

## Went for one show and got three great ones

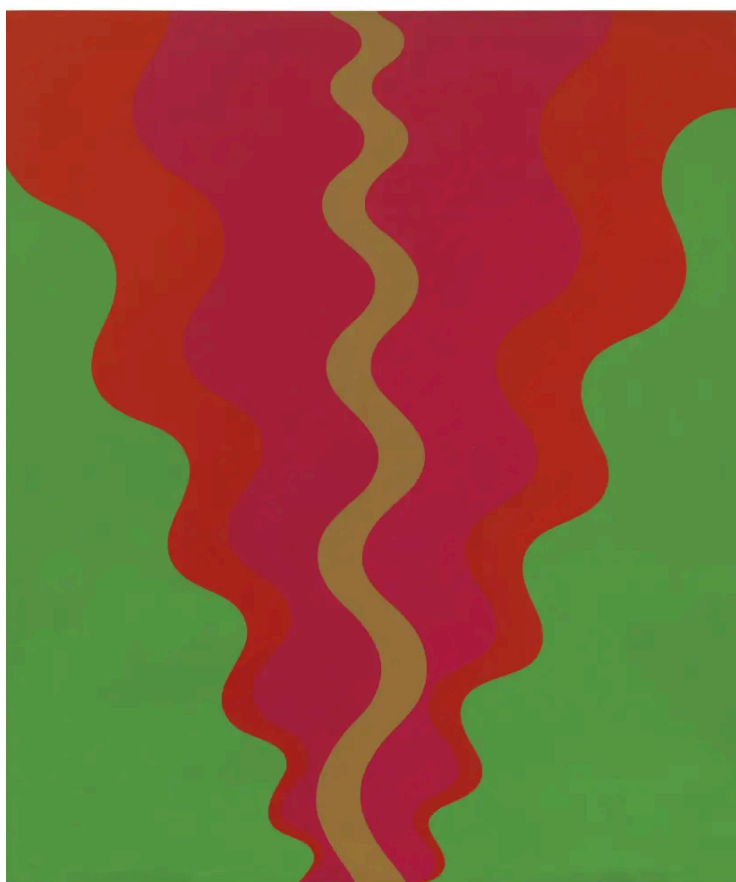
### Don't miss these gems in Greenville

Dec. 15/2025

I finished a hike to Raven Cliff Falls earlier than expected Saturday and decided to run by the Greenville County Museum of Art to see an exhibition of 11 paintings (mostly big) by Brian Rutenberg and two professors he studied with at the College of Charleston, William Halsey and Michael Tyzack (<https://gcma.org/pages/see/exhibitions/default/0/180>). I ended up getting a lot more than that.

In the late 1980s, Rutenberg was among Halsey's last students at the college before he retired. Tyzack was a great influence on Rutenberg and they remained close friends until Tyzack's death at 74 in 2007. Halsey was working steadily until his death in 1999 at 84.

The two teachers were from very different backgrounds.



*'Summer Solstice,'* 1958, by William Halsey (left) and *'Amadeus.'* 1968 by Michael Tyzack

Halsey grew up in Charleston, briefly attended the University of South Carolina, then on to the School of the Fine Arts Museum, Boston. He was among a handful of artists in South Carolina, and especially Charleston, making, for lack of a better term, modern art. His art was greatly influenced by the textures and temperature of a Charleston before it was all prettied up, as well as extensive periods abroad, especially in Mexico, and African art (more on that later.)

Tyzack was British and after studying in his homeland and time teaching there he landed at an Iowa art school in 1971 before accepting a job at the College of Charleston in 1976. His earlier bold color geometric works, what's in this show, are a mix of hard edges and expressive paint application. The Halsey paintings span 1956 – 1978 and all feel related with their composition of patchy colors, some sunny, some dark. The Tyzack paintings are all from the early

