

Modern Forms



*Objects, furniture,
architecture and paint
collide in new **Andy Burgess**
exhibition at the Tucson
Museum of Art.*

BY MICHAEL CLAWSON

Painter Andy Burgess found himself staring out of a window early in his career when inspiration revealed itself. "I was a frustrated abstractionist, sort of obsessing over perspective and geometry. In college I was painting grids, lines and stripes, but I had painted myself in a corner," he says. "I wanted a break from all that so I basically turned and looked out the windows and painted from up high, buildings and rooftops. It was my abstraction."

Over the years Burgess has taken his architectural brand of abstraction and turned it into an exceptional movement of modern thought, where his paints offer transformative, and yet complementary, views of places that were, and are still today, beacons of abstract design. With works featuring homes with butterfly roofs, cantilevered balconies and walls of glass, Burgess has tapped into a real world, but one vibrating with intensely lovely color and framed



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to take maximum advantage of every line, every angle, every flat wall. He says he was inspired by Edward Hopper and David Hockney, and qualities from both of those artists sing from his works.

Burgess, who was born in London but now resides in Tucson, Arizona, currently has works on view in *Mid-Century Perspectives: Paintings by Andy Burgess and Objects of Modern Design* at the Tucson Museum of Art. The exhibition features nine large works, a linocut and etching, and a series of drawings, as well as a selection of objects and furniture by designers Frank Lloyd Wright, Charles and Ray Eames, Harry Bertoia, Rose Cabat and others that align with the spirit of Burgess' works.

The show opened February 2, so Burgess has interacted with museum guests and patrons who came to see his works—more

than 1,000 turned up opening night. "Above everything, they seem to comment on the color most. They've been telling me they get this lovely, warm, excited feeling standing in front of each piece," Burgess says. "If it's touching a nerve and giving someone pleasure, then I'm thrilled. I just want them to enjoy the color and the space of each work that celebrates the zeitgeist of that moment."

Burgess says he settled in Tucson nine years ago and was originally visiting every winter. "One thing that kind of won me over is the art community here," he says. "It's a great place for artists and just very relaxed, but also a little grungy. And of course, the warmth and sunshine really influences what I'm doing. I love the stronger colors and blue skies—they've helped inspire every work."

The exhibition's slant toward modernist design of all kinds is reflected in the artist's own interests, which can be seen with stunning clarity on his Instagram account (@andyartist100), where he snaps pictures of repeating lines in architecture, retro logos, vintage cars, decaying structures and gleaming spires—it's a curated wall of modern design, in everything from paper and plastic to concrete and steel.

The artist certainly admires Hopper and Hockney, but he also gravitates toward more abstract painters such as Richard

1
Falling Water, oil on canvas, 40 x 60"

2
Paraty House, Brazil, oil on canvas, 40 x 60"

3
Wexler Noir, oil on canvas, 39 x 52"



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Diebenkorn and Piet Mondrian. “Diebenkorn was painting figurative and abstract paintings and was freely moving between them, which I loved,” he says. “And then Mondrian was hugely influential because he was trying to create three dimensions in two dimensions. If he could reduce the elements of the structures to just their shapes, he knew he would make a breakthrough, and he did.”

Museum visitors will certainly see flavors of all these artists in the Tucson exhibition, but they will also see Burgess exploring off on his own, pushing those shapes, those cool colors and those complex arrangements of architecture in startling new directions. Take for instance, *Falling Water*, which is based on Wright’s famous Pennsylvania project Fallingwater, a structure cantilevered dramatically over a forest stream. The 40-by-60-inch work is instantly recognizable as a Wright building, yet it feels entirely fresh with an upward-looking view that frames the house not against the trees behind it, but against the winter sky void of almost all color. By eliminating much of the landscape that the landmark is often photographed with, Burgess has re-contextualized Wright’s



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Tower House II, oil on canvas, 39 x 52"

5
 Andy Burgess in his Tucson, Arizona, studio. Courtesy the artist.

6
Wexler Steel House IV, oil on canvas, 60 x 80"

masterpiece into a different narrative, one that more closely aligns with Wright's original inspiration.

"I was in Washington, D.C., in about 1988 and I was going to visit a friend in Pittsburgh, so I decided to head on over to Fallingwater. It was a wonderful memory, and I've since been back," he says. "I was playing a little bit of a game with my painting because Frank Lloyd Wright was influenced by Japanese painting and printmaking, and how they used flat color and a vertical perspective, which made everything kind of flatten out. So I deliberately painted it in a Japanese printmaking style as an homage to Frank Lloyd Wright and his interests."

Elsewhere in the exhibition is *Wexler Noir*, which is based on a home designed by midcentury modern architect Donald Wexler, whose work is still quite prominent in Palm Springs, California, ground zero for much of Burgess' architectural interests. "Wexler made seven steel houses in Palm Springs and they're all mostly white and concrete and steel, so all this color I painted was an invention of mine, a psychological layer that I've added to the painting," he says, adding that the title comes from a slightly earlier period than Wexler. "I love 1940s film and I wanted to get that cinematic feel of drama. So the painting is quite dark and moody, with these almost tropical greens and lots of blacks and

creams. The colors are nothing like the real house but I liked the invention."

In *Tower House II*, the artist takes a straight-on perspective that creates a grid-like array of lines, almost none of them diagonal. The abundance of horizontal and vertical lines is so apparent that viewers tend to notice a tiny detail, the inclined back on a poolside chair. He takes a similar approach in *Wexler Steel House IV*, but the view is closer and more centered on the interior of the house, which gives it a more intimate and also invasive mood. With *Paraty House, Brazil*, Burgess dials up the color intensity with a band of orange on the underside of the modern home, the blue sky reflected in the windows and even more reflections in the pool. Figuring out where the reflections lead in the pool creates an almost hypnotizing effect, particularly as a line of pool loungers sit like teeth in the skull of Burgess' design.

"Paratay is a quite well-known house," he says. "With this one I just allowed myself to have fun with the paint. Water is a pleasure for artists. Some like cars and their chrome and the shine of the metal, and others like fabric and the texture they use to paint it. I love painting water."

The painter, who just released a book of his modernist house paintings, is always on the lookout for new homes to paint in Tucson, Palm Springs, Pennsylvania...wherever the

road takes him. He's also still working on a series of cityscape skyline collages made out of vintage matchbook covers, which has blossomed into an enjoyable side project unto itself—"They're often finds at thrift and antique stores, and I've grown fanatical about them," he says. When asked about how and why he gets captivated by the past so often, whether its midcentury modern architecture or vintage matchbooks, Burgess was quick with an answer:

"I want to preserve things of beauty and to show respect for our past. We tend to live in this throwaway culture, so I want to take the time to look at things that are worth preserving and preserve them," he says. "We have to respect history." ●

MID-CENTURY PERSPECTIVES: PAINTINGS BY ANDY BURGESS AND OBJECTS OF MODERN DESIGN

When: Through April 22, 2018

Where: Tucson Museum of Art, 140 N. Main Avenue, Tucson, AZ 85701

Information: (520) 624-2333, www.tucsonmuseumofart.org