

Ben Norris Exhibit Spans 30-Year Period

By Jean Charlot
Special Writer

At the Hunnicutt Gallery in Punaluu, a major exhibition will stay open through the month of November. The retrospective works of Ben Norris, spanning over 30 years and, varying from watercolors to oils to acrylics, collages and constructions, including moving pictures and music is a vivid statement on the development of the man.

Ben Norris has been an essential part of our cultural scene since the thirties. Is it because he is a resident of such long standing that the Academy of Arts, in this case, maybe missed its cue. A tip of our artist's beret to Lucile Hunnicutt, for this service rendered to the community.

A retrospective that spans so many years presents a story of growth, an equivalent of self-portraits of the artist, that start of course with that of the artist as a young man. Ben Norris, from the first, was highly conscious of his options, and the road he chose in the course of time is fairly well marked.

THE FIRST oil exhibited "Hawaiian Botany" is dated 1941. The subject matter is undoubtedly local—sea grapes, hala fruit, taro leaf. These exotic models are pyramided on a table that, in its slant and its angularity, is an esthetic descendant of Cezanne's kitchen table.

Strewn with apples, Cezanne's own provided a gospel for all young artists early in our century. Braque and Picasso had a go at it. Norris, faced with a new world in the middle of the Pacific needed, at the outset, this reassurance that all ties with what he had known before remained valid.

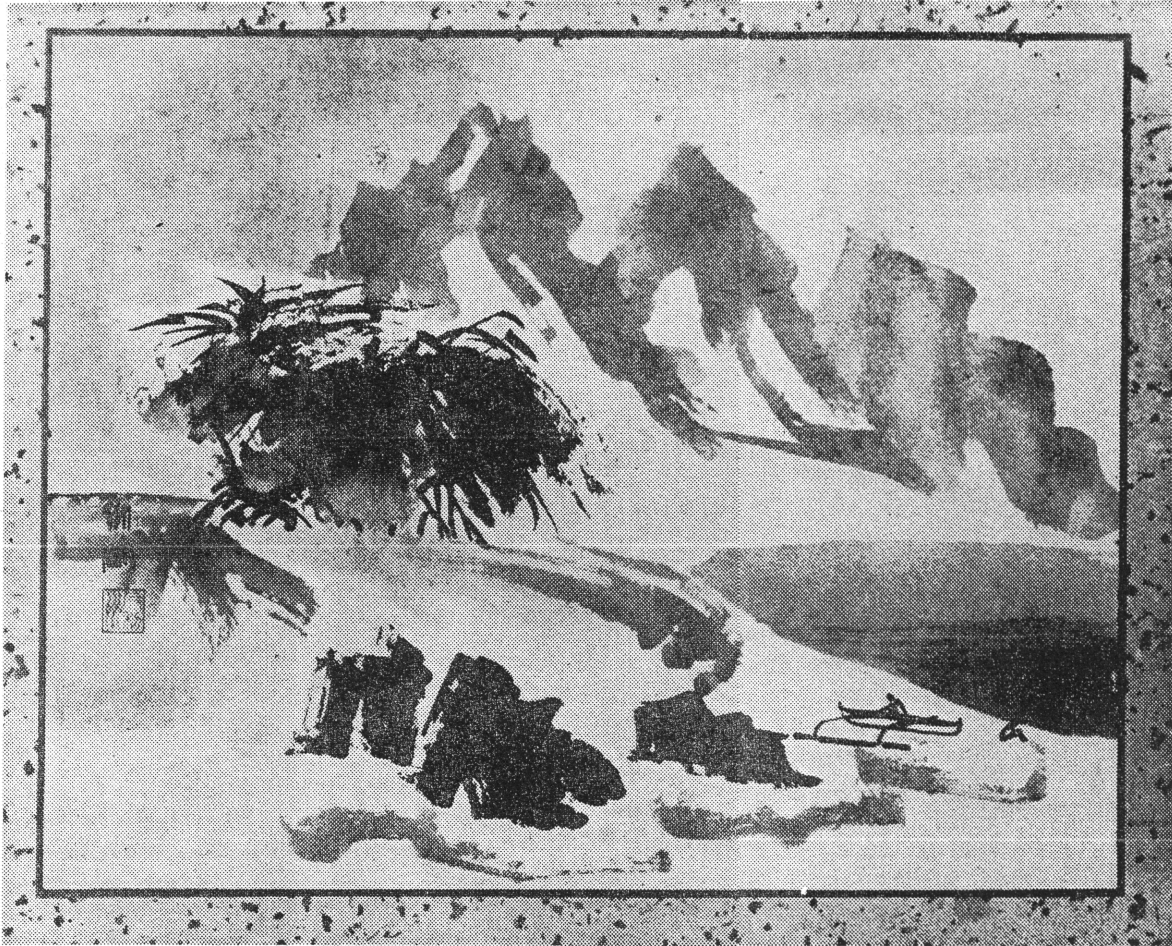
Watercolors, in these early Hawaiian days, were his forte. One could wish that the artist had plunged still deeper into his portfolios to surface with works earlier than those shown. As a sensitive newcomer to the islands, his first care was to efface himself the better to reflect this new found beauty. Hitchcock comes to mind who also held, in his landscapes, a mirror to nature, a gesture not exactly in fashion nowadays, but yet one with a most ancient and excellent pedigree.

