

ALEXANDRE

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ART IN REVIEW

ART IN REVIEW; Loren MacIver -- 'The First Matisse Years'

By ROBERTA SMITH

Alexandre Gallery

41 East 57th Street, Manhattan

Through March 23

Loren MacIver (1909-1998) belongs to a tradition of often overlooked painters blessed with a light, graphic touch. It extends from Marie Laurencin to William Wegman, with Paul Klee the only practitioner to escape obscurity. MacIver showed with the Pierre Matisse Gallery for nearly 50 years, had a retrospective in 1953 at the Whitney Museum of American Art and represented the United States at the 1962 Venice Biennale. But her work was eclipsed by Pop and Minimalism.

A MacIver revival began with shows at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in 1998 and 2000. And just in time: numerous contemporary artists work in a MacIveresque manner. (Amy Sillman is one of the more original; Konstantin Kakanias, whose work is on view at the Paul Kasmin Gallery in Chelsea, is currently the most visible.) This third show, at the new gallery of Phil Alexandre, who used to work at de Nagy, is the best so far.

In honor of the current Matisse Gallery exhibition at the Morgan Library, this show features paintings and drawings from the 1930's and 40's, when MacIver was most consistently at her best. By then she had developed her special brand of descriptive, miniaturist formalism, abbreviating the world into diffident arrangements of spare images and hieroglyphs buffeted by pale washes of color.

Her approach was loosely the same, whether the subject was Greenwich Village, the rosary of her friend the poet Elizabeth Bishop, the dunes of Cape Cod or a few pieces of penny candy drifting through clouds of color like fish in an aquarium. The results have an endearing, poetical charm -- the stick figure and layered landscape of "Winter Dunes" might almost be an especially good cover for The New Yorker.

It also seems likely that MacIver was influenced by folk art. But she wasn't a one-of-a-kind

291 Grand Street, New York, New York 10002

25 East 73rd Street, 2nd Floor, New York, New York 10021 212.755.2828 alexandregallery.com

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eccentric. Her work can be grouped loosely with other miniaturists of human or natural existence, including Anne Poor, Biala, Morris Graves and Mark Tobey. From a strictly historical viewpoint, MacIver evolved her own scaled-down versions of many devices -- thin paint, luminous color, hieroglyphic symbols, all-over compositions -- that would be hailed in the late 1940's and 50's as the distinguishing characteristics of the New York School. The green symbol-laden scaffolding of "Garden Maze" attests that she did so in the late 1930's. ROBERTA SMITH

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