

Vinny Stoppia's notes on Women in Abstract Expressionism

The Exhibit:

PSAM is the last stop of just three museums that have offered this benchmark show to the public. This exhibit is the story of accomplished artists in the 1950's and 1960's who were ambivalently tolerated because they were women. It has a contemporary connection with the current film "Hidden Figures" the story of 3 African-American women scientists who faced the same obstacles in the early 1960's at NASA. As one of the women from that film laments, "Every time we get to move ahead, they move the finish line." That identical sentiment could echo the voices of the twelve women whose art you are about to see.

Background to the AE movement:

This style of art didn't just suddenly pop up off the canvas one day. Its gestation was like colorful lava slowly rising for decades in an art volcano, preparing to burst suddenly on the NYC scene in the 1940's.

In the 1860's, the French Impressionists, impacted by the swift advances in photography and technology, radicalized art by consciously relegating the representational form to a secondary role while advancing to the front seat their preoccupation with process. At first, the art establishment castigated the Impressionists and their scandalously rushed canvases. Art critic, painter, and playwright, Louis Leroy, pursed his lips, declaring, "wallpaper in its embryonic state appears more finished." Soon European artists rewrote the rules about using line, color, shapes, texture, and pattern. By the early 1900's abstract art shockingly appeared, permanently disrupting centuries old art traditions.

By the early 1930's young American artists, mostly clustered in NYC, were influenced by these rapid changes emanating from Europe. They absorbed the European art innovations of the early 20th century created by artists such as Monet, Matisse, Picasso, and Kandinsky. Furthermore, they became focused on new European styles, such as German Expressionism known for distorting the representational with the use of strong colors to express the artists' anxieties of contemporary life post WW1; and next, Surrealism which glorified the unconscious state and dream imagery. Many of the European artists associated with these movements fled to the USA as WW2 began. Besides these European emigres, the young Americans were also impacted by psychology, primitive art, mythology, Native American art, Mexican muralists, and spiritual beliefs of the East. All of these disciplines would help shape the course of the AE movement.

Perhaps the most significant nucleus for artistic exploration revolved around Hans Hofmann's School of Fine Arts on West 8th Street in Greenwich Village. From 1934-1958 Hofmann's school served as the place to absorb formal training with the goal to break free and create something original. Hofmann's students wielded a paint brush in one hand, and a ubiquitous cigarette filled the other. Hofmann stressed respect for the flatness of the canvas by compensating with contrasts of color, form, and texture. His list of students reads like a who's who of young artists of the time.

Concurrently, another hotbed for innovative instruction took place at Black Mountain College in Ashville, North Carolina, where a communal environment attracted luminaries from all the creative art fields, stressing an intra-disciplinary approach, especially in music, dance, and poetry.

At the end of WW2, Europe and most of Asia were devastated with 80% of casualties being civilians. Millions of people were displaced and a feeling of chaos and uncertainty shrouded the world. All of this angst was crowned by the threat of the nuclear age. Times were ripe for a radical change to question the failed established order and the young warrior artists in NYC reflected that mindset to convey their individual feelings in their works. Although both women and men produced AE art, it was the guys who grabbed the microphone and successfully sidelined the women.

Definition of AE:

The term abstract expressionism describes an art movement that originated in NYC after WW2 and is sometimes referred to as The New York School or action painting. The movement comprised different styles and techniques where the artists expressed their attitudes, emotions, and sub-conscious thoughts through non-traditional and normally non-representational means often on large canvases. Art sported a new purpose: powerful abstract images emerged as the acceptable language for expression while representational images were judged to be grossly inadequate.

Viewing AE Art:

If you got a plane to catch in twenty minutes, then don't bother seeing this exhibit. Looking at this art is akin to watching a compelling sunset: you have to throw away your watch and surrender to the subtle and powerful satisfaction of experiencing the extraordinary. The best comparison that I found to explain the AE phenomena was written by Elaine de Kooning regarding her creative process of painting which she compares to dancing: "When you're dancing, you don't stop to think, saying to yourself, 'OK, now I will take a step,' rather, you allow it to flow." So, I suggest that you visualize yourself on the dancefloor and getting "in the mood." After taking in each work of art, it might be fun to describe your reaction in terms of a dance: was it a foxtrot, cha-cha, waltz, tango or maybe a jitterbug.