THE EARLIEST watercolors that Norris chose to show are flavored by a dual approach. Local scenes are still picked out for their beauty, even their picturesqueness. However, Norris is increasingly intrigued by inner visions that spread themselves over the span of sea and surf and hills, in a sort of double exposure. A sudden disintegration of the tranquil image is the result, such as the blue scribbles blatantly powerful in the folds of the hills of "Kaena Landscape," dated 1950.

From then on the growth is inwards. The 1952 oils—"Sea Cove," "Wind from the Sea"—pause half way between the seen and the unseen. The stylization is not, as was the cubist one, an analysis of significant forms.

As a footnote to the history of taste, this crop of works parallels the sinuous shapes that Art Noveau, ca. 1900, favored. This long before the present day taste-makers reintroduced, with psychedelic fanfares, the posters of Mucha and the glassware of Galle.

ABSTRACT expressionism attracted Norris only fleetingly.



ANCIENT BEACH. 1956—"In the accepted Oriental mode—a homage to Japanese Old Masters."

ingly. Norris feels a natural hesitation in letting go of reason so as to plunge the better in the irrational. Even in his most advanced experiments, head and heart are bid to work as a team.

The trip to Japan of 1956-57 proved to be an important experience. To speak of Hawaii as poised halfway between East and West may be a worn-out cliché. Yet it is also a truth that each artist has to cope with in his own way if he is at all sensitive.

In the case of Ben Norris, a deeper knowledge of Asian art resulted, though this seems paradoxical, in a closer tie with the most advanced experimental art of the West. To learn to handle Japanese brush and ink, and Japanese handmade paper, introduced the artist to the beauty of the willed accident.

His "sumi" landscapes are, in the accepted Oriental mode, homages to Japanese Old Masters. Sesshu comes to mind with his ever-varied use of ink, blotted and mute, or active as tracks of sparrows' feet, or splashed brutally as a visual explosion. Sesshu cured Ben Norris of Cezanne, and introduced him, unwittingly, to the delights of pure abstraction.

FROM JAPAN, Norris returns with reams of Japanese paper, beautiful in color and varied in texture. From then on he works on a series of collages wherein the edges of torn papers, fringed with long fibers, are the visual equivalent to soft-edged abstractions. In this style are the monumental murals that are complex orchestrations, such as that of the Bank of Hawaii on Kapiolani Boulevard.

To reach a thorough mastery of a given technique is, for some artists, a sign that it is time to settle down at this that they know best. In the case of Norris, it means instead that it is time to fold one's tent and start on new

adventures. After Japan, a sharp veering to the West proved in order. The prints, basically woodcuts, that form the series "Palm and Pine" are the result.

BEN NORRIS the man has consistently been outspoken and active in adventures of social vindication. These prints are loaded with comments, harsh, satirical, pithy, about an Establishment that seems the more ludicrous for nestling in our beautiful Hawaii.

