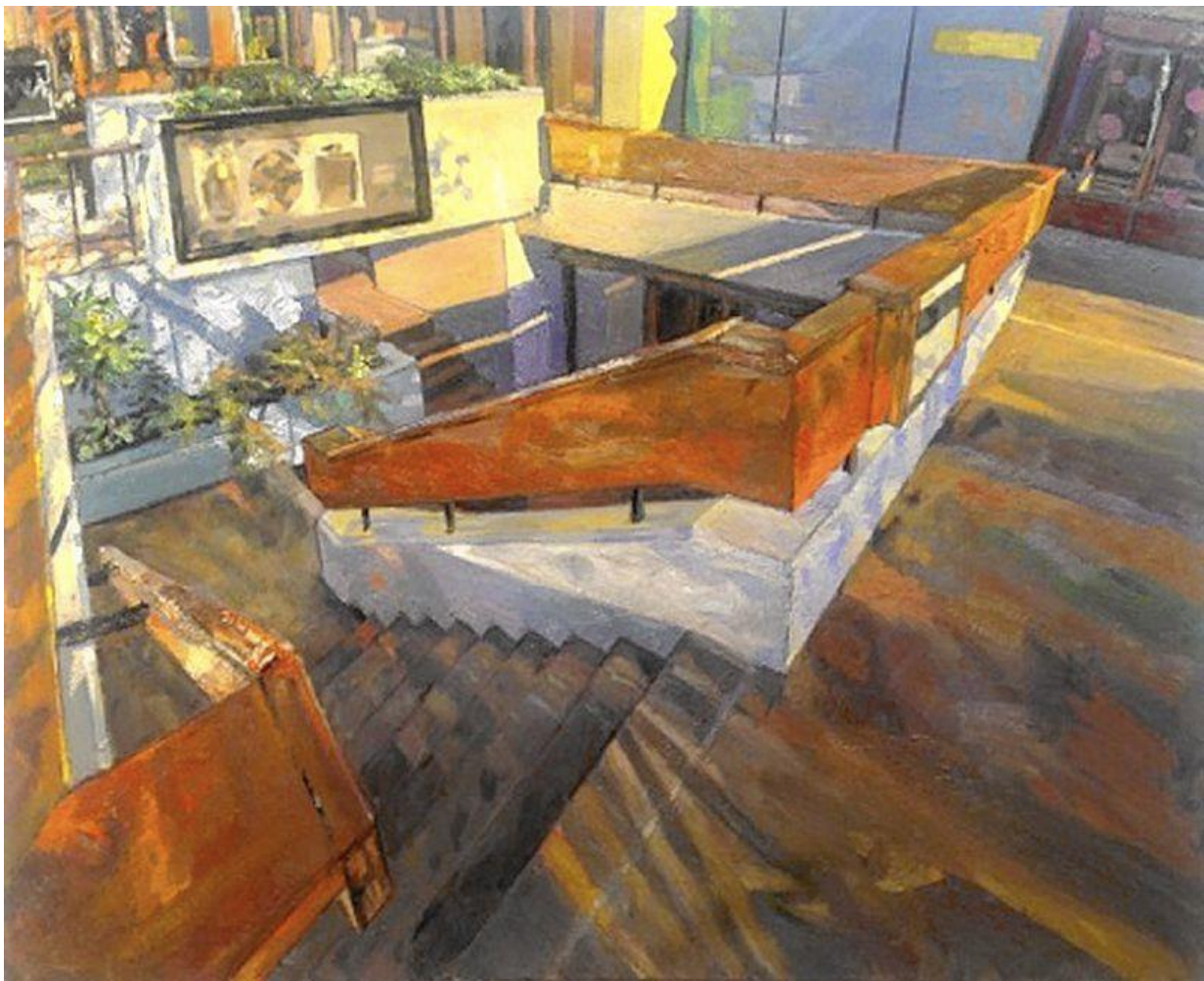


ENTERTAINMENT

What is a perceptual painter?



By BY CHARLES U. ZUG and CORRESPONDENT
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George Nick, "Stairs Below", 2013. (Courtesy of Gallery Naga)

The Mitchell Gallery of St John's College is showing "A Lineage of American Perceptual Painters" through March 1. The exhibition asks the question "What is a Perceptual Painter?"

In art, as in life, it is easier to point out obvious differences than it is to discern meaningful similarities. The paintings of American artist Edwin Dickinson (1891-1978) are no exception.

Dickinson's oeuvre is diverse; even a brief glance at his work confirms that he underwent enormous stylistic changes over the course of his career. It is easy to see why he gained a reputation in his own lifetime as a nonconformist who resisted particular artistic movements. Nevertheless, there are principles that underlie all of his works, and curator Matt Klos' artful design helps expose these principles. In so doing, the exhibit also exposes what it means to be a perceptualist.

What are these principles? Above all, it is the stillness of subject and the novelty of perspective.

Consider two works from the exhibit: "Study for Home 1" by Charles Ritchie and "Stairs Below" by George Nick. Though the subjects of these paintings are utterly different, they nonetheless demonstrate how the perceptual style can bring freshness and imagination to a subject matter that might initially strike one as mundane.

"Study for Home 1" depicts both the interior of a house through a window, and a landscape being reflected in the very same window. Consequently, one sees two scenes lying on top of one another, two perspectives transformed into one. The juxtaposition of these two perspectives invites us to meditate on the boundary between the inner and outer world of the human consciousness.

"Stairs Below" is less explicitly philosophical, though its composition is full of nuances. This apparently straightforward depiction of a staircase in fact shows space being bent in fantastic ways, and leads us to wonder if we are standing at the top of the staircase, or rather floating high above it.

Because the subject matter of each of these paintings is stationary, more emphasis is placed on the relationship between individual objects within the scene, and less on each object's dynamic qualities. The mind, free from thinking about action, is at leisure to concentrate on the artist's perspectival tropes — which are plentiful. Just as a great orchestral composer draws our attention to the beauty of a chord by having it played by an unexpected group of instruments, so the perceptualists capture the essence of ordinary scenes by allowing us to see them through perspectives that would normally be unavailable to us. They bring the hidden subtleties of everyday life to our attention.

A series of free public programs are planned in conjunction with the exhibit. Art educator Lucinda Edinberg will give a gallery talk from 12:15 to 12:45 p.m. Feb. 4. Curator Matt Klos will give a gallery talk at 5:30 p.m. Feb. 17. Select exhibition artists and Klos will discuss the works at 3 p.m. Feb. 22.

Charles U. Zug is a student at St. John's College. The Mitchell Gallery is open from noon to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday. Admission is free. For details, visit <http://www.sjc.edu> and click on Programs and Events. The exhibit is curated by Matt Klos, associate professor, Anne Arundel Community College, with assistance from Lucinda Edinburg.

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<https://www.capitalgazette.com/entertainment/ph-ac-cn-mitchell-gallery-0122-20150125-story.html>