

A Curator's View of *Summer with the Averys* *[Milton | Sally | March]*

Bruce Museum, Greenwich, Connecticut
May 11 – September 1, 2019



Milton Avery (American, 1885-1965). *Swimmers and Sunbathers*, 1945. Oil on canvas, 28 x 48 1/4 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Roy R. Neuberger, 1951 (51.97). © 2019 The Milton Avery Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY.

GREENWICH, CT, April 30, 2019 – On May 11, 2019, the Bruce Museum will open *Summer with the Averys [Milton | Sally | March]*. Featuring landscapes, seascapes, beach scenes, and figural compositions, as well as rarely seen travel sketchbooks, the exhibition takes an innovative approach to the superb work produced by the Avery family.

Along with canonical paintings by Milton Avery, the show offers a unique opportunity to become acquainted with the remarkable art created by Avery's wife Sally and their daughter March.

As it was for many artists before and since, summertime was a moment of heightened creativity for the Averys. Escaping from their hectic lives in New York, the three artists were inspired by these bucolic and sometimes unfamiliar settings. The art they produced, including oil paintings, watercolors, drawings, and prints, was filled with the splendor of nature and the sociability of



family, friends, and acquaintances; the work ranges from the representational to the nearly abstract.

The exhibition is organized by Kenneth E. Silver, Silver Professor of Art History at New York University and Bruce Museum Adjunct Curator of Art, assisted by Stephanie Guyet, Bruce Museum Zvi Grunberg Fellow 2018-19. Silver recently provided further insights about the exhibition in a conversation with Bruce Museum Communications Director Scott Smith:

How unusual is it to organize an exhibition around not only a major artist but also the work of his family? Is this a first for you as a curator?

KS: I don't recall ever curating a show around a family of artists before. For one thing, there aren't that many artist families in the history of art. There are the Wyeths, of course, and the Bruegels, the Flemish family of artists. Closer to home, we have the Ochtmans of the Cos Cob art colony. Surely there are more such families and who have had shows, but this is new for me.

I was intrigued by the idea of trying to figure out, 'well, how do you present a family?' The challenge of this exhibition is that it spans almost a century of time and it follows three people all over the American map and even to a few places outside our borders. It was exciting to see how we could weave these stories together.

When we discovered there were a lot of wonderful photos of the Averys on vacation – that we could also trace the family's life aside from the family's artmaking – that brought another compelling element to the show. It made sense, and I think the documentary photographs add to the story. *Summer with the Averys* isn't just about the objects; it's also about how the interactions of the family members bring these objects about. And because so many people associate summer vacation time with family photos, I think those photographs and the sketchbooks are going to be interesting and appropriate additions to the show.

How did you come up with the idea of the family's working summer vacations as the focus of the exhibition?

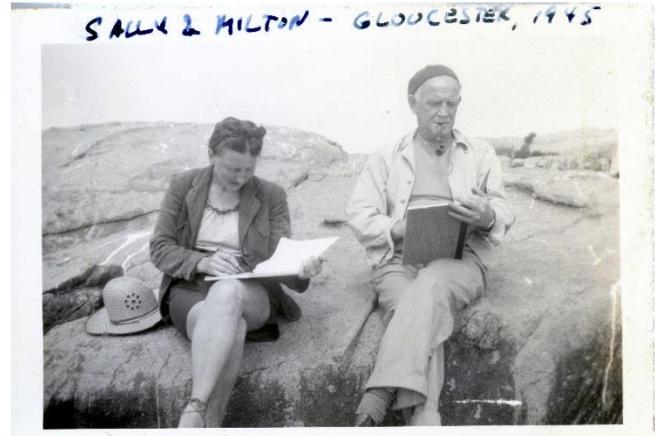
I'll be honest: I've done 'summer' before, most recently for the Bruce in 2017 with *Spring into Summer with Andy Warhol and Friends*. There's something about seeing the word 'summer' that is always exciting, at least it is to me. In some ways it's the obvious, because let's face it, by the time you get through winter, people are ready for spring and excited by the prospect of summer.



Sally, Milton, and March Avery in Vermont, 1938. Photograph by Consuelo Kanaga.



It's also logical because, for the Averys, summer really was a kind of laboratory for the family. Summer was when the Averys did their research, you might say. They went away for months at a time, every single summer, even when they had no money. Milton and Sally met during the summer, in Gloucester, Massachusetts, so their life together begins during a working summer vacation, and then they continue those working vacations for the rest of their married life. And as you'll see in the show, March Avery carried on that family tradition for many years.



Sally and Milton sketching, Gloucester, MA, 1945. Courtesy of and © The Milton and Sally Avery Arts Foundation, New York.

You write in the catalogue, 'A process was put in place whereby each of the media was clearly associated with a specific moment in time and place... Finally, back home in the New York City studio, oil painting represented a grand synthesis, the passage of time and physical relocation resulting (presumably) in a sublime distillation of the two earlier processes.' So, while this exhibition has a specific temporal focus – *Summer with the Averys* – how does it also reflect the 'sublime distillation' that takes place over years?

I can think of two Milton Avery works that best represent that process. The first, which you'll see early in the show, is a work called *Sea Gazers*, lent to the Bruce by the Whitney Museum of American Art. It was painted in 1956, in Gloucester, where the Averys met in the '20s and went back numerous times over the years. So that picture represents, really, at least three decades of looking at that same scene from all different kinds of angles. I think what you can feel about that painting is that it is a kind of calm, beautiful distillation of everything he's thought and felt about the beach and the islands at Gloucester over those many summers.