These woodcuts, meant to reach the many rather than the few, function as did in the past the penny sheet, or the political pasquinade, or the mordant cartoons of a Daumier.

Norris veers back to pure esthetics in the series of op art X shapes, wherein geometry turns into beauty at its most rational.

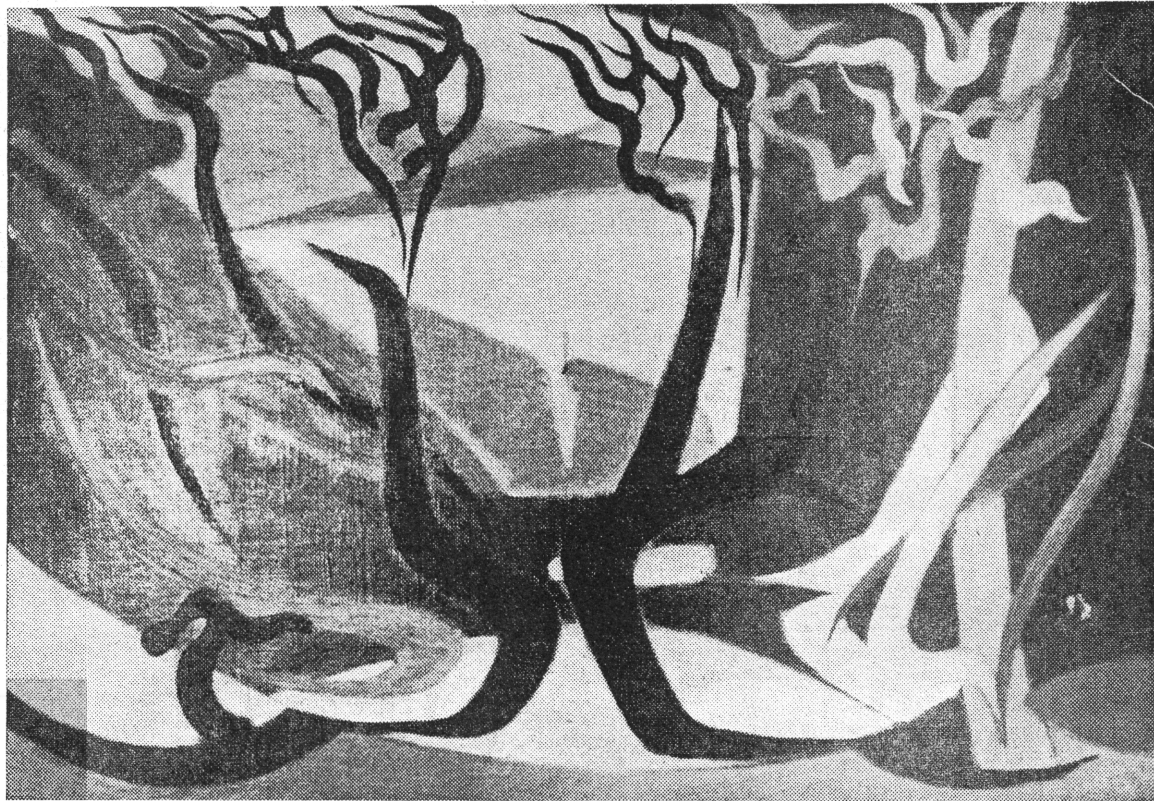
ONE OF THEM, "X Squared," an acrylic, transposes the flat plane into an actual heaving space, thus bridging from painting to sculpto-painting, and from there to the latest set of works, the constructions.

These transcend all categories. The spectator is not merely an onlooker anymore. He is bid to drug himself in total involvement. The constructions are painting in part, sculpture in part. They mix together mirror reflections, flickering pinpoint of light, movies projected on multiple planes at the beat of a melodic line. It would be difficult to imagine a more complex and total inducement.

Knowing from past performances that Ben Norris, having achieved in one mode perfection, reacts violently rather than to repeat himself, may be prophesy as his next phase, an art as severely limited in its means as is the black and white of his "sumi" paintings of 1956.



SIGNS. Collage—1960. "The visual equivalent to soft-edged abstractions."



WIND FROM THE SEA. Oil, 1950 — "Halfway between the seen and the unseen."