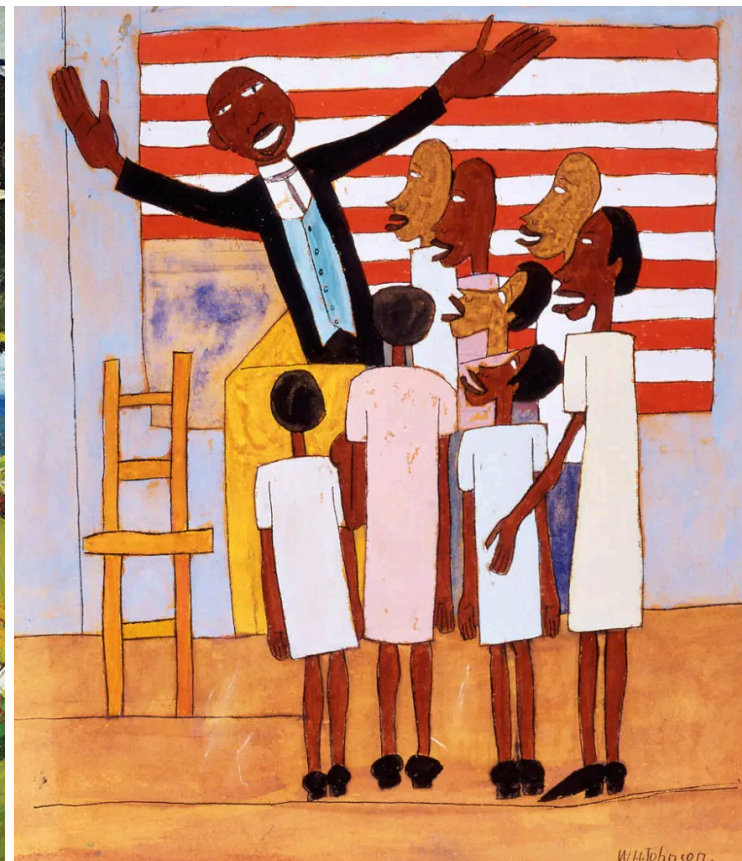
1960s, all but one quite colorful. The three Rutenberg paintings, two from the early 1990s and one newer, were part of a recent exhibition (see my review July 20/25) at the museum. All were donated to the museum recently. One of the three, *September (Four Last Songs)*, I'd consider one of the best pieces he's ever done.

Rutenberg grew up in Myrtle Beach and has long lived in New York. He has a don't missed exhibition of paintings on paper at the Jerald Melberg Gallery (<https://www.jeraldmelberg.com/>) in Charlotte through Jan. 3. (See my short review posted Oct. 27/25.)

This show opened a couple of months ago and has no end date listed, so I'd suggest you go see it ASAP. Last time I recommended someone see a "no end date listed" show at the museum, it was closed.

## Now the art I wasn't expecting.

I'd more or less finished looking at the show and was getting ready to head to Hampton III Gallery, but needed a bathroom break. I found myself walking through a couple of galleries that I didn't even recall existing at the museum (keep in mind I've not visited the museum at all between 2014 and 2024.)



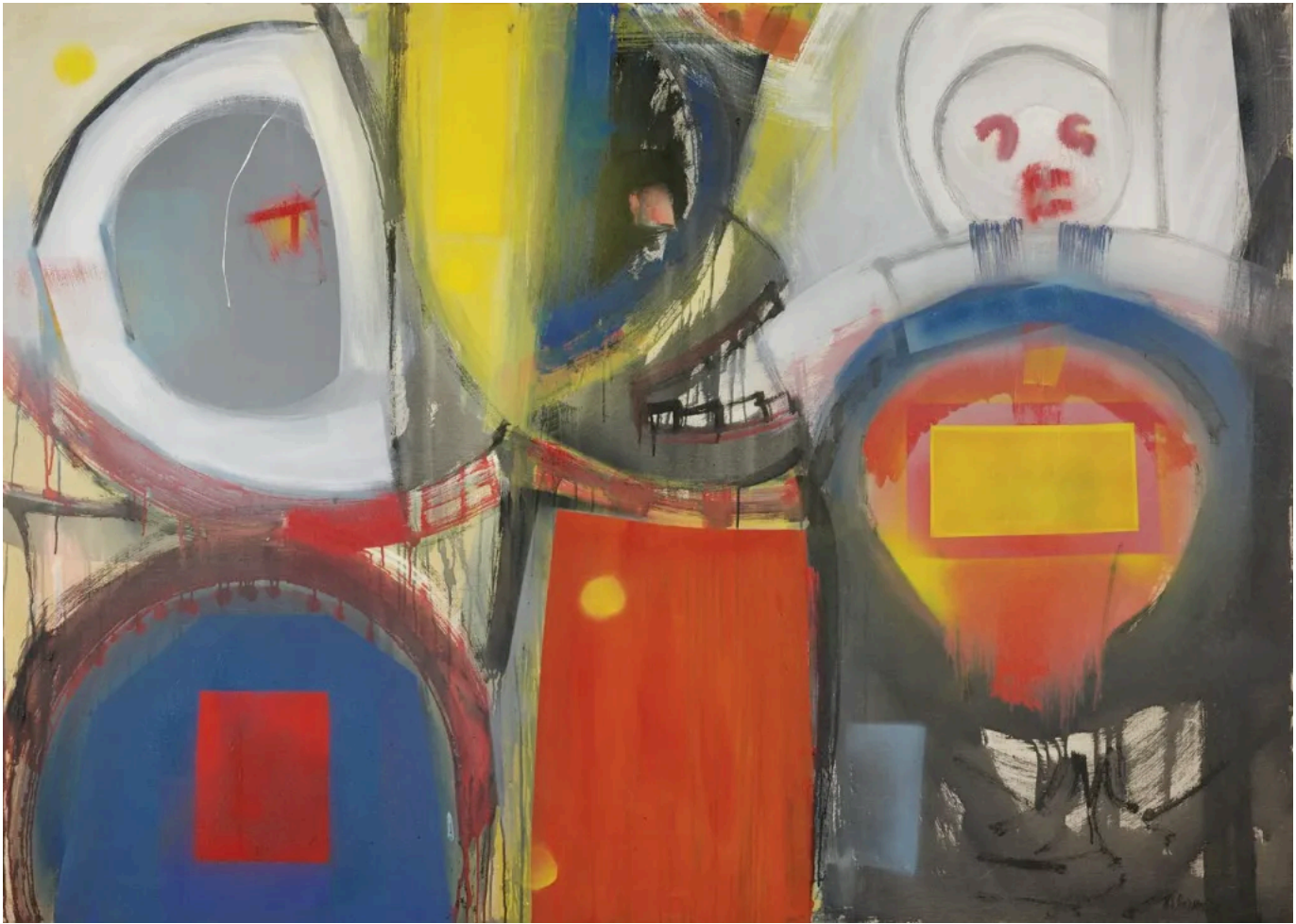
'Flowering Trees, Norway,' 1937 and 'Lift They Voice and Sing,' 1942, William Johnson

