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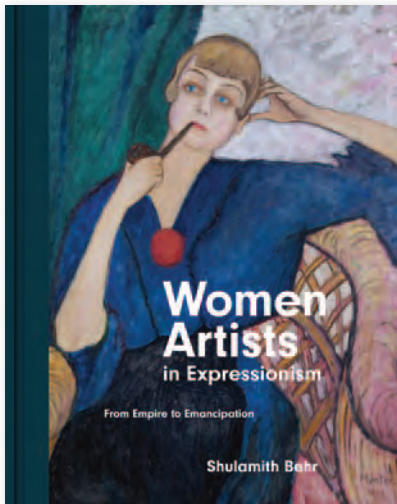




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Shulamith Behr

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Nathaniel Silver and Diana Seave Greenwald

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Distributed for the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum



(Front cover) Lucienne Bloch, *Childhood* from *The Cycle of a Woman's Life* (1936), fresco. Courtesy of the artist's heir, Lucienne Allen. Photo: Nickolas Muray.

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Woman's Art Journal is delighted to publish our current issue celebrating the careers of women artists from the early to mid-twentieth century who have received limited recognition for their achievements in muralism, abstract painting, applied arts, and design. The journal proudly draws international attention to a younger generation of Canadian contemporary artists, whose distinct artistic strategies similarly utilize a wide range of materials in textile and fiber arts in addition to painting and sculpture, and introduces our readers to critical art historical studies grounded in intersectional feminism and race.

Our feature article by Elizabeth Frasco brings deserved recognition to Marion and Grace Greenwood, Lucienne Bloch, and Ione Robinson, resourceful and ambitious artists of the 1930s who answered the "Walls Call" of the New Deal era by mastering true fresco mural painting. They garnered unique opportunities for travel to Mexico City and cultivated transnational relationships while practicing under the guidance of renowned Mexican muralists; subsequently, they brought their impressive skills to the public mural programs in New York City, securing important commissions under the Federal Art Project's Works Progress Administration. The Greenwood sisters' determination to learn fresco technique led them to provincial cities such as Morelia and Taxco, where, between 1933 and 1936, they painted five separate murals between them, earning considerable acclaim for their aesthetic visualization of Indigenous and post-revolutionary sensibilities. Upon her return to the US, Marion Greenwood completed highly accomplished murals for the Red Hook Housing Project in Brooklyn, NY. Lucienne Bloch followed a similar trajectory, making a strong feminist statement in her representation of mothers and children with her mural *The Cycle of a Woman's Life* (1935–36; see front cover).

Alice Trumbull Mason is another pioneer of the 1930s with a different goal: the promotion of abstract art. Abstraction was viewed in opposition to Surrealism or the figurative populism of mural paintings. Mason was one of the most dedicated founding members of the American Abstract Artists (AAA) group. Unlike similar artist groups dominated by men, AAA was ready to acknowledge the leadership of women. In fact, artist and fellow AAA member Ibram Lassaw eagerly explained to Joan Marter that women were viewed as essential to its organization. Mason's own essay in the AAA 1938 yearbook indicates her determination to promote abstract painting and sculpture. Notably, AAA is still in existence and periodically arranges group shows. The essay by Barbara Stehle explores the relatively unknown later works of Mason, painted after she had met Piet Mondrian. Mason's *Shutter* paintings, replete with juxtaposed narrow bands of color, owe some indebtedness to Mondrian, whose art Mason deeply admired, but also reveal her concept of "Bearings" and displacement, anticipating the hard-edge compositions of the Minimalists in the 1960s.

Roni Feinstein's retrospective essay on Mila Gokhman, a self-taught multidisciplinary artist born in Kyiv in 1934, unveils the artist's tremendous spirit and fortitude in the face of censorship and religious persecution under the Soviet Union. Gokhman's unique manipulation of leather, a precious and scarce material in the post-World War II Soviet era, led to the creation of spatially complex, abstractly woven panels that explore her reverence for

nature, landscapes, and music. Feinstein untangles Gokhman's complex biographical web through the use of archives and photographs of exhibitions and installations, including her participation in Ukrainian fashion houses, and interviews with the artist herself, now residing in Stanton, California.

Julia Skelly concludes our articles with a critical discussion of the recent artworks by Elisabeth Perrault and Oreka James, both Canadian, who, in 2021, showed in simultaneous exhibitions at a contemporary art gallery in Montreal. Skelly carefully constructs a dialogue between these distinct emerging artists through an interpretation of skin as both "a resilient and a vulnerable canvas," a feminist reading that opens spaces for marginalized and vulnerable individuals, joy and jouissance, and agency.

The excellent book reviews section, organized and edited by Alison Poe, offers a capacious understanding of women's artistic endeavors throughout modern history for professionalization, endorsement, and status. Colleen Denney's analysis elevates a discussion on gender inequities in the late Victorian and Edwardian period, the "hustle and scramble" endured by women who sold their art, and the demands placed on them by the so-called "art market." The perseverance of Spanish sculptor Luisa Roldán is examined by Liya Okroshidze in a welcomed volume from a new Getty series dedicated to women artists. Sarah Ross casts light upon a study of early modern women artists in sixteenth, seventeenth-, and eighteenth-century Italy, an inclusive exhibition catalogue that builds upon the scholarship of Artemisia Gentileschi.

Addressing a book that takes to task the myths, archetypes, and canons that gave rise to the imagery and patriarchal structures throughout much of Western civilization, Kimberly Lamm's review underscores the broader purposes of feminism in today's world. The recent retrospective catalogue on Joan Semmel (Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia) is explored by Tanya Augsburg, who deconstructs the subversive, painterly strategies deployed by the artist that harness the sheer sanctity of her own naked body, strategies intended to resist the viewers' objectifying gaze. Suzanne Valadon's revolutionary approach to painting the nude in the early twentieth century, and the impact of her modeling *métier* on her artistic practice, is one of the many topics tackled by Emie Diamond in her discussion of the artist's exhibition catalogue at the Barnes Foundation. Gabrielle Stecher expands the geographical and narrative histories of women in the annals of Abstract Expressionism in her coverage of two volumes on art of the 1950s, one focused on the American Midwest, the other, by Griselda Pollock, on New York painting. By contrast, Ella Nixon turns to the "simple pleasures" of Doris Lee's figurative scenes, rooted in American folklore and agricultural life; in 1935, Lee was also selected by the Department of the Treasury to paint murals for the main post office in Washington, D.C., a project supported by the WPA. Maria Elena Buszek brings a global perspective to a wide-ranging volume, *Pop Art and Beyond: Gender, Race, and Class in the Global Sixties*, foregrounding the recent queer, feminist, and postcolonial scholarship representing this period's marginalized voices.

Joan Marter and Aliza Edelman
Editors, *Woman's Art Journal*

WALLS CALL

WOMEN ARTISTS OF THE NYC WPA IN MEXICO, 1929–1936

By Elizabeth Frasco

When the California-born artist Ione Robinson (1910–1989) crossed the border into Mexico in June 1929, she was administered a vaccine in her arm that led to an infection lasting for two weeks.¹ Robinson, who did not speak Spanish, also had trouble organizing her entry papers but was ultimately aided by the children of the Minister of Public Education, José Vasconcelos, who were sent to meet Robinson in El Paso.² According to the letters that Robinson wrote from Mexico City, later compiled in her 1946 book, *A Wall to Paint On*, she was thrilled despite these setbacks, writing that “at any rate, it was Señor Vasconcelos who turned over the walls of the Ministry of Public Education to [Diego] Rivera to paint, so you can see what luck I have fallen upon.”³ Unbeknownst to Robinson, Vasconcelos was feuding with Rivera, who had just lampooned the bureaucrat by depicting him astride a white elephant in a mural housed in his own Ministry of Education (Secretaría de Educación Pública). Despite her poor luck early on, Robinson would soon be painting alongside Rivera at the National Palace (Palacio Nacional) in Mexico City, where he was piecing together a monumental mural cycle on the *History of Mexico*.⁴ Once she began, Robinson scandalized the politicians passing through the palace by dangling from high scaffolding in overalls while painting her section of the mural. Though Robinson wrote that their surprised reaction to her outfit was because the “revolution hasn’t gotten around to liberating women as yet,” ultimately her enthusiasm triumphed, as she effusively corresponded, “I can’t tell you how thrilled I am to be actually working on a wall.”⁵ The artist’s visible smile, unmistakable in a photograph taken of her with Rivera, seated in front of a charcoal cartoon for one of the murals, illustrates her immense happiness at being included in such an important public art project (Fig. 1). Rivera later painted over Robinson’s contributions due to a public feud with her husband, the journalist Joseph Freeman. However, the cartoon’s subject, a sword-wielding soldier on horseback, may be identified as part of the main palace mural detailing the forced colonization of Mexico, titled *From the Conquest to 1930*.⁶ Even for a woman hailing from the sophisticated, international metropolis of New York City, such an opportunity was life changing.



Fig. 1. Diego Rivera and Ione Robinson at the National Palace, Mexico City, Mexico (1929), photograph, from Ione Robinson, *A Wall to Paint On* (New York: Dutton and Co., 1946), p. 22.

Though Robinson’s tenure at the National Palace would end badly for both her and for Rivera (primarily due to the feud between Rivera and Freeman), she would leave Mexico both transformed and relatively enlightened.⁷ During her time there, Robinson socialized with the most noteworthy artists of the day, including Rivera’s future wife Frida Kahlo (1907–1954), David Alfaro Siqueiros, Dr. Atl (Gerardo Murillo Cornado), Pablo O’Higgins, Lola Alvarez Bravo (1907–1993), and José Clemente Orozco. Rivera also gave Robinson a tour of important Mexican historical sites, including Xochimilco and Coyoacán, and as his assistant at the National Palace she was assigned the topic of the “Cruelty of the Spanish.”⁸ Though the murals were credited to Rivera, Robinson did have some input; she reportedly divided her three walls into themes—the Conquest of Land, the Conquest of the Machine, and the Conquest of Social Anarchy.⁹ In her own words, the actions of the Spanish conquistadors made her “blood run cold” and left her “automatically in sympathy with the Mexicans.”¹⁰ Robinson also fondly described seeing murals by Siqueiros and Orozco at the National Preparatory School (Escuela



Fig. 2. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Portrait of Ione Robinson* (1931), oil on burlap, 34" x 23". Museo de Arte Moderno, INBA, Mexico City, Mexico.

Nacional Preparatoria), and told her mother in one of her letters that she didn't understand why people were "afraid of Communists; they are not terrible at all."¹¹ While Orozco's mural at the school, *Cortes and Malinche* (Cortés y La Malinche) (1926), was still extant by the time she visited, Robinson noted that Siqueiros's mural, *The Spirit of the West* (El espíritu de Occidente), remained unfinished, stating, "I supposed he left it when the Syndicate [of Technical Workers, Painters, and Sculptors (Obreros Técnicos Pintores y Escultores Union)] broke up."¹²

Back in New York City, Robinson pursued a career as an artist and was later granted a Guggenheim Fellowship, in 1931, to return to Mexico to continue her work at the National Palace. It was during this second residency in Mexico that she seems to have finally been accepted into the inner circles of Mexico's intelligentsia. On this trip she painted *The Family* (La Familia) (1931; Pl. 1), a group portrait of a mother and her three children that deftly captures the matriarch's inner struggle. Depicted with exaggerated hands,

imposing and strong, the mother in this family portrait wears an expression that suggests worry, preoccupation, and ennui. The children appear to be provided for in terms of food and a stable home, but the situation still wears on the woman at the center, holding it all together. In another painting from the same year by the muralist and rabble-rouser Siqueiros, Robinson switches roles and is depicted as the subject. In *Portrait of Ione Robinson* (1931; Fig. 2), Siqueiros captures Robinson's radiant blonde curls and round face in his characteristically disjointed, post-cubistic style.¹³ Though Robinson is portrayed attractively, she also appears melancholic, with wide blue eyes, downcast, solemn, and pensive in expression. Though Robinson's time in Mexico was, by her own account, life changing, some of her experiences were certainly on the difficult side—a circumstance we see reflected in the isolated sadness communicated by Siqueiros's cropped portrait of her. His burgeoning preference for textured surfaces, called *escultopintura* (sculptural painting), later culminated in his use of Pyroxylin paint and spray guns in the late 1930s. While developing this new style, he created a "coarse impasto" to enhance a sensibility of the sitter's "sculptural quality."¹⁴ In such portraits, Siqueiros was known to "transform the face" to create the "art of pure expression."¹⁵

Upon returning from Mexico for the second time in 1931, Robinson had begun to think even more radically about the artist's contribution to civic society. In her letters from that year, she wrote that the salary she had received for her work from the Ministry of Education in Mexico had made her feel like "a real human being," and that she no longer believed in "painters living on air."¹⁶ Unsurprisingly, once she was back in the US permanently, Robinson became involved with the New York City Works Progress Administration (NYC WPA). Though Robinson's economic situation disqualified her from relief status, she was hired as part of a small group designated "non-relief personnel."¹⁷ Due to her experience working with fresco in Mexico City, Robinson first assisted a group of younger painters preparing sketches for approval by a jury of WPA administrators.¹⁸ By July 1936, Robinson was assigned her own wall to paint by the WPA for a project at Bellevue Hospital in Brooklyn. In a letter to her mother, Robinson wrote "at least I'm going to work on a wall all my own," and that the subject of the mural would be harvesting.¹⁹ The planned composition for the mural included a man kneeling at the center, who "opens the earth to place seeds in a furrow," flanked by a woman with "her apron filled with seeds," and a young child behind them "with an ear of corn in his hands."²⁰ Such an iconographical design and program, which fashions a traditional family group as a symbol of fertility and agricultural abundance, draws on Rivera's depiction of a large maternal nude woman and muscular man within a farm landscape in his mural *Paradise Re-Conquered* (1923–28) at the Universidad Autónoma Chapingo in Mexico. Even though Robinson's Brooklyn-based mural was sadly never completed due to the temporary defunding of the WPA, it is clear that her time in Mexico had informed her attempts to develop mural painting in America.

American women artists like Robinson who went to Mexico and then later painted murals for New Deal programs were answering the “Walls Call” that was proclaimed by the *New York Times* in November 1930.²¹ The article, with sub-heading “Time for Mural Art to Develop Here,” proposed widely that “mural painting promises to come prominently to the fore in America.” Undoubtedly influenced by the reputation of Rivera and his cohorts, whose oversized murals in Mexico created an international buzz, the *New York Times*’s journalist ultimately concluded of fresco, that while “large spaces are unsuited to idiosyncratic treatment,” they “encourage works not merely striking but significant of something more than [the] ornamentation of surfaces.”²² Published four years before the official founding of the Federal Art Project in the US, the “Walls Call” demonstrates the desirability of large-scale public art projects in the 1930s.²³ Murals executed in public common spaces, such as government offices, hospitals, schools, and universities, represented the efforts of the American government to revitalize the economy and the cultural sphere after the devastating job loss, poverty, and social upheaval caused by the Great Depression (1929–1933). The funding of public murals was part of New Deal legislators’ efforts to uplift downtrodden Americans through art, to create a positive view of American history and national identity, and to hire unemployed artists. Significantly, it was American women artists who answered the “Walls Call” by painting murals in both Mexico and New York City. As mural painting gripped the art world at home and abroad, the women artists of the NYC WPA became the formative group developing this art form as it expanded to New Deal programs across the country.

The women artists of the New Deal era (1934–1943) were the first in history to make art on the scale of public murals. A 1940 profile on artist Marion Greenwood (1909–1970) from the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* announced how “few women have ever attempted fresco murals, as a matter of fact, it has rarely been in this country.”²⁴ Through WPA government relief money and interests in Mexican art and progressive civic and labor policies, a generation of female artists explored new topics, including wage discrepancies, incarceration, social inequality, and the marginalization of women’s artistic professionalism. Central to their investigations, in many instances, was a broader interest in a Social Realist style of art that directly depicted cultural and industrial transformation. These interests culminated in their desire to travel to Mexico to study with the muralists, an experience that broadened their use of subject matter and stylistic development.

The women artists discussed in this essay—Ione Robinson, Lucienne Bloch (1909–1999), and the sisters Marion Greenwood and Grace Greenwood (1905–1979)—actively chose to study fresco painting in Mexico City rather than in Paris or Rome, a decision that reflected the unique circumstances of the period. By tracing the paths of these American women to and from Mexico, this account of WPA artists resurrects a cross-cultural, interwar narrative wherein women, the central protagonists, cultivate gendered

identities and tomboy personas that combined social agency and muralism to promote their professional advancement and cultural rebellion in the public sphere. The story of their lives indexes how artists of the 1930s and 1940s shared an interest in social justice alongside the Mexican intellectuals and artists. This unique group of women artists primarily championed leftist ideals in their art once they returned to the US, convictions often complicating their work on the WPA. By looking to Mexico rather than to their US peers representing mainstream American Scene painting, these women developed visual programs and pursued public commissions beyond what they would have typically produced.

Unlike their predecessors, women artists of the 1930s no longer relied on their male peers, husbands, or families to travel (though they were often invited by or hosted by male artists). While women of the 1910s and 1920s had made certain gains in the art world toward professionalization, one obstacle persisted: travel abroad remained both dangerous and frowned upon for single women.²⁵ As art historian Laura Prieto has discussed in her research on women’s studios and domesticity, despite their desires, it was “not easy for women to confront the idea of uprooting themselves, perhaps for many years, from home and loved ones, in order to pursue art abroad.”²⁶ By the 1930s, however, customs began to change as foreign travel became easier, and women, more than ever before, visited increasingly exotic locales. Most American artists traveling to Mexico during this period, however, sought to revitalize their careers by associating themselves with the thriving culture of a nation in the process of rebuilding its modern identity after the Mexican Revolution of 1910–20. As art historian James Oles wrote about the lure of Mexico during the 1930s and 1940s, “Americans began to travel south in greater numbers, attracted not only by a burgeoning cultural renaissance but also by untouched colonial towns, an exciting traditional culture, and an ancient capital of interlaced canals and tree-lined avenues” framed by distant volcanoes.²⁷ These pilgrimages also had political implications and purpose as many Americans believed Mexico offered “alternative strategies for social organization and reform.”²⁸ In her letters from Mexico City, Robinson exhorted how “everything Spanish is hated, even the old colonial art,” and many “painters and writers wear Indian shirts and sandals, and their houses are filled with Indian furniture and dishes, just as Diego’s is filled with Indian sculpture.”²⁹ Such well-meaning but calculated public actions and demeanor signaled artists’ alliances and affinities with Mexico’s pre-Conquest Indigenous past or peasant culture, people historically exploited, segregated, and disenfranchised by the State, Catholic Church, or regional agricultural politics. In Robinson’s case, her newfound interest in social activism was coupled with an air of adventure and worldliness, an “authenticity” cultivated as part of her identity as an artist and writer, and a separation from American values that was, in part, a reaction to the horrors of the Great Depression.

Lucienne Bloch was another artist transformed by her time working alongside Rivera and Kahlo. In December 1931, after meeting Rivera at a dinner party in New York City, Bloch assisted Rivera while he completed the murals for his upcoming exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art.³⁰ Upon informing Rivera about her job offer by Frank Lloyd Wright at his studio in Taliesin, Arizona, Rivera exclaimed, "Wright is a lackey of the capitalists;" the very next day Bloch became Rivera's assistant instead.³¹ Bloch then worked for Rivera on his expansive mural cycle, *Detroit Industry*, for the Detroit Institute of Arts in 1932, and his murals at Rockefeller Center (a commission later aborted) and the New Workers School in New York City, titled *Portrait of America*, during 1933 and 1934.³² On May 8, 1933, Bloch snuck a camera into the RCA Building at Rockefeller Center and captured Rivera's mural, *Man at the Crossroads Looking with Hope and High Vision to the Choosing of a Better Future*, before the fresco was ordered destroyed by his young patron, Nelson A. Rockefeller, due to the visible portrait of Vladimir Lenin.³³ The capitalist Rockefellers deemed the portrait of Lenin, which Rivera intended as homage to the father of Communism, inappropriate.³⁴ As Nelson Rockefeller told Rivera, the mural was "beautifully painted" but was likely to "offend a great many people," as it was located in a "public building," not a private house.³⁵ In a 1933 photograph, Bloch is shown at work on a drawing for *Man at the Crossroads* (Fig. 3); involved with the mural presentation from the beginning, along with Ben Shahn and others, she was thus devastated by the project's destruction. Bloch visited Rockefeller Center one last time with Kahlo and



Fig. 3. Lucienne Bloch working for Diego Rivera on *Man at the Crossroads*, New York (1933). Photo: University of Texas at Austin, Texas.

the artist Stephen Dimitroff, who distracted the guards while Bloch climbed the scaffolding and photographed the incomplete mural with her Leica camera.³⁶

While living in Detroit and assisting with Rivera's murals of automotive manufacturing at the Institute of Arts, Bloch made several sketches and lithographs of the city's unique industrial landscape. In the print *Detroit* (1932; Fig. 4), the waterside scene has a static and sparse appearance, marked by large swaths of negative space, where a sizable unarticulated body of water separates the figures in the foreground from the downtown so much so that it would appear the artist felt ambivalent about the city. The print communicates the feelings of longing and even loneliness, humbly distancing the urban residents from the central downtown activities in the distance, dotted with smokestacks, row houses, water towers, and rotundas. The print's somber tone may have reflected Bloch's unhappiness at recent events, including the demolition of *Man at the Crossroads* and Kahlo's devastating miscarriage at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit, for which Bloch was present.³⁷ Bloch would subsequently travel to Mexico with Kahlo in 1933 to see Kahlo's ill mother; Bloch later wrote in her diary entry, on September 8, 1933, that they were greeted upon their arrival by a large group of family members, and after the death of Kahlo's mother, they stayed for four weeks in Coyoacán.³⁸ During their stay, Kahlo showed Bloch the conjoined houses she and Rivera were designing in San Angel with the architect Juan O'Gorman.³⁹ Kahlo also introduced Bloch to the illustrator Miguel Covarrubias and his



Fig. 4. Lucienne Bloch, *Detroit* (1932), lithograph, 8" × 11 1/4". Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia, 1988.107.

wife, the painter Rosa Rolanda (1895–1970), and the respected art critic Anita Brenner.⁴⁰ This connection led Brenner to write an article on Bloch's art for the *Brooklyn Eagle* in 1936, titled "Muralist Lucienne Bloch—Product of the WPA," where she described Bloch's increased artistic independence from Rivera as she embraced commissions for the NYC WPA.⁴¹ In the piece, Brenner made sure to assign Bloch artistic agency of her own, writing how "Rivera's pupil was, however, rapidly developing into a master in her own right."⁴²

By 1935, Bloch was back in New York City and awarded her first mural project through the NYC WPA for the recreation room at the House of Detention for Women, located on East 39th Street.⁴³ Like her peers, Bloch first had to prove dire economic need to gain relief status; once approved, Bloch planned several murals titled *The Cycle of a Woman's Life*.⁴⁴ Ultimately, Bloch completed just one mural from the cycle for the women's prison, called *Childhood* (front cover), begun in 1935 and completed in 1936, where a diverse group of children play in a city playground while their mothers look on from nearby benches. In this dynamic urban scene, children leap, throw balls, and build sand structures, while their mothers knit and shell peas; highly foreshortened, the communal portrait is framed on the left by an older gentleman selling flowers and in the background horizon by a row of skyscrapers. Intended as a form of escape and uplift for the prisoners, the local and real, gritty quality of a New York City playground made the scene more recognizable to them.⁴⁵ Overall, the scene is dynamic and full of movement—an achievement accomplished through Bloch's training as an artist and preparation for the project. An earlier lithograph by Bloch, also titled *Childhood* (1933; Fig. 5), displays a raucous urban playground filled with actively running and swinging children, their bodily musculature clearly visible as they contort themselves at play. Such preparation for her murals shows how Bloch was intent on succeeding with her project, even developing ideas earlier. Moreover, to combat some of the skepticism on the part of the prison superintendent, Ruth Collins, as well as the prisoners, Bloch painted directly in front of them.⁴⁶ As Bloch noted in her 1936 essay, "Murals for Use," both Collins and the prisoners would often stand by the scaffolding and watch her paint, eager to discuss the problems of composition and design with the artist.⁴⁷ After discussions with the attending psychiatrist at the detention center, Bloch realized that the inmates' suspicious attitude towards art stemmed from their view that it was highbrow, which to Bloch indicated how "art had in the past been severed from the people and placed upon a pedestal for the privilege of museum students, art patrons and art dealers."⁴⁸

Reception for *Childhood* was positive, and Bloch was even nominated in 1936 for the "Hall of Fame" in *Vanity Fair*, where she was described as one of the "ablest craftsmen" on the



Fig. 5. Lucienne Bloch, *Childhood* (1933), lithograph, 10 1/2" x 13 1/2". Mott-Warsh Collection, Flint, Michigan.

federal projects.⁴⁹ The idea of a female artist painting a mural for a women's prison was also, apparently, a comical topic, written up in *Time* magazine in October 1935 as "Jail Job."⁵⁰ According to "Jail Job," the reception of the mural was generally positive: "Giggling, nudging, shrilling with excitement, the inmates in their brown and white house dresses crowded round the small, serious artist," and exclaimed that it was pretty.⁵¹ The women inmates reportedly "adopted" the children in the mural and had regular arguments over whether the playground depicted was located in Brooklyn or in the Bronx.⁵² When reviewing *Childhood*, Brenner, the art critic, wrote that the mural was "the first triumphant argument in New York for government subsidy of large-scale public art."⁵³ Brenner also praised the simplicity and formal integrity of Bloch's composition, which was enhanced by the artist's use of trompe l'oeil to extend the perspective of the actual brick walls of the recreation room into the background of the painting itself.⁵⁴ Another photograph of *Childhood* that includes the surrounding walls illustrates how Bloch skillfully integrated the mural's cityscape view into the architecture of the prison's recreation room (Fig. 6). Bloch's consideration of the mural's specific location and its interaction with the audience of women inmates demonstrates her commitment to the project. Further, Bloch intentionally projected the image of a classically trained muralist, albeit one in a messy bun who wore overalls covered in paint splatters. In a photograph during the act of painting *Childhood* (1935–36; Fig. 7), Bloch was shown to work in the traditional fresco method learned from Rivera, holding a palette while painting on top of a charcoal design sketched on lime. Apparently, the women prisoners were thrilled to see Bloch painting "without a smock and without inspired fits"



Fig. 6. Lucienne Bloch, *Childhood* from *The Cycle of a Woman's Life* (1936), fresco. Courtesy of the artist's heir, Lucienne Allen.

(the tantrums of the artistic genius), and several of them wrote letters of praise for the mural to New Deal administrators.⁵⁵

The heroic nature of mural painting projected a masculine image that the women artists of the NYC WPA embraced as part of their modern liberation. Large-scale public murals combined the laborious process of applying pigments to wet plaster day after day, utilizing scaffolding, palette knives, and other dusty tools, all fashioned by these women artists as de-facto laborers (in the Marxist sense). Though not the first artists to cultivate a 'boyish' look in order to be taken more seriously, Robinson and Bloch relished climbing scaffolding and wearing overalls, a male attire and uniform that would not enter mainstream American fashion until the 1940s with the rise of the wartime character Rosie the Riveter.⁵⁶ Robinson and Bloch's overalls were a far cry from the World War I-era costume of the suffrage activists of the 1920s, marketed as "womanalls" that retained a certain femininity.⁵⁷ The National American Woman Suffrage Association even endorsed "womanalls" by claiming that they prevented a woman from looking "like a frump" while wearing "her service uniform."⁵⁸ In a photo from 1919, the year before ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the matching womanalls worn by a group of women retained a certain flowing femininity, not dusty or covered in paint (Fig. 8). The 1930s, bookended by the Suffragist activists and Rosie the Riveter, afforded women, like Robinson and Bloch, the capacity to bend gender rules without committing to any particular movement or philosophy. Noticeably, in Siqueiros's 1931 portrait of Robinson painted in Mexico, the artist exaggerated her cropped haircut so that it almost appears as short as that of a boy or man (see Fig. 2). In the late 1920s during the height of the Flapper era, short hair had become symbolic of the "New Woman"—a figure permitted new pleasures like cigarettes and new forms of independence, such as working for wages. As art historian Ellen Wiley Todd summarized, the flapper was "young [and] savvy" and "comfortably sported daring clothes" while engaging in "pastimes that undermined all previous notions of genteel



Fig. 7. Lucienne Bloch painting *The Cycle of a Woman's Life* (1935–36), photographic print, 7 7/8" x 10 1/4". Federal Art Project, Photographic Division collection, circa 1920–1965. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Digital ID: 1979.

womanhood."⁵⁹ For Robinson, who desired to travel abroad and paint murals, cropped hair was ideal. Dress and style were ways for women to communicate individually just how much they accepted or rejected prescribed gender roles. In the photograph of Bloch sketching *Man at the Crossroads*, she wore a boy's cap and dark denim jean jacket, telling the world just how little she attempted to dress for work in a traditional feminine style. Given that she was working around charcoal, lime plaster, ground pigments, and other materials, the outfit of overalls made practical sense. Similarly, in the late 1930s and early 1940s before the onset of World War II, women factory workers assumed difficult manufacturing tasks that increasingly required industrial clothing, a tactical shift that encouraged heightened confidence as women eschewed impractical clothing for more pragmatic, albeit masculine attire (Fig. 9). New styles of dress for women artists in the 1930s visually represented the larger trend of women entering the professional workplace, both at home and abroad.

The story of the Greenwood sisters from Brooklyn, New York, epitomizes the newfound freedom, opportunity, and prosperity available to women during this period. Grace Greenwood and her younger sister, Marion Greenwood, traveled to Mexico between 1933 and 1936 and completed five



Fig. 8. Women Wearing Womanalls (January 1919), photographic print. Courtesy Getty Images.



Fig. 9. "Testing a 20mm Aircraft Canon at Aberdeen Proving Ground," *Life* (1942). Photo: Myron Davis.

murals between them. Both sisters had attended the Art Students League in New York City in the 1920s and later studied in Paris, though Marion quickly became the more famous of the two by associating with artists like Emil Ganso and Alexander Archipenko.⁶⁰ While Grace left for Italy to study murals, as Rivera had in 1920, Marion traveled to the US Southwest, first to paint the Pueblo and Navajo Native Americans in 1931, and then to Mexico in 1932.⁶¹ Marion wrote in her letters from the period that she was attracted to Mexico "because it seemed to offer an inspiration and an opportunity that was vital and American."⁶² In Mexico City, Marion met Pablo O'Higgins, a frequent collaborator and assistant to Rivera, who taught her the technique of fresco painting, and in January 1933, she was hired for her first mural commission at the American-owned Hotel Taxqueño in the city of Taxco.⁶³ Both Marion and Grace were subsequently awarded mural commissions at the Universidad de San Nicolás de Hidalgo in Morelia, in the central Mexican state of Michoacán, and as such became, according to American cultural critic Josephine Herbst in *Mexican Life*, "the first women of any nationality to create important works of public art in Mexico."⁶⁴ As Siqueiros proclaimed, Marion was so popular that she "could have been the queen of Mexico."⁶⁵

Unlike Robinson and Bloch, the Greenwood sisters were provided with room and board while staying in Morelia during 1933 and 1934, as their commissions were funded directly by the state of Michoacán.⁶⁶ Guided by the university's leftist leaning rector, Gustavo Corona, who controlled the administration offices and the Museo Regional

Michoacano, Marion designed a mural on the rural history and economy of the state of Michoacán, which featured the daily tasks of the local Indigenous Tarascan people.⁶⁷ Titled *Landscape and Economy of Michoacán* (*Paisaje y economía de Michoacán*), and located on the university's inner courtyard wall, the mural portrayed Marion's admiration for the Tarascan people through the idealized depiction of their continued practice of traditional vocations, including fishing, weaving, and farming (1933–34; Fig. 10 and Pl. 2). For many



Fig. 10. Marion Greenwood, *Landscape and Economy of Michoacán* (*Paisaje y economía de Michoacán*) (detail) (1933–34), fresco. University of St. Nicolas Hidalgo, Morelia, Mexico. Photo: the author.



Fig. 11. Marion Greenwood, *Fisherman and Farmworkers* (final drawing for the ground floor panel of the mural, *The Industrialization of the Countryside*, Mercado Abelardo L. Rodríguez, Civic Center, Mexico City) (1934–35), pencil on paper, 18 3/4" x 24". Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY, 1976.44.4.

American travelers, the Tarascan of western Mexico, whose empire was second only to the Aztecs, were symbolically revered for their preservation of Mexican Indigenous culture in the face of colonization and their performance of daily rituals emblematic of a simpler way of life, separate from the stresses of modernization and assimilation. Their reputation was echoed in the writings of Robinson, who traveled in 1931 to the town of Pátzcuaro and the island of Tzintzuntzan to see the "capital of the Tarascan Empire," where, according to her, "everyone is an expert fisherman."⁶⁸ By today's standards, this fashioning of native people as 'timeless' and 'one with nature' would be considered both reductive and patronizing.⁶⁹ Fortunately, Marion's mural in Morelia would be a stepping stone on her journey towards a more original type of public art that relied less and less on stereotype.

