



ETCETERA



The Full Picture

An exhibition of paintings by Sally Michel awakens interest in an overlooked artist.

WRITTEN BY *Ann Levin*

Over her long career as an artist and illustrator, Sally Michel (1902–2003) befriended the Abstract Expressionists, earned prestigious residencies at the Yaddo and MacDowell art colonies, and helped forge a new style in mid-century painting between realism and abstraction. Yet to many, she is an unfamiliar name because her accomplishments have been overshadowed by those of the more famous Milton Avery, her husband.

Last year the Mennello Museum of American Art in Orlando, Florida, a state where the couple often traveled for inspiration and relaxation, mounted the first solo museum exhibition of Michel's work in over 20 years. In late January the show opened at the Morris Museum, in Morristown, New Jersey, occupying three galleries of the historic, Georgian-style mansion designed by McKim, Mead & White.

The exciting show, "Sally Michel, Brilliant Legacy," which includes over 40 paintings created between the 1930s and the 1990s, seeks to establish a more robust place for Michel in art history's male-dominated narrative, particularly in her generation. The survey includes Matisse-like nudes that highlight the sinuous lines of the body; lyrical landscapes depicting poetic moments in nature; and simplified genre scenes of friends and family that capture the fleeting emotions of everyday life in

The Morris Museum, in Morristown, New Jersey, hosts "Sally Michel: Brilliant Legacy," through May 4, 2025. Works on view by the artist include (opening page) *Single Palm* (1951, oil on board), and (above) *Untitled (Gaspé Hillside)*, a gouche-on-paper work from 1938.



Like many women artists whose husbands were famous painters (hers was Milton Avery), Sally Michel was overlooked for much of her career. Some of her most striking works that are on view in the new exhibition include *Untitled (Sally & Milton)*, an oil on canvas board from 1965.

expressionistic color fields. “Sally Michel was an important artist not really given her due because there was so much energy around Milton Avery,” said Thomas J. Loughman, president and CEO of the Morristown Museum. “Yet she was his equal in this most interesting mid-century circle of artists.” As soon as he saw the show at the Mennello—like the Morris, a Smithsonian affiliate—Loughman said he knew he had to bring it to the region, adding, “It’s such a New York story.”

One striking image, *Untitled (Gaspé Hillside)*, from 1938, shows a bird’s-eye perspective of verdant green hills plunging to a beach along the Quebec coast, where the couple vacationed, as three cows graze in a pasture. The overcast sky with streaks of charcoal-gray clouds and the saturated blue of the sea convey the rugged beauty of the landscape.

A touching double portrait, *Untitled (Sally & Milton)*, painted after Avery died, shows Michel looking down tenderly at her husband, who is stretched out on the grass. His clothing blends into the neon-green hillside. Their gazes are locked, with the blue of her eyeglasses matching the bluish hue of his skin, suggesting he will never be far from her mind.



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Indicative of Michel's bold use of color, abstraction, and form is her *Orange Beach Blanket*, an oil-on-board work from 1951.

Born in Brooklyn in 1902, Michel knew from about the time she was in first grade that she wanted to be an artist. After graduating from high school, she drew fashion illustrations for department store ads and various publications. After studying at New York's Art Students League, she spent the summer of 1924 in Gloucester, Massachusetts, where she met Avery. Two years later they married and, a few years later, had their only child.

For decades Michel worked as a commercial illustrator to support the family and enable Avery to devote himself to his art full-time. The show includes charming examples of illustrations she did over two decades for a column, "Parent and Child," in *The New York Times Magazine*.

Though Michel drew and painted alongside Avery until his death in 1965, serving as his chief adviser and promoter, her work was largely overlooked in the 20th century. She didn't receive her first museum retrospective until she was 85. Eleanor Heartney, a New York-based art writer, describes this as the "artist/wife problem." "When two artists are married, the female partner has historically been expected to be nurturing and supportive and to serve her man as muse," Heartney writes in an illuminating essay in the exhibition catalog.

Loughman said he brought the show to New Jersey to spark a new appreciation for Michel, who died in 2003 at age 100. Thus, the title of the show, "Sally Michel, Brilliant Legacy." "I want to think the legacy she's created is women making art," he said. He might also have added, "making artists." Avery and Michel's daughter, March Avery, became a successful painter, as did their grandson, Sean Cavanaugh, whose own daughter is a first-year art student. "It's something of a little dynasty," Loughman said. ■



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