First, I found myself in what felt like a forest of art by **William H. Johnson** (<https://gcma.org/pages/see/exhibitions/default/0/184>), a Florence, South Carolina native whose art was nearly lost to history, and one of my favorite artists. Over the past couple of decades, the museum has acquired many works by the painter who lived and worked in New York and Europe and explored many art influences before developing what was a truly original style. Most of the 42 pieces in this show were created during the 1930s in his wife's native Denmark. The art in this exhibition is remarkable, but little is in his signature style celebrating African American life that that he created after his return to the U.S. in 1939.

If you don't know about Johnson, you must look into his art and life. There is plenty online and several great books on him. Most of Johnson's art is in the collection of the Smithsonian Museum of American Art. The Florence County Museum (<https://www.flocomuseum.org/>) also has a number of his artworks.

Adjacent to the Johnson is a show by another important South Carolina artist (who also happened to be African American): **Merton Simpson**. This show, titled "*Confrontation*" (<https://gcma.org/pages/see/exhibitions/default/0/185>) is made up of about six large paintings from 1962 to 1972 that explore and express the racial and social upheavals of the times conveying both positive and negative energy, hope and despair, violence and sadness.





Untitled work by Merton Simpson, 1972

Like Rutenberg, Simpson was also a student of Halsey, but not in the same way. As an African American boy living in Charleston in the 1930s, art classes weren't available to him; but William Halsey was. When Simpson was only 13, Halsey saw his work and began giving him lessons. Halsey and his wife Corrie McCallum were big supporters of the young Simpson and along with a couple of other Charleston artists organized his first exhibition.

Simpson continued his studies in New York and went on to meet and become friends with some of the leading artists of the period. Along with having a prolific career as an artist, he owned New York galleries specializing in African traditional arts as well as modern art. Many of the African sculptures the gallery carried came wrapped in textiles, some of which he gave to Halsey who used them in his own art. Simpson died at 84 in 2013.

The paintings in the museum exhibition were part of a 50-year Simpson retrospective at the Hampton III Gallery (<https://www.hamptoniiiigallery.com/>) in Greenville in 2011. Watch a video tour of that show (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S9uqRW1vw44>) with gallery owner Sandra Rupp.

As with the Rutenberg, Halsey, Tyzack show, the Simpson and Johnson shows, which opened Dec. 3, have no announced closing dates. All I can say, is you really shouldn't miss these.

And one final thing. Also at the museum is the photo exhibition "At This Moment: Portraits of South Carolina Artists by Jerry Siegel," connected to a recently published book of the same name. You can read my review of the book posted Nov. 11/2025. My main criticism was that the photos don't really show any work by the 78 artists included and has only a "rudimentary restatement of their resume". The exhibition doesn't even include a rudimentary restatement. It's just one photo after another after another after another lined up. Pretty pictures that that don't tell us a damn thing