Situated on the second story open patio of the main university building, the mural's Tarascan are shown carefully processing textiles, casting fishing nets, carrying children, and harvesting wheat. Greenwood also employed the tropes of communist symbolism by presenting the farmers cutting grain with a prominent "sickle," which represented her sympathy for their struggle in the face of exploitation. Likewise, the mural's emphasis on mothers and children possibly demonstrated her evolving beliefs as she began to identify with the immense workload of the indigenous Tarascan women. Marion, feeling insecure upon arriving in Morelia, wrote to the critic Herbst in June 1933: "I am afraid I have nothing to say, which has not been said before in the way of social significance and political attitudes by Orozco and Rivera."⁷⁰ Given the intimidating

precedent set by these muralists, Marion concluded her only recourse was to "paint these people as I feel them in all their sadness, apathy, and beauty."⁷¹ Progressive women during this period were often sidelined within the greater field of Social Realism, a fact that may have extended from the sexism within the Communist Party in the 1930s.⁷² As Oles hypothesizes for this mural, Marion's choice to sign her name in the striped blue skirt of a woman potter was a political and feminist statement that aligned her experiences with hardship as a female artist with the Indigenous women artisans.⁷³ Despite her insecurity, Marion's *Landscape and Economy of Michoacán* remains a relatively accurate record of local customs in Morelia during the 1930s. In many ways, the work was a celebration—the mural's bright blues, greens, oranges, and reds capture the vibrant, positive aspects of the indigenous lifestyle in Michoacán.

Marion's mural in Morelia was a success and soon a commission followed for Grace at the same university. Though some "counterrevolutionary" Catholic students had picketed Marion's work, upset by its communist message, the current president of Mexico, Lázaro Cárdenas, praised her work when he visited Morelia in January 1934.⁷⁴ As *Landscape and Economy of Michoacán* began to attract tourists, Corona assigned Grace a twenty-six-foot vertical wall on the second story of the nearby Museo Michoacano, also owned by the university.⁷⁵ After learning the fresco technique from her sister, Grace began work in 1934 on a composition titled *Men and Machines* (*Hombres y máquinas*) (Pl. 3). In Grace's mural depicting five muscular men at work surrounded by

large, rotating metal gears, man and machine are melded. The chaotic and cramped organization conceals the architecture of the space wherein the proletariat workers labor, yet reveals the spatial ambiguity and flattened planes informed by European Modernism and the Machine Age. As Oles observed, Grace's *Men and Machines*, overtly mechanistic, drastically departed from Marion's rural celebration of local Tarascan men and women, and, significantly, replaced the lush, communal setting of her sister's mural with the harsh realities of capitalistic American factory life.⁷⁶ For her part, Marion wrote to Herbst that she thought her sister's sketches were "quite communistic in feeling, the workers mastering the machine instead of the machine mastering them as in the capitalistic countries."⁷⁷ While the sisters had different approaches to public art in both style and subject, their murals at the university in Morelia reveal their interest in the plight of the average worker, whether Mexican or American.

After their success in Morelia, the Greenwood sisters were each granted a coveted commission at the Mercado L. Rodríguez, a neocolonial styled public market in Mexico City's working-class Centro Histórico, envisioned as a public space completely decorated with murals. The Mercado was a vastly complex commission with various competing political agendas (originally called Mercado de Carmen, it was renamed in honor of President Abelardo L. Rodríguez).⁷⁸ The market's mural program, a group project and operation, was loosely supervised by Rivera, with additional participating artists including the American ex-pat O'Higgins (associated with the Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios [Revolutionary Writers and Artists League]), Isamu Noguchi, who created a sculpted wall in colored cement and brick dedicated to the "History of Mexico," and other Mexican artists, including Antonio Pujol, Angel Bracho, and Pedro Rendón.⁷⁹ Supported by the recommendation of O'Higgins, the Greenwood sisters designed murals for a sweeping two-story stairwell—a cycle, arranged on opposite stairways, that met in a shared central wall on a second floor—for which they portrayed an expansive narrative of class struggle through allegories of various types of industrial production in Mexico. Each sister was paid a direct stipend from the Mexican government for their work on the market, an historic achievement that echoes Robinson's statement in her letters about artists no longer "living on air." Grace completed a panel on the history of *Mining* (La Minería) (1935–36) on the first floor of the market, while Marion painted *The Industrialization of the Countryside* (La Industrialización del Campo) (1935; Pl. 4) on the second floor.⁸⁰ According to art historian MacKinley Helm's 1941 account, Grace's contribution of *Mining* featured the "flow of gold from mine to capitalistic coffers," while Marion's mural on industrialization portrayed "the progression from seed-



Fig. 12. Marion Greenwood painting *Blueprint for Living* at the Red Hook Housing Project, Brooklyn, NY (1939–40), photograph, 8" x 10". Federal Art Project, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

planting to kitchen."⁸¹ In a drawing study for *The Industrialization of the Countryside*, Marion drew on her earlier depictions of the Tarascan in Michoacán by again depicting figures harvesting produce, negotiating trade, and fishing (1934–35; Fig. 11). Prominently missing is the Communist sickle from her mural in Morelia, which reflected Marion's growing opinion that "hammers and sickles" had been "done to death."⁸² By focusing exclusively on the labor of these individuals, Marion was able to meet the communist aims of dignifying work without resorting to hackneyed symbolism. As Oles has noted, there are overall-clad figures featured prominently in both *Mining* and *The Industrialization of the Countryside*—a leitmotif that subtly references the Greenwoods' own public image as two radical American women who traveled to Mexico to paint murals.⁸³ Their contribution to the project at the Mercado was a huge success, with Rivera telling the *Washington Post* that they were "the greatest living women mural painters."⁸⁴

Paradoxically, considering their gender's historic exclusion from the work force, women artists of the 1930s typically featured the New Deal male laborer at the center of their public art projects. When Marion returned to New York City and began working for the NYC WPA, she designed a series of murals, now lost, for the Community Center of the Red Hook Housing Project in Brooklyn, from 1939 to 1940. The panels, titled *Blueprint for Living*, covered the interrelated subjects of "regional development" to provide a foundation for future generations, "housing construction" to enable families to look forward to a stronger community, and "the healthful environment of the planned community" to reference an idealized social order bolstered by better living conditions.⁸⁵ In 1979, the art historian Marlene Park wrote in her study on



Fig. 13. Marion Greenwood painting *Blueprint for Living* at the Red Hook Housing Project, Brooklyn, NY (1939–40), photograph, 8" x 10". Federal Art Project, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

New Deal Murals that the three panels making up *Blueprint for Living* depicted a "better future" through a social utopia where housing is a basic right.⁸⁶ Art historian Charlotte Rubinstein added, in 1982, that *Blueprint for Living* "expressed the optimism of the period—hope for a future when the people's need would be met through a harmoniously ordered society."⁸⁷ Perhaps because of their dynamic, celebratory nature, Helen A. Harrison and Karal Ann Marling refer to the Red Hook murals as Marion's "most optimistic statement on the potential of New Deal social reform."⁸⁸ With its positive message, *Blueprint for Living* may also have served as a homecoming of sorts for Marion, who was born in the Brooklyn borough and would have been personally invested in the urban community thriving.

Indeed, Marion's Red Hook murals were exquisite and compositionally sound frescoes. A surviving photograph of Marion at work, placing the charcoal outline for *Blueprint for Living* on the white plaster walls of the housing project (Fig. 12), demonstrates the depth of her training in Europe as an academic artist utilizing the grid and perspectival diagonals that date back to the Italian Renaissance. Another photograph depicts the theme of the "healthful planned community":

Marion, standing on scaffolding in a painter's smock and baggy pants, makes additions to the scene where a group of young people read and play music together (Fig. 13). In this particular scene, New Deal values are adapted to the cultural realm wherein such wholesome group activities fostered a sense of shared enjoyment by the community. An installation view features the theme of "communal building," in which a young family surveys the landscape, a construction crew laying bricks and sawing wooden beams for the foundation of a home (Fig. 14). For this symbolic construction and visualization of the American dream house, the rounded figures of the workers appear both strong and limber; their bodies are anatomically correct as well as abstracted. Marion was quoted that she understood "what projects such as [these] mean, the new avenues of education, progress, culture and happy living that they open to those whom life had dealt an unfortunate hand."⁸⁹ The themes of Marion's murals related to the purpose of the building in which they were installed, also often the case for the Mexican mural commissions that she had observed in public government and educational buildings down south. Significantly, Marion continued painting in the manner to which she had become accustomed in Mexico, with



Fig. 14. Marion Greenwood, "Community Building" from *Blueprint for Living* at the Red Hook Housing Project, Brooklyn, NY (1939–40), photograph, 8" x 10". Federal Art Project, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* noting that at the Red Hook Houses, she could be seen "clad in her working clothes, which consist of brown slacks, green anklets, a pair of old shoes and a paint-streaked smock whose original color is practically indistinguishable."⁹⁰

As a reflection of the compound's function, Marion intentionally chose the topics of communal housing, youth education, and environmental protection for her mural cycle at the Red Hook Housing Project, which was intended to provide low-income government residence to people in need. Such a purposeful, socially conscious approach to public art was certainly consistent with the projects she had completed in Mexico, where themes reflected society and the aims of socialism. Portraying idealized working conditions for the laborers building American society, Marion was also expressing her ideas on social reform influenced by Communism. As Karl Marx theorized, housing is one of mankind's basic needs and its accessibility is inextricably tied to "the conditions under which ... the class of free laborers has been formed."⁹¹ Accordingly, the success of public works projects relied heavily upon the success of the working and building class. Mexican muralism was founded on similar principles: each artist, treated as a laborer, was paid a living wage by the government. Moreover, the influence of Rivera is clear in Marion's *Blueprint for Living*—the thick black outline and rounded, muscular forms of the workers recall the Social Realist style that Rivera used throughout his public murals in Mexico. As Greta Berman reflected in 1975 on Greenwood's Red Hook murals, the artist "used Mexican type figures possessing simplified

anatomy with muscular, statuesque frames, but [with] North American facial characteristics and clothing."⁹²

In New York City, Marion had evolved technically from the style she had used in *Morelia* towards that displayed by her sister, Grace, in *Men and Machines*. In the fresco *Construction Worker* (1940; Pl. 5), a preparatory study on board for a figure in the "community building" panel in *Blueprint for Living*, Marion depicted a laborer with short hair wearing a utility cap and a "communist" red-colored shirt with hands grasped around a lever.⁹³ Similar to Grace's visualization of male labor in *Men and Machines*, Marion's *Construction Worker* conflated the laborer with his or her task by cropping the image to emphasize the pained expression of hard work. *Construction Worker* is also painted in the same color palette as the Greenwood sisters' murals in the Mercado Abelardo L. Rodríguez, emphasizing bright blues, ruddy reds and earthy oranges, all traced in a thick black outline. Curiously, Marion's study of a construction worker appears androgynous despite the traditional masculine 'signals' of a pronounced jawline and large muscles. Building upon the sisters' use of overall-clad workers to subtly reference their own reputations in their Mexico City murals at the Mercado, Marion may have intended *Construction Worker* as a universal or open-ended statement—a depiction of every laborer, not just the typical male worker. Furthermore, *Construction Worker* may be understood as a symbolic portrait of the labor required to perform as a public muralist, as well as the propensity of New Deal artists to align themselves with the average worker during this period. For these women artists who journeyed to Mexico, the figure of the androgynous laborer represented

universal struggles at a time when unemployment and poverty were at record highs. Even Robinson was taken with this theme; upon seeing Rivera's murals in the "Court of Labor" at the Ministry of Education, she wrote that they left her with "true feeling," especially the one "showing the embrace of two miners."⁹⁴

The woman artist of the New Deal, wearing overalls and climbing scaffolding to paint mural frescoes, aligned herself with the idealized, Marxist laborer championed by contemporary progressives. By defying gender expectations, to travel abroad and paint on a monumental scale, early twentieth-century modern women artists performed "unprecedented feats of a 'masculine' character" as part of "the new exploits of women achievers."⁹⁵ Many intentionally dressed in a more boyish style to attract less attention on their foreign trips.⁹⁶ Despite these subversions, women artists operated within the patriarchy by choosing (intentionally or not) to associate themselves with the most famous male Mexican artist at the time, Rivera, as well as by competing with their male peers for 'authentic' reputations by traveling to Mexico in the first place. Ultimately, it was professionally impossible for many of these women artists to fully separate from the muralists, an association they had so desired at an earlier stage for their artistic training, evolution, and patronage. As their public alliance with Mexican art solidified, they developed from copying their mentors towards transforming the expectations for women artists of the 1930s. By dressing the part and introducing new approaches to depicting both labor and American values, the women artists of the New Deal answered the "Walls Call" proclaimed by the *New York Times* with an assertively gendered retort that ultimately guided the future of public art.

The progressive women artists of the NYC WPA were undeniably affected by their travels through Mexico and the example of the Mexican muralists. Moreover, the federally funded murals completed by these women reveal a depth of process tied to their desire to make meaningful art. For Ione Robinson, Lucienne Bloch, and Marion and Grace Greenwood, their persistent interest in public murals and their use of a socially engaged style stemmed directly from their initial exposure to the post-revolutionary art developed in Mexico. As Robinson wrote in 1929, it was the Mexican artists (rather than the Europeans) who invigorated these women because "they are serious and have a purpose in what they do."⁹⁷ Travel to Mexico provided a chance to learn about radical political ideologies, new forms of Social Realism and activism, as well as the avant-garde materials and styles of muralism and lithography. Thereafter, the New Deal murals they produced were informed by an increasingly open-minded and international approach to art as well as by their transnational passion for Indigenous cultures and divergent socio-economic backgrounds. The women artists who answered the "Walls Call" embodied and adapted the persona of the androgynous 'laborer' to their own public images, challenging contemporary notions of what women can accomplish in a manner not seen again until the 1950s and 1960s. •

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Notes

1. The vaccination was likely for tuberculosis, small pox, diphtheria, or tetanus. Robinson writes in her letters from Mexico City—dated June 17, 1929—that it was required for her to enter Mexico. Ione Robinson, *A Wall to Paint On* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1946), 81.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid. José Vasconcelos, the Minister of Public Education, was an integral figure in the establishment of the public mural programs in Mexico after the Revolution of 1910–20. Vasconcelos famously secured the commission of the mural *Creación* (Creation) (1922) for Diego Rivera at the San Ildefonso College in Mexico City, when the artist had returned from Europe in 1922.
4. Ibid., 87. Letter dated June 30, 1929, Mexico City.
5. Ibid., 90. Letter dated July 2, 1929, Mexico City.
6. Joseph Freeman supported Rivera's infamous expulsion from the Mexican Communist Party in September 1929, and also attacked the artist for his shrewd, capitalistic pursuit of commissions, in an article published under the name Robert Evans, titled "Painting and Politics, The Case of Diego Rivera," *New Masses* 7, no. 9 (Feb. 1932): 22–25. Later that month, when Robinson went to Rivera's home to pose nude for one of his upcoming murals at the new Health Department, Freeman showed up armed and demanded that she leave. Robinson, *A Wall to Paint On*, 112.
7. Ibid., 197–200.
8. Ibid., 88, 97.
9. Ibid., 102.
10. Ibid., 88, 102.
11. Ibid., 99–101. Letter dated July 30, 1929, Mexico City.
12. Ibid. The murals at the National Preparatory School were controversial due to the artists' association with the Mexican Communist Party (PCM). The schoolchildren of the elite members of Mexico's society even vandalized Siqueiros's mural, *El espíritu de Occidente* (The Spirit of the West), which led him to abandon the project permanently. Jennifer Jolly, "Siqueiros' Communist Proposition for Mexican Muralism: A Mural for the Mexican Electricians' Syndicate," in *Mexican Muralism: A Critical History*, ed. Alejandro Anreus, Robin Adele Greeley, and Leonard Folgarait (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2012), 76.
13. Originally owned by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, this portrait of Robinson by Siqueiros was auctioned at Sotheby's in 1991, and most recently appeared in a tweet on Dec. 7, 2017, by the Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City. The portrait was likely painted when Robinson visited Siqueiros in Taxco, Mexico, either in Dec., 1931 or Jan., 1932. Robinson, *A Wall to Paint On*, 195.
14. David Alfaro Siqueiros and Lorna Scott Fox, *Portrait of a Decade, 1930–1940* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1997), 42.
15. Ibid.
16. Robinson, *A Wall to Paint On*, 99.
17. Ibid., 257. Non-relief workers were hired on WPA Art Projects to establish "appropriate supervision for large mural, sculpture, and other important projects," as well as "to enable us to employ needy artists of known caliber to give leadership and to provide goals for others." Francis V. O'Connor, "The New Deal Art Projects in New York," *American Art Journal* 1, no. 2 (1969): 57.

18. Robinson, *A Wall to Paint On*, 254. Letter dated June 1, 1936, 40 Bank Street, NY.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid. By the time Robinson planned this mural in 1936, several New Deal artists had already begun employing this theme to represent American exceptionalism in their public art projects. These examples include: *How Manifold Are Thy Works, The Earth is Full of Thy Riches* (1934), at Hood River Middle School in Hood River, OR; *Artichoke Pickers* (1936–1937) by Henrietta Shore (1880–1963) in the Old Customs House in Monterey, CA; and *California Agriculture* (1933) by Maxine Albro (1893–1966) at Coit Tower in San Francisco, CA. See Margaret E. Bullock, *New Deal Art in the Northwest: The WPA and Beyond* (Tacoma, WA: Tacoma Art Museum, 2020), 51.
21. "Walls Call: Time for Mural Art to Develop Here," *New York Times*, Nov. 23, 1930, 120.
22. Ibid. Ashcan artist John Sloan is quoted in the article as saying that mural painting is "an expression of the general interest of the people in art" and has "elements of hope for the future."
23. The Federal Art Project (inaugurated in New York City in 1935 as part of the Federal Project Number One program) was the major arts related organization of the Works Progress Administration. Other major organizations funding art projects included The Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP) and the Public Art Works Project (PWAP). See Emily Genauer, Norman Barr, and Greta Berman, *New York City WPA Art*, exh. cat. (New York: Parsons School of Design and NYC WPA Artists Inc., 1977).
24. Katherine Blanck, "Muralist Enjoys Her Work at Red Hook Development," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 14, 1940, 10.
25. Throughout the early modern period into the twentieth century, male artists embarked on "The Grand Tour" attending classical art centers in Rome, Venice, Florence, Paris, Calais, Brussels, Basel, and elsewhere. This tradition almost unilaterally excluded women and, as it was considered integral to a proper humanities education, served to hinder their careers. It was therefore considered exceptional when women defied expectations and traveled far distances.
26. Laura R. Prieto, *At Home in the Studio: The Professionalization of Women Artists in America* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2001), 46.
27. James Oles, *South of the Border: Mexico in the American Imagination, 1914–1947* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1994), 3; and Oles, *Walls to Paint On: American Muralists in Mexico, 1933–1936* (Ph.D. diss., Yale Univ., 1995).
28. Oles, *South of the Border*, 3.
29. Robinson, *A Wall to Paint On*, 97. Letter dated July 20, 1929, Mexico City.
30. Hayden Herrera, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo* (New York: Harper Collins, 1983), 130.
31. Ibid.
32. Helen A. Harrison and Karal Ann Marling, *7 American Women: The Depression Decade* (Poughkeepsie, NY: Vassar College Art Gallery, 1976), 21–24.
33. Lucienne Bloch, "On Location with Diego Rivera," *Art in America* 74 (Feb. 1986): 102–23.
34. Herrera, *Frida*, 164.
35. Alan Balfour, *Rockefeller Center, Architecture as Theater* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1978), 185.
36. Robert Mcg. Thomas, Jr., "Lucienne Bloch, Muralist, Is Dead," *New York Times*, March 28, 1999, sec. 1, 51.
37. Herrera, *Frida*, 132, 163.
38. Ibid., 155.
39. Ibid., 156.
40. Ibid.
41. Anita Brenner, "Muralist Lucienne Bloch—Product of the WPA," *Brooklyn Eagle*, Feb. 2, 1936, 12–13C.
42. Ibid.
43. Lucienne Bloch Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, digital ID 1979.
44. Lucienne Bloch, "Murals for Use," in *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project*, ed. Francis V. O'Connor (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1973), 76–77.
45. Michele Vishny, "Lucienne Bloch: The New York City murals," *Woman's Art Journal* 13, no. 1 (Spring–Summer 1992): 23–28.
46. Bloch, "Murals for Use," 76.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid.
49. "We Nominate for the Hall of Fame," *Vanity Fair*, Jan. 1936, 35.
50. "Jail Job," *Time* 26 (Oct. 21, 1935), 28, 30. The description in *Time* was tinged with sexism; the author wrote: "Down on Sixth & Greenwich Avenues, Manhattan, there was great excitement in the women's jail last week. On the recreation roof of the House of Detention for Women, one of the best known model prisons in the U.S., a great fresco panel, first of a series depicting The Cycle of a Woman's Life was just finished."
51. Ibid.
52. Vishny, "Lucienne Bloch: The New York City Murals," 25.
53. Brenner, "Muralist Lucienne Bloch," 12–13C.
54. Ibid.
55. Bloch, "Murals for Use," 76.
56. In J. Howard Miller's 1942 poster of Rosie the Riveter, based on aircraft plant worker Rose Monroe from Ypsilanti, MI, a woman is shown wearing blue overalls and a red bandana while flexing her right bicep. The caption reads, "We Can Do It!" See Robert J. Sickels, *The 1940s* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004), 49.
57. "Womanalls" were featured in an edition of *Woman Citizen* magazine in June 1917. Margaret Mary Finnegan, *Selling Suffrage: Consumer Culture & Votes for Women* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1999), 97.
58. Ibid., 95.
59. Ellen Wiley Todd, *The "New Woman" Revised: Painting and Gender Politics on Fourteenth Street* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1993), 146–47.
60. Harrison and Marling, *7 American Women*, 28–30. Significantly, Grace Greenwood admired the indignant nature of her notorious predecessor, sculptor Harriet Hosmer (1830–1908), who "cultivated the persona of the "'child-woman,'" or as Grace later described it, a "boy-woman." Prieto, *At Home in the Studio*, 51.
61. Ibid. See also James Oles, "The Mexican Murals of Marion and Grace Greenwood," in *Out of Context: American Artists Abroad*, ed. Laura Felleman Fattal and Carol Salus (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), 115.
62. Cited in Oles, "The Mexican Murals of Marion and Grace Greenwood," 115–16.
63. Ibid. During this period, Marion rented the house of Moises Saenz, an education advocate and reformer who also served as the Sub-Secretary of Public Education in the 1920s. Helen Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican: Cultural Relations Between the United States and Mexico, 1920–1935* (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press), 1995, 160.
64. Josephine Herbst, "Marion Greenwood," *Mexican Life* 9, no. 7 (July 1933): 19. Cited in Oles, "The Mexican Murals of Marion and Grace Greenwood," 116. The North American painter Ryah Ludins (1898–

- 1957) was also commissioned to paint murals at the Museo Regional Michoacano in Morelia; see "Pinturas murales en el Museo Michoacano," *Revista de revistas* (Mexico City) 25, no. 1335 (Dec. 1935): n.p., <https://icaa.mfah.org/s/en/item/749070#>, accessed Aug. 15, 2022.
65. This quote was first cited in Charlotte Streifer Rubinstein, *American Women Artists* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982), 217 and n. 9. Siqueiros's "phrase" may have been intended pejoratively, as Greenwood and he fought openly in the pages of *New Masses*, in summer 1935. In defense of her teacher, Rivera, Greenwood accused Siqueiros of not practicing what he preached. Oles, "The Mexican Murals of Marion and Grace Greenwood," 122.
 66. Esther Acevedo, "Young Muralists at the Abelardo L. Rodríguez Market," in *Mexican Muralism: A Critical History*, ed. Alejandro Anreus, Robin Adele Greeley, and Leonard Folgarait (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2012), 145.
 67. Oral history interview with Marion Greenwood by Dorothy Seckler, Woodstock, New York, Jan. 31, 1964, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, available at <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-marion-greenwood-11871>, accessed Aug. 15, 2022.
 68. Robinson, *A Wall to Paint On*, 186. Letter dated Sept. 28, 1931, Pátzcuaro, Michoacán. Greenwood's mural was visited and admired by state officials, including General Benigno Serrato, in the company of the university rector, Gustavo Corona; El Corresponsal (*Correspondent*), "Marion Greenwood terminó su obra mural en Morelia: La mencionada artista norteamericana ejecutó admirables frescos en el antiguo Colegio de San Nicolás de Morelia" (Marion Greenwood finished her mural work in Morelia: The aforementioned North American artist executed admirable frescoes in the old Colegio de San Nicolás de Morelia), *El Nacional: Diario popular* (Mexico City), Feb. 7, 1934, 5, <https://icaa.mfah.org/s/en/item/749027#?c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-1038%2C141%2C4549%2C2546>, accessed August 15, 2022.
 69. As Oles writes, Greenwood's "emphasis on traditional costumes and her elimination of any signs of modernization configured Mexico as timeless, devoid as a postcard of any evidence of political or social progress." Oles, "The Mexican Murals of Marion and Grace Greenwood," 116.
 70. Marion Greenwood to Josephine Herbst, June 22, 1933, Josephine Herbst Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale Univ. Cited in Oles, "The Mexican Murals of Marion and Grace Greenwood," 117–18.
 71. Ibid.
 72. "Women in the Communist Party faced consistent sexism from their male colleagues, which led to under-utilization of their talents." In Susan Ware, *Holding their Own: American Women in the 1930s* (Woodbridge, CT: Twayne Pub., 1982), 133.
 73. James Oles, *Las Hermanas Greenwood en Mexico* (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 2000), 19.
 74. Oles, "The Mexican Murals of Marion and Grace Greenwood," 119.
 75. Ibid., 120. Oles writes that the commission was partially due to O'Higgins lobbying Corona on behalf of Grace.
 76. Ibid.
 77. Marion Greenwood to Josephine Herbst, Nov. 3, 1933, Josephine Herbst Papers. Cited in Oles, "The Mexican Murals of Marion and Grace Greenwood," 120.
 78. Oles, "The Mexican Murals of Marion and Grace Greenwood," 121.
 79. Acevedo, "Young Muralists at the Abelardo L. Rodríguez Market," 125–42. Barbara Haskell, *Vida Americana: Mexican Muralists Remake American Art, 1925-1945* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2020), 32–33.
 80. Ibid., 121–24.
 81. MacKinley Helm, *Modern Mexican Painters* (New York: Dover, 1941), 101.
 82. Cited in Oles, "The Mexican Murals of Marion and Grace Greenwood," 117–18.
 83. Ibid., 127.
 84. "Marion Greenwood Applauded for Steady Rise to Mural Fame," *Washington Post*, April 12, 1936.
 85. The mural has been painted over; the only surviving records of the design are from photographs in the Marion Greenwood Archives at the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, in Washington, D.C.
 86. Marlene Park, "City and Country in the 1930s: A Study of New Deal Murals in New York," *Art Journal* 39, no. 1 (Autumn 1979): 38.
 87. Rubinstein, *American Women Artists*, 219.
 88. Harrison and Marling, *7 American Women*, 29.
 89. Blanck, "Muralist Enjoys Her Work at Red Hook Development," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 10.
 90. Ibid.
 91. Karl Marx, "Capital I (1867)," in *Karl Marx: A Reader*, ed. Jon Elster (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986), 141.
 92. Greta Berman, "The Lost Years: Mural Painting in New York City Under the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project, 1935–1943," (Ph.D. diss., Columbia Univ., 1975), 75.
 93. Barbara Haskell, *Vida Americana: Mexican Muralists Remake American Art, 1925-1945*, 104.
 94. Robinson, *A Wall to Paint On*, 101. Letter dated July 20, 1929, Mexico City.
 95. Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (Binghamton, NY: Vail-Ballou Press, 1987), 215.
 96. The artist Doris Rosenthal (1889–1971) proudly told *Life* in 1943 that during her travels to Mexico she wore dungarees, rode on horseback, traveled by train second class, and carried a gun wherever she went. "Doris Rosenthal: Schoolteacher Paints Lovable Pictures of Mexicans," *Life* 15 (Nov 22, 1943), 64.
 97. Robinson, *A Wall to Paint On*, 99. Letter dated July 30, 1929, Mexico City.

THRESHOLDS OF MODERNISM

ALICE TRUMBULL MASON'S *SHUTTER* PAINTINGS

By Barbara Stehle

Alice Trumbull Mason (1904–1971) lived and worked in New York City for most of her life. Mason pursued abstraction from 1929 until her death in 1971 (Fig. 1). She worked hard and humbly. Despite the limited recognition her name has today, during her lifetime she was known by, and knew almost everybody, on the New York art scene. Mason's trajectory is typical of a woman artist of her generation: she fought for the visibility of American abstractionists but gained little prestige for herself. It did not slow her down or dull her sharp brush; she kept going. Eventually, she knew that she would achieve renown. This article chronicles her path and eventual notice and standing in the 1960s by a very young art dealer who, like her, was a poet in his soul—Dick Bellamy.

Mason's creativity came as no surprise: she was a descendant of John Trumbull, the eighteenth-century American portrait and Revolutionary history painter. In the family, an artistic fiber was also attached to the feminine. Mason's mother, Anne Leavenworth Train Trumbull, had trained at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1885.¹ Mason and her sister, Margaret Trumbull Jennings, would take their art studies very seriously.² Their mother saw with pride her children's desire to paint. Mason herself will pass it on to her own daughter, painter Emily Mason (1932–2019).

Mason had the privilege to travel while young all over the world: Europe, the Caribbean, Asia, and the Middle East. She gained an incredible visual culture from these residencies and tours, and it is abroad that she first started studying painting. From 1921 to 1922, she enrolled at the British Academy of Arts in Rome. Her time spent in Italy and Greece left her with a deep admiration for the Italian primitives, Byzantine mosaics, and Archaic Greek art. Mason's preference for Cycladic art over the Classical period, for Cimabue over Raphael, points to a taste for simplified form over intricate realism. Amy Horschak notes, rightfully, that "Despite her traditional training, Mason responded to what she believed were the possibilities of abstraction."³

For Mason creation was invention. Her passion for both poetry and the visual arts express a desire to author a specific language. She was passionate about experimentation. As a poet she played with words, privileging sound over meaning.



Fig. 1. Alice Trumbull Mason in front of her painting *Bearings Charted with Yellow* (September 1946). Photo: Charles Horowitz. Courtesy of the Archives of American Art.

In painting, she saw abstraction as a field she could explore with the same freedom as her poetry. Abstraction was then newly practiced in America and its vocabulary was full of possibilities. "Today a sense of wonder is alive again," Mason

declared in a speech to young art students. "The abstract painter finds it, essentially in his materials, and deals in the magic of textures, colors juxtaposed to force intensities.... Wonder is in the work again as it was in primitive works of art."⁴ Abstraction was an exciting field of investigations for Mason. Like an explorer, she was determined to push into new territories. Her daughter, Emily, had a vivid image of her mother as a fierce, self-reliant being. Mason was a maker of things, mixing her own pigments, fabricating her own paint, often stretching her own canvas.⁵ Mason never asked herself what a woman could or could not do. She was daring and independent. Yet she understood the important role community played and the support an artist needed to make it into the world.

At once bold and polite, the artist would easily reach out to figures with whom she felt a kinship. In 1931, she initiated correspondence with Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, and an answer arrived.⁶ Their exchange of letters carried on until 1934, and the conversation always focused on the arts. Among the sheets of Mason's poetry is one bearing the title "Dated 1930," showing the note, "Gertrude Stein gave me a hand on this poem," which starts:

which which or red much puff you please to thorn
in nickel is soon⁷

By the mid-1930s, Mason was part of a wide artistic circle—they met, talked, and wrote each other frequently. She socialized with the Abstract Expressionists and Black Mountain College crew. Back then, New York was small when it came to abstractionists, and everybody intermingled. Mason saw Ad Reinhardt regularly, as they were involved together with the American Abstract Artists (AAA) group. Elaine de Kooning (1918–1989) babysat her daughter on more than one occasion; she was familiar with Lee Krasner (1908–1984), Jackson Pollock, and Willem de Kooning. This is how Mason remembers it: "I mean, all around the village you'd see these people, say hello to them, and meet them in coffee shops and so forth."⁸

Mason was closest with Ibram Lassaw, a sculptor and future co-founder of American Abstract Artists, as well as Esphyr Slobodkina (1908–2002) and her husband Ilya Bolotowsky, who taught at Black Mountain. Mason had met Bolotowsky in 1927 at the National Academy of Design in New York, and they became close friends. Bolotowsky and Mason's work evolved similarly from a biomorphic aesthetic to non-objective abstraction. Mason was also in regular contact with Josef and Anni Albers (1889–1994) and Piet Mondrian after their arrival on US soil. She had great respect for these artists. Their theoretical writings and thoughts on color, structure, and all matters of art deeply influenced her thinking. She found their dedication to abstraction an example to follow.

In 1936, Mason became one of the founding members of American Abstract Artists. Faced with minimal representation of and antagonism toward abstraction in the US, Mason and her colleagues organized and demanded visibility for generations of abstractionists. Fully committed to the cause,

Mason became one of America's greatest promoters of abstraction. Reinhardt famously remarked at "The Club," the so-called headquarters of the Abstract Expressionists at 39 East Eighth Street created in 1949: "Were it not for Alice Trumbull Mason, we would not be here nor in such strength."⁹ Reinhardt was recognizing the endeavors of a great woman, an even more symbolic gesture at The Club, which had not admitted women amongst its ranks originally.

To the contrary, American Abstract Artists welcomed women artists and was actively pushed forward by a number of female members. Indeed, amongst its thirty-nine founding members, nine were women.¹⁰ This was highly unusual for the time and broke from the traditional format. Mason was dedicated to AAA, deeply believed in its actions and the advancement of abstraction, and invested much time and energy into the association: she was treasurer (1939) and secretary (1940–1945). Charmion von Wiegand (1886–1983) became the first woman president in 1951.¹¹ Mason followed in 1959, stepping down only in 1963.¹² Mason wrote, published, demonstrated, gathered, and rallied others to the cause. In short, she became an activist for abstraction; she even picketed in front of the Museum of Modern Art on several occasions, to protest the exclusion of American Abstract Artist members from exhibitions—first during *Cubism and Abstract Art* (1936), then *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* (1936–37) and *Art In Our Time* (an exhibition to celebrate the tenth anniversary of MoMA), all under the direction of the museum's founding director, Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Three decades later, Mason recalled excitedly to Ruth Gurin: "Oh!! Was this ever fun, we picketed the Museum of Modern Art!.... When we first began forming the American Abstract Artists we said, 'What is the Museum of Modern Art anyway if it isn't for abstract artists? And we picketed them!'"¹³ Mason showed every year with AAA and remained a lifelong member. She had fewer opportunities to show with institutions and galleries. Alice Adams remembered meeting Mason and von Wiegand at AAA: "These women and all the members of the group seemed genuinely interested in one another's life and work. To me, it was different from the competitiveness of the 'art world.'"¹⁴ Yet, the association was not able to facilitate women's presence (especially for mothers) beyond its own walls.

