org) or (813) 274-8230.

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