Milton Avery (American, 1885-1965). *Sea Gazers*, 1956. Oil on canvas, 30 1/16 x 44 1/16 in. Whitney Museum of American Art; Lawrence H. Bloedel Bequest, 77.1.3. © 2019 The Milton Avery Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Digital image © Whitney Museum of American Art / Licensed by Scala / Art Resource, NY.

The other Milton Avery work I would put in that category is *Swimmers and Sunbathers*, from 1945, and on loan from The Metropolitan Museum of Art. This work also has this quality of Milton having distilled summer scenes of his wife and daughter sitting by the water into a grand synthesis of everything he's thought about the subject. He used them as characters in his art – just as Sally often used Milton as a model in her art.

We seem to be in the midst of a cultural moment, one in which the lives and careers of women and wives and others who have been long overlooked, are getting newfound respect and attention. Can you speak to that?

I can't say I went into this with the self-conscious idea that I would do a show about 'the Avery women.' The concept arose from discussions I had with [private dealer] Michael Klein. I mean, I knew of Sally Avery as an artist, and I'd heard of March Avery, but I was completely unaware that she also was an artist, let alone that she was alive and well and still active as a painter. The discovery of Sally and March as artists was exciting.

Nonetheless as an art historian, I have to say, it's not just that you make a cultural moment, your cultural moment makes you. Once I recognized that there was not just one woman in this story, but two, the approach seemed natural. After we went to visit with March, and saw more of Sally's works in the flesh, I soon realized that they were both gifted artists, and that it would be very exciting to have all three Averys represented. And, certainly, I think people are very interested nowadays to see the works of artists, particularly women, who have been neglected by the history of art.

The work of Sally Avery and that of her daughter March will be discoveries for many visitors to the exhibition. What new insights into Milton Avery do you think this exhibition will reveal?

The biggest surprise is what a great draftsman Milton Avery is. That's certainly the single greatest takeaway for me. Milton is an extraordinary draftsman. He can draw in many different styles, and his skill is tremendous, and, like Sally and like March, he drew constantly. We've got lots of beautiful Milton Avery drawings in this show, and I think people don't know Milton Avery's drawings like they know his paintings. I think people are going to be quite thrilled to see what a remarkable draftsman he is.

You've been assisted by Stephanie Guyet, the Museum's Zvi Grunberg Fellow 2018-19, in organizing this exhibition. How would you characterize that collaborative process?

Having Stephanie on board as the Assistant Curator of this show has been of immense benefit. It's been extremely important. First of all, having a very smart, sensitive assistant means there is a sounding board for ideas about specific works. Through this process, she has become an expert in the art of March, and included in the catalogue is a marvelous interview that Stephanie did with her.



Curator Kenneth E. Silver and Assistant Curator Stephanie Guyet review the catalogue that will accompany the *Summer with the Averys* exhibition. Photo: Bruce Museum.



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One Museum Drive • Greenwich, CT 06830-7100
203.869.0376 • www.brucemuseum.org

Press Release

What she also brought to the project is the fact that she is a woman, a wife, a mother, and a daughter. All the things that I can't talk about, except as an outsider. I think that particular set of perspectives really enriched the project. We would talk a lot about the relationships, between Milton and Sally, between March and her parents, and I think Stephanie was key to my understanding much more fully what the life of a woman in the art world might be, and I'm tremendously grateful and think the show is enriched by that insight.

Do you take working summer vacations? Are you as productive as the Averys?

I'm not an artist, so I don't do a working vacation like an artist does. But I will say this: When I do find myself in a location like the Averys sought out, which is to say a beautiful place, somewhere in the country – in the mountains or by the seashore – there is an element of a working vacation on my travels, to the extent to which an art historian is constantly seeing the world through the eyes of the artists they study. I'm so steeped in the history of images of certain places, I do find myself looking at scenes and seeing them through the eyes of a Cézanne, a Monet, Matisse, or a Milton Avery. And that's a good way to look at the world...

Summer with the Averys [Milton | Sally | March] will be accompanied by an audio guide and a scholarly catalogue, featuring full-color illustrations of all the works in the show. Educational programming will include a Curators' Conversation on May 30, 6:00 – 8:00 pm, with Silver, Guyet, and Barbara Haskell, esteemed curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art and Milton Avery authority. Seats may be reserved at brucemuseum.org. The exhibition closes on September 1, 2019.

The Museum is grateful for exhibition support from the Milton and Sally Avery Arts Foundation, Guardian Life Insurance Company of America, Sotheby's, Sylvia and Leonard Marx, Jr., Bank of America, The Charles M. and Deborah G. Royce Exhibition Fund, the Connecticut Office of the Arts, and a Committee of Honor Co-Chaired by Rebecca A. Gillan, Pamela Lawrence, Susan Mahoney, Heidi Brake Smith, Jacqueline Adler Walker, and members of the 2019 Museum Council.

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About the Bruce Museum

The Bruce Museum is located in a park setting just off I-95, exit 3, at 1 Museum Drive in Greenwich, Connecticut. The Museum is also a 5-minute walk from the Metro-North Greenwich Station. The Museum is open Tuesday through Sunday from 10 am to 5 pm; closed Mondays and major holidays. Admission is \$10 for adults, \$8 for seniors and students with ID, and free for members and children less than five years. Individual admission is free on Tuesday. Free on-site parking is available and the Museum is accessible to individuals with disabilities. For additional information, call the Bruce Museum at 203-869-0376 or visit brucemuseum.org.