

# Arnold Mesches' 'It's a Circus' featured at Allyn Gallup Gallery

## MARK ORMOND About Art



Although the Ringling Circus has not wintered here for decades, Sarasota is still a circus town. Hundreds of descendants of circus families and many performers live here. The new Tibbals Learning Center that will open in January will add more than 35,000 square feet of circus material to the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art collections. Now through Nov. 19 at Allyn Gallup Contemporary Art, you can focus your attention on a painter who has chosen the circus as the theme of a series of paintings big and small. So, come one and all and have a Circus Day exploring the imagination and talents of Arnold Mesches.

The exhibition consists of large paintings and small sketches and studies for the elements of the larger works. It is interesting to see the transformation of his ideas from the panels to the 7-foot square canvases.

One sketch shows a flame thrower exhaling a stream of fire longer than the length of a body, which is costumed with painted triangles to indicate fabric. The work is exquisite in its economy of paint, saturated color and simplicity of composition. Another strong sketch for a larger canvas in the exhibition depicts a scene where Uncle Sam points toward a red curtained passage that in the finished painting has added the word "EXIT" above. In both, he has included a Chinese Dragon figure on the right and a Lion (of Britain?) on the left. I prefer the sketch because of its spontaneity and mystery.

There are a number of paintings with the words "Shooting Gallery" written on the canvas. These canvases recall the banners that one might have seen along the entrance to the side show of a circus. In one painting, a gruesome clown head frames a view of Manhattan where we can recognize the Chippendale scroll top of the building Philip Johnson designed for AT&T that now belongs to Sony. He has dotted the cityscape with colorful birds and dragons as well as a King Kong-like ape. These introduce some narrative elements and each creature could tell its own story. The only person to tie them together might be the



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driver of the convertible rocket Mesches has invented who seems to be shuttling sightseers above town.

"It's a Circus #4" seems to have been inspired by a circus banner or poster. We find ourselves staring into a gorilla's mouth revealing a jungle of real and imaginary creatures. There are colorfully plumed birds and other forms that look as if they entered the composition after walking through a color wheel on their way from a Hieronymus Bosch painting. In one of the darker paintings, an eerie green backlight illuminates an outdoor scene where the carousel horses seems to have escaped and are stampeding across the lower edge of the canvas. In the middle ground, an enormous truncated one-eyed doll with outstretched arms dangles ghoulish heads from dragon lady red fingernail polished hands. Rockets shoot in the air, parachutes descend and a pilot-less World War I plane floats in from the left.

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floating like a giant parade balloon, is a giant red skull wearing a horned helmet looking like a bizarre Darth Vader mask. In the most tame of the large paintings, we are taken inside an open lion's mouth to the rings of the big top, where animal and flying acts have been painted for our amusement. What a grand idea to have Mesches paint an enormous mural for the new Ringling circus museum.

Mesches has been painting for most of his 82 years and it's evident that he has not lost any of his enjoyment of the process he taught himself. His brushwork can be seductive and his color juxtapositions masterful. In some works, the paint looks wet and its freshness is appealing. This is a show for painters and those who love paint.

After living for more than 40 years in Los Angeles and almost 40 years in New York, Mesches and his wife Jill Ciment moved to Gainesville in 2002, where they both teach at the University of Florida. You can meet the artist at Allyn Gallup Contemporary Art Gallery on Friday, Nov. 4, from 6-8 p.m. He is having another exhibition called "The FBI Files" at the Selby Gallery on the Ringling School campus in November. The Ringling show opens Friday, Nov. 4, from 5-7 p.m.



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