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Cool Blanton galleries offers summer respite for young and old

Raising Austin, Carolyn Jones



BLANTON MUSEUM OF ART

ENLARGE PHOTO

'Madonna and Child with the Young Saint John the Baptist' by Luca Cambiaso.



BLANTON MUSEUM OF ART

ENLARGE PHOTO

A third-century 'Bearded Man' drew much attention from a toddler on a recent visit. Especially fascinating was his lack of a nose.



ENLARGE PHOTO

Carolyn Jones

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It was another stifling day in Austin. For weeks we'd broiled beneath a relentless sun, and if it weren't for my cranky toddler, Poppy, I might have retired to the fridge till the fall. I was hating Texas in the summertime with all the energy I could muster.

Yet my 16-month-old was even more miserable than I. Her gums were erupting with teeth, her toys no longer amused her and it was too hot outside to play. Inch by inch, the walls closed in upon my testy tot till inevitably she started to wail ...

And wail ...

And wail.

I knew that I had to take Poppy somewhere, but where if not into the searing heat? Indoor playgrounds were the obvious picks, but I confess that I hate those dismal places. The noise, the crowds and the picked-through toys make me peevish about paying for the privilege.

Instead, I sought somewhere better. I wanted somewhere cool, somewhere cheap, somewhere for Poppy to roam.

Was that too tall an order for Austin in the summertime?

Actually, no.

In a flash of inspiration, I recalled that the Blanton Museum of Art is free on Thursdays. Before Poppy was born, I would spend hours in this gallery, able to lose myself in the artists' worlds. Now, with greater responsibilities and less-edifying goals, I decided to take Poppy to see these worlds.

In truth, I'd hoped only that the airiness of the museum would counter the claustrophobia of home. I was in for a surprise. So enthralled was Poppy by the many things to see that she stopped fussing the instant we arrived.

I first knew I'd hit parenting gold when Poppy saw George Segal's "Blue Woman in a Black Chair." Not only was this a life-sized model of a person, but it seemed to capture for Poppy the perplexing strangeness of adulthood. That a blue lady might sit alone in a room, naked and indifferent to a child's curious stares, encapsulated for her all that seems mystifying about the world.

As Poppy stood and stared, I began to relax.

Poppy was equally mesmerized by the Roman antiquity of the "Bust of a Bearded Man." For her, the most fascinating aspect of this marble sculpture was that he had no nose. She studied the snootless bust with fierce intensity, then touched her own face.

The sound of a child transfixed (or confused) by art is the sound of blessed silence.

Yet the silence was not to last. Like all toddlers, Poppy takes enormous pleasure in identifying babies in her midst. Luca Cambiaso's "Madonna and Child with the Young Saint John the Baptist" was no exception. To say that she was thrilled to spy Cambiaso's chubby infant Jesus is to understate her joy. Gallery-goers were treated to the echoing chants of "Baby! Baby!" as she danced and hollered through the rooms.

Indeed, Poppy ran through the entire museum, and I ran fast to keep her exploring fingers off the art.

Isabel del Rio's "2244 Módulos" presented the greatest challenge. This sculpture comprised 2,500 plaster bricks stacked in the random way that Poppy stacks blocks and boxes. My toddler circled this vast installation a number of times, sizing it up for interactive potential. It took stern looks from the docents, and my constant hovering, to prevent Poppy from rearranging the display.

Despite this, I was having as much fun as my toddler.

Finally, the work of "art" that most entranced my child was something she found near Teresita Fernández' "Stacked Waters." It wasn't the piece itself but the retractable ladder being used to fix it. The ladder went up, it went down, it went sideways on wheels that said "whoosh." Poppy spent more time considering the ladder than she had any other exhibit in the museum.

After an hour, Poppy was weary and meekly submitted to going home. Yet, even though I'd worked hard to maintain control, it had been the easiest work I've done all summer. By seeing the familiar through Poppy's eyes, I'd experienced delicious escape. Whether we admired a Roman antiquity or a retractable ladder, all of it was art to Poppy, and so to me. If there's a better antidote to a hot, bad-tempered afternoon, I haven't yet found it.

Carolyn Jones is an Austin freelance writer and mother to a toddler, Poppy. She blogs at www.spoiledfruitsofempire.com.

Visiting the Blanton

The museum is open Tuesdays through Fridays, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Saturdays, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sundays, 1 to 5 p.m. Admission is \$9 for adults, and children younger than 12 get in free. Admission is free every Thursday. (200 E. Martin Luther King Jr., Blvd., www.blantonmuseum.org).

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 - Plein Air Austin Corridor of Art Exhibition at Chase Bank Corridor of Art, Fri, Oct 28 7:00a
 - THE EDGE OF TIME: Photographs of Mexico by Mariana Yampolsky at The Wittliff Collections, Fri, Oct 28 8:00a
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