Public Reaction to AE art:

The early reception by the art institutions and the general public was not favorable. Only 3 NYC galleries were willing to show AE artists and sales were dismal. In January 1951, Life magazine's front cover spotlighted the pronounced disappointment of 18 artists, dubbed The Irascibles, (all males except for Hedda Sterne) who publicly chastised the patrician Met Museum in the New York Times for excluding them in the Met's exhibit in 1950, "American Art Today." Ironically, the photo in Life was taken by a woman photographer, Nina Leen. In a compensatory response, MOMA launched an impressive exhibit of 108 works by 85 artists, called "Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America." The show provided a historical review of abstract art stretching from the revolutionary Armory Show of 1913 to 1951. The exhibit showed works by artists such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, David Smith, Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko, Hans Hofmann, and many others. It was definitely an all-boys homage. Two American art critics, Harold Rosenberg and Clement Greenberg, touted the macho preeminence of AE artists, propelling them onto the art stage to become Cinderella at the ball while their female counterparts sank to the minor role of ignored step-sisters.

At first, women AE artists found a welcoming venue for showing their art at Peggy Guggenheim's Art Of This Century gallery on West 57th Street in NYC from 1943 until 1947, when Peggy left NYC and set up shop in beguiling Venice, Italy. During the 1950's, most AE women had a difficult time finding galleries willing to show their work.

However, one lukewarm nod for women artists in the broad media occurred in 1957 when Life magazine published in a May issue, "Women Artists in Ascendance." It featured 5 women artists *under* the age of 35 (sexism was alive and well), three of whom are in in this current exhibit: Joan Mitchell, Helen Frankenthaler, and Grace Hartigan. Although a puerile acknowledgement, the story did not carry the impact of the August 1949 bombshell created by Life's deification of Jackson Pollock as the greatest American artist. As art historian Barbara Rose wrote in 1974, "In 1957, avant-garde women artists were a pathetic minority, subjected to every kind of social and critical rectitude." By 1960, the dazzle of AE lost some of its fizz as the figurative and conceptual art manifestations, leading to Pop Art claimed the spotlight. But abstraction was here to stay, even if forced to share the stage.

Meet the Artists:

Lee Krasner, 1908-1984. Her birth name was Lena (whereas the name Lee was probably less gender defining). In the 1930's she got a job with the WPA's art project mural division, where she worked on large scale projects. Concurrently, she studied at Hans Hofmann's school in NYC and in 1937 he said of one of her works, "It was so good, you would not know that it was done by a woman." Her early works were small tightly controlled canvases as she worked in a small upstairs bedroom in a house she shared in Springs, Long Island with her husband, Jackson Pollock who commandeered the large barn studio for himself. When the couple stayed in NYC, Lee's husband often got smashed at the Cedar Bar (the preferred meeting and drinking establishment in Greenwich Village where the mostly male AE artists hung out together.) When they were in NYC Lee said, "I hated the Cedar Bar; the women were treated like cattle." In 1951 Lee had a solo exhibition at Betty Parsons Gallery which turned out to be a huge flop for Lee. Devastated, Lee destroyed much of her work and used some of the scraps to be collaged on her next series which was an encouraging success at the Stable Gallery in 1955. After her husband died in 1956, she took over his large studio and began creating large canvases filled with color and gestural paint strokes. In the early 1960's she embarked on even larger canvases with a monochromatic flavor. Endlessly switching gears, she was back to collage paintings by the mid-1970's. In 1983, MOMA organized a traveling retrospective which was most fitting since Lee died the following year.

Elaine de Kooning, 1918-1989. In 1938 she met Willem de Kooning whom she married in 1943. Her husband became her art instructor and continually "corrected" her canvasses. In the late 1940's she studied at the avant-garde Black Mountain College. She was a member of the male-dominated Eighth Street Club which discussed ideas about art. Early in her career she began a series of paintings called "Faceless Men," a not so subtle dig at the men who dominated the art scene. In 1948 she became a steady contributor to Art News magazine where she wrote about culture, art, and the new ideas circulating in the art community. In the late 1950's she taught at several universities including the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, from where she traveled to Juarez, Mexico and attended bullfights. An indefatigable traveler, her work reflected her travels influenced by mythology and cave drawings. In December of 1962 and January of 1963 she made sketches of JFK in Palm Beach. She did not complete the painting until several months after JFK's assassination. The painting now hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC. Her work is rarely a pure abstraction, with nods to representation. Basically, she did it all: taught, art critic, sculpted, etchings, watercolors, still lifes, and portraits. She described her career saying, "A painting to me is a verb, not a noun. It's an event first and an image second."

