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A REHANG OF HOPPER'S ICONIC "NIGHTHAWKS" CHANGES THE GAME

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View of Edward Hopper's "Nighthawks" (1942) in Gallery 262 at the Art Institute of Chicago after the rehang (all images by the author for Hyperallergic unless otherwise noted)

Psychologically, the work of both Gertrude Abercrombie and Hughie Lee-Smith enhance the otherworldly isolation of "Nighthawks."

The practice of curatorial activism, as defined by feminist curator Maura Reilly in her 2018 book on the subject, seeks to ensure "certain constituencies of artists are no longer ghettoized ... from the master narratives of art." Curatorial activism doesn't need to be splashy — in fact, the less overt it is, the more significant its long-term impact.

Subtlety is the modus operandi of the Art Institute of Chicago's recent rehang of one of its most iconic works: Edward Hopper's 1942 "Nighthawks," which immortalizes those three lonely, night-time patrons (and a soda jerk) underneath a diner's burning fluorescent light.

The change — which took place on March 4 and had the painting moved from its place alone on a freestanding wall at the center of a gallery to hanging between two paintings on the far end of another — is noted only on the gallery map, for the clarification of the habitual visitor.

This new setting, where it is flanked by oil paintings by the (woman) artist Gertrude Abercrombie to the left and the (Black) artist Hughie Lee-Smith to the right, seeks to undermine the "art system," as Reilly puts it, as "an hegemony that privileges white male creativity to the exclusion of all Other artists."

With no heavy-handed explanatory text, the museum allows the works to speak for themselves, and, perhaps more importantly, to speak to each other. As a pseudo-triptych, they paint a portrait of figurative art at midcentury that fleshes out just who took part in that movement, and how each artist added to it.

On a formal level, motifs are mirrored across the paintings: a white vase in the Abercrombie rhymes with a ghostly cash register in the shadows of a closed storefront in “Nighthawks,” and the faceless figure at Hopper’s counter is mimicked in Lee-Smith’s mystery woman, whose back is also turned to us.

Psychologically, the work of both Abercrombie, a Chicago Surrealist who explored placelessness in her work, and Lee-Smith, who used Surrealist displacement as a tool for communicating the anxiety of being a Black man in America, enhance the otherworldly isolation of “Nighthawks.” Whereas before “Nighthawks” may have felt lonely, in the presence of these pendants it now feels almost threatening.

Together they reveal that Hopper was not a lone genius, but rather a man among many others tapping into a common unease interpreted by American artists of all kinds. (Furthermore, Hopper’s success was not his alone — his wife Jo Nivison Hopper gave up her own art practice to support her husband’s career.)

In the 21st century, the museum should not be a place that blindly reinforces the lack of context typical of social media, but rather should use the breadth of its collection to add depth to our digitally informed ways of seeing, especially when that complication reveals the participation of underrepresented identities.

The Art Institute of Chicago has done just that with one of the country’s most recognizable artworks. I challenge other art institutions to follow suit.