

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

ART REVIEW

'Art in Abstract' specifically about Illinois painters

Show explores the artistic drive toward abstraction

By Alan G. Artner
Tribune art critic

There are few better indications of how the art scene in Chicago has changed than "Art in the Abstract," the wonderful group show at the Illinois State Museum Chicago Gallery that brings together high points from nearly 90 years of abstract painting in the state.

Just a few decades ago, much of this work was ignored, and the assumption seemed to be that abstract art constituted an "other" tradition secondary in quality to fantastic figurative painting as practiced by Ivan Albright and later Chicago painters known as Imagists. Abstract painting had a difficult time being shown here, and only two surveys were as large as the present show, but both exhibited work by living artists and were not concerned about history.

"Art in the Abstract" is much more ambitious, indicating through representational work some of the steps leading to abstraction; presenting a succinct overview — really a show within a show — of the art of Manierre Dawson, arguably the most advanced painter Chicago ever produced; analyzing the components of classic Illinois abstractions; and tracing the allegiance to non-objective painting up through artists of today.

The show also is more didactic than most, and this is good, for even viewers who never have thought about artists' motivations can come away having better understood the drive toward abstraction and key moments in its Chicago history, such as the visit of the 1913 Armory Show. The extended wall labels that focus on line, scale and other elements in each picture serve as a helpful guide to looking at abstract art for anyone still insecure with it.

Dawson (1887-1969) is the undisputed "star" of



"Angel Dance" by Judith Geichmann is among the works in the exhibition on abstract art.

the show, having come to abstraction on his own at the same time as better-known European pioneers. Other exhibitions, at the Museum of Contemporary Art and Hollis Taggart Galleries, may have presented more of his art, but here the work clearly shows its development. Such pictures as the 1913 "Night Flower" and "Beech" rank with early abstractions by Arthur Dove, which proved some of the most daring American paintings of the period. So perhaps now, finally, Chicago will recognize Dawson's achievement, as he truly is the city's first great modern painter and a brilliant self-taught original.

The show is likewise good in presenting smaller figures such as Carl Kohler, Myron Kozman, William Schwartz, Richard Koppe and Rudolph Weisenborn, who created powerful abstractions but have tended to be passed over in favor of later generations. Here they assume their rightful place in the development of abstraction in Illinois, and the exhibition would be thinner without them.

Most of the artists still working — Rodney Carswell, William Conger, Julia Fish, Susan Mi-



Manierre Dawson (1887-1969), arguably the most advanced abstract painter Chicago ever produced, created this work titled "Hercules." It is one of the pieces being shown in "Art in the Abstract" at the Illinois State Museum Chicago Gallery.

chod, Frank Piatek, Dan Ramirez — need no introduction and are represented by strong pieces. But the show is good for a surprise, too, and it's the work of Elwood Howell, a native of Pekin who became a poetic landscapist. His 1974 "Whistling in the Dark" is a delicate addition

that helps make the exhibition both beautiful and stirring.

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"Art in the Abstract" continues at the Illinois State Museum Chicago Gallery, 100 W. Randolph St., Suite 2-100, through Feb. 17, 2006. 312-814-5317.