Mason confided in her daughter, Emily, that she "felt left out of the success her male peers received because she was a woman.... Her [Alice's] experience with commercial galleries was not sanguine, and she was quite aware that it was the men of the American Abstract Artists who got to show in those very galleries."¹⁵ Remembering Mason, Lassaw suggested that "under the double standard galleries were reluctant to offer women solo shows due to the unfounded fear that their love and/or family responsibilities would prevent total dedication."¹⁶ Mason had two children, and group shows were what she was offered but for a few exceptions. Yet nothing softened her focus and drive to create, for she knew: "I'll be famous when I'm dead."¹⁷

Mason did not become a celebrity during her lifetime, but it is noteworthy that a number of influential women took interest in her work. Hilla Rebay, the Solomon R. Guggenheim



Fig. 2. Alice Trumbull Mason, *Emergent Form* (1945), oil on board, mounted on wooden strainer, 28" x 23". The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY; Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection (45.996). © 2022 Emily Mason | Alice Trumbull Mason Foundation/ARS.



Fig. 3. Alice Trumbull Mason and artist Ibram Lassaw at a party, early 1940s. © 2022 Emily Mason | Alice Trumbull Mason Foundation/ARS.

Museum's first director (then The Museum of Non-Objective Painting), acquired two of her paintings for its collection: *Emergent Form* (1945; Fig. 2 and Pl. 6) and *Classic Noctuber* (1947). On several occasions, Peggy Guggenheim showed Mason at her Art of This Century gallery (opened in 1942). In May 1943, Mason wrote to Lassaw (Fig. 3) about a juried group show held there: "I saw Peggy's show this afternoon. It is not bad, but heavily surrealistic. Included are you, Reinhardt, [Irene Rice] Pereira [1902–1971], Geist, Slobodkina, Bolotowsky, me!"¹⁸ Mason was excluded from Guggenheim's *Exhibition by 31 Women* (1943), organized with Max Ernst, Duchamp, and others; the Surrealist diaspora had dominated the selection again, and Mason's geometrical abstraction did not fit in the mold.¹⁹

Mason's association in 1945 with the groundbreaking printmaking studio Atelier 17, established by Stanley William Hayter in Paris and then New York City at 41 East Eighth Street, brought her to the attention of Una Johnson, the perspicacious and influential curator of prints and drawings at the Brooklyn Museum. Johnson admired Mason's innovative techniques in etching, lithographs, and woodcuts, and often recommended, exhibited, and purchased Mason's work.²⁰ The artist became quite renown as a printmaker, and her work entered many prestigious American museum collections.²¹

The artist's engagement with the politics of the art scene made her an ever-aware observer, analyzing the scene, looking for the next abstractionists. Mason's relation to several Black Mountain College professors made her a point of contact for the students who moved to New York. Her wonderful wit and great humor, as well as her desire to push for progress, brought the youth to her. Ray Johnson became a dear friend and AAA participant. He was for a time her fun studio neighbor and often came to her house in the company of Richard Lippold. It is probably via Johnson that Mason knew John Cage and Merce Cunningham's work and became friends with them.²²

Mason was at a prime place to witness the impact of European émigrés and the emergence of groundbreaking American art. She belonged with all her heart to the modernist tradition, but from where she stood, she clearly perceived the rising force of Conceptual and Minimal art that was going to take art beyond geometric abstraction. Her belief in experimentation led her to understand and accept more quickly than most the transformation of the arts. She had herself announced a number of these evolutions.

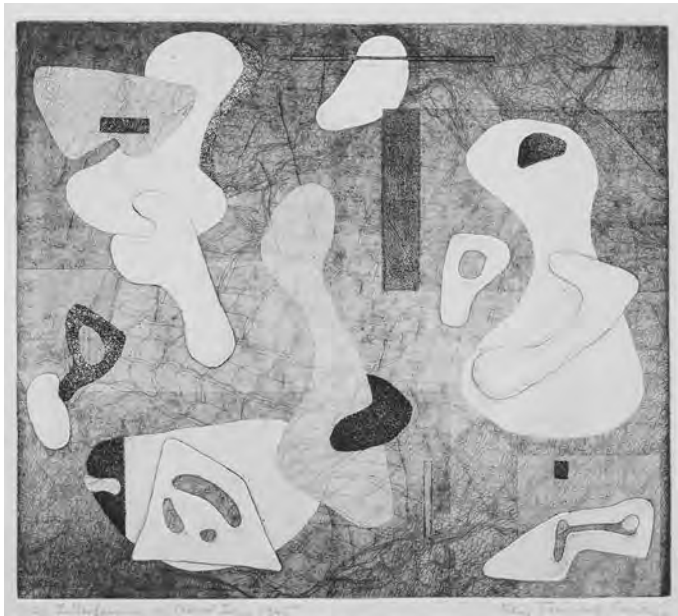


Fig. 4. Alice Trumbull Mason, *Interference of Closed Forms* (1945) (edition 11 of 20), soft ground etching and aquatint, 11 1/4" x 13 1/4". Private Collection. Photo: Gavin Ashworth. Courtesy of Washburn Gallery. © 2022 Emily Mason | Alice Trumbull Mason Foundation/ARS.

Mason's style evolved through the decades, each period introducing new propositions and contributing to her personal vocabulary. In 1928, after a summer at MacDowell, Mason returned to the city and enrolled at Grand Central School of Art, where Arshile Gorky was teaching the required life and antique art classes.²³ As an instructor for these academic exercises, Gorky was somewhat of a strange fit; it is thus not surprising that Mason got a taste for abstraction by taking his classes in front of a model. Mason remembered vividly: "He [Gorky] really opened my eyes to abstract painting but he himself wasn't strongly abstract at that time."²⁴ Gorky's art was then intensely involved with Paul Cézanne, and in the next year, Mason's art was, too. Her catalogue raisonné is still incomplete, as many of her early works from the 1930s have not yet been located, and dating periods and identifying stylistic shifts are still tentative. However, as Mason herself stated, her body of work shows two tendencies: biomorphic and geometric, the latter called "architectural." "The theory is that the biomorphic are more or less physical, and the straight lines more or less architectural," Mason summarized.²⁵ While biomorphism arrived early, it never completely disappeared, and was at times combined with the geometric. The artist did not present any rigidity in her practice.

Mason digested the formal vocabulary of late Cubism and Surrealism, including a phase between 1930 and 1931 where Kandinsky is very present. But she frees herself from his influence by 1934, producing works evoking a certain fluidity of space with cut-out curvilinear forms. They often have an imaginary still life or landscape sensibility, with funny body, plant, and animal parts, or objects traveling through colorful

space. *Free White Spacing* (1939; Pl. 7), presents forms deliciously alive and spirited. All the elements engage in a dynamic conversation animating the pictorial space. Mason was not interested in psychic content, deregulation of the senses, or automatism. In her essay "Concerning Plastic Significance," published in the *American Abstract Artists 1938* yearbook, Mason explained:

During the past two centuries the pleasure in actual materials, paint, stone and so forth was forgone for skill in copying, and a sense of adventure in the use of mediums is completely lacking in the work of the majority of artists of that period. Today a sense of wonder is alive again. The abstract painter finds it, essentially, in his materials, and deals in the magic of textures, colours juxtaposed to force intensities which thus show movement.... The abstract painter builds his canvas without representation or perspective in relation to the fullest use of the elements of paint that have appeared from time to time throughout the history of art.... We look for nothing mystical or dreamlike but the magic of the work itself. Abstract art demands awareness of the intrinsic use of materials and a fuller employment of these means which build a new imaginative world by using them for their own potential worth.²⁶

Mason carefully planned her compositions with preparatory drawings, studying the interactions of forms. Joan Miró had a similar process, even in the early days of Surrealism. Both artists were so experimentally inclined and yet so reflective about the organization of space. The kinship between Mason and the Spanish artist is an interesting thread in her career: Mason probably saw the Joan Miró retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, curated by James Johnson Sweeney in 1941, and Miró's evolution from figuration to an adventurous abstraction must have resonated with her. Mason later met him when he visited New York for the first time in 1947. Miró was commissioned to paint a mural for the Terrace Plaza Hotel in Cincinnati, Ohio, however he painted it in New York City, reconnecting with his longtime friend Hayter. Miró needed a studio, and a number of Atelier 17 students, including Mason, became his neighbors in East Harlem on 119th Street and Lexington Avenue, witnessing his working process, both in paint and in print.²⁷ Mason's etching *Interference of Closed Forms* (Fig. 4) shows a deep understanding of Miró before ever meeting him. Observing the artist work must have only confirmed what she knew. Her print reinterprets with inventive ease Miró's whims with her own textual experimentations.

One of Mason's particularities was to often paint or draw by rotating the work on each of its sides in the process. This interesting technique would allow her to make sure it was fully balanced.²⁸ She called it the principle of "four-way balance." If pleased, she would sign the work in two different places, indicating that it could be viewed vertically or horizontally. Painters have been known to turn paintings upside down during the process, to test the balance of the

composition. Abstract Expressionists, Jackson Pollock in particular, were known to paint on the floor moving around the work, not choosing the final orientation until later. But no painter, arguably, has initiated this perspective, as Mason did, to give several possible viewing orientations of the same work. As Aliza Edelman notes: “Her desire to mask her original contributions to geometric abstraction—stating in a questionnaire that there are no “qualities or advantages” in my work which are particularly “mine”—are subversively, and perhaps inadvertently, exposed through her ability to encourage shifting views and variable order in her paintings.”²⁹ Mason defined her personal inclination toward an “architectural abstract art” as a choice to “make painting a positive architectural construction. Architectural is a fitting word for this work. It is building and not destroying. It is making color, density, dark and light, rhythm and balance work together without depending on references and associations. This is my concept of Architectural Abstract Art.”³⁰ Mason credits Mondrian for her shift to “straight edged forms.”³¹ He had written about his desire to produce compositions with “dynamic movement in equilibrium,” but never used the term architecture for his abstraction. Yet, Mondrian wished to extend the compositional principals of his pictures into real space and understood painting as preparation for “future architecture.”³² His arrival in New York in 1940 confirmed his intuition, reflected in his seminal painting *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942–43).

In 1940, Mason met Mondrian, who joined the ranks of AAA and became an admired friend. His impact on her art was about the structure and architecture of painting, but she never could embrace the Neo-plastic aesthetic; her spirit needed experimentation, any dogma was too rigid. Mondrian resided in Mason’s own art collection, albeit it was a Mondrian that she had, in fact, made for herself. On the back of *After Mondrian* (c. 1951; Fig. 5), Mason noted in pencil: “I measured the work in a gallery and painted from memory. I believe the original is in Switzerland. Mondrian 19.” Her painting is a slightly enlarged replica of his *Composition B; Composition with Double Line and Yellow and Gray* (1932). The painting was held from 1932 to 1965 in a private collection in Basel.³³ Emily Mason remembered that her mother had seen the painting at the Sidney Janis Gallery. No record of the work traveling to the US before 1971 exists; however, there was a Mondrian exhibition at the Sidney Janis Gallery in 1951.³⁴ The copy executed by Mason is incredibly accurate, even in terms of colors. The artist had the work imprinted in her memory. Her version exudes a bright light, perfect balance, and peaceful feeling. It is a hard edge, architectural icon representing Mason’s admiration for the Dutch master.

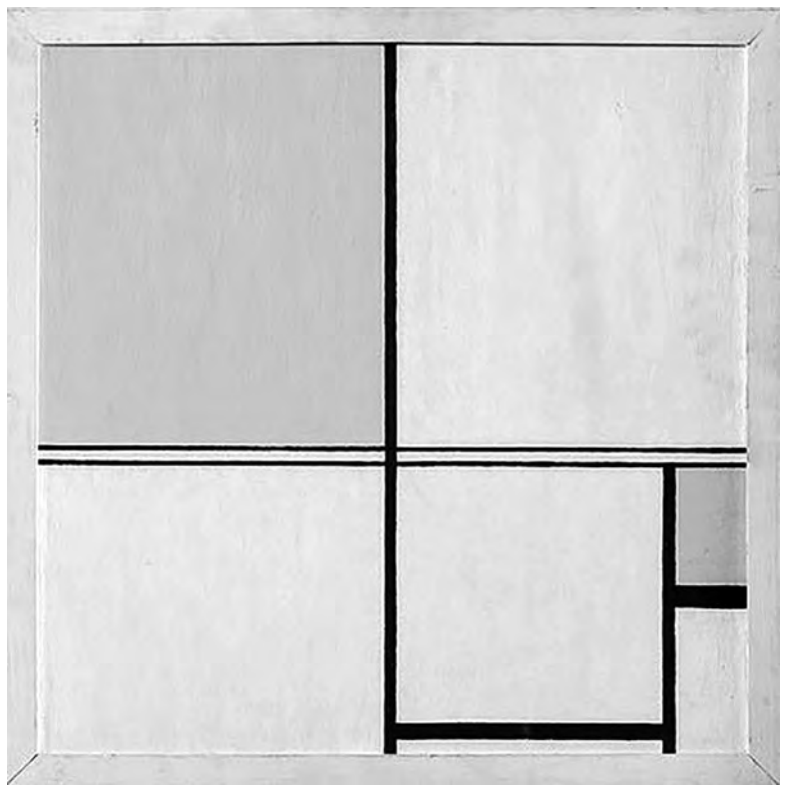


Fig. 5. Alice Trumbull Mason, *After Mondrian* (c. 1951), oil on masonite, 21 5/8" x 21 5/8". © 2022 Emily Mason | Alice Trumbull Mason Foundation/ARS.

The artist loved the artist and the man: “Mondrian was the dearest, kindest, most wonderful person you ever saw in your life.... He came to our meeting and he wrote for us and he was deeply interested in the work we were doing.”³⁵ Her daughter, Emily, remembered the special consideration her mother had for Mondrian by relating an anecdote: Emily and her brother, Jo, were to meet their mother uptown for an



Fig. 6. Alice Trumbull Mason's solo show at Hansa Gallery in New York, 1959. © 2022 Emily Mason | Alice Trumbull Mason Foundation/ARS.



Fig. 7. Alice Trumbull Mason, *86th Street High #1* (1966), oil on canvas, 36" x 24". Photo: Gavin Ashworth. Courtesy of Washburn Gallery. © 2022 Emily Mason | Alice Trumbull Mason Foundation/ARS.

exhibition opening. They did this all the time, except that this time it was in the presence of Mondrian, and Mason asked the children to really behave themselves. Never had they been asked to be quiet for family members or for other artists—Mondrian had a special status.³⁶

In 1958, Mason endured the loss of her youngest child, when her twenty-five-year-old son, Jo, was found drowned, months after disappearing. The loss was devastating, and the artist struggled with depression and alcoholism. But through it all, she kept on painting and kept her activism alive.³⁷ As for Joan Mitchell (1925–1992) and Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010) (to only name a few), working was a salvation for Mason. Art gave her structure. The year of the tragic loss was slow but did not come to a full stop. By 1959, she was back in the studio full-time and had a solo show at the Hansa Gallery (Fig. 6) that announced a shift in her aesthetic: Mason was taking her first steps toward hard-edge abstraction, yet the shift did not come as a complete surprise. She did not break away, but rather leaned into her past explorations to push her way ahead, and she continued in that forward direction until 1966.

Mason's 1960s series has been called the *Shutter* paintings—their vertical shapes shut off the pictorial field behind them, and color is "slammed across her canvases like steel shutters."³⁸ These paintings appear to conclude a pictorial logic initiated about a decade prior. As early as 1946, Mason started generating rhythmic, narrow vertical bands over her compositions. Most of these works are titled with the word "Bearings," such as *Bearings Charted with Yellow* (1946; see Fig. 1). At the time, the artist superimposed the verticals over geometric and biomorphic compositions; the shapes interrupt the viewer from having direct access to the background. By the 1960s, Mason eliminated the figure-ground configuration and focused solely on the vertical bands crossing the canvas from top to bottom. There is nothing rigid about the composition. The shapes expand and contract, in a back-and-forth motion between extreme slenderness and wider ribbons.

With the *Shutter* paintings, Mason pushed her personal stake in modernism to a new limit. These paintings are a departure from her signature biomorphic or architectural compositions, standing out, striking in their simplicity and confidence. Perspectival depth is almost completely gone. Volumes have disappeared. More than a decade earlier, in 1948, Mason had formulated a concept of "displacement" with the *Bearings* series. She wrote:

One theme is that of displacement of one form by another, every space in the painting being regarded as a separate form working in conjunction with all the others. Displacement should be understood in contradistinction to the idea of representing perspective on a two-dimensional plane. Displacement occurs through the juxtaposition of colors and through formal construction, that is, one form does not stand in front of another but displaces it with color and form.³⁹

The *Shutter* paintings embrace fully this concept of displacement. Mason lines up forms at the very edge of the pictorial surface. Each form leans on and influences the next, and their alignments are irregular. They have breadth, one could say magnitude, a word the artist used to title paintings such as *Ionic Magnitude* (1960; Pl. 8) and *Magnitude of Memory* (1962; Pl. 9). Mason embraces a wide range of colors. She favors blues, grays, bright yellows, oranges, ochers, and blacks. With one exception, there are no shadows, and modeling and a constructed perspective have disappeared. Yet the works are not totally flat—they are too non-standardized, too handmade to be. Brush marks are visible, and Mason varies the density of paint, and the traces of her process remain. Some corners are filled with tactile marks, and edges are slanted rather than straight. The *Shutter* paintings are a crafted hard-edge series, each singular, non-objective, and personal.

Mason was certainly aware of the direction taken by the Minimalist generation: Sol LeWitt belonged to AAA, and while Ellsworth Kelly and Dan Flavin did not, Mason would have been observing their trajectory just as well.⁴⁰ The artist had an

open mind and the necessary cultural background to understand where the Minimalists were coming from. Her own work made that clear. Indeed, an extraordinary quality of the *Shutter* series is that they clarify the link between the modern European avant-garde and Minimalism. Mason allows us to look back in order to understand what goes forward, and where she stands.

Mason's love for Mondrian resonates in her painting, *86th Street High #1* (1966; Fig. 7). Its title salutes Mason's uptown neighborhood and Manhattan's urban fabric. The painting is made of multicolored linear forms, thin and thinner, traveling fast up the canvas. Like geometric elevators, a few short and thicker white and black rectangles move vertically along these lines. It is a funny abstraction, a little cartoon-like, that evokes strong relationships with two works of the same year: the more reserved *Transitive Channels* and *Evasive Square* (1966; Figs. 8–9), which further develop the insertion of a geometric character. During the year 1966, paintings often bring to mind urban elements such as parallel streets, roads, facades, and patterns of verticality. It is most interesting that when speaking, in 1969, of "Mondrian's chief influence" on her work, Mason emphasized his "leading her to straight edge forms."⁴¹ She could certainly have spoken of the grid or geometrical compositions, but she chose straight edge abstraction. Further, she suggests that Mondrian has led her beyond her architectural abstraction all the way to the *Shutter* paintings. He had brought her to a pictorial space where the architectural vocabulary is made of thresholds and liminal spaces, palisades and fences. The straight edge was architectural still, but at the limits of being conceptual.

At times in her new explorations, she reflects on other giants of modernism and their own relationship to "straight edge." Mason admired Matisse, his use of color especially, but also his architectural qualities. She had a reproduction of one of his works in her studio, and describes it as "a beautiful one in the Museum."⁴² Mason approached color as essential to the construction of the painting: "This is one of the most important things in my works and I know that I can construct with color, which is not an easy thing to do."⁴³ During the mid-1960s, she revisits the Matisse of 1914, made during the beginning of the First World War, when he had arrived at a place of extreme austerity. Matisse's powerful *French Window at Collioure* (1914) offers an opaque, black rectangular center, framed by three brushy bands of translucent blue, gray, and green. The painting is the only window without a view in Matisse's oeuvre. It achieves much with little means. It is the skeleton of a window—architectural, liminal, and bare. Mason's *White Parenthesis* (1965; Pl. 10) and *Transitive Channels* (1966) follow this path, the latter standing right between her admiration for Mondrian and Matisse.

Mason must have known very well Picasso's remarkable *Painter and Model* from 1928. It was, at the time, in the Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection.⁴⁴ The painting depicts a painter at work in the studio in front of the model, surrounded by geometrical frames. A figurative painting, clearly organized like an abstraction, it is divided from top to bottom by vertical planes, diagonals, and diamond sections. The structure of the Picasso is essentially the same as Mason's *Magnitude of Regions* (1962;

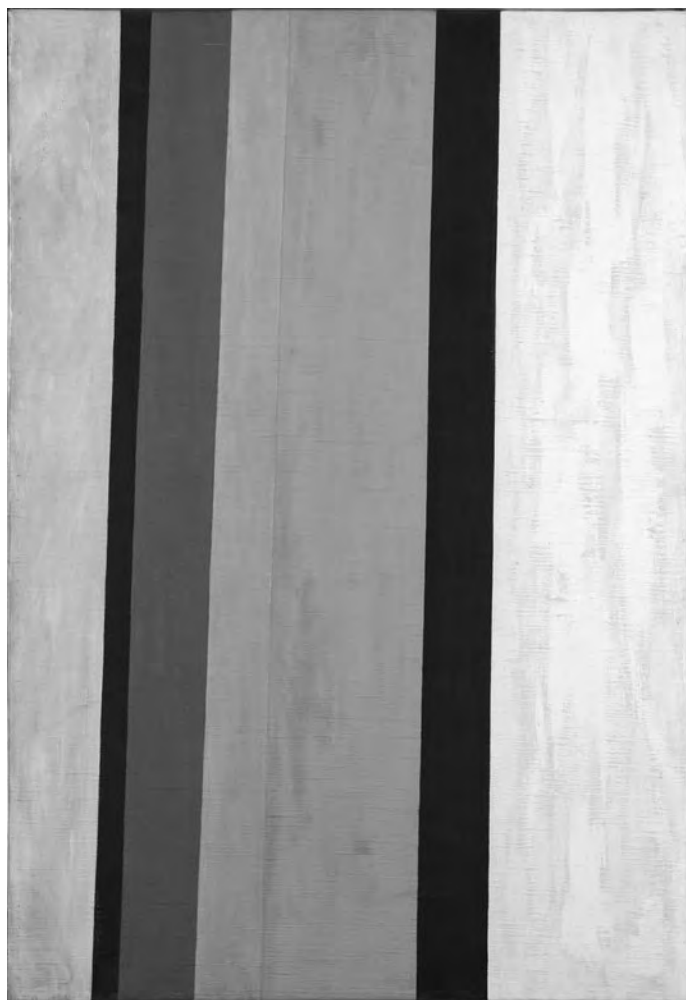


Fig. 8. Alice Trumbull Mason, *Transitive Channels* (1966), oil on canvas, 40" x 27". Photo: Gavin Ashworth. Courtesy of Washburn Gallery. © 2022 Emily Mason | Alice Trumbull Mason Foundation/ARS.

Pl. 11). Its palette of yellow, blue, red, gray, black and white is also shared by both works. Mason's teacher, Gorky, occasionally used a painting by Picasso as a secret point of departure for some of his compositions.⁴⁵ In 1969, Mason reflected:

The problem is the canvas itself and the organization on the canvas. Of course, I realize that realistic painters face the same problem too, but in a much more superficial manner than abstract artists do, because they can deceive you, they can say here's a pretty face, here's a pretty figure, I'll just place it this way or that way and do a pretty good job at it and therefore it will get by. But when you are faced with only the canvas and the colors and what you are placing on the canvas then you have a tremendous proposition to face, much more less deceptive, let us say than realistic painting.⁴⁶

If somebody thought of reinterpreting the structure of Picasso's legendary *Painter and Model* in a radically abstract way, it may have been Mason.

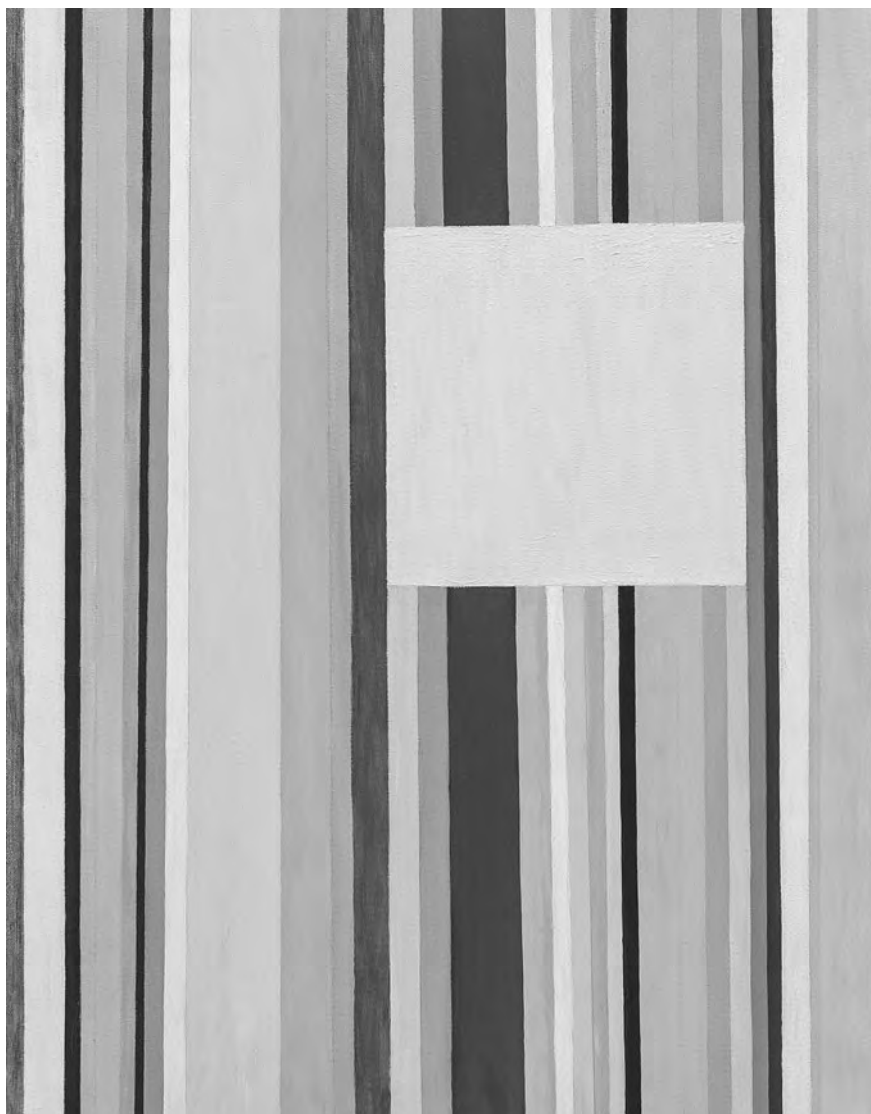


Fig. 9. Alice Trumbull Mason, *Evasive Square* (1966), oil on canvas, 32" x 24 1/4". Photo: Gavin Ashworth. Courtesy of Washburn Gallery. © 2022 Emily Mason | Alice Trumbull Mason Foundation/ARS.

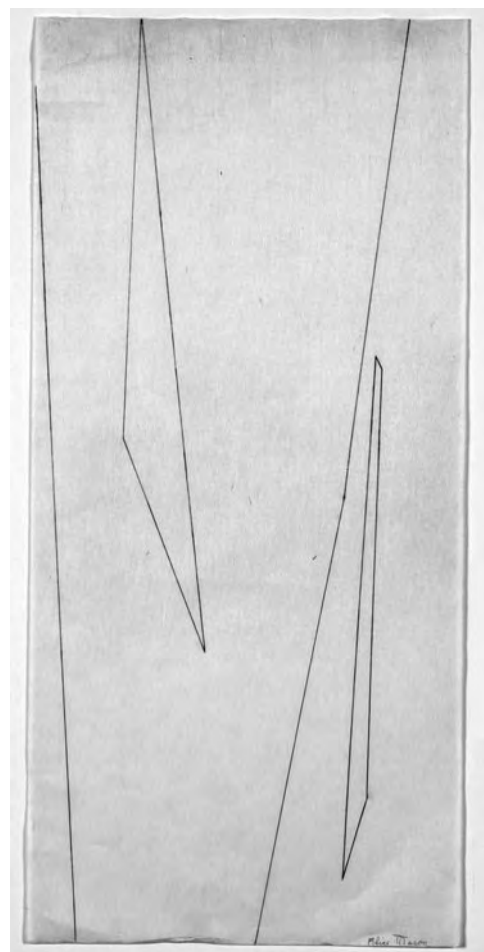


Fig. 10. Alice Trumbull Mason, *Untitled* (1950), graphite on rice paper, 20" x 9 1/4". Photo: Jonathan Mildenberg. Courtesy of Washburn Gallery. © 2022 Emily Mason | Alice Trumbull Mason Foundation/ARS.

Preparatory drawings for the *Shutter* series are scarce. There is very little documentation to chronicle her artistic process. Most often, Mason drew the composition directly on the canvas and lines are sometimes in full sight. A rare pencil drawing on rice paper (1950; Fig. 10) has survived for *Magnitude of an Electric Storm* of 1960. Its pencil lines are razor sharp; they recall Kelly's precise analysis of space. Since the early 1950s, like Mason, Kelly was interested in hovering verticals over an abstract space. A decade later, the two artists found themselves again exploring the same terrains. Mason was even more daring—this was a time of cutting declarations. The minimalism of her preparatory drawing is defiant. More than a sketch, it is a statement. The painting in black and white is splendid, of an equal mesmerizing radicalism.

Mason's *Shutter* paintings engage with a pictorial language that would preoccupy generations of artists after her. Vertical suites were pushed to new levels of simplification and color

interactions. In the late 1960s, Bridget Riley (b. 1931) started experimenting with vertical progressions of contrasting color. Kelly, Gerhard Richter, and Robert Irwin all played with such rhythmic juxtapositions. Dan Flavin built a series of barriers; their physical quality is reminiscent of Mason. Unlike these artists who engaged to various degrees with optics, Mason's pursuit was anchored in architectural abstraction. Her work was after something more concrete than phenomenological. The paintings are matter of fact: erected shapes stand at the edge of the pictorial space, each individualized, facing the viewer. Mason never freed herself from the boundaries of the canvas, yet I share Thomas Micchelli's view that her work is an important link to artists who went beyond it.⁴⁷

The *Shutter* paintings took Mason to a new place in her career, putting her work in a completely new artistic context. They were shown repeatedly by art dealer Richard Bellamy: First, as an introduction, in 1959, at Hansa Gallery on East Tenth Street,⁴⁸ and then almost yearly at Green Gallery, located on the top floor of a brownstone on Fifty-Seventh Street.

Mason and Bellamy met in 1958, during a stay at the Towns Hospital on Central Park West.⁴⁹ It is strange how life brings people together.⁵⁰ “Dick” was thirty-one, around the same age as her lost son; Mason was fifty-four. Both were passionate about art and poetry. Bellamy was irreverent and outlandish.⁵¹ Mason loved him.⁵²

The Green Gallery was short-lived, a shooting star on the New York art scene. Privately funded by a collector, it was directed solely by Bellamy, who declared wanting to show “new art when I can find it.”⁵³ Bellamy “had the first exhibitions of Claes Oldenburg’s soft sculptures, the first exhibition of Donald Judd’s cadmium red light sculptures, and the first three shows of Robert Morris’s work.”⁵⁴ He committed to what he found engaging: Color Field painting, Pop art, and Minimalism. His support of emerging artists was extraordinary. Barbara Rose reported that Leo Castelli acknowledged how “Dick Bellamy was younger than I, but my teacher.”⁵⁵ Bellamy had declined working for Castelli, preferring a life of exploration. When the Green Gallery closed, Bellamy continued on, walking his uncertain and unusual path. He became an insider’s legend.

Bellamy found Mason at a turning point and realized that something important was happening there. It was new, and he wanted to show it, with “an ability to pick out the authentic maverick from the herd.”⁵⁶ Mason was a maverick, he could feel it. Their relationship was productive. Mason’s records show pages of scribbles indicating the many paintings she loaned Dick Bellamy for shows (Fig. 11).⁵⁷ She highlights the ones he sold and notes the ones that were returned. Mason gifted Bellamy *Magnitude in Grey and Yellow* (1959). They were clearly friends. Most of the *Shutter* paintings made until 1965 went through his gallery. They were included in group exhibitions where Mason was invariably the oldest. Mason was also one of the few women on the roster, next to Yayoi Kusama (b. 1929), Lee Bontecou (b. 1931), and Jo Baer (b. 1929). Bellamy himself must have seen Mason as a link between the history of abstraction and the avant-garde he defended. He was so in tune with his time. The gallery became a hangout for the avant-garde; young art historians, upcoming artists, and daring collectors followed his program. It was a place where the unexpected could be seen.