Joan Mitchell, 1925-1992. A wealthy gal from Chicago who studied at the Chicago Art Institute. In the mid-1940's she spent time in Mexico, a familiar pilgrimage for many artists, where she studied with the master Mexican muralist, José Orozco. She moved to NYC in 1950 and became immediately noticed. In 1951 her work was exhibited in the Ninth Street Show. (The 9th Street Show was organized by Leo Castelli and 61 participating artists. At that time, most museum curators and galleries were not receptive to these avant-garde painters, so the artists claimed a space to show their work for three weeks in the late spring of 1951.) In 1959 Joan ran off to France pursuing her heartthrob, French-Canadian painter and race car driver, Jean-Paul Riopelle. During their stormy relationship, her life was a perpetual train wreck, not helped by all of her heavy drinking; painting became her survival mechanism. Landscape was the primary influence on her paintings. She once said, "My paintings have to do with feelings. Music, poems, landscapes, and dogs make me want to paint. Painting is what allows me to survive."

Helen Frankenthaler, 1928-2011. Raised in a penthouse on Park Avenue she began painting as a child and won first prize at the age of ten in an exhibition that included mostly adults; her proud father gave her a Tiffany charm bracelet with a silver artist's palette attached – a bright future beckoned. In 1945 she studied at the Dalton School in NYC with the renowned Mexican painter, Rufino Tamayo. She stained rather than painted the canvas, often using commercial house paints thinned with turpentine. This practice was labeled Color Field painting by art critic, Clement Greenberg whom she dated in the early 1950's. Helen's works evoke the outdoors and nature in general, presented in an elegant, visually seductive experience creating a subtle in and out movement, earning her works the title of "lyrical abstraction." She stands out as the only AE woman artist to be consistently mentioned in art books about the period. Hopefully, that will change as a consequence of this riveting exhibit.

Deborah Remington, 1930-2010. As a child in suburban New Jersey, just six miles from Philadelphia; she was an accomplished pianist but she found it to be boring. Her interest resided in drawing and painting, so at age 8 she began private art lessons. After her father died in her early teens her mother moved West and eventually settled in Santa Monica, where Deborah was placed in all advanced classes in high school thanks to a high IQ. In 1947 at age 17 she began her studies at the California School of Fine Arts in SF. She studied under Clyfford Still in SF. In 1954 she along with four other male artists and their teacher/poet, Jack Spicer, founded The Six Gallery. It was at this gallery in 1955 that Alan Ginsburg read his generation-shifting poem, "Howl." In the early sixties, Deborah lived in Japan where she studied calligraphy. In 1965 the sophisticated Remington moved to NYC where she exhibited in various galleries and taught first at Cooper Union and then at NYU. Remington's early work in the 1950's was marked by a focused gestural application of paint. Her art from the mid 1960's onward suggests mechanical, machine parts, musical instruments executed in a hard edge style.

Ethel Schwabacher, 1903-1984. She is perhaps the least known of the 12 artists in this show. She grew up in Pelham, NY, and began painting her family's garden at an early age. In her teens, she began studying at the Art Students League of NY under Max Weber. She lived in Europe from 1928-1934 where she underwent intense psychological analysis in Vienna after a suicide attempt. In NYC she developed a close friendship with Arshile Gorky who introduced her to automatism, a method where the artist suppresses the conscious mind in order to allow the unconscious mind to pave the way. Throughout the 1950's her art reflected mostly her feelings about fertility, pregnancy, and childbirth. She also began a series of paintings called Odes which referenced her grief at the death of her husband in 1951. At this time she also did a series of Women paintings that coincided with Willem de Kooning's Women series

which Ethel believed demeaned women. In 1952 she attempted suicide a second time and the following year she had a show at Betty Parson's gallery. By the early 1960's she was using figuration and embarked on a series using tragic Greek mythical subjects.

Jay DeFeo, 1929-1989. Born in New Hampshire as Mary Joan DeFeo. In 1932 her family moved to SF Bay Area. She studied at Berkeley and then continued her studies in Europe. She was part of the groundbreaking show at MOMA in 1959, call "Sixteen Americans." Her most famous work is called "The Rose;" it took her 8 years to complete, weighs 2,300 pounds and is now part of the Whitney Museum's collection. It exemplifies how the AE movement was not limited to bold brush strokes. The piece is a densely built-up painting on which Jay used a palette knife carving out white paint ridges; it measures ten and a half feet high and one foot thick. For almost twenty years, she taught art in the Bay area, particularly at SF Art Institute and Mills College in Oakland, CA. Like most of her contemporary artists, she smoked to excess and died of lung cancer at age 60.

