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# REVIEW: Institute of Contemporary Art looks at Black Mountain College

"Leap Before You Look," on view now at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, traces one path that links Gloucester to the rural south. The path that poet Charles Olson took.

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Zoom Charles Olson, with glasses, is at the center of this group portrait of colleagues at Black Mountain College. COURTESY PHOTO



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By Keith Powers / capeann@wickedlocal.com

Posted Nov. 28, 2015 at 10:04 PM

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SALEM

If you go...

**WHAT:** "Leap Before You Look," Black Mountain College exhibition

**WHERE:** Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston

**WHEN:** through Jan. 24

**TICKETS:** Free with museum admission. Visit [www.icaboston.org](http://www.icaboston.org) or call 617-478-3100.

It's not that far from Gloucester to the mountains of North Carolina. At least not intellectually.

"Leap Before You Look," on view now at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, traces one path that links Gloucester to the rural south. The path that Charles Olson took.

Black Mountain College was a short-lived experimental institution that was founded in 1933 near Asheville, North Carolina. A small group of educators — most of them relieved of their duties from a Florida college for their progressive ideas — started the school to experiment in new ways of learning.



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Those experiments focused on interdisciplinary approaches, which blended aesthetic studies in painting, weaving, poetry, music, dance and architecture with practical applications. Students studied architecture, but also built the campus structures. They grew cabbages, and they photographed them.

“Leap Before You Look,” curated by Helen Molesworth and Ruth Erickson, offers a fascinating and unusual museum experience. A short-lived college hardly seems like the subject of a contemporary art exhibition, but the paintings, collages, architectural models, dance

videos (and live performances), musical samples and poetry displays combine to make this a riveting visit.

The utopian experiment didn't thrive financially — Black Mountain existed from 1933 until 1957, constantly fighting to stay solvent — but along the way attracted so many artists to the campus that its influence far outlasted its lifespan.

Josef and Anni Albers. Robert Motherwell. Jacob Lawrence. Elaine and Willem de Kooning. Buckminster Fuller. Ruth Asawa. Merce Cunningham and John Cage. Lou Harrison. Roger Sessions. Walter Gropius. Robert Rauschenberg. Albert Einstein. These artists and intellectuals all passed through Black Mountain, teaching, experimenting, performing, creating.

Along the way, they altered so many schools of thought — abstract expressionism, Beat poetry, Bauhaus architecture, modern dance, aleatoric music — that one could image Black Mountain as the center of American cultural life in the pre- and post-war decades.

Most relevantly to Gloucester, Charles Olson was there as well.

Olson played a particularly powerful role at the college, even though he basically presided over Black Mountain's demise. He came there in 1951 as a visiting professor, and became rector shortly afterward. The school closed in 1957, and Olson then moved to Gloucester.

Olson intersected at Black Mountain with other poets, names familiar to those who know his work, like Edward Dorn, Robert Creeley, and Robert Duncan. Denise Levertov and Jonathan Williams were also involved. They founded the Black Mountain Review during the time, a freewheeling journal, largely run by Creeley. When Creeley moved to San Francisco, it created a link between those poets and the west coast Beats.

Black Mountain Review, among many other things, furthered Olson's notions about Projective Verse, which he had published in 1950. A kinesthetic approach to ideas and meaning, with meter based on breath and actual speech, the concepts in Projective Verse remain an important organizing principal in contemporary poetry.

“Leap Before You Look” is mostly arranged by discipline and chronology, beginning with the late 1930s (when the Albers had a powerful involvement). Visitors might be surprised to see culminating section, labeled “Poetry and Pottery.” Apart from the poetry itself, Olson's most profound impact at Black Mountain came from inviting Robert Turner to create a pottery program.

The intersections between the creations of poetry and pottery — “it is breathing,” Turner said to one of his students, as he listened to some clay he was forming — make a visit to “Leap Before You Look” worthwhile in itself. There are also sound clips of poets reading their work, and displays of some of the broadsides and pamphlets that were created at Black Mountain as well.

*“Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933-57” stays on view through Jan. 24 at the Institute of Contemporary Art, 100 Northern Ave., Boston. The exhibition is free with museum admission. Visit [www.icaboston.org](http://www.icaboston.org) or call 617-478-3100.*

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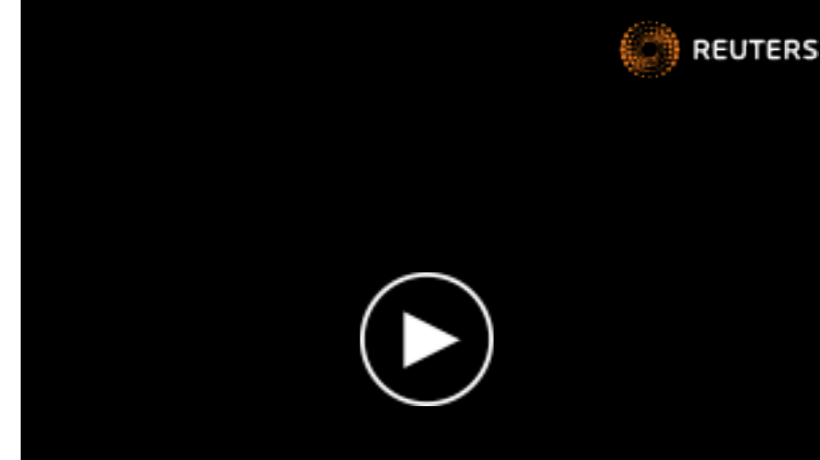
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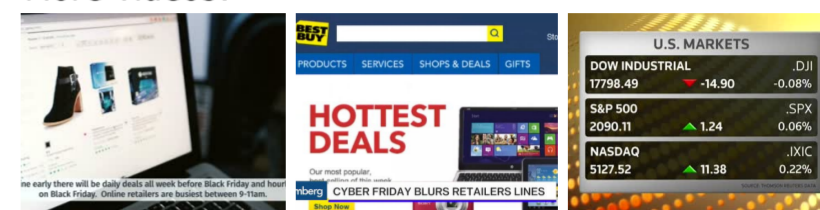
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