NEWS RELEASE  
Sept. 17, 2014

FRED JONES JR. MUSEUM OF ART  
UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA - NORMAN  
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WITH IMAGE

FJJMA Opens Southwest Abstract Expressionism Show Oct. 2

NORMAN, OKLA. – In the 1950s, the American Southwest became a crossroads for Abstract Expressionists from New York and the San Francisco Bay Area. A new exhibition at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art at the University of Oklahoma explores how the Southwest’s geography and the changing idea of space affected dozens of burgeoning artists across the United States. Macrocosm/Microcosm: Abstract Expressionism in the American Southwest opens with a complimentary lecture and reception Thursday, Oct. 2, at the museum.

Mark White, the Eugene B. Adkins Senior Curator and Curator of Collections at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, will give the lecture at 7 p.m., followed by the opening reception at 8 p.m. Both are open to the public.

Abstract Expressionists Elaine de Kooning, Richard Diebenkorn and other East and West Coast artists found inspiration in the expansive land and sky of the American Southwest, using gestural brushwork and veils of color to depict the vast spaces and distinctive coloring of the landscape. They joined with local artists in Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas to create a distinctly modern view of the Southwest that expressed the aesthetic and cultural concerns of postwar America.

With more than 60 works representing nearly 40 American painters and sculptors, Macrocosm/Microcosm not only documents the spread of Abstract Expressionism from major urban centers to other parts of the country but also how artists of the Southwest adapted the techniques of the style to interpret the region.
“Macrocosm/Microcosm reveals that modernists in the region not only kept pace with aesthetic innovations on national and international levels but avoided mere imitation by addressing the essential qualities of the local and regional,” White said. “In this respect, this exhibition also provides a new perspective on art in the Southwest.”

Regardless of their points of origin, modernists from the coasts brought styles and techniques to the Southwest that they adapted in order to express the distinctive features of their new environments. Exhibition and travel created lines of influence and dialogue that spread quickly between Albuquerque and Taos and points in Colorado, Oklahoma and Texas. By the mid-1950s, Abstract Expressionism, as it had been dubbed, had a strong presence across the Southwest.

“Geology, not as a science but as a source of aesthetic ideas, appealed to many of the Southwestern Abstract Expressionists, all of whom saw nature as unpredictable and subject to constant change,” White said.

Established New York artists such as Beatrice Mandelman and Louis Ribak, as well as San Franciscan artists such as Edward Corbett and Clay Spohn, reacted to New Mexican landscape in their paintings or even relocated to Taos to immerse themselves in the landscapes they were painting. At the same time, the Southwest attracted regional artists such as Charles Bunnell and Vance Kirkland of Colorado, Dord Fitz and Charles Williams of Texas, and University of Oklahoma art professors John O’Neil and Eugene Bavinger, as well as fellow Oklahoma artist J. Jay McVicker.

“The vacant yet astounding immensity of the Southwest prompted many to pause in contemplation of both the limitless cosmos above and the nuanced variations of the natural world below,” White said. “Prompted by such ruminations, they turned inward to scrutinize the self and their place in their universe.”

As if the spaces of the Southwest were not vast enough, scientific and technological advances in the postwar era changed perceptions regarding the extent of the universe. The establishment of the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico and the NASA space launches, organized and controlled in Houston, linked the Southwest to the expansion of human knowledge into microcosmic and macrocosmic spaces of the atom and the solar system.

Prompted by this emerging culture of innovation and experimentation in the postwar period, Southwestern modernists took notice of these scientific developments and responded using the language of Abstract Expressionism. In
this respect, the artists included in this exhibition helped to expand how Abstract Expressionism addressed both the Atomic and Space Age in meaningful ways, adding both richness and complexity to the innovative and experimental approaches initiated in New York and San Francisco.

"Macrocosm/Microcosm demonstrates that space, broadly speaking, became a persistent theme among disparate artists from different geographic points in the Southwest," White said. "Whether they worked independently, or in one of the more closely knit art communities in Albuquerque, Taos, Houston or Norman, Oklahoma, they all responded to the enormity of space, whether infinitely large or infinitely small."

The exhibition remains on display through Jan. 4, 2015.

Public educational programs scheduled at the museum to coincide with the exhibition include a lecture by White at 7 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 2, followed by a public opening reception at 8 p.m.; weekly meditation in the museum on each Monday in October at 5:30 p.m.; a lecture by Houston painter Richard Stout at 6 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 16; Art After Noon events at 12:30 p.m. on Oct. 21 and Nov. 18; a FREDTalk presentation titled Creativity and the Subconscious at 5:30 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 30; an OU faculty presentation at 5:30 p.m. Thursday, Nov. 6; a gallery talk by OU School of Art and Art History students at 12:30 p.m. Tuesday, Nov. 11; a Family Day from 1 to 4 p.m. on Sunday, Nov. 16; and a lecture by OU American West art history professor Alison Fields at 5:30 p.m. Thursday, Dec. 4.

More information about the exhibition and programs is available on the museum’s website at www.ou.edu/fjjma.

The Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art is located in the OU Arts District on the corner of Elm Avenue and Boyd Street, at 555 Elm Ave., on the OU Norman campus. Admission to the museum is complimentary to all visitors, thanks to the generosity of the OU Office of the President and the OU Athletics Department. The museum is closed on Mondays. Information and accommodations on the basis of disability are available by calling (405) 325-4938 or visiting www.ou.edu/fjjma.

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IMAGE CREDIT

Macrocosm/Microcosm: Abstract Expressionism in the American Southwest opens at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art Thursday, Oct. 2, with a complimentary public lecture at 7 p.m., followed by a reception at 8 p.m. The new exhibition explores
how the terrain of the Southwest affected mid-century American artists, such as Louis Ribak and his late-1960s painting, *Red Canyon Rising*.

Louis Ribak (U.S., b. Lithuania, 1902-1979)
*Red Canyon Rising*, late 1960s
Acrylic on canvas, 52 x 68 ½ in.