Perle Fine, 1905-1988. Perle, considered by many as an independent and opinionated woman, was born in Boston and began studying art during her teens at her older sister's prompting. In 1930 she moved to NYC and studied with Hans Hofmann which served to propel her career. In 1945 she had her first solo show. In 1947 she was represented at the newly established Betty Parsons Gallery. At this time, she developed a lifelong friendship with Lee Krasner. Perle was a great admirer of Piet Mondrian. She participated in the important Ninth Street Show in 1951. In the early years, her works were gestural forms focusing on color and line. By the late 1950's she began using collage, weaving jagged pieces of paper, newspaper, and aluminum and gold foil on a field of white. By the mid-1960's she painted vibrant geometric images. Beginning in 1954, she maintained a studio in Springs, East Hampton. On her art, she once said "It's presumptuous of me to tell someone how to feel when looking at my work. The viewers need to do that on their own by first having an open and curious mind." In her later works she tried to convey serenity and a harmony with the Universe.

Grace Hartigan, 1922-2008. Grace was born in New Jersey . She saw Pollock's work at Betty Parsons gallery in 1948 and immediately began painting gestural abstractions. She formed a friendship with Willem de Kooning who was a formative influence in her work. In 1951 she had her first solo show where she used the name George Hartigan. In 1954 she lamented, "What I really want above all at this time is to sell, so that I can be relieved of financial worry for a few months." Grace and other female artists fetched a pittance for their works in comparison to their male counterparts. She was once asked in an interview if any male artists considered her work to be on their level and she quickly responded, "not even twice." She was the only woman represented in MOMA's 1956 show "Twelve Americans." She did a number of series dealing with gritty street life, masks, marriage, womanhood, and consumerism. She also did a series called "Oranges" where she incorporated words from Frank O'Hara's poems. She left NYC in 1960 and settled in Maryland where she taught art.

Mary Abbott, 1921-still living. She came from a prestigious family line, descendants of John Adams; her parents were sophisticated pillars in society. She began art studies at age 12. In 1941 Mary had her coming out as a debutante and began modeling for Vogue, Harper's Bazaar, and Mademoiselle magazines. Yet art beckoned and she rented a studio in 1946 on Tenth Street to pursue her painting career. By 1948 she was receiving lessons from art giants, Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko, who influenced her to embrace abstraction with gusto. About this time she developed an enduring artistic relationship with Willem de Kooning. Her work in the 1950's consisted of all-over compositions using oil,

charcoal, and oil stick. Her art, both abstract and later figurative was also influenced by the tropical lushness of Haiti and St. Croix where she often visited in the 1950's. She deliciously captured the vitality of nature through vivacious paint, color, and line. Beginning in 1959, she collaborated with poet, Barbara Guest, to create word pictures in which Guest would say a word and Abbott would paint a visual response. These "poetry paintings" appeared in an exhibition in 1974 called, "Poetry and Painting." Mary Abbott splits her time between homes in Manhattan and Southampton.

Sonia Gechtoff, 1926-still living. Raised by parents who were both involved in the arts, her father was a painter and her mother managed art galleries. Sonia began painting at age 6, studied in Philadelphia where she got her BFA and then headed to San Francisco. In 1954 she participated in the Guggenheim Museum's show "Younger American Painters." In 1957 Sonia scored the first one-person exhibition at the Ferrus Gallery in Los Angeles. In 1958 she moved to NYC and had this to say about the art scene in NYC, "In SF there was none of that macho bullshit. When I came to New York I was horrified at how female artists were being disregarded." Her work was inspired by poetry, especially poems by Michael McClure. Her work consists of mostly large canvases boldly filled with color and energetic brush strokes, sometimes with hints at figuration.

Judith Godwin, 1930-still living. She was from Virginia and while attending Mary Baldwin College she met Martha Graham and became inspired by her dance movements. They became lifelong friends and after receiving her BFA in 1953 Godwin moved to NYC and enrolled in Hans Hofmann's classes both in NYC and Provincetown where she rubbed shoulders with the leading art figures of the era. By the late 1950's she developed a harsher, rougher style. She confessed, "If you were a woman painter, you had to paint as strongly and as violently as the men did." During this period, she used sailcloth which she primed as a canvas. By 1960 she was achieving acclaim by the art critics in NYC. She became a staple at the Stable Gallery, the premier showcase for AE artists. She bought a townhouse in Greenwich Village and had a studio and extensive garden in Connecticut. She shifted gears in her career in the mid-1960's, residing in Connecticut where she restored colonial homes as well as becoming a landscape designer. She returned to NYC and painting in 1974. She once summarized her art career as a way "to emphasize what is important by honestly painting the image of my feelings on canvas."

Time to say goodbye:

Ostensibly this show is a long-delayed tribute to the women artists who richly contributed to the radical art scene in post-war USA, each with a unique style. Yet on a larger scale, the show represents a powerful homage to gifted individuals everywhere who have been minimized, marginalized, or excluded because of their gender, race, sexual orientation, or political/religious beliefs. This exhibit is an opportunity to proclaim a delayed but well-earned victory for all of them – it's finally their time to party.