The Green Gallery closed in 1965. During her lifetime, Mason never again found a context for her art like she did with Dick Bellamy. She continued working and had a large survey of her work in 1967 at the Fire House Gallery in Garden City, NY. A traveling retrospective exhibition arrived in 1973, two years after her death, at the Whitney Museum of American Art.⁵⁸ One of the early *Shutter* paintings, *Suspension Points (Surface Winds)* (1959; Pl. 12), made the cover of the catalogue. It came a year after the museum presented Alma Thomas (1891–1978), and a year before it honored Alice Neel (1900–1984). The art world was ready to look at these great women artists. Like them, Mason had persisted and created a singular body of work. She was a pioneer of American abstraction, and the *Shutter* paintings are some of her most important contributions. Standing at the critical juncture between European and American abstraction, the *Shutter* paintings

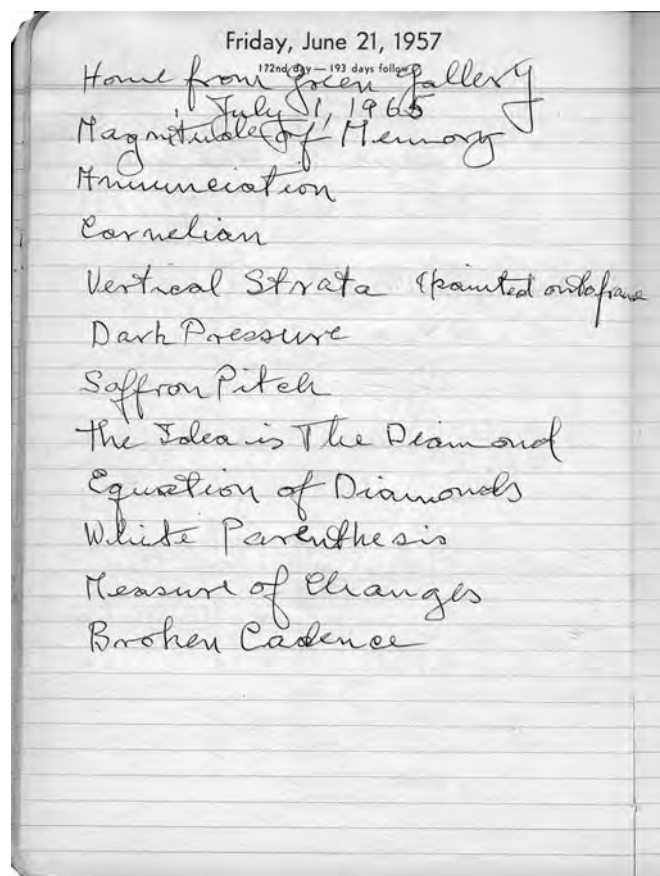


Fig. 11. Diary page of Alice Trumbull Mason, June 21, 1957. Courtesy of Emily Mason | Alice Trumbull Mason Foundation. © 2022 Emily Mason | Alice Trumbull Mason Foundation/ARS.

exist at the threshold of modernism, where Mason defined the line between straight edge painting—inherited from Mondrian—and the hard edge abstraction of Minimalism. Humbled by life, heartbroken and reclusive, Mason worked in solitude and in dialogue with the ghosts of the studio. It took somebody like Dick Bellamy to notice her striking stance and to honor her. We are so glad he did. •

Barbara Stehle is a New York-based art historian and independent curator publishing on architecture and women’s contributions to the art historical field. She teaches at the Rhode Island School of Design. Previously, she worked at the Pompidou Center in Paris. In 2021 and 2022, respectively, she curated two critically acclaimed exhibitions in New York: “Kazuko Miyamoto in the Sol LeWitt Collection” at Zürcher Gallery, and “Lula Mae Blocton: The First Two Decades” at Skoto Gallery. Her exhibitions are reviewed in the *New York Times* and *Artforum*, among other publications.

Notes

1. Marilyn R. Brown, *Alice Trumbull Mason, Emily Mason: Two Generations of Abstract Painting* (New York: Eaton House, 1982), 12; idem, “Three Generations of Artists,” *Woman’s Art Journal* 4, no. 1 (Spring–Summer 1983): 1–8.

2. Marilyn Brown mentions Jennings's studies in Paris with Fernand Léger in *Alice Trumbull Mason, Emily Mason: Two Generations*, 13. Emily Mason and Wolf Kahn's collection had cubist-like drawings made by Jennings, completed when she studied under Hans Hofmann. They were sold May 18, 2022, at Millea Bros Ltd, Boonton, NJ, Lot 1281 to 1285 included.
3. Amy Horschak, "Alice Trumbull Mason," in *Alice Trumbull Mason, Emily Mason, Cecily Kahn: Three Generations of Abstract Painting*, ed. Sanford Wurmfeld (New York: The Bertha and Karl Leubsdorf Art Gallery, Hunter College, 2005), 19.
4. Alice Trumbull Mason, speech to students at the Art Honor League, High School of Music and Art (1960s), Alice Trumbull Mason Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, reel 629:172.
5. Emily Mason, "Foreword," in *Alice Trumbull Mason: Pioneer of American Abstraction*, ed. Elisa Wouk Almino (New York: Rizzoli Electa, 2020), 8.
6. Mason's letters with Gertrude Stein from March 1931 to 1934 have survived. The correspondence between Mason and Stein is held in The Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. It is possible Mason met Stein and Toklas in New York during their visit in October 1934. See Elisa Wouk Almino, "A Dedicated Poet," in *Pioneer of American Abstraction*, 216–17, and Brown, *Two Generations*, 13.
7. This particular poem is conserved at the Alice Trumbull Mason Foundation, New York (hereafter the ATM Foundation, NY).
8. Alice T. Mason, interview by Ruth Gurin, transcript of a tape recording, Aug. 26, 1969, 24, ATM Foundation, NY.
9. Robert Pincus-Witten, *Alice Trumbull Mason* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1973), 8.
10. See Rebecca DiGiovanna, *Blurring Boundaries: The Women of American Abstract Artists, 1936–Present*, exh. cat. (Murray, KY: Clara M. Eagle Gallery, Murray State University, 2018), 5, https://americanabstractartists.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/IAA_BB_travel_catalogue_2020.pdf, accessed Sept. 15, 2022. The original founding women members included: Rosalind Bengelsdorf, Jeanne Carles (Mercedes Matter), Gertrude Greene, Anna Cohen, Ray Kaiser (Eames), Marie Kennedy, Agnes Lyall, Alice Trumbull Mason, and Esphyr Slobodkina. See Alice Adams, "Ahead of Its Time," in *ibid.*, 8.
11. Letter from Daniel G. Hill, former AAA president and current member, to the author, Aug. 23, 2022. See Aliza Edelman, "Departing the Plane: Charmion von Wiegand's Otherworldly Abstractions of the 1950s," in *American Women Artists, 1935–1970: Gender, Culture, and Politics*, ed. Helen Langa and Paula Wisotzki (New York: Ashgate, 2016), 201–17.
12. "Alice Trumbull Mason" in *Blurring Boundaries*, 52.
13. A. T. Mason, interview by Ruth Gurin, transcript of tape recording, Aug. 26, 1969, 4, ATM Foundation, NY.
14. Adams, "Ahead of Its Time," in *Blurring Boundaries*, 8.
15. E. Mason, "Foreword," in *Pioneer of American Abstraction*, 8–9.
16. Ibram Lassaw, interview by Marilyn R. Brown, June 22, 1981, Easthampton, NY. Cited in Brown, *Two Generations*, 11.
17. E. Mason, "Foreword," in *Pioneer of American Abstraction*, 9.
18. Marelá Zacarías, "Chronology," in *Pioneer of American Abstraction*, 244.
19. See Siobhan M. Conaty, "Art of This Century: A Transitional Space for Women," in *American Women Artists, 1935–1970*, 27.
20. Mason participated in *14 Painter–Printmakers*, curated by Una Johnson at the Brooklyn Museum, on view Nov. 16, 1955 to Jan. 8, 1956. Zacarías, "Chronology," in *Pioneer of American Abstraction*, 247.
21. See Christina Weyl, "The Print Connection," in *Pioneer of American Abstraction*, 185; idem, *The Women of Atelier 17: Modernist Printmaking at Midcentury New York* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2019).
22. See Zacarías, "Chronology," in *Pioneer of American Abstraction*, 246.
23. Brown, *Two Generations*, 13.
24. A. T. Mason, interview by Ruth Gurin, transcript of tape recording, Aug. 26, 1969, 4, ATM Foundation, NY.
25. *Ibid.*, 34.
26. Amy Horschak, "Alice Trumbull Mason," in *Three Generations*, 18. A.T. Mason, "Concerning Plastic Significance," *American Abstract Artists: Three Yearbooks (1938, 1939, 1946)* (repr., New York: Arno Press, 1969), 19–20.
27. "There is more room, or they make room for Miró. That is where he paints the commission. He also spends a lot of time at Atelier 17 and they think of projects to do together." See Margo Dolan, Ron Rumford, and Mehves Lelic, "A conversation on Atelier 17: Stanley William Hayter, Joan Miró, and Printmaking," in *Miró in New York, 1947: Miró, Hayter and Atelier 17*, exh. cat. (Easton, MD: Academy Art Museum, 2021), 17. Jean Morrison, André Racz, and Harry Hoehn also had studios at the same location. See Carla Esposito Hayter, "Miró and Hayter, New York, 1947," in *Miró in New York, 1947*, 9.
28. See Ray Bethers, "Alice Trumbull Mason," in *Pictures, Painters, and You* (New York: Pitman Pub., 1948), 246.
29. Aliza Edelman, "The Masquerade of Geometry: Identity And Abstraction in the Americas" in *Constructive Spirit: Abstract Art in South and North America, 1920s–1950s*, ed. Mary-Kate O'Hare, exh. cat. (Newark, NJ: Newark Museum, 2010), 113.
30. Alice Trumbull Mason Papers, Feb. 20, 1952, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, reel 630:169, cited by Brown, "Abstraction and the American Abstract Artists," in *Pioneer of American Abstraction*, 39 and n.24.
31. Mason, interview by Virginia Pitts Rembert, Dec. 1, 1969, in "Mondrian, America, and the American Painting" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia Univ., 1970), 213–14.
32. See Yve-Alain Blois, "Mondrian and the Theory of Architecture," *Assemblage*, no. 4 (October 1987): 102–30.
33. Currently in the collection of the ATM Foundation, Mason's copy, in oil on masonite, measures 21 5/8" x 21 5/8". Mondrian's *Composition B; Composition with Double Line and Yellow and Gray* (1932), oil on canvas at 19 3/4" x 19 3/4", belonged to Oskar and Annie Müller-Widmann, from 1932 to 1965. The catalogue entry from Mondrian's 1994 exhibition at MoMA does not list this work participating in any New York exhibitions until 1971; see Yve-Alain Blois et al., *Piet Mondrian 1872–1944* (New York: Little, Brown and Museum of Modern Art, 1994), 253.
34. *Piet Mondrian: Sidney Janis Gallery* (Feb. 5–March 17, 1951) listed in "Exhibitions," *Piet Mondrian 1872–1944*, 391.
35. A.T. Mason, interview by Ruth Gurin, transcript of tape recording, Aug. 26, 1969, 20, ATM Foundation, NY.
36. This Mondrian anecdote was relayed by Emily Mason to Marelá Zacarías, who shared it with the author, Sept. 7, 2022.
37. See Brown, "Life and Art," in *Pioneer of American Abstraction*, 21.
38. Will Heinrich, "Painting Motion from Stillness," in *Pioneer of American Abstraction*, 32.
39. Bethers, "Alice Trumbull Mason," in *Pictures, Painters, and You*, 246.
40. Emily Mason reported that her mother kept up with the exhibition scene very closely.
41. Mason, interview by Virginia Pitts Rembert, Dec. 1, 1969, in "Mondrian, America, and the American Painting," 213–14.

42. A.T. Mason, interview by Ruth Gurin, transcript of tape recording, Aug. 26, 1969, 35, ATM Foundation, NY. The work must have been one from MoMA, perhaps Matisse's *The Red Studio* (1911).
43. *Ibid.*, 10.
44. See Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *The Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection: A Gift to the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1968), 1, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1886>, accessed Sept. 16, 2022.
45. A fact uncovered thanks to the research of the artist Marela Zacarías (b. 1978), who worked extensively on the ATM Foundation archives.
46. A.T. Mason, interview by Ruth Gurin, transcript of tape recording, Aug. 26, 1969, 35, ATM Foundation, NY.
47. Thomas Micchelli, "From Universal Reality to the Forever Now: Alice Trumbull Mason and Contemporary Art," in *Pioneer of American Abstraction*, 230–37.
48. The Hansa had started as an artist co-op with Allan Kaprow, Alfred Leslie, George Segal, and others. Wolf Kahn, Mason's son-in-law, was one of the founders. Bellamy had become the director in 1955, yet he seems not to have met Mason prior to his stay at the Towns Hospital.
49. E. Mason, "Foreword," in *Pioneer of American Abstraction*, 9.
50. Mason was sinking into alcoholism and needed a detox. Bellamy was undergoing treatment too.
51. On Bellamy, see Judith Stein, *Eye of the Sixties: Richard Bellamy and the Transformation of Modern Art* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016).
52. E. Mason quoted in *Pioneer of American Abstraction*, 249–50.
53. Andrew Russeth, "Greener Pastures: The Storied Dealer Richard Bellamy Steps Out of the Shadows," in *Art News*, July 27, 2016, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/greener-pastures-the-storied-dealer-richard-bellamy-steps-out-of-the-shadows-6728/>, accessed Sept. 16, 2022.
54. Roberta Smith "Richard Bellamy Art Dealer is Dead at 70," *New York Times*, April 3, 1998, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/04/03/arts/richard-bellamy-art-dealer-is-dead-at-70.html>, accessed Sept. 16, 2022.
55. Barbara Rose, *Dick Bellamy: The Man Hiding at the Center of Everything*, *New York Times*, July 22, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/24/arts/design/dick-bellamy-the-man-hiding-at-the-center-of-everything.html>, accessed Sept. 16, 2022.
56. Barbara Rose, "Richard Bellamy," *Art Forum* 36, no.10 (Summer 1998), <https://www.artforum.com/print/199806/richard-bellamy-32564>, accessed Sept. 17, 2022.
57. See Alice Trumbull Mason work and sales log from 1959 to 1965.
58. A brochure was published; it lists thirty-nine paintings exhibited, available at <https://archive.org/details/alicetrum00maso/page/n9/mode/2up>, accessed Sept. 17, 2022.

SPIRIT LIVES WHEREVER IT CHOOSES

THE ART OF MILA GOKHMAN

By Roni Feinstein

Residing in a tiny and cramped government-subsidized apartment in Stanton, California, is a remarkable artist of soaring creativity. Mila Gokhman (b. 1934), still vivacious, resilient, and technically adventurous in her approach, had once achieved, against all odds, a measure of success as an artist and designer in Eastern Europe. The chief curator of the Taras Shevchenko National Museum, Yuliia Shylenko, recalls the artist's 1993 retrospective at the museum: "The exhibition of Mila Gokhman's works became a real sensation and an extremely bright event in the museum space of Kyiv."¹ In 2000, hoping that her art would attain wider exposure internationally, Gokhman abandoned her established ties and moved to the United States, where, instead, she has spent the past two decades working in obscurity. At age eighty-eight, she has continued to make art on a daily basis. Inspired by nature, poetry, and music, she creates meticulously crafted, abstract collages of cut and pasted paper that radiate life, joy, and movement. She also produces beaded necklaces of beauty, variety, and invention (Fig. 1).

Although Gokhman was forced to leave the bulk of her work behind when she emigrated from Ukraine to the US, it was thanks to a small bribe given to a Ukrainian official that enabled her to carry an astonishing amount of her most prized work to her new home. Stacked against walls and crammed into closets in her small apartment is a veritable treasure trove of work dating back a half-century: not only paper collages created since her arrival in 2000, but a large collection of leather relief panels executed during the early years of her career, which are brilliantly accomplished works widely varied in expression, execution, and design. Stockpiled in boxes and stuffed into drawers is a cache of leather necklaces, bracelets, purses, belts, vests, and more—pieces she made independently, as well as for leading designers at the Kyiv Fashion House.

Spirit Lives Wherever It Chooses (дух живет где хочет) is the title given by the Russian writer, Lyudmila Svershskova, to an essay written thirty years ago on the occasion of Gokhman's aforementioned midcareer retrospective at the Shevchenko Museum in Kyiv.² This title has proven apt and all-too-prophetic. Despite the obstacles she has encountered, Gokhman's life-affirming and seemingly invincible spirit radiates from her art. The second chapter of her life, realized in



Fig. 1. Mila Gokhman wearing a beaded necklace (c. 2009). Photo: Michele Mattei, Los Angeles (2020). Courtesy of Mila Gokhman.

the US, has been one of poverty and ill health, and while indigence has been a constant presence, the first chapter of her career posed daunting challenges of a different kind.

Gokhman's art has its origins in the Soviet Union of fifty years ago, where independent art, techniques, and the spirit were repressed and aroused suspicion. As a self-trained artist unaffiliated with official art academies and, more significantly, as a Jew, Gokhman was an outsider who not only struggled for recognition and exposure, but for materials and for the very right to be an artist. In the Soviet Union, where it was mandated that all work be in support of the government, Gokhman worked for herself. Moreover, from the moment she began to make art in the mid-1960s, Gokhman blatantly defied the dictates of Socialist Realism and the blandness of Soviet life. At a time when galleries and museums were filled with paintings of farmers and steelworkers in gilded frames, Gokhman indulged in an art that was abstract, lyrical, and improvisational. As Svershkova wrote, Gokhman "stood against the [Soviet] system in much more substantial ways than authors of popular brochures and tracts, because she chose opposition of a different level and meaning—a *spiritual* opposition.... Under the conditions of Soviet life, when the principles of Socialist Realism were mandatory, even the names of Mila's panels—*Eye of the Universe*, *Symphony*, *Spheres*—looked criminal. Choosing an approach of philosophical abstraction required courage, daring, and persistence."³

The recent exhibition, *Painting in Excess: Kyiv's Art Revival, 1986–1993*, presented at the Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers University, did not include Gokhman's work (nor did the organizing curators know about her).⁴ The show and its accompanying catalogue nevertheless shed light on the reception of her art. The exhibition, which drew largely from the Zimmerli's extensive collection of Russian and Soviet Nonconformist Art, examined art created in the Ukrainian capital during and immediately following the period of *glasnost* and *perestroika* ushered in by Mikhail Gorbachev. It was explained that while these policies—extending from 1985 until the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991—resulted in an openness to the West, a loosening of restrictions, and even the rise of a politically engaged, openly critical art in most of the Soviet bloc, the Communist Party head in Ukraine towed the *old* party line and was in fact responsible for the imprisonment of artists and writers during the 1960s and 1970s.⁵ Although Ukraine gained independence in December 1991, the period that followed was one of disorganization and corruption. The situation and policies of 1986 to 1993 in Kyiv led to an underground flowering of artistic work in predominantly figurative but also abstract styles as well as the formation of numerous artists' groups that exhibited together (often clandestinely) and supported one another's work. As the exhibition title underscores, most of the artists who were affiliated at this time were painters, among them Arsen Savadov, Georgii Senchenko, Tiberiy Silvashi, and Valeria Troubina (b. 1966), and many were alumni of official art academies. As evidenced by this exhibition, the art in Eastern Europe made during the Soviet and early post-Soviet era has only just begun to be studied.

Gokhman stood apart from these groups, just as she was at a remove from the official Union of Artists, the government-sanctioned trade union of men and women active in various fields of the visual arts, committed to certain ethical, aesthetic,

and ideological objectives. She pursued abstraction with an independent vision, yet her work was presented in a string of solo exhibitions at major museums, former palaces, and other major venues, in Tallinn, Estonia, St. Petersburg (then Leningrad), and Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine, from 1972 to 2000, a period that extends from the highly restrictive Soviet era to the "loosening" period of Gorbachev's leadership and through the chaotic decade of the 1990s. This individualistic presence and standing was because Gokhman worked in the highly unusual medium of leather.⁶ From early in her career, she produced leather reliefs but also jewelry, hats, belts, purses, and related objects. Gokhman was free from the restrictions placed on painters because her work was relegated to the categories of craft and applied art.

Leatherwork has a long and distinguished history in Eastern Europe. Gokhman's technically innovative use of this medium was valued both for its beauty and the artistic visualization it offered craftspeople and designers producing in the service of the state. Even as Gokhman saw herself—as did various art writers and critics—as a fine artist "on the highest level" for her creation of leather reliefs and paper collages, it was within the field of applied arts that she received recognition as a pioneer and was able to exhibit her work on a scale and in a manner from which other artists—particularly *outsider*, Jewish, and abstract artists—were prevented and barred.⁷ In spite of her success, Gokhman's career has suffered categorically, further marginalized as one of applied art or craft, and thus lost to history. The resurrection of Gokhman's past has been complicated by the turmoil of the present moment—the fact that Russia, for months, threatened and then permeated Ukraine's borders—as well as by the historical period in which her art was first shown and created. Most of the museums and major venues where she had exhibitions are no longer extant or were reconfigured after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and few records survive. Some exhibition materials, archived by the Taras Shevchenko National Museum in Kyiv, came to light during the preparation of this article. Additional sources used to construct Gokhman's history include installation and other photographs in the artist's collection; a half-dozen magazine articles of the 1980s and 1990s; a recent study of the Ukrainian fashion houses in the Soviet era; accounts given by a few of the artist's colleagues; and the memories of the artist herself. However, the greatest resource resides in the vast accumulation of work in Gokhman's possession.

This article revitalizes an artist of formidable power and vision whose work enriches the histories of both art and design, and whose life is as complexly interwoven as the strands of leather in her stunning and innovative relief panels. These reliefs are not Gokhman's only works of significance, yet their original material approach deserves further discussion, and several are examined in considerable detail. In both the first and second chapters of her career, Gokhman's lifelong devotion to her work and the creative process triumphed over her circumstances, leading her to produce art that is technically accomplished, highly expressive, and imbued with strength, meaning, and irrepressible spirit.

Gokhman was born in Kyiv in 1934, the only child of a father trained as an engineer, and a mother who taught kindergarten. Among her early memories is the bombing that began the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, which coincided with her seventh birthday, on June 22, 1941. Three months later, approximately 34,000 Jews were massacred in Kyiv's Babi Yar ravine on September 29 and 30, 1941.⁸ Although Gokhman wanted to attend university to study literature and languages, her choices as a Jew were limited. In 1960, she earned a certificate in civil engineering, a profession that accorded her official status and a salary. Dissatisfied with the prospect of designing bridges, she abandoned engineering by 1966 to pursue her passion for art. She was to work independently henceforth without pay and official sanction, supported by her parents, with whom she lived well into her sixties. Initially, Gokhman had a brief stint working in window and interior floral design, and while she was soon to focus her practice on other materials and processes, she incorporated artificial flowers, tree branches, and great swaths of fabric in the installation of her exhibitions for decades to come.

When visiting a friend in Tallinn, Gokhman met a woman who worked in a leather factory. In her spare time, the woman made childlike panels showing girls with flowing hair made from leather waste. Noting Gokhman's interest, the woman gave her a bag of scraps and some glue. The next day, Gokhman constructed her first leather assemblage. The date January 7, 1967, is etched in her memory: the day of her rebirth when she found the direction of her art. Utilizing scraps of this scarce, luxury material, Gokhman began to construct small, intricately developed low-relief panels on cardboard. In some, the leather is glued down in relatively flat, parallel lines, juxtaposed with arcs. In others, it is variously layered, twisted, crimped, coiled, and woven in such a way as to exploit its plasticity, at times extending half an inch or more above the backing. She colored most of her found materials using silk and leather dyes and developed a vast palette. While most of the pieces are purely abstract, some evoke or more directly represent landscapes, plants, and flowers. In Gokhman's earliest surviving relief, the red and black *Tulip* (1967; Pl. 13), narrow strips of leather give form to a flower in an image of studied asymmetry that suggests possible folk art sources. In other early works, such as the diptych *Two Compositions in Yellow* of 1968 (Fig. 2), Gokhman adapts the techniques of weaving and lacing belonging to ancient leathercraft traditions. By 1969, Gokhman's panels exhibit an astounding manipulation of leather, the material wholly open and compliant to improvisation at the service of her vision. A wide range of imagery and expression evokes still broader frames of reference to Constructivist abstraction and Symbolist landscape painting.

Two very different works, each entitled *Spheres*, date to 1972. One, a grid of four panels (Fig. 3), dynamically engages an optical and spatial play among each section by overlapping



Fig. 2. Mila Gokhman, *Two Compositions in Yellow* (1968), right panel of diptych, leather and leather dyes, 7 1/2" x 7 1/2". © Mila Gokhman.



Fig. 3. Mila Gokhman, *Spheres* (1972 and 1975), leather and leather dyes (quadriptych), each panel, 12 1/2" x 12 1/2". © Mila Gokhman.

semicircles and arcs in closely valued tones. Comparatively, this work evokes important examples set by earlier avant-garde women Russian Constructivists, many of whom were



Fig. 4. Mila Gokhman, *Golden Rain (Manna from Heaven to the Suffering Earth)* (1973), leather and leather dyes, 7 1/2" x 17 1/4". © Mila Gokhman.

also textile designers, such as Lyubov Popova's (1889–1924) *Space Force Construction* paintings of the early 1920s, and more strongly, Vavara Stepanova's (1894–1958) bold, geometric fabric designs of the same period in which intersecting patterns are layered to create optical effects. Gokhman's other *Spheres* (1972; Pl. 14), a horizontal triptych, features in the center panel a tulip form surrounded by symmetrically radiating disks in gradated red, orange, and tan colors. The flanking panels present similarly vibrating patterns that appear as almost otherworldly visions, recalling the spiritual forces rooted in the planets and in nature that are referenced in the abstractions of Swedish artist Hilma af Klint (1862–1944) and American artist Agnes Pelton (1881–1961), both of whom explored transcendental ideas in their paintings.⁹

Gokhman's reverence for nature is intuitive and personal, and radically apart from Theosophy and other such spiritual and religious movements followed by other modern artists in the early twentieth century, yet there remain transcendentalist reverberations in her quadriptych *Symphony* (1972; Pl. 15). Each panel—*Galaxies of the Heart*, *Rhythms*, *Dawning*, and *Etude*—features a distinct motif and approach, but the four are united through the common use of leather strips and a harmonious palette in earth colors: various shades of brown, rust, terracotta, ocher, and forest green, with marigold and beige on the right-hand panels. This complex work shows the sheer variety of ways that leather is layered over each panel's surface. Reading from left to right, there is a tightly coiled mass set upon a rolling plane; a series of black crimped bars, each with a tight spiral at one end, superimposed upon a seemingly free-floating network of concentric ovals that suggest a cluster of abstractions, perhaps flowers; graceful

wisps unravel across the surface of a radiant sunrise; and stiffly bent vertical forms, akin to organic reeds, rest against a rectilinear ground. This piece holistically evokes the magic and wonders of the natural world, from the haphazard ground cover and vegetation to the glories of sunrise, the redolence of the forest, earth, and soil.

Gokhman's *Sunset in the Golosievo Forest* (1972; Pl. 16) offers another improvisation on what is notably a landscape, the golden light of a sunset glimpsed through a dark tangle of undergrowth and trees, an illumination seemingly mirrored in the surface of the forest's lake in Kyiv. The leather strips spiral, weave, and dance across the surface of this piece, many rising high above the plane. Kyiv's Golosievo Forest was dear to Gokhman's heart; she called it her "inspiration," explaining, "The trees were my saviors from vulnerable events of Soviet reality."¹⁰ *Golden Rain* (or *Manna from Heaven to the Suffering Earth*, 1973; Fig. 4) is yet another *tour de force*. A landscape featuring a series of rolling hills, the entire surface is animated with great twists, coils, and spirals of leather. The top half of the composition does not consist of the characteristic parallel strips seen elsewhere, but of a flat piece of leather through which tiny golden bands have been punched repeatedly from the back, forming a series of arching lines, presumably the "golden rain." The undulating rhythms and roiling quality of the composition call to mind the animated skies of Vincent van Gogh, Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1893), and the swirling linear patterns seen in the abstract watercolor paintings of the British Spiritualist medium Georgiana Houghton of the 1860s and 1870s.¹¹ The subtitle of Gokhman's work—*Manna from Heaven*—is a reference to the food that God miraculously provided to the Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness.



Fig. 5. Mila Gokhman, Accessories for clothing (c. 1990), leather and leather dyes (garnet). © Mila Gokhman.

This is the singular direct reference pertaining to Judaism found in her art (another is found in the small 1968 leather relief, *Jacob's Ladder*). Gokhman recalls that she was reading the Bible at the time, having been led to do so less from a religious connection than because the Russian poetry of Boris Pasternak and others had piqued her curiosity. She also remembers thinking that her life was greatly constrained, but that her spiritual life was the rain—the manna from heaven—that had sustained her.

Remarkably, about thirty of Gokhman's early leather panels remain in her possession, including a series of tiny leather ovals executed from 1967 to 1991.¹² In spring 1973, some of these pieces were presented in her first solo show, *Spring Sprouts*, which took place in the Flower Pavilion (or Conservatory of Model Floriculture) in Tallinn, an exhibition and performance space within a large city park overlooking the sea. Gokhman hung fabric on the walls as backgrounds for her then unframed pieces and utilized branches to display a few belts and pendants. Although the exhibition was apparently widely covered in the newspapers and on television, the reports have not yet publicly surfaced. Gokhman had just begun to create the intricately handmade leather jewelry and accessories that were displayed in *Spring Sprouts*, an endeavor originally prompted, she says, by a shortage of the leather needed to make even small panels. The earliest pendants in her collection, from the early 1970s, some with beads, semiprecious stones, or ceramic details, are symmetrical and appear stiff and tightly controlled. Rapidly, however, Gokhman was working with greater freedom and fluency, her leather pieces exuding an ease and lyricism and her floral improvisations and asymmetrical abstractions employing not only black and brown shades, but a wide range of luscious jewel tones—garnet, malachite, and amethyst (Fig. 5). The organic forms, trailing tendrils, and whiplash curves seen in many of these pieces find a precedent in the



Fig. 6. Mila Gokhman, Black leather wearable with onyx "button" (c.1986). Photo: Alexei Kolmykov, Kyiv (1991).

ornamental style and characteristics of Art Nouveau from the turn of the twentieth century. Gokhman's decorative accessories can stand alone as fully realized works of art.

From the late 1980s through the early 1990s, her designs grew bolder and more elaborate. These highly sensuous *wearables* responded to the curves of the female form that supported them. In contrast to the tightly configured works that preceded them, these compositions are more open, scale is increased, and elements are loose and pliable. As Gokhman was quoted in an article of 1994, "My leather jewelry is not in any way connected with fashion. It is the art of shaping, glorifying the beauty of the human body. In this sense, it relates to the art of abstraction in the same way as most of my easel works. It is also akin to music."¹³ This sense of bodily abstraction is epitomized in the 1991 photograph (Fig. 6) by famed Moscow photographer Alexei Kolmykov; it shows Gokhman's leather wearable (from around 1986) positioned on a woman's back, an elaborate form of a musical clef recalling Man Ray's *Le Violon d'Ingres* (The Violin of Ingres) of 1924.¹⁴

In the early 1970s, when Gokhman began creating leather accessories for personal use in the Soviet Union, any private or public display of such luxuries was chancy and disreputable. Perhaps nothing better exemplifies the tenor of that time than the rash conduct of Svetlana Titova, the director of the Kyiv House of Fashion Design in 1973. Titova threw her precious jewelry into the foundation of the fashion house's new building as it was being laid, a symbolic act intended to demonstrate the renunciation of privately held luxury items



Fig. 7. Installation photograph displaying leather pendants, belts, bracelets, rings, brooches, and purses from Mila Gokhman's solo exhibition *Plasticity and Color*, Yelagin Palace, St. Petersburg, 1981–82.

for the greater good.¹⁵ Gokhman worked at this fashion house from about 1973 until it closed in the early 1990s, producing meticulously handcrafted leather jewelry, belts, and items not intended for widespread public consumption. Instead, she collaborated with leading designers, such as Lydia Avdeeva, who specialized in dresses, and Hertz Mepen, who fabricated coats and outerwear, producing samples for public display within the Soviet Union and for international fashion shows and exhibitions. As Olha Korniienko wrote in her 2021 article on Ukrainian fashion houses, "Particular importance was attached to these exhibition collections, because the garments made by the Ukrainian fashion houses represented not only the republic, but the whole country."¹⁶ Each piece of clothing and accompanying accessories existed only in singular versions, prepared for a particular model or "clothing demonstrator."¹⁷ Gokhman received neither pay for her work nor official recognition, but she was compensated instead with leather, a state-controlled commodity that she could use to create her own jewelry, accessories, and reliefs.

A Hungarian-style coat designed by Hertz Mepen, with leather details and pendant constructed by Gokhman, was featured on the front and back covers of the Autumn 1983 issue of *Kpaca i Moda* (Beauty and Fashion), one of the most popular and widely distributed magazines in the Soviet Ukraine. Only Mepen's name was credited. Gokhman reports that she worked day and night for months applying elaborate leather details on another coat by Mepen, later shown in

several international festivals that were received with widespread acclaim. She recalls Mepen saying that only he would be listed as the primary designer, "as it was impossible to list two Jewish names."¹⁸ Nevertheless, Gokhman was able to display this same coat as her own design on two occasions: once in her first major show in Kyiv in 1989, and later in her retrospective *Twenty-Six Long Years* at the Shevchenko Museum in 1993. For these exhibitions, as well as for her last appearance at the Kyiv Planetarium Gallery in 2000, there were corresponding fashion shows of Gokhman's jewelry and other designs, organized as special events at the openings and during the course of the venue. Dress designer Avdeeva sent her clothing and her "clothing demonstrators" for these presentations; and the artist's friends and museum staff also modeled Gokhman's independently produced designs.

