

ART

Norton exhibit worth the risk

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On paper, at least, the Norton Gallery of Art is offering a lackluster exhibition season. That makes the museum's decision to organize a major exhibition of paintings by Edward Giobbi all the more risky.

Giobbi is a painter's painter, much admired by the likes of Robert Motherwell and James Rosenquist, but relatively unknown to the general public. He's not a high-powered name sure to attract the multitudes.

Easy to admire

Giobbi is also a tough painter. His work is at once very intelligent and very personal. The intelligence is easy to admire if not so easy to plumb. The autobiographical nature of the work, however, may prove too daunting for the fainthearted or unimaginative.

Nevertheless, the decision to give Giobbi the spotlight was a good one. The exhibition, which runs through Dec. 4, is not only satisfying but downright moving. This is a no-nonsense show that appeals equally to the heart, mind and eye.

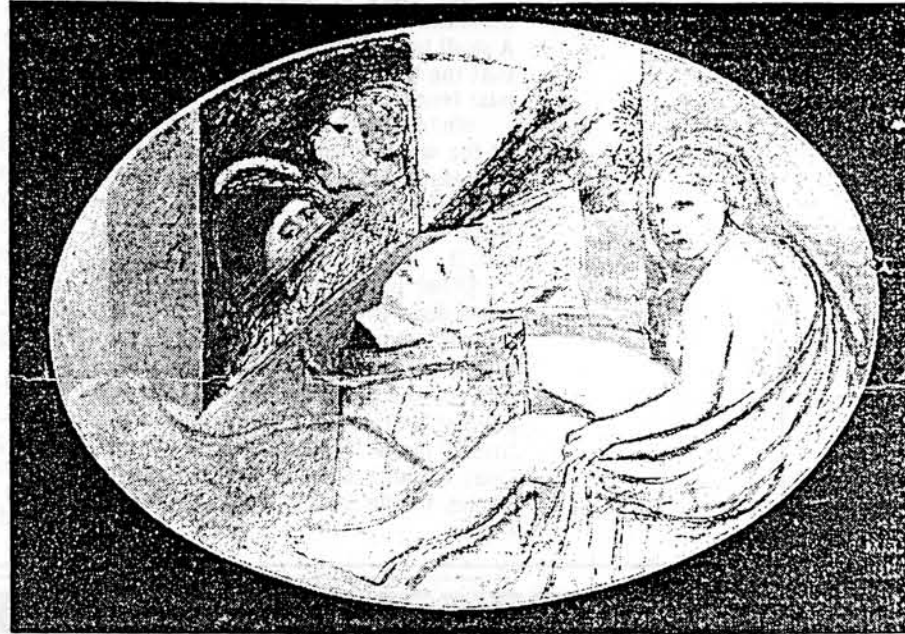
The exhibition contains roughly 40 paintings executed over 30 years. The show is more a survey than a retrospective. Rather than trying to be exhaustive, the exhibition touches lightly but tellingly on important aspects of the 62-year-old artist's career.

If one phase is emphasized, it's the work of the '80s, when Giobbi returned to figurative painting, the style of his youth. These late canvases are haunted. They contain a potent, unsettling mixture of memory and yearning. There seems to be an obsession at their core that begins to obsess us.

Success came early to Giobbi. While still in his 30s, he had pictures included in group shows at major New York museums.

The show's earliest paintings are figurative works, such as *The Voyage* (1959). Here ghostly figures, similar to those of Edvard Munch, stare at us from what appears to be the cocktail lounge of a ship.

The figures are at once elegant and wraithlike, intense and vapid. A couple dances, but there's no joy in this painting. There's only the sense that a mind-numbing waiting is taking place. But for what? It is as if the lounge on this "ship of fools" were actually an anteroom to *The Twilight Zone*.



The artwork of Edward Giobbi, like this 'From a Greek Myth,' is haunting, unsettling and thought-provoking.

ART REVIEW

Kennedy on canvas

Another intriguing painting from the early '60s is a large canvas divided into numerous squares, each containing fuzzy, loosely rendered paintings. This is a narrative work in every sense. Close inspection shows that what appears at first to be a young couple nuzzling in a car is really President and Mrs. John F. Kennedy on that grim day in Dallas. What we're watching unfold frame by inevitable frame, in a kind of stop-action photographic technique, are those terrible moments of the assassination. But why does the last frame contain a serene sunset?

With the advantage of hindsight, there seems to be innovative, Pop Art qualities to this canvas. For example, there's the implicit commentary on the power of mass media. There's also the fascination with images that have become — through sheer repetition — at once banal and horrible, and the common property of us all.

Giobbi didn't push down the Pop Art trail, however. We next find him creating non-objective paintings inspired by the Italian Futurists, particularly Carra. In these pictures, which he pursued into the '70s, Giobbi becomes a kind of architect, a master builder constructing his paintings with a rigorous, logical clarity.

Giobbi began using an oval format. Diptychs and triptychs take on the forms of architecture — arches, vaults and pendentives. The geometric and organic forms within their oval "frames" are as tightly organized and interactive as any cubist picture.

What's impressive, however, is the way these works still possess movement, what might be called "structured dynamism." The eye flutters across them, searching out the secrets of their construction.

Repeated images

Some of Giobbi's abstract paintings also are shaped canvases — cardboard reliefs, almost — a technique he was one of the first to employ. In some of these works, the oval formats take on sexual overtones, appearing as female genitalia.

In the 1980s, Giobbi returned to painting figures. He worked in oil and mixed media. The themes became autobiographical. The titles certainly suggest as much, hinting at lost love and lost fathers.

Giobbi's figures are lifted out of the early Italian Renaissance. Here are the crudely drawn yet eloquent gestures found in, say, Giotto or Masaccio.

Certain images appear repeatedly.

Giobbi works in series. Picture after picture in a series may contain only slight variations. A series called *When We Were Lovers* invariably shows a couple in an Edenic setting in the foreground of the picture. Tall, black trees stand on either side, forming a kind of stage and turning the distant landscape into a set. A quirky, winding path leads to a rambling house.

But there is trouble in Paradise. Sometimes a fire burns in the distance. A skull lurks in a tree. We're reminded that the title of the series employs the past tense.

When Giobbi tackles myth, he gives us the whole shebang. His *Venus* rises gracefully from the sea. But, as in the original tale, it's a sea stirred into a froth after male genitals are tossed into it.

Other paintings show spirits rising from dead men. Heads spit blood and lizards, symbolizing an old Italian curse invoking consumption. The artist's father appears as the severed head of a classical sculpture. Martyrs lifted from Renaissance paintings float through the air, enigmatic witnesses to the action taking place below.

The shape of the canvases is architectural. The colors of earth and dried blood have a wild, austere beauty. The landscapes seem to meld upstate New York, where the artist lives, and Tuscany, where he has frequently visited and where his imagination roams.

These recent works are marked by a sharp pictorial logic wedded to a passionate, almost instinctive imagery. Although odd or grotesque images are incorporated in these paintings, they aren't there for shock value. Rather, they appear to have tumbled out of the imagination and life's baggage of an intense, first-rate painter.

This excellent exhibition is marred only by a delay in getting the catalog to the public, an omission that seems a slap in the artist's face. On the other hand, the museum deserves a slap on the back for organizing a risky show and succeeding so well.