



ARTIST
color concerto

words by SHERYL NONNENBERG



ABOVE: (from top) *Picnic with Red Palm Tree*; Roland at his studio with Stephanie Martin, director of Burlingame's Studio Shop Gallery.

Roland Petersen celebrated his 100th birthday on March 31 doing what he does almost every day: painting at his home studio in Pacifica.

While Monet was inspired by waterlilies and Degas loved ballet dancers, Roland found inspiration in a beloved school tradition. Picnic Day, an annual spring event at UC Davis where Roland taught for 35 years, began in 1909. It was a chance for this university, well-regarded as an agricultural college, to invite the local community to peek into its

new barn and see its dairy operations. Over time, it became a large-scale event with food, art and craft booths, entertainment—and a little imbibing of libations.

Roland, a major player in the mid-20th-century Bay Area Figurative Movement, was born in En-delave, Denmark and emigrated with his family to San Francisco when he was a small child. Following military service in both the United States Army and Navy, he earned undergraduate and graduate degrees in art at UC Berkeley. The next several years were spent traveling to Europe and the East



ABOVE: (clockwise, from top left) *Ready to Dive*; *Farm Picnic*; *The Terrace with Flag*.

Coast in order to study with noted artists like Hans Hofman. In the early 1950s, he taught art history at Washington State University before being hired as one of the first instructors in the newly-formed art department at UC Davis. This would prove to be a significant event in his career, both because he remained on the faculty until his retirement in 1992 and also because the Davis campus provided him with inspiring subject matter for over seven decades.

As a founding father of the now-renowned art department at Davis, Roland hired Wayne Thiebaud and worked alongside key players in the California Funk Movement like Manuel Neri, Robert Arneson and Roy De Forest. These artists rebelled against the serious, angst-ridden nature of Abstract Expres-

sionism and wanted to return to the figure, while also exploring basics like color, form, line and composition in their own quirky, irreverent ways.

Picnic Day was a perfect vehicle for Roland to express his love of color and the arrangement of forms to illustrate depth and build pictorial space. He would sketch on site, then return to the studio to paint large-scale paintings that combined landscape and still life.

In many of these works, there are picnic tables, umbrellas, American flags, a dog and at least one figure. In most paintings, there are multiple figures—but each is rendered as though alone. This is one of the signature features



ABOVE: (from top) *Picnic with 13 Figures*; *Shades of Blue*.

of Roland's paintings. In a 2016 interview with art historian John Seed, Roland said, "I like the feeling of isolation, where the figures seem to be in their own worlds, sort of daydreaming."

Over the decades, the Picnic paintings have become larger and even more colorful. Working first in oils (and later in acrylic paints), the application is thick and expressive. All of his work encompasses strong geometric shapes, with tables, trees and figures arranged in such a way as to lead the eye to the horizon, which is often depicted in multi-colored patterns delineated by both horizontal and diagonal lines. Colors that one would not imagine placing together are, in his work, complementary and distinct. Roland's color palette begins with one small area that he then extends and expands upon throughout the painting.

There is an undeniable boldness to his work, created by the almost neon-

bright colors—especially cobalt blue—but it is offset by those solitary, faceless figures, rendered in a muscular, blocky manner, that creates a quiet, contemplative stillness.

Stephanie Martin, director of Burlingame's Studio Shop Gallery where Roland's work has been shown for decades, says that people respond to the abundance of color in his paintings. "We almost always have something by Roland on display," she says. "We call him our superstar."

Over the years, the gallery has had several retrospectives of his work, including one in May of this year. Stephanie says she enjoys showing Roland's early work, in which he moved from Abstract Expressionism to Hard Edge Abstraction to his more representational Picnic Series. "For this retrospective, I really wanted to put together work from every decade. I wanted people to see the progression of his work from the



ABOVE: (from top) *Sun Bathers*; *Figure Playing Ball*.

1950s to now.” She notes that there are a lot of Roland Petersen collectors in the Bay Area. “There is one collector who has made it a goal to own some of his paintings from each decade.”

Roland’s paintings have been shown in galleries around the United States and his work can be found in prestigious museums like the Whitney Museum in New York, the Philadelphia Museum of Art and Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C. Three of his Picnic paintings were recently gifted

by the artist and his wife Caryl Ritter to Filoli Home and Gardens, where they are on display in the Education Center.

Stephanie says that her gallery will continue to show Roland’s paintings as long as he keeps creating. Why does she think there is such an enduring interest in his art? “I think it’s his ability to capture a feeling of timelessness in his work, which resonates with so many people. He has a sensibility for the California landscape and he keeps reinventing himself while staying true to his style. To me, he is a cornerstone of Bay Area art!”