While Gokhman had no money, she nevertheless cut quite the exotic figure and was known for her personal sense of style and taste. She not only wore her own elaborately configured leather jewelry and accessories, but produced clothing of her own design, collaborating with friends who were seamstresses or knitting machine operators, to create unique garments. Gokhman's next solo show was held at the Architect's Union in St. Petersburg in May 1981. Leather reliefs were exhibited with the belts, pendants, purses, and additional pieces, all displayed on gray linen panels. Gokhman's visual presence in the city was greatly expanded when St. Petersburg's historic Yelagin Palace mounted a major one-person show entitled

Plasticity and Color, on view for five months beginning in September 1981. Her exhibition was installed in the domed third-floor gallery of this majestic former summer palace, built in 1822 on a landscaped island in the Palladian style for the mother of Alexander I. Large hand-painted placards, announcing the exhibition and featuring Gokhman's necklace, were hung throughout the vast park and its surrounding environs. According to the artist, the KGB canceled the opening reception at the last moment. (She is uncertain whether her lack of official status or Jewishness, or both, was at issue.) Nevertheless, the exhibition remained on view and was widely seen and reviewed. These reviews have yet to be uncovered, and the Yelagin Palace, which has since reinvented itself several times in the intervening years, has no surviving records.¹⁹

Gokhman, however, has a collection of black and white photographs of the installation. Some images show double-sided, freestanding panels covered with gray linen displaying her leather reliefs (among them *Sunset in the Golosievo Forest*). Other photographs reveal gray linen panels on wooden frames, originally constructed for the Architect's Union exhibition, resting flat upon a sea of low pedestals, on top of which are presented leather pendants, belts, purses, bracelets, rings, and even a book cover and vase (Fig. 7). Glass vitrines, positioned on either side of the larger installation, held a vest and purse, one set garnet in color, the other green.

In 1983, Gokhman had a one-day show of her leatherwork in the Moscow offices of *Dekorativnoye Iskusstvo* (Decorative Art), the Soviet Union's most respected magazine of art and design. One of its leading writers, Irina Uvarova, wrote in a later (1986) issue:

The collection allows one to talk about 1: mastery of the craft—it is exceptional; 2: color, saturated and dense, but occasionally transparent; 3: dedication to one material—leather.... One can also talk about small leather études, fanciful otherworldly landscapes, where material and color play a sophisticated game.... But through all the things useful or intellectual and abstract, one very strong theme is pulsing through. It takes the form of a pendant, or a brooch, or an unknown flower. Perhaps they do not feel themselves as phenomena of applied art; instead, they wait for a dress to come to them ... (If they even care about such insignificant things as dresses).... *They are beautiful in a higher sense, and their occasionally painful affect is full of the absolute vitality of art* (emphasis added).²⁰

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, several Ukrainian fashion and design magazines featured Gokhman's leather work in copiously illustrated articles, with many of her pieces captured in multiple double-page editorial spreads. While her leather panels were occasionally illustrated, the focus was on her jewelry and other wearable accessories. Notable in these articles is the openly sexualized appearance of female nudes draped in Gokhman's wearables, a presentation frequently encouraged by the artist, as she served as the stylist for many of these fashion shoots. In some, the woman's body is shown from the back, as in Kolmykov's 1991 photograph, while other images are stylized frontally, the breasts bared. The

publication of these photographs reflects the move away from the prudery of the Soviet era that occurred in the 1990s.

Svershkova's 1998 article—from which this essay takes its title—was the last to be published on Gokhman's work in the Eastern European press. Although it illustrated many jewelry pieces and accessories, and only a single leather relief, Svershkova offered the following assertion:

By the way, Mila's creative search began with panels. Once one realizes this, it all becomes clear: the sources of Mila Gokhman's art stem from painterly and not applied impulse. And the abstract nature of leather "canvases" turns out to be not an aesthetic game of an applied artist (not even an enormously talented one), but something born and realized from an internal thought, an embodiment of an internal concept. This is the proper order. The jewelry pieces are a continuation of the technology of the panels, the concentrated result of the same creative and intellectual drive.²¹

Like Uvarova, Svershkova recognized Gokhman's work in the applied arts as a "higher" art indistinguishable from her artistic production and inseparable from the painterly and constructive.

In the late 1970s, Gokhman had expanded her practice by making collages. The artist meticulously cut a wide array of shapes and lines in plain and patterned papers that drift, float, overlap, and collide. Working with paper solved the problem of leather's unavailability and allowed her to compose materially with enhanced gestural freedom on a larger scale. As Gokhman offered, "Unlike leather, which is structurally dense, similar to mosaic, paper allows for flying lightness of lines."²² Henri Matisse's cut-outs, which offer strong precedents for her cut-paper works, were known to her (many examples by Matisse entered the Hermitage Museum collection in 1968), although Gokhman claims that she was more strongly drawn to the paintings of his early career. Several postcard reproductions of Vasily Kandinsky's abstract work currently sit in frames on Gokhman's shelves in her California residence. Kandinsky is a great and continuing influence, the inner spirituality of his working method and the musicality of his improvisations holding particular appeal.

Alongside themes from nature, music is a primary source of inspiration for Gokhman. Many works are dedicated to figures in the worlds of music and dance—of the eighteen pieces currently in her possession executed between 1977 and 1995, all but five directly reference music or dance in their titles or dedications. Moreover, she employs line, shape, and color to evoke music's abstract rhythms, utilizing multipanel paper collages with each panel serving as the equivalent of a different movement within a musical score. The earliest surviving collage in her collection, *From Chaos to Harmony* (1977; Fig. 8), is a five-panel work, each panel smaller than 6 x 4 inches. The work's narrative development reads from left to right, beginning with a panel filled with a frenzied accumulation of coiled shapes in gray, black, and royal blue, and ending with two gray marks quietly disposed, a movement from density to scarcity. This

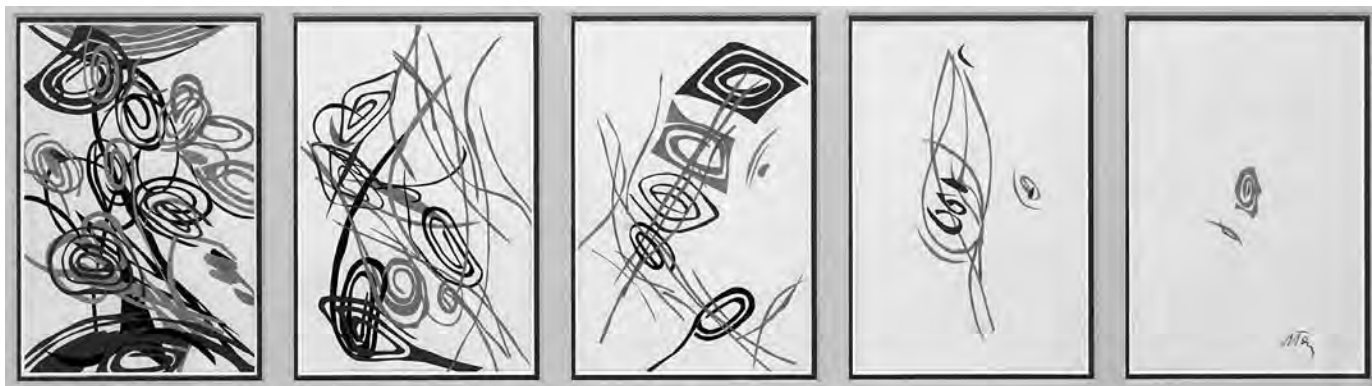


Fig. 8. Mila Gokhman, *From Chaos to Harmony* (1977), cut and pasted paper, five panels, each 5 3/4" x 3 3/4". © Mila Gokhman.

piece is dedicated to the composer Valentyn Silvestrov, whose musical works have been characterized as involving "a fading into nothingness."²³ Silvestrov was the husband of Gokhman's dear friend, the musicologist Larissa Bondarenko, and several of the artist's pieces are devoted to them.²⁴ His recorded music was played in the galleries of her retrospective at the Shevchenko Museum in 1993. As an inherently abstract art, music was freer from the demands of Soviet Socialist Realism that constrained the visual arts. Gokhman's contemporaries, composers like Silvestrov, Sofia Gubaidulina, and Mark Pekarsky, were able to experiment with influences from the West, like serialism and aleatory music, and to have their work performed, since they occupied "the gray space between legal and illegal" during the Soviet era.²⁵

Gokhman's triptych, *Improvisation* (1991; Fig. 9), is dedicated to Mark Pekarsky, a close acquaintance who was a famous Jewish Muscovite percussionist and conductor, and the director of the renowned Percussion Instruments Ensemble (founded in 1976). Each panel was envisioned as a score for musical improvisation by Pekarsky's ensemble. The trailing, undulating

lines in varying colors and patterns connote sound waves and appear to signal different degrees of emphasis and volume. The circular forms in the center panel suggest, strikingly, the crash of cymbals. Gokhman produced this work when it was suggested that Pekarsky's ensemble play to accompany her planned exhibition at the Central House of Artists in Moscow.²⁶ Unfortunately, the exhibition never happened; Gokhman later learned that she was expected to pay a substantial fee to use the installation space. She devoted collages to other important figures in the Russian musical world of her day, including the choreographer Boris Eifman, whose associated prima ballerinas and dancers were among her circle of friends, and the composer Sofia Gubaidulina, whom she did not know, but admired. A collage dedicated to Gubaidulina, *Musical Journey* (1989), consists of a single panel on which a blue swatch horizontally bisects the bright green ground and thin red lines dance in arcs and swirls around the surface.

Several of Gokhman's collages from 1991 refer in their titles and compositional rhythms to the musical genres of jazz and blues. She recalls attending concerts of American jazz



Fig. 9. Mila Gokhman, *Improvisation* (c. 1991), cut and pasted paper (triptych), each panel 12 1/2" x 9". © Mila Gokhman.



Fig. 10. Mila Gokhman, *The Small Corners of My Garden (which I don't possess)* (2019), cut and pasted paper with watercolor, 11 1/4" x 11 1/4". © Mila Gokhman.

musicians in Kyiv at that time.²⁷ That year saw the independence of Ukraine and an opening of art, culture, and society to influences from abroad.²⁸ However, not only did Ukraine not loosen its strict control of art and culture during Gorbachev's time, but throughout her livelihood in Eastern Europe, Ukraine remained notoriously antisemitic. When Gokhman left engineering to become an artist, she lost her government salary and official status, essentially becoming a "non-person," and maintains that it was "sheer luck" that she was never sent to a labor camp. Although she had the occasional lover, she never married or had children.²⁹ The papers enabling Gokhman to immigrate to the United States arrived in 1991, but she decided to stay until 2000 because this period was the beginning of Ukraine's autonomy. While there was much chaos, uncertainty, and corruption, this era was also a sign of great promise in the literal sense, as Gokhman received numerous promises for the exposure of her art. While she experienced a host of disappointments, a few opportunities came through.³⁰

Gokhman's first solo exhibition in her native Kyiv was in 1989 at the Museum of History, Podil, which was headed by an architect and located in what was once the rectory of the Florovsky Monastery. (In 1991 the space was again repurposed, with no surviving records of her exhibition.) In 1993, her mid-career retrospective, *Twenty-Six Long Years*, was held in three large halls in the Shevchenko Museum, Kyiv, and featured leather-work, paper collages, and floral improvisations—installation works consisting of fresh and artificial flowers, tree stumps and branches, draped fabric, among other pieces. This month-long exhibition had both opening and closing receptions attended by members of the new government and foreign diplomats. Museum officials delivered welcoming and laudatory speeches, including one by the well-known art critic and collector Igor

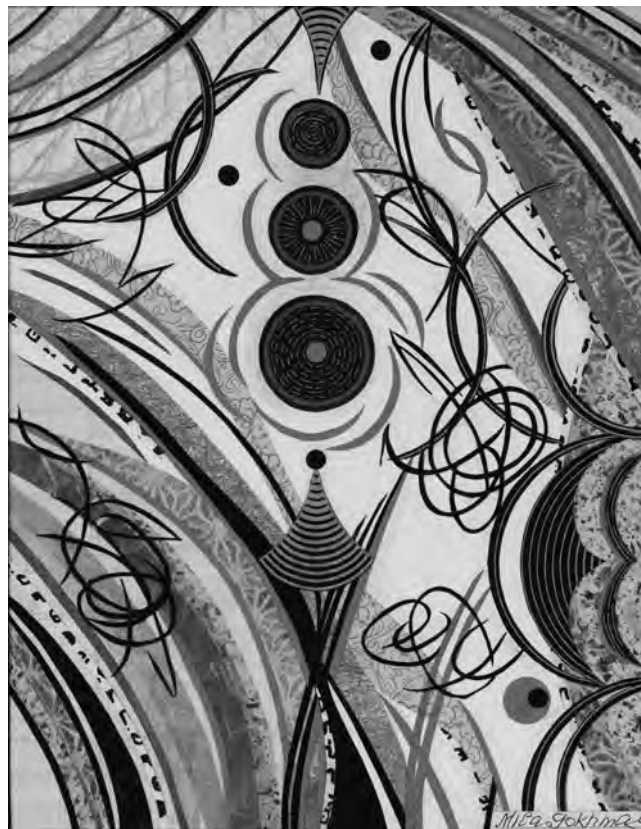


Fig. 11. Mila Gokhman, *Light & Shadow #6* (2021), cut and pasted paper and watercolor, 14" x 11". © Mila Gokhman.

Dychenko.³¹ Both receptions included concerts in the exhibition space by renowned musicians—among them Oleg Kudryashov, flutist and conductor of the Kyiv Chamber Orchestra. The concerts were followed by a fashion show with women showcasing Gokhman's leather jewelry and accessories.³²

Gokhman's final show in Ukraine's capital, called her "farewell show" by the artist, was presented in the Kyiv Planetarium Gallery in 2000. She was promised this exhibition for several years, but the director, a respected art critic, was famously antisemitic. It was not until the artist was packed and ready to leave for the United States that she was invited to install her work in all media. Gokhman mounted the exhibition, deinstalled two days before her flight, and carefully packed the work back into suitcases. Again, no gallery records exist, but a photograph shows Gokhman at the opening, speaking into a microphone before a large crowd and television cameras.³³

In 2000, Gokhman left Kyiv for Southern California with her mother, moving into the small apartment that she still occupies.³⁴ However, lacking art world connections, her only exhibition of note during her first two decades in the United States was a small, two-person show at the California State Fullerton Grand Central Art Center in Santa Ana, in 2010, which came about when a professor saw and admired her work.³⁵ Through decades of continued obscurity, she never stopped working, producing an extended series of elaborately beaded necklaces, and cut and pasted paper pieces, mostly in

thematic series.³⁶ As she said recently, “Art is my religion. It has helped me overcome disease and be happy in what I was doing, despite my art not being seen.”³⁷

During the extended period of quarantine in 2020, Gokhman conceived of an unrealized exhibition called *Mila's Garden* consisting of paper collages that explored themes of nature, among them the poignantly titled *The Small Corners of My Garden (which I don't possess)* of 2019 (Fig. 10). The project features photographs of nude models adorned with elaborate crowns of artificial flowers made by Gokhman and draped in cascades of her beaded jewelry. Subsequently, Gokhman produced a stunning series of fifteen paper collages, *Light & Shadow* (2021; Fig. 11), which express, according to the artist, her “spiritual opposition to the devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic, while conveying the joys of liberation and hope.” The *spirit* that emanates from this series, as in her other works, does not involve spirituality in any formal sense. Emulating the healing and uplift derived from poetry, nature, and music, Gokhman seeks to communicate a sense of lightness and freedom in her work by improvising with free-flowing lines and confetti-like compositions. In the *Light & Shadow* collages, a wide variety of plain and patterned textured papers, cut in circles, arcs, and squiggles, and a recurrent conical shape, dynamically array across the paper surface to conjure plays of space and depth. These works, while structurally divergent, are united by a tonal palette of orange, brown, and yellow, with black and white and touches of watercolor. Gokhman envisioned the series both as exhibition materials and as large-scale book illustrations, where the images would be interspersed with English and Russian poetry by an international roster of inspirational writers throughout her lifetime, among them Pasternak, Rainer Maria Rilke, William Blake, and Juan Ramón Jiménez. While the book project has yet to be successfully realized, a modest exhibition, including the *Light & Shadow* collages, together with a selection of earlier works, was presented in the gallery of the Merage JCC in Newport Beach, California, from April 24 to May 23, 2022.³⁸ The Russian invasion of her homeland weighs heavily on the artist, whose many friends remain in Kyiv. The spirit with which she defied the Soviet system fifty years ago burns in her still.

In her ninth decade, Gokhman's creative energies continue to flow. Her artistic production is astounding in its originality, vision, and technical perfection, and her spirit and perseverance through the many years of seclusion and frustrated aspirations are no less inspiring as a life force radiating from her art. “Spirit Lives Wherever It Chooses” is intended as a new beginning and investigation: to discover works that have been lost, to unearth museum archives, to uncover newspaper reviews and television footage, and to interview potential contacts. For the meantime, the accumulated energy of a lifetime of work pulsates against the walls of Gokhman's tiny apartment, waiting to be set free upon the world. ●

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Notes

1. Yuliia Shylenko, e-mail to the author, Feb. 18, 2022.
2. The title of the present article is the English translation (from Russian) of the one used by Lyudmila Svershkova for her profusely illustrated and brilliantly articulated article on Mila Gokhman, which appeared in *Yehupets Literary Almanac* 4 (Kyiv: Institute of Judaic Studies, 1998), 278–92. It is appropriated here with Svershkova's permission. Although Svershkova's article was written in 1993, at the time of Gokhman's retrospective exhibition at the Shevchenko Museum, it did not appear in print until five years later.
3. Ibid. Svershkova's article and additional texts in Russian quoted here were translated by Gokhman's nephew, David Tsali; original page numbers are indicated, where possible.
4. Julia Tulovsky, curator of Russian and Nonconformist Art, Zimmerli Art Museum, telephone conversation with the author, Jan. 29, 2022.
5. Olena Martynyuk, “Painting Ukrainian Perestroika: A Parade of Excesses,” in *Painting in Excess: Kyiv's Art Revival, 1985–1993*, exh. cat. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, Zimmerli Art Museum, 2021), 12.
6. Tulovsky, co-curator of *Painting in Excess*, noted with interest that while Gokhman was unknown to her, several handsome wood panels, featuring strips of leather, were also found among the early works of her father, Alexander Konstantinov (1953–2019), a Muscovite artist known for creating large public and architectural projects. Gokhman began working with leather in 1967 and exhibiting in 1973, so it seems likely that his works post-date hers by several years. Tulovsky, telephone conversation.
7. Women artists working in the categories of craft and design have historically found their work marginalized or ignored. A comprehensive retrospective that brilliantly addressed this issue was the recent landmark show, *Sophie Taeuber-Arp: Living Abstraction*, which originated at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 2021.
8. On March 1, 2022, Russian bombs damaged the Holocaust memorial at the site. Gokhman's family survived the Nazi invasion of Kyiv (the Babi Yar Massacre), having moved eastward to the Ural Mountains shortly before. Her father, a manager of a plant that manufactured electronic components (important for the war effort), was relocated. The family endured harsh conditions until they returned, in 1944, to Kyiv, a city destroyed by the war.
9. While they are of a wholly different scale, media, and intended placement, see, for example, the bilateral symmetry and radiating forms of Hilma af Klint's paintings, *Group X, Altarpieces, Nos. 1–3* (1915), oil and metal leaf on canvas, approx. 93 1/2 x 70 5/8 in., in Tracey Bashkoff, ed., *Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2018), 161–63.
10. Mila Gokhman on the Golosievo Forest, “Statements,” Sept. 7, 2020, <https://www.milagokhman.art>, accessed June 20, 2021. The mood and composition of *Sunset in the Golosievo Forest* recall Piet Mondrian's *Woods near Oele* (1908), in Gemeentemuseum den Haag, The Hague, Netherlands.
11. For information on this long overlooked Victorian painter, whose abstract works predate by several decades those of Kandinsky, Mondrian, and Hilma af Klint, see Ernst Vegelin and Barnaby Wright, eds., *Georgiana Houghton: Spirit Drawings* (London: The Courtauld Gallery and Paul Hoberton Publishing, 2016).
12. Gokhman reports that countless other leather panels have been variously lost: either given to museums and curators, exhibited and never returned to her, presented as gifts to friends, or left behind, too bulky to transport.
13. Gokhman, “Statements,” 2002, <https://www.milagokhman.art>, accessed June 20, 2021.
14. Gokhman designed the piece in hopes of it being shown to the French designer Yves Saint Laurent in 1986–87, during the

- presentation of the designer's work in Moscow and St. Petersburg (a wish never realized). Klymykov's photograph accompanied Svershkova's article of 1998.
15. Image and caption illustrated in Olha Korniienko, "Ukrainian Fashion Houses as Centers of Soviet Fashion Representation," *Hungarian Historical Review* 10, no. 3 (2021): 506, https://hunghist.org/images/Korniienko_doi2.pdf, accessed June 20, 2021.
 16. *Ibid.*, 513.
 17. *Ibid.*, 514.
 18. Iryna Danylevska, who founded Ukrainian Fashion Week in 1997, recalled in a 2016 interview that during the Soviet era in Ukraine, "Hertz Mepen ... was awarded with 'Gold Scissors' by Pierre Cardin, but he could not go to Paris to take the award. He was a Jew and it was forbidden for him to leave the country." Danylevska, quoted in "Iryna Danylevska about Ukrainian Fashion," *Destinations UA*, Feb. 11, 2016, <https://destinations.com.ua/faces/iryna-danylevska-about-ukrainian-fashion>, accessed June 20, 2021.
 19. Tatiana Ershova, Deputy Director for Museum Activities of Kirov Central Park I, Yelagin Museum, stated: "It was very interesting to know that an exhibition of such a wonderful artist as Mila Gokhman was held in our palace. The museum ... was organized only in 1987; before that there were exhibition halls in the palace and there was no archive of exhibitions held...." Ershova, e-mail to the author, Jan. 13, 2022.
 20. Irina Uvarova, "Leather Sculpture of Mila Gokhman," *Dekorativnoye Iskusstvo* (Moscow) (Decorative Art), no. 10 (1986): 24–25. The poor quality of photographs from the 1983 showing delayed publication of the article until 1986, when better images were obtained.
 21. Lyudmila Svershkova, "Spirit Lives Wherever It Chooses," *Yehupets Literary Almanac* 4 (Kyiv: Institute of Judaic Studies, 1998), 278–92.
 22. Mila Gokhman, "Life Statement" (unpublished text, Nov. 1, 2021), Mila Gokhman Archive, Stanton, CA.
 23. Valentyn Silvestrov's music is characterized as "fading into nothingness" or "into toneless whispers," in Raymond Tuttle, review of *Requiem for Larissa*, by Silverstov, *Classical Net*, 2004, <http://www.classical.net/music/recs/reviews/e/ecm01778a.php>, accessed June 20, 2021.
 24. Gokhman's three-panel paper collage, *Requiem for Larissa*, made at the time of her friend's early death in 1996, shares a title with Silvestrov's musical composition composed between 1997 and 1999.
 25. For a fascinating and comprehensive study of music by Gokhman's contemporaries that occupied this "gray space" during the Soviet period, see Peter J. Schmelz, *Such Freedom, If Only Musical: Unofficial Soviet Music during the Thaw* (Oxford, UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009).
 26. For information about exhibitions of Soviet, Russian, and Western art at the Central House of Artists in Moscow during this period, and for a comprehensive account of international exchanges, see Kate Fowle and Ruth Addison, eds., *Exhibit Russia: The New International Decade 1986–1996* (Moscow: Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, 2016).
 27. The history of jazz in the Soviet Union is recounted in S. Frederick Starr, *Red and Hot: The Fate of Jazz in the Soviet Union* (St. Petersburg, FL: Limelight Publishers, 2004).
 28. From the time she began creating art in the late 1960s, Gokhman's circle of friends in Eastern Europe consisted of artists, designers, writers, musicians, and dancers. All were members of a bohemian underground or, as Gokhman identifies it, "the intelligentsia." Many had been university trained or schooled in official academies of art or music, but they broke away from the doctrines of the proletarian dictatorship and the demands of Socialist Realism to pursue their own paths. Gokhman saw many of her colleagues' nonconformist work banned and her friends imprisoned, sent to labor camps, or even killed. A great many of Gokhman's friends and colleagues, Jewish and otherwise, chose to immigrate to Israel, the US, Germany, and elsewhere.
 29. She continued to live in her parents' apartment through the time she moved to the US with her mother in 2000, her father having died after a long illness a few years before.
 30. As Gokhman recalls, "I was promised exhibitions in different countries, films, and special laboratories exploring the possibilities and properties of leather." Conversation with the author, Stanton, CA, Nov. 8, 2021. Among the missed opportunities was an offer in the late 1980s, when she was courted by Moskovskaya Palitra (Moscow Palette), one of the first commercial galleries in the Soviet Union, founded in collaboration with the Soviet Ministry of Culture in 1989 to take Soviet work abroad. (A physical space opened in Moscow in 1994.) At the time, she thought that she would soon be leaving Kyiv (her papers came through in 1991), so she declined their offer to handle her work. For more on Moscow Palette, see the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art's Russian Art Archive Network, <https://russianartarchive.net/en/catalogue/collection/moscow-palette-gallery-archive>, accessed Sept. 1, 2022.
 31. In 2015, Igor Dyachenko's extensive collection of paintings and drawings was donated by his widow, Valeria Virsca, to the state-owned Mystetskyi Arsenal (Art Arsenal) in Kyiv. (The catalogue of this collection is available in Ukrainian at http://uartlib.org/downloads/DyachenkoCatalogue_uartlib.org.pdf.) No works by Gokhman were included in this donation, but Dyachenko specifically collected work in all media by Jewish artists. The author was in communication via email with Olha Melnyk, curator of the Museum Collection, with regard to the Dyachenko family's possession of any of Gokhman's works. The war intervened this correspondence.
 32. Yuliia Shylenko, currently chief curator of the museum, recalled in her email to the author, Feb. 18, 2022: "For the first time in the museum, the opening was like an extravaganza, a vivid action, rather than a static statement.... Mila attracted us, young researchers at the Taras Shevchenko Museum, as models who demonstrated her products. She personally picked out accessories for each of us that emphasized our individuality. It was a fascinating experience, the memories of which will be remembered for a lifetime." Gokhman recalls that the opening banquet, sponsored by a bank, offered food and drink in abundance at a time of famine in Kyiv.
 33. In an email dated Jan. 26, 2022, Dirdovskaya, Kyiv Planetarium Director, wrote to the author: "Since 2000, the planetarium has been reorganized and repaired. That is why no information about the exhibition you are interested in, as well as about many other events, has been saved."
 34. Within the year, her mother's dementia was so advanced that she was moved into a nursing home.
 35. The exhibition was organized by Mike McGee, Professor of Art History, California State University, Fullerton, and founder of Grand Central Art Center, a University satellite, in downtown Santa Ana. Despite her indigent circumstances, she has managed to care for her works elaborately, in anticipation of an exhibition.
 36. Gokhman's jewelry, other accessories, and clothing designs were extensively documented by Phillip Ritchie, a professional photographer based in Costa Mesa, CA, who became aware of Gokhman's work through the Grand Central Art Center exhibition. Ritchie hired models and photographed Gokhman's designs with Gokhman serving as stylist. He self-published a small catalogue, *Mila Gokhman: Fifty Years of Design*: <https://imageevent.com/reddoorstudio/milagokhman>. In June 2011, Ritchie also produced a video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hZDbpZTpjBA>.
 37. Gokhman, conversation with the author, Stanton, CA, Sept. 15, 2020.
 38. On April 24, 2022, a special sale was held to benefit Ukrainian humanitarian relief, with more than two dozen collages and a large collection of jewelry donated by Gokhman.

SOFTENING THE BLOW

SKIN, DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, AND PROTECTION

IN WORKS BY ELISABETH PERRAULT AND OREKA JAMES

By Julia Skelly

In spring 2021, Projet Pangée, a gallery in Montreal, Canada, held simultaneous exhibitions: one was entitled *Screams of a Thousand Suns* for the Black Toronto-based artist Oreka James (b. 1991), and the other entitled *Ces petites morts domestiques* (Little Domestic Deaths) for the white Montreal-based artist Elisabeth Perrault (b. 1996). Projet Pangée specializes in the work of female artists, including the Toronto artist Shary Boyle (b. 1972), who represented Canada at the Venice Biennale in 2013, and is known for her paintings, drawings, installations, and sculptures that often revolve around monstrous female figures. James and Perrault are of a younger generation than Boyle, and they also work in a range of media: James in painting, both on wood and canvas, and Perrault with textiles, a particularly “rich” medium, according to the artist, because of its malleability and association with everyday, “quotidian” life. In an exchange of e-mails, Perrault explained: “I have always worked with cloth. Since I was seven years old I made dresses for my dolls. When I was eight years old I asked my mother for a sewing machine for Christmas. I think that it is a really rich material, because its possibilities of use are infinite. Furthermore, I think it’s really interesting, that every day, our bodies are in constant relation with cloth: we live with it, sleep under it, cover our windows with it....”¹

James (they/she) depicts Black subjects as fluid, otherworldly, and resilient. The works are not explicitly related to anti-Black violence and rhetoric, but it is possible to read them as critiques of historical and ongoing narratives in which Black people experience bodily harm. Projet Pangée described *Screams of a Thousand Suns* as “a conduit of hope and possibility, examining the enormities and fluctuations between loss and love, life and death while making multiple cross-references to oral traditions, African-Caribbean folklore, ancient cultures, animism, all within attempts to provide sight into the future.”² Perhaps because of these varied references, most of James’s paintings are untitled, and thus the artist does not force viewers to a determined interpretation, although they do intend their

pieces specifically for Black spectators, making me, a white feminist art historian, the “other” to their artworks. I am not the intended viewer. Nevertheless, there is an open-endedness to these works: they can be read in terms of Black grief and/or Black jouissance; Black experience and/or Black futurity. In what follows in this essay, James’s paintings are read as vessels of both critique and psychic resilience; importantly, there is never any visible violence in their works.

Perrault’s fiber artworks, on the other hand, are sometimes explicitly concerned with violence, specifically domestic or “intimate” violence, and she employs textiles and “domestic” objects, including furniture (tables, chairs, mattresses) and settings to engage with this difficult subject, in part because of the conventional view of fiber-based practices as “women’s” amateur work and the domestic or “private” space as a specifically “feminine” space.³ This article considers both James and Perrault’s works in dialogue through a framework of violence towards vulnerable individuals—focusing on James’s strategy of protecting their Black subjects and Perrault’s use of textiles and domestic objects—and the way that skin as a canvas signifies violence in both of the artists’ oeuvres. Methodologically, this discussion—inspired by Projet Pangée’s concurrent exhibitions—is a way of moving away from the marginalization of textile art, which can risk, in its categorization as “craft” and interpretation as merely “useful,” a reification of the art/craft hierarchy, especially when artists working with textiles are only explored or exhibited alongside other artists working with cloth.⁴

Skin is significant in the work of both James and Perrault. Many scholars have considered the way Black skin has signified complex aesthetic concepts in relation to shine, slave identity, and monstrosity.⁵ Krista A. Thompson has discussed how slave owners would oil Black people’s skin before slave auctions to make their bodies more seductive and attractive as objects to consume and purchase.⁶ According to Mechthild Fend’s historical research in *Fleshing Out Surfaces: Skin in*

French Art and Medicine, 1650–1850: “The perception of people’s [skin] colour changed gradually from the sixteenth century, and this shift was related to the colonial expansion of European nations, the increase of the transatlantic slave trade and the exploitation of African slaves in America and the Caribbean. ‘Black’ became a synonym of slave and a discriminative marker in the colonial politics of slave labour.”⁷ James’s paintings draw attention to their Black subjects’ skin by depicting parts of the bodily surface with areas of white (raw or unpainted) space, which the artist insists is not an act of “white-washing.”⁸ (This artistic strategy will be explored further in later sections.)

Comparatively, in Perrault’s *Ma peau de 24 ans* (My Skin at the Age of 24) (2020; Pl. 17), the artist has stitched a skin suit, ostensibly her own embroidered skin from the age of twenty-four, shed like a snake. This symbolic shedding has left a “skin craft” that shows traces of harm on the body, including bruises, but the various visible marks can also be read as tattoos.⁹ The Montreal-based, non-binary artist Laurence Philomène wrote in their recent book project, *Puberty*, “I get tattoos to mark chapters in my life, an ongoing living storybook.”¹⁰ This act of collecting tattoos on the skin, documenting specific moments and memories, is an example of what Jay Posser has described as a “skin autobiography.”¹¹ Perrault, too, is interested in how skin documents lived experiences. In *Thinking Through the Skin*, Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey propose a “feminist philosophy of skin,” one that considers how skin becomes meaningful: “To ask such a question is to suggest that the skin is always open to being read.”¹² James and Perrault make the subject of skin meaningful in their artworks with different objectives by using diverse materials and distinct artistic strategies. The feminist philosophy of skin offered in this reading of their works demands an intersectional approach—an interpretation of skin as both a resilient and a vulnerable canvas, and an acknowledgement that skin equally indexes domestic violence and acts of agency and self-possession. James—a Black artist—and Perrault—a white, cis feminist artist—have had divergent lived experiences, and their art deserves to be read in ways that attend to specificity and difference, as well as to ways that demonstrate the unintended interrelationships amongst their works. An intersectional feminist approach to both their practices is absolutely crucial if we are to take an ethical and activist stance as art historians.

