

ON EXHIBIT: Cuban painter Rafael Soriano at the McMullen

Monday

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Updated at 11:50 AM

By Keith Powers, Daily News Correspondent

BOSTON - Artists forced into exile often struggle with dual identities. They can find it hard, as well, to cultivate an audience, living and working in multiple worlds.

Rafael Soriano, as a Cuban who fled his homeland for the United States after Castro's revolution, certainly faced these problems. But his art, international in influences and almost otherworldly in subject matter, transcends the simple facts of his biography.

Soriano (1920-2015) lived mainly in Miami after leaving Cuba in 1962. His paintings - from his earliest shows in Cuba in the 1940s - show both the acceptance and the rejection of artistic trends from his native country. He was an important artist in his homeland, the center of several popular movements that exhibited widely throughout the 1950s.

That changed in Miami. It took Soriano several years to find his footing in exile. When he did, his style had grown - less geometric, more abstract and magical.

But it is only possible to appreciate the scope of Soriano's work, on view now in a comprehensive retrospective at Boston College's McMullen Museum, by considering Soriano in light of the global artistic currents of the 20th century.

Viewing him simply as one type of artist in Cuba, and another type in exile, falls short of explaining his ambitions and achievements. Equal parts an admixture of surrealism, abstract expressionism, geometric abstraction and magical realism, as well as new ideas in science and psychology, Soriano created his own visual language.

It's abstract. Nocturnal. Geometric, or architectural, by degrees. Emotional. Deeply mystical - elusive, searching, almost an invasion of the human psyche. And above all, gorgeously rendered.

Dozens of works fill two floors of the newly renovated McMullen. A welcoming gallery is filled with early, starkly geometric paintings, accompanied by half a dozen sculptures by Soriano's compatriot, Agustín Cárdenas. This anteroom duplicates an important Cuban exhibition of the two artists from 1955.

As you work deeper and deeper into this gallery, Soriano's transition to a mystical abstractionist, his subject matter elusive but his identity always clear, grows. By the time the viewer reaches the furthestmost section of these galleries - showing nine large oil-on-canvas works that represent a pinnacle in size, allusion and intensity - a deep sense of the man as artist has been traced.

The upper-floor gallery, a long narrow room, contains biographical information, with memorabilia from Soriano's life. Photographs, samples of his work as a graphic designer (his occupation once he came to the United States), and letters accompanying about two dozen oils and pastels.

These works, the result of Soriano's final productive decade before his health declined in the 1990s, are extremely deep, vague, stylized and mystical.

This is art of the nighttime, of the psychological interior. Objects emerge from black backgrounds, in a manner that suggests the interior of the shape, not its outward appearance.

Surrealism animates this work but does not dominate it.

Soft, translucent, magical, there is substance to these works, but also room to inhabit them, in a way, to move around freely inside them.

Keith Powers is a freelance writer. Follow us on Twitter [@WickedLocalArts](https://twitter.com/WickedLocalArts).

"Rafael Soriano: The Artist as Mystic"

WHEN: Through June 4

WHERE: McMullen Museum of Art, 2101 Commonwealth Ave., Boston

TICKETS: Free

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