Oreka James is a Black Canadian artist, born in Toronto, who paints Black figures that are depicted at the edge of the canvas so their faces are not accessible, or are shown with minimal facial features. In each work, certain body parts (such as hands, feet, or breasts) are painted with some white-ish pigment or left unpainted. As James told Canadian art critic Tiana Reid in 2018, this process was “a way to visually wrestle with dissociation, the experience of disconnection from reality.” James continued, “It reminded me of the figure being present but also not being present at the same time. It’s something that’s intuitive, that I can’t really explain, but if I had to explain it, I would say it’s mirroring a psychological

aspect of being Black in this world.”¹³ We might relate James’s statement with Frantz Fanon’s psychoanalytic theories related to the skin and psyche articulated in *Black Skin, White Masks* of 1952. Fanon suggested that one of the consequences of anti-Black racism was the desire to erase one’s Blackness: “Out of the blackest part of my soul, through the zone of hachures, surges up this desire to be suddenly white.”¹⁴ That is not to say, however, that James feels the same way that Fanon often felt, but rather that James is communicating something invisible (a psychological state) through visual means in their paintings.¹⁵

Several scholars have broadly interrogated the physical and psychological consequences of anti-Black racism, and their theories are highly relevant for understanding the tense, fragmented Black bodies that James depicts in their paintings. Anne Anlin Cheng has studied “the melancholy of race,” and Ann Cvetkovich has argued that “racial depression” is one result of anti-Black racism and the intergenerational trauma that has resulted from slavery.¹⁶ More recently, Mary Frances Winters has investigated what she calls “Black fatigue” in her book *Black Fatigue: How Racism Erodes the Mind, Body, and Spirit*.¹⁷ All of these sources illuminate the fact that anti-Black racism, whether in the context of slavery or in our contemporary period, conjures material (physiological or otherwise), inducing affective, psychological, and spiritual consequences for Black people.¹⁸ A large untitled painting by James (2021) uses dramatic body language to evoke psychological despair, but also, perhaps, transcendence. A naked Black masculine figure is depicted kneeling in sunbeams on a wooden floor, in the center of a spare room with several arched windows. The figure’s muscular legs have white sections behind the left knee and near the groin on the upper left thigh. His arms are bent at the elbows and his hands are pressed upward to where his face and head should be, but instead of facial features, all we see is a brilliant burst of light emanating from the figure’s palms. The subject’s placement in rays of sunlight, along with the splashes of white paint, may be interpreted as a flash of insight, an epiphany, or an experience of psychological pain that obliterates subjectivity. It is a powerful painting in part because of its affective ambiguities.

It is important to note that James does not deliberately or explicitly depict Black pain in their artworks.¹⁹ One of their most powerful works, *Softly, dusk whispered into my ear, AWAKEN* (2016; Fig. 1), represents a solitary Black female figure with a long neck, face undisclosed, and parts of her torso and right breast bearing white paint. It is portrayed with the hand near the pubis, holding a flower with petals resembling female genitalia between the legs, acting as “an optical illusion.”²⁰ Though not an explicit representation of self-pleasure, the work does inevitably allude to the possibility of Black bodily pleasure or “Black jouissance,” while blocking the viewer’s access to the figure’s actual pubic area. The open portrayal of the figure speaks of vulnerability, and the solitary placement in a window or niche suggests isolation in co-existence with sexual agency. While James’s painting is distinct in many ways from queer Black artist Mickalene Thomas’s (b. 1971) work, both artists draw attention to Black

female pleasure and the skin surface: James through the white flutters of paint on certain areas of their subjects' bodies, and Thomas with the material addition of rhinestones on her female subjects' skin to suggest make-up or shimmer. Sarah Stefana Smith has also noted the way that Thomas's materials foreground the Black female subjects' skin: "An assortment of textiles, paints, and glitters [function] to construct epidermal surfaces. These epidermal surfaces vacillate between real and fictive geographies of black embodiment and subjectivity."²¹ The difference, of course, is that Thomas covers Black skin with rhinestones, which both protects and draws attention to the epidermic surface, while James's painterly act of depicting their Black subjects' bodies as fluid and fluttering draws attention to the surface of the skin while also suggesting movement and agency, even transcendence. James has articulated this artistic device: "The white pieces one can find within the figures I paint aren't the act of whitewashing, but rather the fluttering of the figure appearing in and out of this realm. They began unintentionally as I draw my figures then paint them in and felt the spaces needed to be left blank."²²

Rather than reading their subjects as fragmented by the frame, James prefers to think of their figures' faces as "undisclosed" to the viewer: "The figures' heads are not 'cut off' but rather intentionally undisclosed as an attempt to protect their identities or to allow the figures to have their autonomy."²³ Nonetheless, James's work can, perhaps, be linked with the cut-paper silhouettes by controversial artist Kara Walker (b. 1969). In choosing not to disclose the face in many of their depictions of Black subjects, however, James has avoided the racial visual stereotypes that Walker has been criticized for in her images—particularly directed at her by other Black female artists, like Betye Saar (b. 1926), who has taken issue with Walker's abject perpetuation of the tradition of racist, pseudo-science physiognomy—which read the face for evidence of racial difference and indications of intelligence, or lack thereof.²⁴ Whereas Walker's silhouette panoramas and installations, such as *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby* (2014: Domino Sugar Factory, Brooklyn, NY)—a monumental Black female subject as sphinx, presented with exaggerated lips and the headscarf of a "mammy" figure—employ facial and bodily stereotypes historically attached to Black individuals, James does not exaggerate any particular body parts or features, such as the sexualized buttocks, on their Black female subjects. As Amber Jamilla Musser wrote about Walker's *Marvelous Sugar Baby* in *Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance*, the artist "offers [a] case study to think about the fraught relationship between blackness and sexuality. Here, the presence of the black vulva disrupts because it illustrates the difficulty of seeing black women outside the realm of the consumable."²⁵ Musser also discussed Mickalene Thomas's painting, *Origin of the Universe I* (2012), an appropriation of and critical engagement with Gustave Courbet's *L'Origine du monde* (The Origin of the World; 1866), the "infamous headless, nude portrait of a woman."²⁶ In Thomas's work, she fragments the Black model's vulva, embellishing it with "excessive" rhinestones. As Musser states: "Instead of trafficking in [the] legacy of anonymous pain,



Fig. 1. Oreka James, *Softly, dusk whispered into my ear, AWAKEN* (2016), oil paint, oil stick, and acrylic gouache on stretched canvas, 60" x 47 1/2".

Thomas illuminates the pleasures of tactility and opacity offered by excess surface."²⁷ While there is the suggestion of intimacy and sensuality in some of James's paintings (for instance through the combination of two Black bodies in a single pictorial space), which have received dramatically less attention than those of the earlier generation of artists such as Thomas and Walker, James neither depicts explicit sexual encounters nor do they expose the fragmenting or ornamenting of their Black subjects' genitals (male or female), thereby avoiding the risk of triggering racial trauma in their Black viewers or allowing other viewers to fetishize their subjects.

The face in Western art has long been the seat (or site) not only of identity and individuality, but also of intellect and subjectivity. White men were associated with the head, and by extension, the mind; people of color (and to a lesser extent, white women) were associated, conversely, with the body, or base matter. This is, as I have argued elsewhere, the reason that the face is so important for the Black British artist Lubaina Himid (b. 1954), whose installation *Swallow Hard: The Lancaster Dinner Service* (2007: Judges' Lodgings Museum, Lancaster, UK) depicts in acrylic the countenance of Black subjects on ceramic tureens, jugs, and plates.²⁸ By contrast, James's depiction of their Black subjects as anonymous (without faces) runs the risk of reifying this historical discourse, wherein Black individuals are discursively framed as bodies with no minds, a



Fig. 2. Oreka James, *Untitled* (2022), oil and acrylic on canvas with nails, 77" x 63".

racist lie that was long used to justify slavery.²⁹ The strategic act of fragmentation—or to use their own words, the lack of disclosure—in James's works is, on the one hand, a risky one. In *The Repeating Body: Slavery's Visual Resonance in the Contemporary*, Kimberly Juanita Brown examines the "fragmented figurations of the maternal" in order to argue that "[c]ognizant of the relationship between violence, sexuality, and maternity within the institution of slavery, contemporary writers and artists use the sight of the fragmented slave woman's body to underscore the vulnerabilities faced with little reprieve."³⁰ Likewise, in *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects*, Christina Sharpe demonstrates that violent fragmentation was and continues to be—in the post-slavery context—endemic to anti-Black racism. Sharpe "explores the monstrous internalization and perpetuation of ... violence in various forms of power and desire among the formerly enslaved and those who claimed ownership over them," further arguing that "the complicated articulations of sex, violence, and use, the occupying or refusing to occupy the space of the other, are necessary to understanding power in relationships on the intimate level and in their larger historical expression."³¹ Sharpe also discusses Walker's works, stating that she "read Walker's cut-outs as representing a violent past that is not yet past in such seductive forms that black and white viewers alike find themselves, as if against their will, looking and looking

again."³² Sharpe continues: "For white viewers this act of looking at Walker's allegories of slavery often entails a seduction by or complicity with violent acts of reading, seeing, naming, and fixing into stereotype that resolves in disavowal and projection. For black viewers this looking can mean encountering shame and violence and sometimes refusing this representation or sometimes being seduced into and complicit with violent acts of reading, seeing, naming, and fixing into stereotype; it means engaging with the disfigurements of black survival that we would prefer to look away from."³³ For contemporary viewers, this engagement with the historical narratives and visual tactics of the "disfigurements of black survival" and anti-Black racism is contingent to the process of exploring fragmentation in James's works. In Linda Nochlin's text, *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity*, compiled from earlier lectures, the feminist scholar refers to the "signifying power of the fragment," and observes that, in visual art, bodies that are literally "in pieces," or "broken, amputated—serve to remind us that there are times in the history of modern representation when the dismembered human body exists for the viewer not just as a metaphor but as an historical reality."³⁴ Although Nochlin was not explicitly addressing race, racism, or slavery in this passage, her statement does have implications for the dangers of fragmentation in contemporary art representing marginalized individuals who endure literal (material) fragmentation in their lived experiences.

The antidote to this risky act of nondisclosure and anonymity is the representation of Black joy, or what Musser calls Black or Brown "jouissance," building on the psychoanalytic ideas developed by Jacques Lacan, namely his vision of jouissance as a "sensation that is beyond pleasure," but one that Lacan does not explore in terms of specificity (that is, for people of color), assuming the whiteness of the embodied subject.³⁵ According to Musser, jouissance "can be understood as excess sensation."³⁶ Her Black feminist framework moves away from Lacan's limited masculinist theory in taking an intersectional approach that focuses on the specific embodied and psychological experiences of Brown and Black individuals.³⁷ Crucially, Musser suggests that, unlike Lacan's jouissance, "Brown jouissance emphasizes the production of selfhood in relation to the social. While the self-Other relation underlies all formulations of jouissance, the Other is often neglected, which, in turn, removes the social from the scene of jouissance. Foregrounding relations with the Other brings objectification, race, and gender into the mix."³⁸ She also notes, in a fascinating art historical footnote, that Lacan owned Courbet's *Origin of the World* for many years, keeping it "hidden behind a screen."³⁹ The affective strategy of representing Black joy, Black pleasure, and Black jouissance is becoming more and more prevalent in the work of Black artists, including James, Thomas, and Kezna Dalz (b. 1996), an emerging Montreal artist who also goes by Teenadult. This critical strategy of depicting Black embodied joy is a riposte to anti-Black racism, but it is also a deliberate balance to Black pain, both in art by Black artists and in Black lives. In his last exhibition before he died, the renowned curator Okwui



Fig. 3. Elisabeth Perrault, Installation view of *Ces petites morts domestiques* (Little Domestic Deaths) (2020) at Projet Pangée (2021). Canvas, polyester, pressed flowers, and inflatable mattress, 36" x 60" x 84." Collection of the artist; courtesy of Projet Pangée, Montreal. Photo: Jean-Michael Seminaro.

Enwezor developed a framework to consider contemporary art by African American artists. The 2021 exhibition *Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America*, which was on display at the New Museum in New York, illuminated various ways that white grievance has led, and continues to lead, to Black death and Black grief.⁴⁰ While Black grief is an extremely poignant and important framework for analyzing art by Black artists, given the ongoing anti-Black racism not only in the United States but in Canada and other parts of the world, James and others are acknowledging their grief while simultaneously showing that they and their artistic colleagues also experience, and deserve to express, Black joy and *jouissance*. According to James, their paintings are explicitly intended for Black viewers: "I'm making my work strictly for Black people to enjoy or to understand. If they're looking for happiness, they'll find it.... The room I'm trying to create for pleasure is very limited for people who don't understand. If you don't understand the painting, you're not going to contextualize, or understand, the joy, the love or the pain, or anything."⁴¹ As Musser has remarked, "pleasure and pain [both] emerge from the history of black female fleshiness."⁴²

In May 2022, Projet Pangée presented a single painting by James at the New Art Dealers Alliance (NADA) New York. The painting, *Untitled* (2022; Fig. 2), depicts an isolated, naked Black female figure standing centrally in the foreground of

what appears to be a rocky landscape. This work departs from the other paintings previously discussed because the Black female subject has a black bird (a crow or raven) in place of a head, and four other black birds encircle her. In the distance a lighthouse throws a beam of light that shines onto, and past, her. Encompassing the bird-headed woman and the lighthouse is black water tinged with pink. In this work there is literal light in the darkness, the lighthouse possibly symbolizing hope and futurity. Both the crow and the raven have multiple iconographical meanings. According to the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, "the raven [is] a mediator between life and death;" Patrick Elliot recalls this idea in his reading of Raqib Shaw's painting *Last Rites of the Artist's Ego at Shankryacharya Temple (After Ludovico Mazzolino)* (2015–16: Scottish National Gallery of Art), where ravens fill the snowy scene.⁴³ If this reading is adopted and applied to James's related representation, we might see both the raven and the lighthouse as icons that acknowledge darkness and death but also function symbolically as harbingers of life and futurity for Black individuals. The hybrid bird-woman also recalls the collages of New York-based artist Wangechi Mutu (b. 1972), whose works are described, in Jillian Hernandez's analysis, as "craft[ing] otherworldly hybrid figures by combining images of models from high fashion magazines, racialized pornography, and ethnographic photographs of African



Fig. 4. Elisabeth Perrault, *Le napperon en coeur* (The Heart Doily) (2021), canvas, polyester, and pressed flowers, 3 1/2" x 19 1/2" x 12 1/2". Collection of the artist; courtesy of Projet Pangée, Montreal. Photo: Jean-Michael Seminaro.

villagers.”⁴⁴ Like James, Mutu addresses violence and race, as well as Black women’s embodied subjectivity. With collage, Mutu signals both fracture and healing or, to use a skin metaphor, suturing. Likewise, the crafting of the body as an animal-human hybrid in James’s recent painting signifies not straightforward decapitation—a literal mind-body split—but, perhaps, a mythological figure who combines the capabilities of both human and bird.⁴⁵

Elisabeth Perrault (she/her) is a white feminist artist working primarily with fiber and sculptural installations. The title of her solo exhibition at Projet Pangée—*Ces petites morts domestiques* (Little Domestic Deaths)—references both orgasms (*la petite mort* or little death) and the ongoing gendering of the domestic as feminine; yet there is another darker layer of meaning here, namely domestic violence that sometimes leads to death.⁴⁶ This darker reading, inflected with violence, is relevant given the explosion of domestic assault and femicide around the world, including Quebec, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴⁷ Perrault appears explicitly to reference acts of domestic violence in this exhibition, and it is possible to see traces of corporeal damage in some of these works. For instance, in *Ces petites morts domestiques* (Little Domestic Deaths) (2020; Pl. 18 and Fig. 3), a human body made out of white and light blue fabric, lies in the fetal position on an inflatable mattress, the cover of which is the same pattern and material as the figure. Its protective pose and placement suggest someone coping with trauma and/or the aftermath of physical wounds in a domestic space. The similar design and construction of the mattress and the figure evoke

the desire to camouflage oneself—to hide in order to have time to heal, like an animal digging a hole in the forest and curling up in order to lick a wound.

Perrault sometimes uses fragmentation as a formal aesthetic, and this artistic strategy can be proposed as signifying violence. In an untitled work that was part of Perrault’s solo exhibition, a textile heart, titled *Le napperon en coeur* (The Heart Doily) (2020; Pl. 19 and Figs. 4–5) is placed on a set table with a chair across from clasped hands sewn from the same soft material (*Le napperon en mains* [The Hands Doily]). Dried flowers—from bouquets that Perrault collected in the Quebec countryside—have been placed under the sheer white cloth that make up the hands, heart, and placemats. The table setting is a fragment of a domestic scene, and home is, as they say, where the heart is. The home—the “domestic” space—is not necessarily a stable or, indeed, safe space, as shown in the studies by Alexandra Kokoli on the feminist uncanny and by Claudette Lauzon on the “unmaking” of the home in contemporary art.⁴⁸ This “unmaking” is particularly

true for women, and the phrase “domestic violence” makes this chillingly clear. Perrault’s textile of dismembered hands and tell-tale heart are uncanny in the Freudian sense; they are familiar but made strange by Perrault’s choice of materials and their fragmentation from the body. The hands and heart can be read as violently cut synecdoches that stand in for absent bodies and abject subjects. As Kokoli and others have noted, the *uncanny* translates as *unhomely*, crystallizing the strangeness and potential threat of the home.⁴⁹ The fragmented hands could signify the hands of an abuser or those of a victim. The heart—a traditional symbol of love—has been placed on the table as though it were something to be devoured. Even as this work may be interpreted in terms of



Fig. 5. Elisabeth Perrault, *Le napperon en mains* (The Hands Doily) (2021), canvas, polyester, pressed flowers, 3 1/2" x 19 1/2" x 12 1/2". Collection of the artist; courtesy of Projet Pangée, Montreal. Photo: Jean-Michael Seminaro.

domestic violence, based on the iconography of a fragmented heart and hands, Perrault did not in fact intend it to be read in this way. The work was created while in isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic, and that for her, the disembodied heart and hands signified a woman sitting alone with herself, in a “moment of calm”: “I made these artworks in confinement. It was a moment of calm, of solitude, of stillness. For me, the work speaks of a person sitting alone at their table, who shares her being with herself.”⁵⁰

As previously mentioned, Perrault has a particular interest in skin and the ways it touches our lives. *Ma peau de 24 ans* (My Skin at 24 years old) (Fig. 6; see also Pl. 17) is a skin suit made out of polyester and red thread in the shape of the artist’s body, an artistic ritual that Perrault enacts every year around her birthday. The dark spots on the white polyester “skin” can be viewed as bruises, and the red thread that runs throughout the surface inevitably evokes blood. Perrault has stated that she is interested in the symbolism of snakes shedding their skin, namely as a symbol of transience and renewal.⁵¹ From a distance, the marks on Perrault’s skin suit can be read as bruises or tattoos. This is, on my part, a deliberate misreading of the skin in Perrault’s work, referring back to Ahmed and Stacey’s observation that “skin is always open to being read.”⁵² They also warn against the assumption that skin is always a reliably legible text. Put another way, the skin (in lived and visual culture) can be misread, willfully or accidentally: “So although skin may have a testimonial function,” Ahmed and Stacey discern, “the act of bearing witness to trauma, injustice, violence and the pain of others cannot involve simply the transformation of skin into voice.”⁵³ In this reading of Perrault’s skin suit as having *both* bruises and tattoos, the index of harm or violence on the skin—“skin-assaults”⁵⁴—is not ignored, but, to this “skin narrative,” accounts of agency, empowerment, and self-possession, specifically *in response to* trauma such as domestic violence, must be added.

Margo DeMello has similarly argued that tattoos function for many women as a way of enacting agency, both privately and publicly, over their own bodies.⁵⁵ This act of self-inscription is particularly poignant when the woman has decided to tattoo herself because of an experience that made her feel that she had lost control over her own body; these experiences include, but are not limited to, intimate violence, self-harm, eating disorders, and sexual assault.⁵⁶ In her ethnographic study of the tattoo community in the 1980s and 1990s, DeMello determined that women’s motivations for getting tattoos had a great deal to do with agency and healing from trauma: “Women—working class and middle class—are much more apt [than men] to explain their tattoos in terms of healing, empowerment, or control. I have not had any straight men report to me that they acquired a tattoo as a means of regaining control over their life while undergoing a crisis, but many women’s narratives, my own included, show that this is a powerful motivation for becoming tattooed. For some women, the tattoo is an important step in reclaiming their bodies.”⁵⁷ It is therefore highly significant that in Perrault’s skin work, viewers can read the amorphous shapes as bruises and/or tattoos, suggesting both the loss of agency and

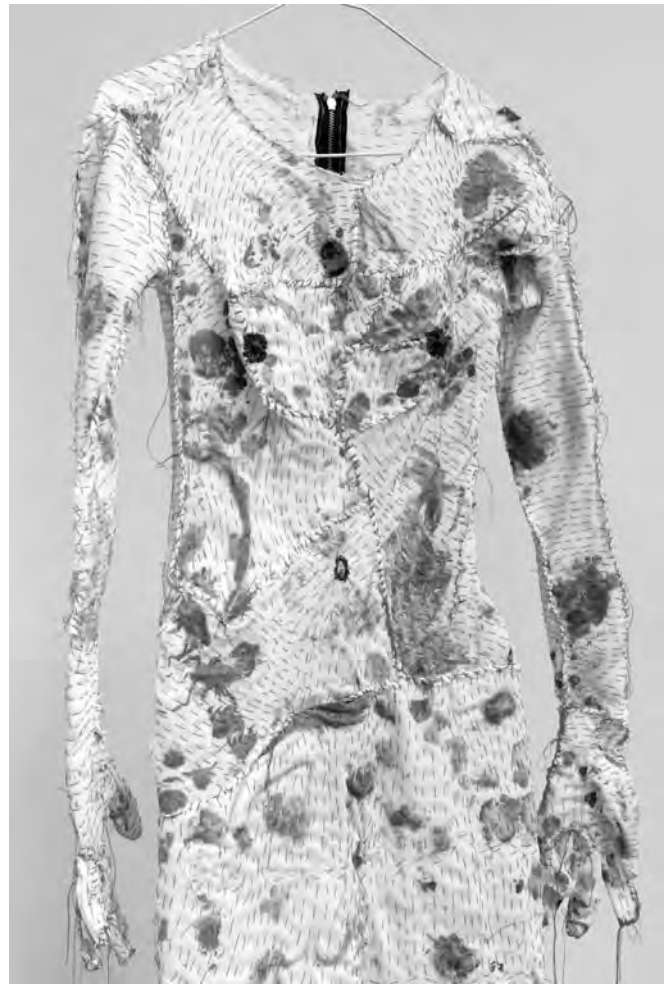


Fig. 6. Elisabeth Perrault, Detail of *Ma peau de 24 ans* (My Skin at the Age of 24) (2020), canvas, polyester, and pressed flowers, 72" x 50" x 5". Collection of the artist; courtesy of Projet Pangée, Montreal. Photo: Jean-Michael Seminaro.

wrestling back bodily control, depending, perhaps, on the viewer’s own lived experiences and relationship to their skin.

In her book on the fragment in art, Nochlin offers, “I firmly believe that the fragment in visual representation must be treated as a series of discrete, ungeneralizable situations. Were I to attempt to construct a general theory of the fragment, however, I would be sure to establish it on a model of *difference* rather than attempt to construct a unified field of discourse.”⁵⁸ In dialogue, the works by James and Perrault demonstrate that the fragment signifies differently based on lived experiences and subject positions, even as the artists illuminate violence towards women, people of color, and other vulnerable, marginalized groups. When James’s work was on display at the gallery *ltd los angeles*, the wall text stated that James “intentionally objectifies the bodies by removing their faces, thus concealing the identity.”⁵⁹ As James observed in 2018: “The intentional objectification comes from not wanting to disclose all of me, [to not] have my whole identity exposed. So it’s a way of keeping a certain gaze out: a male gaze, a Western gaze, an anti-Black gaze.”⁶⁰ Both James and Perrault are

hyperaware of violence towards women, including women of color, white women, and transwomen. Perrault's gallery website reads: "Her artistic practice narration's core is around Human Behaviors and explores the themes of the enduring effect of domestic violence, including trauma, anxiety, sexual abuse, and physical pressure."⁶¹ Both of these young Canadian artists are engaging with difficult subjects, including intimate violence and Black resilience, that are not only resonant in Canada but around the globe as violence towards women and people of color continues, as does misogyny and misogynoir.⁶² James and Perrault do not offer solutions to these dilemmas; they do, however, open avenues for painful and important conversations. •

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Notes

1. Elisabeth Perrault, e-mail to the author, June 10, 2022. In French: "Je travaille depuis toujours avec le tissu. Lorsque j'avais 7 ans je faisais des robes à mes babies et toutous. À mes 8 ans j'ai demandé à ma mère une machine à coudre pour Noël. Je trouve que c'est un matériel très riche, dont les possibilités de malléabilité sont infinies. De plus, je trouve bien intéressant, qu'au quotidien, notre corps soit en constante relation avec du tissu: nous nous habillons avec, dormons dedans, couvrons nos fenêtres avec" All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
2. Projet Pangée, press release for *Screams of a Thousand Suns*, <http://projetpangee.com/screams-of-a-thousand-suns>, accessed May 29, 2022.
3. There is a large literature on this subject. See, for instance, Griselda Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," in *Vision and Difference: Femininity and the Histories of Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010; originally publ. 1988), 70–127.
4. See Julia Skelly, *Radical Decadence: Excess in Contemporary Feminist Textiles and Craft* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).
5. Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2010).
6. Krista A. Thompson, *Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African Diasporic Aesthetic Practice* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2015), 1–46.
7. Mechthild Fend, *Fleshing Out Surfaces: Skin in French Art and Medicine, 1650–1850* (Manchester, UK: Manchester Univ. Press, 2017), 146.
8. Oreka James, e-mail to the author, Sept. 20, 2022.
9. Julia Skelly, *Skin Crafts: Affect, Violence and Materiality in Global Contemporary Art* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022).
10. Laurence Philomène, *Puberty* (Atlanta, GA: Yoffy, 2022), np.
11. Jay Posser, "Skin Memories," in *Thinking Through the Skin*, ed. Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey (London: Routledge, 2001), 52–68.
12. Ahmed and Stacey, eds., "Introduction: Dermographies," in *Thinking Through the Skin*, 1.
13. Tiana Reid, "I Do See Myself: Why the figures in Oreka James's paintings protect their privacy," *Canadian Art*, Dec. 17, 2018, <https://canadianart.ca/features/oreka-james-i-do-see-myself/>, accessed June 1, 2022.
14. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (1952; repr. New York: Grove Press, 2008), 45.
15. Indeed, when they read a draft of this article, James indicated to me, in no uncertain terms, that Fanon's words do not reflect how they currently feel. James, e-mail to the author, Sept. 20, 2022.
16. Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001); Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2012), 116–17.
17. Mary Frances Winters, *Black Fatigue: How Racism Erodes the Mind, Body, and Spirit* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publ., 2020).
18. Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian, and Helene Moglen, "Introduction: The Dream of a Common Language," in *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, eds. Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian, and Helene Moglen (Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1997), 4. In their introduction, the editors observe that some Black feminists center African and African American spirituality in their psychoanalytic scholarship, focusing on Black people and healing, which is a significant difference from how white feminists approach psychoanalysis concerning Black individuals, particularly Black women.
19. James, e-mail to the author, Sept. 15, 2022.
20. James, e-mail to the author, Sept. 20, 2022.
21. Sarah Stefana Smith, "Surface Play: Rewriting Black Interiorities through Camouflage and Abstraction in Mickalene Thomas's Oeuvre," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 28, no. 1 (2018): 1.
22. James, e-mail to the author, Sept. 15, 2022.
23. Ibid.
24. On physiognomy, see Sander Gilman, "The Hottentot and the Prostitute: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality," in *Critical Readings in Race and Art History*, ed. Kymberly N. Pinder (New York: Routledge, 2002), 119–38. On critiques of Kara Walker, see Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects*, 153–87.
25. Amber Jamilla Musser, *Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2018), 31.
26. Ibid., 21. I would argue that Courbet's painting is the antithesis of a portrait, as the "likeness" of the vulva is not intended to be identifiable by the majority of viewers. The erasure of the female "sitter's" face and head are instances of representational violence.
27. Ibid., 46.
28. For more on this work and others by Lubaina Himid, see chapter 2 of Skelly, *Skin Crafts: Affect, Violence and Materiality in Global Contemporary Art*, 65–93.
29. On the shiny Black body in the context of slavery and slave auctions, see Krista A. Thompson, "The Sound of Light: Reflections on Art History in the Visual Culture of Hip-Hop," *The Art Bulletin* 91, no. 4 (Dec. 2009): 481–505.
30. Kimberly Juanita Brown, *The Repeating Body: Slavery's Visual Resonance in the Contemporary* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2015), 58–59.
31. Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies*, 5. Emphasis added.
32. Ibid., 156.
33. Ibid.

34. Linda Nochlin, *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1994), 16, 18, 57.
35. Musser, *Sensual Excess*, 13. Musser is working from the text by Néstor Braunstein, "Desire and Jouissance in the Teachings of Lacan," in *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003), 102–15.
36. Musser, *Sensual Excess*, 13.
37. Musser notes that for Lacan, "[J]ouissance, especially phallic jouissance, is understood as something that, however inadvertently, reifies the idea of sovereign subjectivity through an insistence on dwelling in its space of shattering, thereby emphasizing the dichotomy between subject and Thing." Musser, *Sensual Excess*, 13. As with the exploitative logic of slavery, Lacan's phallic jouissance would implicitly position the Black individual as Thing rather than subject. As Griselda Pollock offers: "Under a phallic logic, the other, if it is not like me and hence cannot, through radical difference or threatening abjection, be incorporated, is to be rejected, its otherness menacing my own narcissism, my belief in my self, body, colour, position as the one, as whole and desirable. Under a phallic regime, difference, threatening the one with otherness, hence relativity, becomes deadly and must be destroyed. At the ultimate end of this treatment of the other as enemy is the idea that s/he cannot live if I am to be myself: genocide." Griselda Pollock, "From Horrorism to Compassion: Re-Facing Medusan Otherness in Dialogue with Adriana Caverero and Bracha Ettinger," in *Visual Politics of Psychoanalysis: Art and the Image in Post-Traumatic Cultures*, ed. Griselda Pollock (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 178.
38. Musser, *Sensual Excess*, 13.
39. Ibid., 46.
40. Okwui Enwezor, *Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America*, eds. Naomi Beckwith, Massimiliano Gioni, Glenn Ligon, Mark Nash and Okwui Enwezor, exh. cat. (New York and London: Phaidon Press Limited and The New Museum, 2020).
41. James, cited in Tiana Reid, "I Do See Myself: Why the figures in Oreka James's paintings protect their privacy," *Canadian Art*, December 17, 2018, <https://canadianart.ca/features/oreka-james-i-do-see-myself/>, accessed June 1, 2022.
42. Musser, *Sensual Excess*, 3.
43. Patrick Elliott, *Raqib Shaw: The Old Masters* (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2018), 30. Shaw is a Calcutta-born artist raised in Kashmir and based in London.
44. Jillian Hernandez, "The Ambivalent Grotesque: Reading Black Women's Erotic Corporeality in Wangechi Mutu's Work," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 42, no. 2 (Winter 2017): 427.
45. For an extended discussion of decapitation as a material mind-body split, see Pollock, "From Horrorism to Compassion: Re-Facing Medusan Otherness in Dialogue with Adriana Caverero and Bracha Ettinger," 160–67. See also Jane Gallop, *Thinking through the Body* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1988), 1–9.
46. The title also has echoes of Hanya Yanagihara's novel, *A Little Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 2015), a magnificently written, heart-rending story about abuse, self-harm, and interpersonal violence amongst gay men.
47. On domestic abuse in Canada, see Annabelle Olivier, "Seven women killed in 7 weeks has Quebec sounding alarm over domestic violence spike," *Global News*, March 24, 2021, <https://globalnews.ca/news/7715820/seven-women-killed-quebec-domestic-violence-spike/>, accessed April 1, 2021.
48. Alexandra M. Kokoli, *The Feminist Uncanny in Theory and Art Practice* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016); Claudette Lauzon, *The Unmaking of Home in Contemporary Art* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2017).
49. Kokoli, *The Feminist Uncanny*, especially chapter 4, 91–118.
50. The original French is: "J'ai fait ces œuvres suites au confinement. C'est un moment de calme, de solitude et de période morte. C'est pour moi une personne assise seule à sa table, qui partage sont être en entier avec elle-même." Perrault, e-mail to the author, June 10, 2022.
51. "Snakes shed their skin up to four times a year, to allow for both growth and protection." Projet Pangée, press release for Elisabeth Perrault, *Ces petites morts domestiques*, <https://projetpangee.com/ces-petites-morts-domestiques>, accessed July 22, 2022.
52. Ahmed and Stacey, "Introduction: Dermographies," in *Thinking Through the Skin*, 1.
53. Ibid., 6.
54. Ibid., 10.
55. Margo DeMello, *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2000).
56. On skin and self-harm, see Jane Kilby, "Carved in Skin: Bearing Witness to Self-Harm," in Ahmed and Stacey, *Thinking Through the Skin*, 124–42.
57. DeMello, *Bodies of Inscription*, 172–73.
58. Nochlin, *The Body in Pieces*, 56 (emphasis in the original).
59. Quoted in Tiana Reid, "I Do See Myself," *Canadian Art*, Dec. 17, 2018, <https://canadianart.ca/features/oreka-james-i-do-see-myself/>, accessed June 1, 2022.
60. James, cited in Tiana Reid, "I Do See Myself," *Canadian Art*, Dec. 17, 2018, <https://canadianart.ca/features/oreka-james-i-do-see-myself/>, accessed June 1, 2022.
61. Elisabeth Perrault, "Biography—Statement," Mayten's, <https://www.maytens.com/elisabeth-perrault>, accessed May 29, 2022. While I have focused on Perrault's works as related to domestic violence, in an e-mail the artist expressed that only some of her works can be considered in this light, for she does not want to "educate the world" with her art: "In fact, domestic violence is only the subject of a few of my works. Those [artworks] speak of the legacy of that violence, how those acts impact the behaviour of other generations. For me art is only one way to express what I feel for the women of my family. I do not set out to educate the work, only to speak softly. [En fait, la violence domestique a été le sujet de seulement certaines oeuvres. Celles-ci parlaient de l'héritage de cette violence, comment que ces gestes influencent le comportement des autres générations. Pour moi l'art c'est seulement une façon d'exprimer ce que je ressens aux femmes de ma familles. Je ne cherche pas à éduquer le monde avec, seulement à parler doucement]." Perrault, e-mail to the author, June 10, 2022.
62. On misogynoir, see Robyn Maynard, "Misogynoir in Canada: Punitive State Practices and the Devaluation of Black Women and Gender-Oppressed People," in *Policing Black Lives: State Violence in Canada from Slavery to the Present* (Halifax, CA: Fernwood Publ., 2017), 128–57.

Women in the Picture: What Culture Does with Female Bodies

By Catherine McCormack
Norton, 2021

Reviewed by Kimberly Lamm

Catherine McCormack's book is an insightful and accessible study of Western art and its contributions to the myths that tell us who women are and what they should be. *Women in the Picture* shows that a deep-seated fear of women moves with a fervent consistency throughout Western culture, and that the artwork that allows the West to see itself as civilized helps to manage and justify those fears, keeping the concept of woman policed, constrained, and recognizable. McCormack states that she set out to "writ[e] about women in pictures and chart the histories and tangled roots of the archetypes that limit the complexity of female experience" (219–20). She certainly meets this goal, and perhaps what is most impressive about *Women in the Picture* is the clarity with which she narrates these histories and disentangles the roots of the archetypes that have gathered force and legitimacy through images.

Those familiar with feminist art history might approach the book with the feeling that it covers well-established ground. Hasn't the sexual objectification of women in the art-historical canon been covered before, and aren't we ready to move on from it? *Women in the Picture*, however, underscores how necessary the insights of feminist art history remain, particularly for pedagogy, and beautifully navigates the multiple temporalities that impinge upon feminism: not only the time of teaching, but also the time of academic scholarship, the time of contemporary politics, and, perhaps most importantly, the deep time of patriarchal history that continues to unfold in the present. McCormack moves seamlessly between feminism's academic and popular iterations and demonstrates how much they embolden each other in the long,

arduous fight to unravel and expose patriarchal definitions of women. As she rightly explains, while feminist art history has been a part of academia for quite a while, "in the mainstream, discussions of how women are seen and how they see keep getting lost" (16). *Women in the Picture* shows us that this loss is neither inevitable nor permanent.

The book begins with a preface in which McCormack narrates a visit to London's National Gallery, child in tow. A man approaches her while she looks at *The Story of Griselda* (c. 1494) and tells her, in a manner that is both "avuncular and imperious," the painting's story of sexist cruelty against a young peasant girl (2). In recounting both episodes of this misogynist history for her readers, McCormack brilliantly uses her interlocutor against his presumed authority. For the man who took it upon himself to narrate *The Story of Griselda* had clearly not listened to McCormack say that she was an art history lecturer preparing a course on images of women in Western painting. She speculates that he "saw [her] as a mother, and perhaps not so much as a mind" (3). The anecdote attests to the ease with which McCormack makes her personal history part of her arguments, which I found to be one of the book's most enjoyable features. It grounds her feminist claims in the ambiguities of the real world, where everyone has inherited limited ideas about women and how they should look.

McCormack continues through the National Gallery, and though she loves the sensual pleasures its paintings offer, she has trouble ignoring the prettification of sexual violence and misogyny that is a consistent refrain. After passing paintings of Susanna and the Elders and Leda and the Swan, McCormack focuses on the inclusion of these subjects in the museum: "The walls of our galleries have a sacrosanct charge that absorbs any censure." She draws attention to the mollifying qualities of paint, which "smooths out the brutality and double standards of these narratives and turns them into lessons in culture and civilization for the general public" (6). The space of the

gallery and the medium of paint are subtle contributions to the patriarchal constructs about women that the paintings simultaneously crystallize and make harder to see.

McCormack connects these portrayals of violence to the preponderance of male artists whose works adorn the museum's walls. In Guerrilla Girls fashion (she includes one of the group's posters), McCormack adduces statistics that demonstrate how thoroughly museums are steeped in Western culture's sexism and racism, and she raises Linda Nochlin's still-resounding question of 1971, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" She also evokes a more fundamental and pervasive restriction, women are barred from looking. These constraints, found in "everything from paintings and sculptures to medical textbooks, cinema and political cartoons," limit society's ability to see the "myriad ways in which women see themselves" (8).

McCormack's first chapter, "Venus," deals with the many predictable appearances of Venus as a nude, *the* genre for putting women in the picture. The first artwork McCormack looks at here, also in the National Gallery, is the *The Toilet of Venus*, otherwise known as "The Rokeby Venus" (1647–51), a luxurious nude painted with "velvety sensuality" by Diego Velázquez (42). McCormack poses the rhetorical question, "The naked body of a woman in an art gallery is so normal, who would be pedantic enough to question it?" (25). With prose that is lively and decidedly not pedantic, McCormack questions the art-historical and capitalist forces that enshrine the beauty of "The Rokeby Venus" as sacred:

Venus means 'Art' with a capital 'A.' Good art. High culture. Unimpeachable value. The inviolate tradition of beauty. Wander into the gallery shop and there she is again on the most popular postcard, a vehicle of the culture industry's mythmaking. You can take her home on a poster or wear her printed on a cotton tote bag. She is a hot commodity. (25)

For McCormack, to revere the painting, and to imagine that it is somehow beyond mass culture (even as copies of it are easy to purchase), is to deny that “classical culture has trickled down into the way in which we see women’s bodies generally and the expectations that we place on them” (31). McCormack tells the story of the suffragette Mary Richardson, who took a cleaver to Venus’s body in 1914. Though their weapons are different, Richardson and McCormack are aligned. Both “dismantle” the “illusion” of “passive, beautiful and enticing femininity” (28).

Wading into the charged debates about pornography and censorship, McCormack expresses skepticism about sex positivity and the choice to objectify oneself, but she also questions the strong desires of many to take away the pleasures offered by images of women’s bodies. She crafts a nuanced perspective while affirming that Venus highlights a real problem: the single, narrow understanding of sexuality in paintings such as “The Rokeby Venus” must still be confronted today. She writes of Sandro Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* (c. 1484–88), “Her breasts are high and round like apples, her stomach softly curved, but still reminiscent of time spent in the Pilates studio” (40). McCormack’s powers of description dovetail nicely with her ability to draw on the familiar contemporary landscape—“Pilates studio”—as she moves effortlessly between the canonical past and the hyper-capitalist present.

Uncritical reverence for painted Venuses, McCormack notes, also contributes to racial hierarchies, making white femininity “the default in global culture” (31). Indeed, Venus is part of what McCormack identifies as “sexual racism” and also “misogynoir,” Moya Bailey’s term for prejudices rooted in, as McCormack explains it, “racialised fantasies of slave women as sexually promiscuous and wicked” (59). McCormack engages with portrayals of Black women in the art-historical canon that express and reinforce “misogynoir.” One of them is Thomas Stothard’s etching *The Voyage of the Sable Venus*



Fig. 1. Debra Cartwright, *Derica's LA Loft* (2020), oil on canvas, 48" x 60". Private collection.

(1801), where, posed on a shell like Botticelli’s Venus, and surrounded by white cherubs, the nearly nude figure makes the transatlantic slave trade beautiful and enticing. McCormack concludes this first chapter by discussing some of the contemporary artists who rewrite the Black Venus, among them Renee Cox (b. 1960), Debra Cartwright (b. 1988), and Beyoncé (b. 1981). In *Derica's LA Loft* (2020; Fig. 1), Cartwright celebrates her reclining subject as having achieved “financial solvency and status, affording her desirable real estate” (72).

In response to Cartwright’s paintings of Black women leisurely resting in affluent spaces, McCormack asserts the political importance of self-care, following author and theorist Audre Lorde. From here, she makes the broad statement that “all women can identify with how patriarchal capitalism demands they care for others before themselves, while also creating the additional ‘work’ of maintaining the appearance of Venus” (71). It is rare to find universal claims—“all women”—in contemporary feminist writing and

scholarship, and for good reason. Often, such assertions downplay or efface colonialism and racism, along with other forms of oppression that shape women’s lives. And yet the equally necessary focus on misogyny’s ability to reduce many women to one definition of “woman” has often been lost in the rejection of such claims. I admire McCormack for working against some shibboleths of feminist thought and politics that might ultimately undercut the impact of feminism, and for acknowledging the overlap of sexism and racism without refuting the force of sexism in and of itself.

The great qualities of the “Venus” chapter—the supple movement between the present and the past; the evenhanded consideration of polarizing issues; the rich, clear descriptions; and the nuanced attention to racism—characterize the subsequent chapters as well. “Mothers” is devoted to the idealization of motherhood in Western culture and to the symbolically laden images that flatten its heights and its depths. McCormack characterizes portrayals of the Virgin Mary and the

Victorian “Angel in the House” as condensed propaganda campaigns that sanctify maternal sacrifice but ultimately bestow upon motherhood only limited value—except as an inexhaustible resource of care. Such figures block from view the radically uneven material conditions that shape the lives of mothers. To show how contemporary women artists draw attention to the precarious place of many mothers in the global economy, McCormack features Eti Wade’s *Migrant Mothers* (c. 2014), a series of portraits that depict women who have left their children in the Philippines to perform domestic labor in wealthier countries.

McCormack makes a compelling argument that representations of the Madonna and other mothers have influenced moral judgments about the ways mothers project themselves *as images* in secular culture: “The way mothers *look* on the surface is still an indication of how *good* they are” (82). In an especially elegant passage, McCormack demonstrates how painter Berthe Morisot (1841–1895) undermines this insistence on the fixed goodness of mothers. Morisot’s women “vaporise at their edges, unsure and unstable in their environments, shifting in and out of focus in evanescent flocks of brushstrokes, bobbing up to the surface of the image to be pulled under again” (88). Also compelling is McCormack’s argument about images of Black mothers mourning sons murdered through state violence. The idealizing iconography in these images, she contends, “obscures” other issues that impinge upon Black women (97), including the murders of their daughters, “perhaps...because our visual culture lacks a framework for the unjust sacrifice of female bodies” (98).

Rape qualifies as an “unjust sacrifice” and is the subject of the next chapter, “Maidens and Dead Damsels.” Here McCormack begins with Titian’s *Rape of Europa* (1560–62), a painting that “seethes with sensual nuance and foreboding” (123). McCormack brilliantly evokes rape’s purpose and effect—to silence: “And then there’s the crimson violence of the scarf held

clenched in the maiden’s fist, unfurling like a screaming tongue” (125). She links the myth not only to the imperial ambitions of the work’s patron, King Philip II of Spain, but also to imperialism writ large: “Beneath the veneer of erotic pleasure and the god-given right to desire, the story is also about expansionism and colonisation, and how rape sits at the heart of that ambition” (126). A figure of feminized passivity, the maiden makes this allegory work. The dead damsel, her dysfunctional sister, also eroticizes suffering, but she brings it on—and often ends it—herself. Figures like Ophelia and Juliet allow viewers to confirm the essentialized connection between women and hysteria without asking those viewers to take any responsibility for it.

While McCormack considers other images that normalize rape, she also focuses on overlooked feminist works about rape that foresaw the #MeToo movement. They include the performance piece *Ablutions* (1972) by Judy Chicago (b. 1939), Suzanne Lacy (b. 1945), Aviva Rahmani (b. 1945), and Sandra Orgel (b. 1952), in which recordings of testimony by women who had been raped played while the artists submerged their bodies in bathtubs filled with eggs, blood, and clay; Lacy’s *Three Weeks in May* (1977), which documents, through maps, the epidemic of sexual violence in Los Angeles; and the three-image *Slave Rape* series (1972) by Faith Ringgold (b. 1930), which depicts a woman running from and fighting off an implied rapacious pursuer. The similarities among these interventions are thematic—rape is portrayed without “fantasy, entertainment or eroticism”—and also formal, rejecting the visual language for portraying silent maidens and dead damsels (152). These artworks not only developed a feminist language to make sexual violence against women and its consequences visible and audible, but created a “process of expression, empathy and collective consciousness raising,” an effort that “reached critical mass” in #MeToo (155).

The last chapter, “Monstrous Women,” tracks the heinous figures of unbound female desire who justify the idealizing control that underlies the

archetypes in the preceding chapters. This analysis could not be more pertinent and timely: As McCormack points out, Donald Trump portrayed Hillary Clinton as a “monstrous woman” and “deluged her campaign with well-rehearsed images of witches, whores and monsters” rooted in millennia of Western misogyny (170). McCormack looks at a poster produced in Britain in 1908 to scare women from participating in the suffrage movement. Its racist depiction of a ravenous, dark-skinned, cross-eyed beast “masquerading as female” no doubt frightened some woman viewers into making their claim to femininity real, thereby reinforcing the “truths” of this sexist and racist propaganda (171).

The mythical Medusa helps animate the belief that women are inherently monstrous. For McCormack, Medusa expresses anxieties about women’s reproductive capacities and the need to delineate the borders between those who belong and those who are foreign. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (c. 8 CE), Medusa’s hideous appearance becomes the “ultimate punishment for a woman in a patriarchal world: she was made horrible to look at” (180). McCormack places Medusa squarely within contemporary racism as well, making the brilliant argument that Medusa “can be read ... as the unmanageable black woman with unmanageable hair who has been suppressed and marginalized” (182). She also finds places where the monstrous woman trope overlaps and reinforces the archetypes featured in the other chapters, noting the way the “dangerous” and “unpredictable” images of these monsters “defy Venus with their aging bodies and menstrual blood ... [and] undermine maiden virginity with their unapologetic sexuality” (171). At their core, these monstrous images bear the threat of an imperfect, unsanitized female body with unrestrained sexual desires.

Women in the Picture gave me new ways to think about feminist art and feminist art history and reaffirmed the value of both. My one criticism is that the book contains a meager twenty-three images, all in a dull paperback grayscale. If Norton scrimped, they

made a mistake. Particularly when McCormack brings artwork from the feminist 1970s out of obscurity, I felt the need to see bright and glossy color reproductions. But McCormack's elegant, precise, inviting descriptions go a long way toward making the artwork visible. Those who don't know the pieces will likely feel as if

they can see them clearly. Those who are familiar with the works and with the previous feminist art-historical scholarship will find their knowledge deepened and enriched. •

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is the author of *Addressing the Other Woman: Textual Correspondences in Feminist Art and Writing* (2018). Her research, which has appeared in journals such as *Women's Studies Quarterly*, *Feminist Theory*, and *Oxford Art Journal*, brings psychoanalytic feminism to bear on the study of Anglophone literature, film, and visual culture.

Joan Semmel: Skin in the Game

Edited by Jodi Throckmorton, with contributions by Rachel Middleman, Jodi Throckmorton, and Amelia Jones
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, 2021

Reviewed by Tanya Augsborg

The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA) has held a series of exhibitions celebrating women artists since 2020 that remains ongoing as I write this review in July 2022. The series was originally conceptualized as giving tribute to the centennial anniversary of women's right to vote in the US. To punctuate the inclusion of women's perspectives in the political realm, PAFA organized the first major retrospective on the work of painter Joan Semmel (b. 1932), an artist who "has long been a determined champion of a woman's point of view," as director Brooke Davis Anderson notes in her foreword to the catalogue (6).

Semmel, who has had multitudinous gallery exhibitions and has given countless interviews since the 1960s, is yet another prominent woman artist who has had to wait too long (until the age of eighty-eight, to be exact) for her first museum survey. To complicate matters, the very concept of a "retrospective," with its proverbial emphasis on a "retro" or backward view, is problematic for any prolific artist who is still very much alive and producing new work. In Semmel's case, her 1960s abstract paintings and the feminist self-portraits she has produced

over nearly five decades have been habitually overshadowed by two series produced over a three-year period: her sexually explicit expressionist "Sex Paintings" from 1971, and her equally explicit, preternaturally realist "Erotic Series" from 1972–74. These works broke the mold for erotic art. Nonetheless, there is so much more to Semmel's repertoire than just feminist paintings of heterosexual couples fucking.

Curator and catalogue editor Jodi Throckmorton has addressed these gaps in the literature on Semmel by borrowing the exhibition and catalogue's title, *Skin in the Game*, from one of the artist's most recent oil paintings, at 96 by 288 inches her largest to date. The 2019 painting (Fig. 1) is particularly significant because it revisits and propels forward Semmel's primary concern since the 1970s: the observation and representation of the female naked body, typically her own, at specific moments of time. Across the expansive canvas, Semmel overlaps six nude self-portraits in varying poses that suggest active thought or contemplation. While she strategically flaunts her aging body at different angles and positions, she subversively deploys multiple visual strategies to resist viewers' objectifying gazes. Two recumbent nude female figures whose shoulders, neck, and head are cut off from the bottom of the picture frame bookend the left and right sides of the painting. The leftmost female figure is depicted nearly vertically, with foreshortened legs. Semmel's clever pictorial composition calls upon viewers to identify with the subject looking down at her own body. This aesthetic strategy of subjectifying the viewer as female is

one for which Semmel has been well known since her "Self-Image" series (1974–79). The fragmented figure closest to the right edge of the canvas is portrayed diagonally, reclining on her left side, with the suggestion that the rest of her body extends beyond the visual frame to the right. Viewers need to move to the right of the painting to see the work from this implied perspective. From there, the bodies they've passed strongly invite a backward glance, one that reaches across the canvas all the way to the leftmost figure. Hence one meaning of the title's double entendre: Semmel structures the viewing experience of *Skin in the Game* like a loop.

Besides adopting its ambiguous title, the exhibition and accompanying catalogue appropriate the painting's looped structure, not least by beginning and ending their presentations of Semmel's career with her most recent works. The catalogue cover entices readers with a dramatic detail from Semmel's *Red Hand* (2019), where the artist's hand with her signature turquoise ring stands out against her quasi-abstracted torso, painted expressively in deep purples, fuchsias, and browns except for a pale yellow stripe along her angled back, as if she were lit from behind by sunlight. The front endpaper features a detail from *Blue Embrace* (2016), again highlighting a hand touching the artist's body, this time in a sketchy outline overlaid atop painted flesh. A third detail appears on the rear endpaper, this one from *Flesh Ground* (2016), another overlay painting, with the painted figure's ringed hand grasping her arm. Evidently, these hand renderings are spotlighted as overdetermined images,



Fig. 1. Joan Semmel, *Skin in the Game* (2019), oil on canvas, 96" x 288". Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates, New York. © Joan Semmel/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

each one brimming with various meanings, evoking Semmel's personal identity, body awareness, and artistic labor.

At 128 pages, the volume is slim yet expertly designed. The frontispiece and additional pages that would typically be left blank feature yet more details from recent paintings. The dynamic layout generates multiple visual orgasms with each turn of the page. Texts include the gracious foreword by Edna S. Tuttleman Museum Director Anderson, three illuminating scholarly essays, and a dutiful set of acknowledgments written by Throckmorton. Curiously missing are the exhibition checklist, contributor biographies, a bibliography, the artist's biography, and a chronology. Even curiously is that the catalogue does not include a text by the artist. The publication is replete with eighty-eight dazzling, full-color reproductions of Semmel's work—seventy-five plates and thirteen smaller figures. It includes six supplemental figures consisting of color photographs from Semmel's archives.

The lead essay, written by art historian Rachel Middleman, offers a meticulously researched overview of Semmel's early artistic career. Middleman furnishes elegant readings of Semmel's abstract paintings from the 1960s, created while she lived in Spain. During this time Semmel established herself as a professional artist and, after 1965, as a single working mother, although she was unable to obtain a divorce until leaving Francoist Spain in

1970 and returning to New York, the city of her upbringing. Back in America, Semmel—primed for both the sexual revolution and the women's movement, and increasingly critical of how women were being represented in media and pornography—turned to figurative painting. Middleman recounts how the artist transitioned from abstraction to figuration with her "Sex Paintings" by retaining from the former her saturated colors, gestural brushwork, and attention to the paintings' central visual fields. Based on quick sketches produced from direct observation, the "Sex Paintings" capture conjoined bodies with irregular skin colors painted in an expressionist style, their faces either obscured or cropped out altogether. Middleman explains how Semmel adopted a more "hard-edged" photorealist style in her "Erotic Series," countering the depictions of sex in "girlie magazines" with images that were more equitably balanced between the sexes (12–13). Middleman politely refrains from describing exactly how this balance is achieved in such vividly carnal feminist paintings as *Erotic Yellow* and *Indian Erotic* (both 1973); readers can nevertheless scrutinize the color reproductions of these images and draw their own conclusions. The author makes up for her reserve with an elucidation of how Semmel produced *Intimacy-Autonomy*, her iconic 1974 painting of non-tactile postcoital closeness: Semmel first separately photographed her lover and herself before collaging the images

together for the painting's preparatory study.

Middleman cites mostly male critics and art historians when contextualizing Semmel's paintings within art history. She mentions, for example, that Donald Kuspit took interest in Semmel's "Echoing Images" (1979–81) series for its lack of consistent style, which he felt, in Middleman's words, "opened up new possibilities for postmodern painting."¹ She concludes her essay with cogent readings of several of Semmel's recent paintings, noting that "Semmel's work since the 2000s has confronted the social taboo of visible aging and the denial of sexuality in older bodies by returning to the nude self-image" (28).

In the middle essay, curator and editor Throckmorton examines Semmel's work in light of philosopher Fanny Söderbäck's concept of "revolutionary time," emphasizing the idea of perpetual return.² Throckmorton divulges her thinking behind the looped structure of both the exhibition and its accompanying catalogue, noting that "each painting is in itself a retrospective of those that came before it" (38). Throckmorton provides intriguing brief insights about Semmel's paintings from the 1960s and 1970s that solidify Middleman's observations. She traces the evolution of reflected images in Semmel's paintings, beginning with her "Locker-Room" series (1988–91), for which Semmel photographed and then painted reflections of herself and other women in mirrors at her local gym.

Semmel's interest in reflected images eventually led to *Centered*, her astounding 2002 painting depicting a mirrored reflection of herself while taking a photograph, the top of her camera and forehead visible above the mirror pane, creating a destabilizing doubling effect. Throckmorton wryly observes that Semmel's paintings predate social media platforms like Instagram, where users compulsively post selfies of themselves, but the author draws a sharp distinction, claiming that while selfies may be about narcissistic self-love, Semmel's paintings are about self-acceptance (55). Throckmorton crowns her essay by making a case for the radicality of Semmel's most recent paintings, particularly her 2020 *Couch Diptych*, in which Semmel's dissonant palette and visible brushwork "unsettle" viewers' gazes (58).

Eminent feminist art historian Amelia Jones authors a revelatory third essay that considers Semmel's portrayal of her body over time from the perspective of feminist art history. After recalling that in a 2016 interview the artist identified, in Jones's paraphrase, "three key elements that are the basis for all lived experience in relation to visual creativity: ... point of view, materiality, and time," Jones rightly asserts that these elements dwell also at the heart of Semmel's paintings. The author frames her essay as drawing upon these concepts to "reflect on the power of Semmel's 'bodies'—her own living, painting body, the bodies in her work, and her body of work" (62). The rest of the essay is divided into three sections. In the first, "Point of View," Jones contrasts Semmel's use of top-down foreshortened perspective in *Standing Up Looking Down* (1979) with fifteenth-century painter Andrea Mantegna's deployment of bottom-up foreshortening in his *Lamentation of Christ* (c. 1480). Jones historicizes Semmel's work further in relation to feminist visual theory from the 1970s and 1980s, specifically Laura Mulvey's pivotal 1975 text on the gaze and Mary Kelly's 1982 proposal to eschew images of "woman" to avoid further fetishization.³ Semmel, on the other hand, by representing the naked woman's body from her own

point of view, "resisted the common terms actively being circulated in feminist debates of the 1970s about the objectification of women in western painting and popular imagery" (65).

In the next section, "Materiality," Jones considers Semmel's aesthetic and painterly strategies to emphasize the body's material qualities. Drawing from feminist film theory and French phenomenology, Jones points out that "the seen body in Semmel's paintings is a seeing body, a full subject" (66). Jones compares Semmel's still images, with their presentation of the woman's body as a bearer of memory and agency, to works by renowned feminist artists Carolee Schneemann (1939–2019) and Mira Schor (b. 1950). She notes that Semmel's "career-long use of cameras, frames, and mirrors" finds precedents in the 1930s work of proto-feminist artists Florence Henri (1893–1982) and Claude Cahun (1894–1954), with the caveat that those artists' oeuvres are dominated by photography. Semmel's aesthetic innovations, Jones seems to argue, lie in manipulating how the viewer "sees" by drawing on strategies like cropping the figure and combining points of view, while also manipulating the materiality of paint to represent "the flesh of bodies" (68).

In "Time," the concluding section of her essay, Jones shares her own interpretation of Semmel's later works: "The doubling or layering of the body asserts both its materiality and the ephemerality of this materiality (this too shall pass...), through opening into temporality" (71). Jones reads Semmel's depictions of her own body as both securing its presence and conceding its impermanence. The author goes a step further by positing that Semmel's overlays and doubling emphasize not only how bodies vary over time, but also how they serve as sites of memories, both individual and collective. Jones beautifully sums up Semmel's self-portraits since 2000 as feminist triumphs, detecting "female incarnate intentionality out of the materiality of paint" (72).

Readers should take Throckmorton at her word when she concludes the entire publication in her acknowledg-

ments with the following pronouncement: "This book is intended to be an introduction to the work of Joan Semmel, with the aspiration that it will seed future exhibitions and scholarship" (127). Her statement is perhaps an indirect admission that the catalogue falls a bit short of allocating all the materials necessary to give a full account of Semmel's artistic oeuvre. Despite their distinct approaches, the three catalogue essays have multiple instances of overlap, perhaps meant to echo Semmel's unique overlay techniques. Ultimately, while the exhibition catalogue *Skin in the Game* achieves its editor's aims to elevate awareness about a still-working artist, it also leaves readers yearning for more. •

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Notes

1. Donald Kuspit, "Joan Semmel at Lerner Heller," *Art in America* 68, no. 3 (March 1980): 123.
2. Fanny Söderbäck, *Revolutionary Time: On Time and Difference in Kristeva and Irigaray* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019).
3. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 6–18; Mary Kelly, "No Essential Femininity: A Conversation between Mary Kelly and Paul Smith," *Parachute* 37, no. 26 (Spring 1982): 31–35.

Pop Art and Beyond: Gender, Race, and Class in the Global Sixties

Edited by Mona Hadler and Kalliopi
Minioudaki
Bloomsbury, 2022

Reviewed by Maria Elena Buszek

In her contribution to this new anthology, Maryam Ohadi-Hamadani quotes Afro-British artist Frank Bowling regarding his neglect by Pop Art critics and collectors: he chalks it up to his work having “to do with political things in the Third World ... I did not paint Marilyn Monroe because she did not interest me” (209).¹ And yet, as Ohadi-Hamadani notes, the same “visual and sensory Babel” of pop culture that drowned the post-World War II world in oppressively glossy white icons like Monroe also brought about the “increasing visibility of black and brown faces [that] had not existed to such scale” previously (212). This expansiveness in turn empowered artists like Bowling to see the “popular culture” at the center of Pop Art as what Geeta Kapur has recently called an “amazingly hospitable category”: a movement that encompassed a broad cultural spectrum and critiqued art’s traditional relationship to its popular manifestations.² The spectrum ranged from commercial kitsch to the authentically folkloric as part of a world where, to paraphrase writer and curator Lawrence Alloway, consumer culture was the only universal postwar culture.³

In their introduction to the volume, editors Mona Hadler and Kalliopi Minioudaki point out that Alloway—not just among the earliest definers of the Pop Art movement, but arguably the originator of the term itself—recognized as early as 1959 that the contemporary “mass” cultural audience was “numerically dense but ... highly diversified.”⁴ Yet the subsequent rapid establishment of a near-exclusively Anglo-American male canon of Pop disappeared other artists, who, Hadler and Minioudaki write, “used the language of the popular, in its mass, vernacular, and everyday manifes-

tations resistively or transgressively, for the agency to speak from and against their complex positions of gender and race and class during the quite long and tumultuous 1960s” (16). Their extraordinary volume draws from and builds upon recent queer, feminist, and postcolonial scholarship on Pop to foreground these marginalized voices, as well as offering new entry points for those more familiar with this history.

Several common themes recur in multiple chapters. For example, many artists in the book drew inspiration from, were educated in, or practiced their art in transnational contexts, including Bowling as well as Brazilian artist Yêdamaria (born Yeda Maria Correia de Oliveira, 1932–2016), Japanese artist Tom Max (born Tsutomu Makishi), and Israeli artist Myriam Bat-Yosef (b. 1931). Sarah Wilson, in her chapter on Bat-Yosef, points out the “world citizenship” of many Pop Artists outside of an Anglo-American orientation, exemplified by the globe-trotting practice and collaborators of this Lithuanian Jewish multimedia artist. Giulia Lamoni’s chapter focuses upon this internationalist signaling of Pop to Brazilian artists, for whom “the notion of *cultura popular* was critically distinct from that of *folklore*” (156), as their frequent references to Indigenous peoples, histories, and deities were mobilized to assert Brazil’s unique contemporaneity. Even when artists used Pop appropriation strategies to critique racism and nationalism, as Marine Schütz writes of Hervé Télémaque’s signature use of the *Banania* logo, the relative universality of these pop-cultural languages allowed them to “negotiate identity and allegiances beyond borders” (255).

Schütz expands upon Télémaque’s work by analyzing ways in which the Haiti-born, Paris-based artist explored France’s simultaneous exploiting of its colonies and the country’s own exploitation by US capitalism within post-World War II global politics. This notion of Pop’s political ambivalence is another thread that wends its way through several chapters. Hiroko Ikegami writes about Okinawan Max/Makishi’s use of American

iconography to express the complex perspectives of Okinawa’s occupation, first by Japan and then by the US, casting America in a “dual role as both aggressor and savior in Okinawa” (142). This duality is also a theme in Mercedes Trelles Hernández’s analysis of Raúl Martínez’s Pop images promoting Cuba’s “brand” at home and abroad. The aesthetic suited his paradoxical position, Trelles Hernández shows, as a gay man persecuted by the very government that commissioned his poster-friendly—yet often homoerotic—portraits of revolutionary icons.

Hadler rethinks the very idea of the “revolutionary icon” within Pop Art history in writing about the interconnections between groundbreaking stand-up comedians like Richard Pryor, Jackie “Moms” Mabley, and Lenny Bruce—their style characterized by “fraught and ambivalent ideologies” (126)—and the feminist, anti-racist Pop Art of the era. (Pryor and Mel Brooks, for example, regularly mingled at Max’s Kansas City with such struggling New York artists as Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, and Larry Rivers, whose creative and political goals, Hadler notes, often aligned with the comedians’. And in a surprising reveal, Hadler notes that artist Rosalyn Drexler [b. 1926] worked with Pryor as a writer on Lily Tomlin’s 1973 CBS comedy special *Lily*.) Hadler deftly connects the common symbolism of Télémaque and Pryor, Mabley and Drexler. For the latter pair, Hadler explores their uses of oppositional humor both to counter sexist and racist female stereotypes and to find a kind of feminist intersectionality where Jewish, Black, and working-class resistance found common ground in women’s laughter.

As satisfying as these utopian approaches to rethinking Pop may be, more gimlet-eyed critiques of what took these revisions so long to emerge are unquestionably in evidence here as well. Kristine K. Ronan’s essay on Santa Fe’s Institute for American Indian Arts (IAIA) celebrates the ways in which Pop offered artists like Apsáalooke painter Kevin Red Star a new way to liberate Native art from its predominant existence as “dead things” in museum vitrines. Yet when a group of IAIA

graduates were invited to exhibit their “Indian Pop” as part of the Woodstock festival in 1969, their art camp was remembered by the festival’s white chroniclers as containing “Plains artifacts,” “moccasins and jewelry” (234).⁵ Lina Džuverović addresses the double bind for feminist Pop artists in Soviet Yugoslavia, where embracing Pop meant engaging with what both Soviet authorities and many Western feminists viewed as “the gendered disease of consumerism” (77). Analyzing the work of artists Olja Ivanjicki (1931–2009) and Katalin Ladik (b. 1942), rife with longing for Western post-World War II domesticity and celebrity, Džuverović ponders what feminist Pop—in both art and art history—looks like when poverty rather than abundance drives the critique. Performance artist Ladik, for example, used traditional Yugoslav household objects and domestic activities like sewing and cooking associated with “women’s work” not to celebrate these everyday things as authentic and beautiful, but to reveal them as oppressive in light of new technologies and products that were eliminating this burdensome labor for Western women. As Ladik put it, “I was not going to rebel against consumer society when I was poor” (85).⁶

While the most exciting scholarship in *Pop Art and Beyond* is dedicated to introducing lesser-known artists into the scholarly discourse on Pop, other fine chapters ask readers to rethink Pop’s canon in different ways. Thomas Crow explores how working-class Mod(ernist) subcultures helped to set up British Pop, eventually “bridging ... London street style to the most intellectually elevated precedents” (44). Anthony E. Grudin centers his chapter on Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg’s Kantian underpinnings around the issue of class, a concern that Grudin also identifies in Pop’s earliest collectors, most of whom shared Greenberg’s discomfort in “relinquishing the Kantian privileges of taste and disinterest” (98) from which the two critics defended their respective positions on Pop. Similarly,

Minioudaki’s contribution addresses how the gendering of labor affected the ways that workers were represented and received in 1960s art. She tellingly contrasts the perceptions of George Segal’s sculptures of roofers and butchers as dignified and all-American with the sexist, racist criticism of the installation *Maid* (1966) by Jann Haworth (b. 1942).

Lowery Stokes Sims acknowledges how uneasily Robert Colescott’s work sits within the Pop canon but makes a compelling bid for its place there, or at least for its proximity. Recognizing that Colescott’s painterly sensibility is indebted to post-World War II gestural abstraction, Sims argues that the artist’s works, with their references to the pop culture and politics of the American scene, often “straddle th[e] divide” (262) between Abstract Expressionism and Pop. She argues that Colescott embraced and critiqued Pop from an African American perspective, exploring how Black audiences received Pop Art icons: comic books, pulp fiction, and pin-ups, to say nothing of overtly racist advertisements and logos for all-American brands like Aunt Jemima. His work thus sought “to celebrate the contributions that difference brings to the course of society” (276) with the same depth as his white, working-class contemporaries now better-known in Pop Art histories. And while Rebecca Zorach acknowledges that the feminist artists in Chicago’s Black Arts Movement “never, ever claimed that name [of Pop] for themselves” (316), her analysis of the seductive pop-cultural icons and graphic protest imagery in the revelatory, media-savvy work of Barbara Jones-Hogu (1938–2017), Yaoundé Olu (b. 1945), and Evelyn Patricia Terry (b. 1946) makes a case for these artists’ relevance to Pop Art’s canon nonetheless. Terry’s 1973 *Hijack a Plane to Cuba* (Fig. 1) exemplifies their strategies, juxtaposing outlaw-heroes with porno vixens in works that simultaneously celebrate the daring and critique the misogyny of



Fig. 1. Evelyn Patricia Terry, *Hijack a Plane to Cuba* (1973), oil on canvas. Courtesy of the artist.

Black pop-cultural tropes of the 1970s.

The volume’s outlier—but perhaps its best chapter—is Manthia Diawara’s brilliant essay on “Pan-African and diasporic aesthetics through rock and roll” (50) in the studio portraits of Malian photographer Malick Sidibé. The self-fashioning of Sidibé’s subjects, members of the youth generation in the urban center of Bamako, reflected the influence (and indeed occasionally incorporated the album covers) of The Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, and especially James Brown as these young people assumed “a new identity that [was] secular and cosmopolitan” rather than “defined by the[ir] tribe or by Islam” (59). Citing Clyde Taylor’s concept of “pagan modernism,” Diawara frames Brown as a secular manifestation of the sacred, gender-fluid Nommo twins of Dogon cosmology, his music and dance elevating post-colonial Africans “to perfection” in a new era of possibilities.⁷ Sidibé’s fashionable subjects—pairing minidresses and bell-bottoms with afros and “twist” turbans—embody a “modern and democratic language understood by all” (61). At their most utopian, the Pop Art strategies documented in this volume share this same universal language. More

fundamentally, the portraits that come from Sidibé's loving collaborations with ordinary Malians represent the sheer, unadulterated joy possible in resistance—a joy that this marvelous snapshot of the global sixties has gifted its readers. •

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Notes

1. Frank Bowling in Okwui Enwezor and Olu Oguibe, "Frank Bowling: A Conversation," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* (Spring 1996): 18.
2. Geeta Kapur, "The Uncommon Universe of Bhupen Khakhar," in *Pop Art and Vernacular Cultures*, ed. Kobena Mercer (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 111.
3. Lawrence Alloway, *Six More: An Exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, July 24-August 25, 1963* (Los Angeles: LACMA, 1963): n.p.
4. Alloway, "The Long Front of Culture [1959]," in *Imagining the Present: Context, Content, and the Role of the Critic*, ed. Richard Kalina (London: Routledge, 2006), 63.
5. Ann Charters and Bill Belmont in Charters, ed., *The Portable Sixties Reader* (New York: Penguin, 2002), 317.
6. Katalin Ladik in interview with Lina Džuverović, November 30, 2013, Budapest, Hungary.
7. Clyde Taylor, *The Mask of Art* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

Killing Men & Dying Women: Imagining Difference in 1950s New York Painting

By Griselda Pollock
Manchester University Press, 2022

Three Women Artists: Expanding Abstract Expressionism in the American West

By Amy Von Lintel and Bonnie Roos
Texas A&M University Press, 2022

Reviewed by Gabrielle Stecher

In the introduction to *Three Women Artists*, Amy Von Lintel and Bonnie Roos invite the reader to search for the hidden truths of a movement that critics and art historians have overwhelmingly situated within midcentury New York. What does it look like, then, for scholars to make contact with the omitted and underexplored contexts of Abstract Expressionism? This analytical work, performed in both of the books examined here, is not simply a matter of unpacking issues of gender or media (though those are indeed crucial frameworks); rather, it involves geographical and therefore cultural expansion, the plotting of a new map to identify and navigate the complex terrain of Abstract Expressionism. Von Lintel and Roos make a persuasive case for diversifying the stories we tell about the movement beyond the limits of New York, and although the two books do so to dif-

ferent degrees, both *Three Women Artists: Expanding Abstract Expressionism in the American West* and *Killing Men & Dying Women: Imagining Difference in 1950s New York Painting* hitch up their wagons and head west. For Griselda Pollock, the West is Marilyn Monroe's Hollywood; for Von Lintel and Roos, it is Amarillo and the many surrounding communities in Texas as well as in Oklahoma, Kansas, and other western states where, thanks to the influence of Amarillo-based art teacher and gallery owner Dord Fitz, a new market and life arose for the movement starting in 1957, even as New York lingered in shock from the sudden death of its heroized Jackson Pollock the year before.

Through over four dozen illustrations and eight chapters, the eminent feminist art historian Griselda Pollock interrogates what it meant for woman artist Lee Krasner (1908–1984) to be caught between two icons: Marilyn Monroe (1926–1962), the defining image of American womanhood in the 1950s, and Krasner's husband Jackson Pollock, the American Artist. Challenging traditional distinctions between popular culture and the avant-garde, the author argues that each of these artists, three among many, "co-created modern art" (Pollock, 42). Pollock poses a striking question at the start of her book regarding *mm Mark 1* (1994), a print in which the artist Kerry Filer Harker manipulat-



Fig. 1. Kerry Filer Harker, *mm Mark 1* (1994), digital print. Private collection. © Kerry Harker.

ed a 1962 negative of Monroe that the actress had objected to and defaced (Fig. 1). “Is MM’s mark her gestural painting,” Pollock wonders, “linking Marilyn Monroe with the famous Abstract Expressionists of the 1950s, the action or gestural painters who distilled the dynamic between gesture, mark and surface?” (Pollock, xxvii). Pollock’s question bursts open the possibilities for theorizing how the embodiments and gestures of actresses like Monroe can be read productively alongside those of their those of their women artist contemporaries. Her meditation on and triangulation of Krasner and Monroe with Jackson Pollock reads, on the one hand, as a primer for what psychoanalysis and theory can afford contemporary studies of women artists in diverse media whose lives have been mythologized as quickly as their work has been dismissed. On the other hand, Pollock’s study sets the stage for her forthcoming monograph on Monroe, which will, one hopes, bring the star’s aesthetic production further into the foreground and attempt to clarify the nameless quality, something more than loveliness or ecstasy, that continues to elude us despite Monroe’s ubiquity.

Pollock’s main project, however, is considering—and increasing the visibility of—Krasner and other women Abstract Expressionists. Pollock discusses a wide array of creative, personal, and political forces at work in Krasner’s efforts to reconcile her self-identification as an artist with the public’s cultural dismissal of her as woman. This process required Krasner to confront the sometimes larger-than-life figures who loomed over her, including her artist-husband and the critic Clement Greenberg.

Killing Men & Dying Women furnishes a fascinating reflection on its author’s own intellectual and career trajectory as well as a plea to the reader to “endure” a consistent series of “turn[s] of the theoretical screw” (Pollock, 152). In fact, much of the text functions as a rich, rigorous unpacking and complication of major theorists. Pollock re-educates the reader on the work of such thinkers as Georges Bataille, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva and on topics ranging from matrixiality—

Bracha L. Etlinger’s theory that the prenatal sharing of “border-space” with the mother shapes a person’s being and viewing—to sexual difference (a concept to which the appendix essay is devoted). What Pollock so eloquently argues from the outset is that theory and transdisciplinary approaches “are necessary if we are not to allow art history to fall into the realm of the financialized art market, easy consumption and light entertainment” (Pollock, xxii). This point applies as much to art history’s attempts to codify Abstract Expressionism as it does to our continued commodification and consumption of Marilyn Monroe, Jayne Mansfield, and other dead blonde bombshells.

Von Lintel and Roos employ a much more accessible prose style for their study illuminating and grounding the roles—artistic, performative, and pedagogical—played by women Abstract Expressionist artists in the American Middle West from the later 1950s to the mid-1980s. *Three Women Artists* provides an invaluable resource for understanding the dynamic teaching- and community-centered market for Abstract Expressionism within the terrain and culture(s) of the west central states. One of the text’s major through lines is the fascinating story of Amarillo gallery owner, teacher, and artist Dord Fitz sharing the work and personages of Elaine de Kooning (1918–1989), Jeanne Reynal (1903–1983), Louise Nevelson (1899–1988), and other Abstract Expressionists with patrons who appreciated the novelty of these artists’ style as well as their personalities. While not downplaying the discriminatory aspects of midcentury Midwestern culture, the authors nuance stereotypes about the region’s conservatism. Racism likely deterred Reynal’s African American husband, artist Thomas Sills, from joining her in Amarillo, but Fitz, a gay man who had lost a University of Kentucky teaching position because of an arrest on “morals” charges, could “hide [in Amarillo] in plain sight ... as a beloved if ‘unusual’ neighbor” (Von Lintel and Roos, 8). For Midwestern communities, the eccentric, flamboyant Nevelson embodied “foreignness,” but they embraced this persona (Von Lintel and Roos, 152).



Fig. 2. Jeanne Reynal, *Sphere* (1950s), cement, mixed media, 29" diameter. Anita Shapolsky Gallery, New York. © 2021 Estate of Jeanne Reynal / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Pollock, in her chapter surveying Krasner’s career trajectory, states in emphatic terms that women artists in the postwar US encountered systemic misogyny:

They wanted to be considered merely painters, but were consistently *only* perceived as women.... Krasner was often eloquent about just how sexist the actual art community was—the critics who did not review the shows, the dealers who would not buy and exhibit, the curators who did not collect and historicize. Gender bias was as active in the modernist community as it was in the rest of the conservative, post-war culture of Eisenhower’s hegemonizing Cold War America. (Pollock, 199)

In *Three Woman Artists*, however, by shifting focus from Abstract Expressionism’s geographical center to its periphery (or, the authors might contend, to the center of its second act), Von Lintel and Roos demonstrate that

some states traditionally perceived as conservative not only showed a great investment in the avant-garde but also treated women artists as key figures within this movement.

Von Lintel and Roos's three chapters uncover how the West was won by de Kooning, Reynal, and Nevelson respectively. Supporting this narrative with an impressive array of beautifully reproduced illustrations (numbering just over one hundred), the authors include rarely reproduced works of art as well as photographs from archives and private collections of the artists at work or in community settings. The book's appendix provides a comprehensive timeline of each of the Abstract Expressionist events organized by Fitz between 1957 and 1986, including festivals as well as collective and solo shows held in Amarillo or, occasionally, in other cities, including Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, and Scottsdale, Arizona.

What quickly emerges is the extent to which de Kooning, Reynal, and Nevelson immersed themselves into these Midwestern communities. On tours of canyons and country fairs, they gained an appreciation for the local landscape and cowboy culture. De Kooning captured this spirit in her bull series, a large body of paintings and sketches that transformed the signification of cattle into something appealing and magnetic.

One of the prime ways these women artists established such strong bonds with local audiences was through teaching. Their instruction took the form not of formal academic courses but of workshops where diverse groups of adult students were invited to experience the joy and experimentation of art-making. Fitz himself had initiated this project, teaching classes across much of the rural High Plains in which men and women alike, across a range of social strata, learned how to produce art—and also how to consume it, especially as patrons of abstraction. The adventurous women artists Fitz invited from New York turned their newly forged relationships within these appreciative circles into opportunities to passionately discuss and demystify their avant-garde aesthetics. Ever the

committed teacher, de Kooning amassed a roster of seventy-five students in Albuquerque alone. Reynal created her *Amarillo* mosaic (1960) following a particularly formative trip to market her art in that city; she then returned to teach classes to Fitz's students twice in the mid-sixties. For Nevelson, conducting workshops was, at its heart, a social act meant to inspire her students "not to sleep through life," a teaching philosophy aligned closely with Fitz's (Von Lintel and Roos, 133).¹ One of this volume's major strengths is in revealing how much of de Kooning's, Reynal's, and Nevelson's work remains in the Midwest, often in private collections amassed by community members—the majority of them women as well—whose interest in becoming patrons of Abstract Expressionism grew out of their exposure to these artists, their classes with Fitz, or both.

Von Lintel and Roos reposition Reynal and Nevelson alongside de Kooning, and together with Reynal's and Nevelson's media of mosaic and sculpture respectively, as critical components in a more diversified understanding of "action" art. Photographs and accounts of the women artists' creation-in-action make it more difficult to ignore the physicality, performativity, and expressiveness of their gestures, large and small. Von Lintel and Roos put the three artists' practice in dialogue with Jackson Pollock's painting methods and with critic Harold Rosenberg's ideas about the central importance of the mobilized body in American abstract art. Reynal, the authors note, pushed back against the notion that the technique of mosaic was inherently meticulous and restricted by the need for planning: photographs show her energetically slathering adhesive or dribbling tesserae. In Reynal's *Sphere* (1950s; Fig. 2), we witness the results of her new, more spontaneous technique, the "gestural dusting of colored tesserae onto the cement" (Von Lintel and Roos, 82).

The images of Reynal hunched over her works-in-progress are met in *Killing Men & Dying Women* by a 1969 photograph in which Krasner moves so fast, in carrying out her broad, curving strokes, that the camera cannot keep up.

Krasner's statements about the biographical dimension of her work, Pollock contends, resonate with the argument by Rosenberg—whom Krasner knew well—that the physical act of painting was intertwined with, indeed a formative element in, the life of the American artist. Pollock interprets Krasner's famous assertion, "Painting is not separate from life. It is like asking—do I want to live? My answer is yes—and I paint,"² in light of Rosenberg's formulations: "Painting [for Krasner] constitutes living and each set of works ... mark[s] liveliness, still living, being alive, restlessly examining painting itself as a way of life." For Rosenberg, though, the artist is "he"; Pollock asks, "What is a life when it is *hers*?" (Pollock, 221).

Killing Men & Dying Women thus shares with *Three Women Artists* a consideration of postwar women artists' painterly gestures. For Pollock, a robust, explicit, and expansive feminist theoretical framework helps shed light on these gestures as enacted mostly in New York. Von Lintel and Roos instead situate women's actions as artists in the overlooked artistic hub of the American Midwest.³ Above all, both books provide welcome expansion to our understanding of the works, practices, and professional trajectories of Abstract Expressionist artists Krasner, de Kooning, Reynal, and Nevelson. •

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Notes

1. Nevelson in *Dawns + Dusks: Taped Conversations with Diana MacKown* (New York: Scribner's, 1976), 100–101.
2. Louise Elliott Rago, "We Interview Lee Krasner," *School Arts* 60 (September 1960), 32.
3. See also Amy Von Lintel and Bonnie Roos, "The Women: Tops in Art, 1960, Abstract Expressionism in Amarillo, Texas," *Woman's Art Journal* 42, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2021), 12–21.

Simple Pleasures: The Art of Doris Lee

By Melissa Wolfe, John Fagg, Tom Wolf,
and Barbara L. Jones
Westmoreland Museum of American
Art and D. Giles, 2020

Reviewed by Ella Nixon

The work of Doris Lee (1905–1983) should be taken seriously even though—and in part because—it brings pleasure. This is the central argument advanced by *Simple Pleasures: The Art of Doris Lee*, perhaps best expressed by Melissa Wolfe, who questions “why neurosis or the tragic is considered a more profound expression of the human condition than joy” (50). The experience of joy, it is argued, can provide us with meaning.

The catalogue accompanies an exhibition of the same name that originated at the Westmoreland Museum of American Art in Pennsylvania before touring to three other art institutions in America through January 2023. As the first major critical assessment of Lee’s work, the exhibition included over seventy pieces from the early 1930s through the late 1960s, the full span of Lee’s career. The catalogue contains high-quality illustrations of these artworks along with a foreword by Westmoreland director and CEO Anne Kraybill, essays by exhibition co-curators Wolfe and Barbara L. Jones, additional chapters by John Fagg and Tom Wolf, and a chronology of the artist’s life by Amy Torbert.

The essays outline and elucidate the key aspects of Lee’s life in an integrated and wide-ranging way to provide a comprehensive overview of the artist. Lee began her artistic training at the Kansas City Art Institute (1928–29) and the California School of Fine Arts (1930) before moving to the Woodstock artists’ colony in 1931. Chiefly a figurative painter of American life, Lee first gained widespread attention for her 1935 *Thanksgiving* (Fig. 1). The painting won an acquisition prize at the Arts Institute of Chicago’s Exhibition of American Paintings and Sculpture that year. To the objection by



Fig. 1. Doris Lee, *Thanksgiving* (1935), oil on canvas, 28 1/8" x 40 1/8". The Art Institute of Chicago, 1935.313.

the prize’s patron that Lee’s bustling figures lacked beauty, the artist responded, “Most modern painters are coming down to earth, interpreting commonplace scenes and people....To paint beautiful pictures is not my aim at all....*Thanksgiving* was based on what I actually saw in a New England kitchen” (28).¹

After an amicable divorce in 1940 from photographer Russell Lee, the artist spent nearly three decades in a romantic relationship with painter Arnold Blanch. She owned a succession of homes in Woodstock with Blanch but also travelled extensively, wintered in Florida, and kept studio space in New York City to maintain links with the series of galleries that held solo exhibitions of her work. Her 1940s paintings drew influence from modernism and folk art; starting in the 1950s, her style became increasingly abstract. She supplemented her practice by teaching at art schools and through commercial commissions. For the latter, Lee produced works in a remarkably wide range of media, including magazine illustrations, textiles, wall murals, and even playing cards featuring nostalgic scenes of apple- and corn-pickers in agricultural America.

She received an honorary doctorate in Fine Arts from the Moore College of Art and Design in Philadelphia in 1961, and her long and successful career continued until a diagnosis of Alzheimer’s disease in the late 1960s removed her from the public eye. A year after her death in Florida in 1983, the Woodstock Artists Association held a memorial exhibition of her work.

In the opening essay of *Simple Pleasures*, “Simple Joys and Serious Painting,” author Wolfe’s emphasis on Lee’s simplicity is an intelligent guiding principle for her feminist art-historical account of Lee’s career. Wolfe employs the word “simple”—an adjective often used in a derogative way to describe art produced by women—to evoke a complex philosophy. “Simple” artworks have long been positioned as antithetical to those produced by Great Artists, typically envisioned as male, whose “genius” lies in a creative vision detached from the surface perceptions of everyday life. In twentieth-century criticism, as observed famously by Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker, women artists were stereotyped as uncreative and “less serious” than their male counterparts.² Wolfe postulates that Lee’s career subverted this

gendered antithesis: "Rather than deny the characterization of her art as feminine, Lee quite confidently embraced the term and was explicit about releasing the feminine from the negative connotations to which it had become tied" (42). The simplicity of Lee's work is its strength, the author argues, and this is where the artist's genius lies.

Wolfe identifies several factors that underlay the marginalization of Lee's work by critics. Not only did Lee's embrace of figuration violate notions of the heroic abstract artist, but the "folksy" nature of her subjects also blurred conventional distinctions between fine art and kitsch (23). Her flattening approach to form was dismissed as "decorative," another quality seen as feminine (39). The public popularity that Lee's artworks attracted during her lifetime further discouraged critical engagement: "The genuine pleasure experienced in viewing them brought wide public appeal," Wolfe notes, but made them seem "too unserious to take seriously" (23).

The appeal of Lee's artwork lay partly in its humorous character. This is the central argument of the book's second chapter, "Doris Lee's Senses of Humor and History," written by John Fagg, which "considers various ways of laughing with the art Lee made during the Depression" (55). According to Fagg, Lee's comedy emerged in part from her reception of sources in historical art and contemporary popular culture. She adapted the unguarded liveliness of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's figures to paintings of American life. She infused irreverent, even naughty wit into images recalling antebellum genre paintings (themselves sometimes punning and playful) and Currier & Ives prints. Lee's *Noon* (1935), for example, substitutes a couple canoodling in a haystack for the farm boys resting in William Sydney Mount's *Caught Napping* (1848). In a dense chapter that at times becomes difficult to follow, Fagg's close analysis of Lee's 1935 *Thanksgiving* (Fig. 1) is a highlight. The author explores Lee's humorous representation in this painting of "woman-centered" domestic disorder (66), likewise a premise of 1930s

screwball comedy films and of Mary Lasswell's comic novels.

Fagg's essay also examines the emotional responses elicited by Lee's humor. *Thanksgiving*, the author argues, prompted instinctive reactions rooted in a sense of common connectedness, with viewers recognizing the "hurried and hyperbolic" actions in the scene as ones they themselves performed (66). This relatability provides another strand to the argument that the simplicity of Lee's work is of great value. Accessibility through humor is a quality Wolfe ascribes Lee's personality, and in particular to her interactions with the figures who made up the Woodstock artists' colony.

Tom Wolf's chapter, "Doris Lee in Woodstock," employs photographs, anecdotes, newspaper excerpts, and quotations to provide a rich picture of the artist's life at that colony. Wolf successfully untangles the relationships that helped to form Lee's artistic training and life at Woodstock, above all with her longtime partner Arnold Blanch, whose charismatic personality placed him at the center of the colony. Wolf includes a 1932 diary excerpt from Florence Ballin Cramer (1883–1962) placing Lee, Blanch, and their then-spouses within a group at Woodstock that met to recite erotic texts and respond with drawings. Lee's involvement with this group, led by artist Emil Ganso, provides insight into Lee's 1935 *Noon*, which portrays a woman enjoying the sexual advances of a man. Wolf's chapter provides a useful perspective on the importance of networks within the regional spaces of artistic practice, which in themselves can be, through their marginality, creatively propitious environments.

Wolf's linking of Lee to Woodstock's "feminist tradition" of thriving women artists (82–83) resonates with Wolfe's contextualizing of Lee within Woodstock's "progressive atmosphere," where "her female cohort shared her belief in the autonomy and equality of women's creative production" (39). Both authors discuss how Lee celebrated women in her many scenes depicting them absorbed in a range of activities and in her 1950s portrait series of

historical and twentieth-century female authors (Wolfe, 42–43; Wolf, 83–84). Their points contribute yet more support to the book's central argument that Lee's work is rooted in joy.

Barbara L. Jones deepens our understanding of Lee's professional commissions in the book's final chapter, "Into the Commercial Realm." Jones presents the worlds of business and art as uncontradictory facets of the artist's career and creative output. Lee's commercial projects include an array of works, including illustrations for American Tobacco Company cigarette packets and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and for such magazines as *Seventeen*, *Mademoiselle*, and *Vogue*. Her role as artist-correspondent for *Life* magazine took her to Hollywood, Mexico, North Africa, and many other destinations. The cumulative impression is of a professional career marked by pragmatism and hard work, in contrast to mythic and conventionally masculinist conceptions inherited from Romanticism of the artist's life being defined by isolation and struggle. The equal value Lee afforded to her commercial commissions invites a broader re-evaluation of artistic hierarchies, as articulated by the artist herself: "Of first importance in illustrating or decorating is that there be no feeling of condescension on the part of the artist—no feeling that a lesser degree of creativity is involved" (Wolfe, 45).³

The authors of *Simple Pleasures* together create a nuanced portrait of an artist who successfully navigated the art market in a professional capacity while retaining her creativity. They note, for example, that Lee travelled easily between the bohemian space of Woodstock and the commercial galleries of New York (25) and that she followed regimens and kept to deadlines (23). Overall, the catalogue offers richly textured essays, insightful visual analyses, and a thorough account of Lee's artistic career, convincingly presenting Lee's artworks as tools of positivity that operated through the "simple joy" (50) they evoked. The simplicity that made Lee's art so popular during her lifetime is, I propose, one of the reasons her work remains so relevant

today. In an age of divisive identity politics and jargonistic language that can often occlude meaning (or, rather, conceal non-meaning), the approach to Lee's oeuvre in *Simple Pleasures* provides a model for judging artistic value in terms of public preference based on identification with and/or affinity for an image. These are values set apart from those held by traditional art establishments and rest instead on a criterion of positive communication and human connection. •

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Notes

1. Lee quoted in Hope Ridings Miller, "Doris Lee, Who Won Prize for Work Criticized by Donors, Is Holding 'One-Man' Show Here," *Washington Post*, November 20, 1935.

2. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981; repr. I.B. Tauris, 2013). See also recently Pollock, *Killing Men & Dying Women: Imagining Difference in 1950s New York Painting* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2022), and Gabrielle Stecher's review in this issue.
3. Lee quoted in Amy Geller, "The Lure of the Naïve" (MA thesis, Fashion Institute of Technology, 2010), 57.

Suzanne Valadon: Model, Painter, Rebel

Edited by Nancy Ireson, with contributions by Lisa Brice, Adrienne L. Childs, Lauren Jimerson, Marianne Le Morvan, Martha Lucy, Denise Murrell, and Ebonie Pollock

The Barnes Foundation in association with Paul Holberton Publishing, 2021

Reviewed by Emie Diamond

This catalogue presents a thorough accompaniment to the exhibition of work by the artist Suzanne Valadon (1865–1938) that originated at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia and traveled to the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen. *Model, Painter, Rebel* explores Valadon's evolution from model to artist and the breadth of her oeuvre. It covers this ground in four contextual essays; a selection of supplementary primary texts; a chronology by Marianne Le Morvan; and fifty-four plates divided into six visual themes, "Maria the Model," "Suzanne Valadon the Artist," "Intimate Circles," "Naked Ambition," "Redefining a Genre," and "Faithful to Figuration."

The catalogue begins with editor Nancy Ireson's chapter, "Locating Suzanne Valadon," which provides a biographical sketch of the artist. Ireson suggests that Valadon's upbringing in poverty, mostly in Montmartre, simultaneously limited and liberated the artist in her career choices. As a youth she tried and failed at a variety of professions, from seamstress to waitress to circus per-



Fig. 1. Suzanne Valadon, *The Blue Room* (*La chambre bleue*) (1923), oil on canvas, 35 7/16" x 45 11/16", Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, on loan to Musée des Beaux-Arts, Limoges.

former (this last, however, perhaps a later fabrication). She found work at age fifteen as Maria—her birth name was Marie-Clémentine—posing for Pierre-Auguste Renoir and, over time, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Vojtěch Hynais, Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, and other artists. Modeling was a financially viable, though morally compromising, option for women from poor families. Valadon gave birth at eighteen to a son, Maurice, whom artist and critic Miguel Utrillo came to acknowledge as his own, although the boy's true biological father remains unknown to history. In 1892, having already produced drawings,

Valadon moved into the medium of oil and adopted the name Suzanne. Her choice to marry businessman Paul Mosis in 1896 allowed her to give up modeling. In her art career, she employed Lautrec's nickname for her, Suzanne (after the biblical story of Susanna and the Elders, a reference to her having modeled for older artists, as Lisa Brice relates in her essay). Ireson poignantly suggests that the artist's divorce from Mosis in 1910 and subsequent marriage to the much younger André Utter contributed to her pragmatic decision to pursue financial independence as a painter of larger-scale oils. Valadon went on to

achieve notable commercial success, exhibiting regularly at such prestigious venues as the Salon des Indépendants and Salon d'Automne in Paris. Ireson's humanized picture of Valadon shows a clever, resourceful, performative young woman who became a serious artist.

Most notably in this chapter, Ireson points to evolving attitudes towards women artists at the turn of the twentieth century that benefited Valadon, specifically the acceptance of women studying female nudes. Valadon's explorations of nudity, puberty, desire, and sexual awakening in her works often reflect broader art-historical trends, Ireson notes, and sometimes place women into traditional roles (e.g., the femme fatale), but they can also be "startling" and indeed revolutionary (13). In *Young Girl with Mirror* (*La petite fille au miroir*) and likely companion piece *Nude with Mirror* (*Nu au miroir*) (both 1909), for example, Valadon's subjects strain to see their reflections in small, off-center mirrors held at unusual angles. Ireson points out that this theme of girls' emerging sexuality also interested Valadon's contemporary Edvard Munch; in this way, the paintings are "very much of their moment" (12). Ireson cites *Adam and Eve* (*Adam et Ève*) (1909) as a highly progressive and central painting in Valadon's oeuvre, wherein the artist portrayed herself nude as Eve alongside her significantly younger lover.¹ *The Blue Room* (*La chambre bleue*) (1923; Fig. 1) is also emblematic of Valadon's revolutionary approach to painting in its clash of patterns and "its celebration of a carefree, liberated woman" (14). Contemporary critics frequently praised Valadon's work, albeit sometimes in masculinist terms: writer Adolphe Basler called the artist a "virile" talent whose figures possessed a "male brutality," words intended as compliments (15).²

Martha Lucy explores how Valadon's employment as a model affected her later role as an artist in the chapter "Painting from Both Sides of the Easel: Suzanne Valadon and the Female Nude." Lucy writes that Valadon was "one of the few artists to have ever occupied the position of both subject and object—painter and painted—in such a deeply engaged way" (20). This unusual relationship to the process of

painting informed Valadon's choice to defy the conventions of her time that offered flawless female nudes to the male gaze. Valadon ventured into "off-limits terrain" in presenting her unclothed women in ways that were raw, banal, and intimate (18), such as her candidly painted, unobjectified *Two Figures* (*Deux figures*) (1909).

Valadon was in a unique position to recreate the image of woman through her own vision, in contrast to the ways her body as model had been reworked by male artists. She recalled that Puvis had "transposed and idealized" her body in *The Sacred Grove* (1884–89), employing her limbs for both male and female figures (20).³ Renoir likely merged elements of Valadon's and other models' bodies, Lucy suggests, to create the timeless, monumental figures of his *Great Bathers* (1884–87). Valadon did not look to classical archetypes or pursue *la femme éternelle*, as Renoir had done with *Great Bathers*; rather, she brought her subjects' humanity to the foreground. In a number of her works, she depicted models with mirrors "experienc[ing] ... the self as an image seen from the outside" (27), as in *Nude with a Mirror* and *Young Girl with a Mirror*. Elsewhere, Valadon reframed the odalisque by placing her into scenes that may be images of modeling itself, such as *Reclining Nude* (*Nu couché*) and *Nude Reclining on a Sofa* (*Nu allongé sur un canapé*) (both 1928).

The theme of Valadon's relationship to, and departures from, dominant approaches to figural subjects continues with the chapter "Disrupting Tradition: Suzanne Valadon's *Black Venus*." This chapter provides the transcript of an online conversation among art historians Adrienne L. Childs, Ireson, Lauren Jimerson, Denise Murrell, and Ebonie Pollock. Together, the five scholars analyze, decode, and question Valadon's motivations behind her *Black Venus* (*Vénus noire*) (1919) and four other images of Black nudes painted in the same year that all depict the same woman—Valadon's only known Black model—in what Pollock has identified as a series. The speakers above all address the motives underlying Valadon's choice to paint a Black model in early twentieth-century Paris.

Citing Pollock's MA research on *Black Venus*, Murrell notes that 1919 was the year of W.E.B. DuBois's first Pan-African Congress and the finalizing of the Treaty of Versailles, and that Valadon would likely have been aware of contemporary discussions in the public realm about Pan-African identity and colonialization. Murrell points out that unlike many of Valadon's painting subjects, the Black model's name is unknown, which raises the issue of Black erasure. Childs observes that Valadon's placement of the Black Venus in an "Edenic and primitive" space racializes the setting (32). Pollock brings the discussion in another direction, observing that the Black model is in the pose of the classical Aphrodite of Knidos statue, and is perhaps being elevated through this reference. The woman's "direct confrontational gaze channels the brazen modernity" of Édouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863) (Murrell, 34), so it is possible Valadon was looking to shift the understanding of beauty by claiming it for a Black nude body. For the Barnes and Glyptoteket exhibitions, some of the paintings in Valadon's series have been retitled, removing nomenclature with roots in enslavement, "tropes [that] are part of what constructs the ideologies of white supremacy" (Murrell, 33). Renaming works, Murrell affirms, is "one of the many revisionary gestures that we are trying to make as interventions with art history" (38). In the end, on the question whether Valadon was racist, the speakers find that Valadon did respond to contemporary market demands for archetypes that perpetuated racism, but her classicizing of a Black figure and avoidance of caricature reflect at least a limited desire to rewrite tradition. This chapter's discussion ultimately settles on the inherent complexity and ambiguity of Valadon's unconventional Black Venus series.

The chapter by contemporary painter Lisa Brice (b. 1968), "Suzanne Valadon: To and From the Blue Room," straddles past and present, placing Valadon's female and male nudes and clothed *Blue Room* figure in dialogue with works by female contemporary artists, including Brice's own *Between This and That* (2017). Brice proposes that Valadon felt a sense of empathy with her models: the artist spoke of painting as a way "to get to know" a person

(45);⁴ in her drawings, moreover, “the lines that describe the body, which are invariably stronger than those elsewhere in the composition, act like armatures that ... protect the fragilities of their subjects” (44). *The Blue Room*, Brice points out, exists between genre painting and portraiture. Women in the post-World War I era had just begun wearing trousers outside of work, and Valadon depicts her subject’s relaxation as a “radical act—to be at ease on one’s own terms [constituting] a protest of sorts” (46). Valadon’s half-nude self-portraits from 1917, 1924, and 1931, the last painted when she was in her mid-sixties, served as forerunners, Brice argues, to the nude self-portraits by pivotal contemporary artists Alice Neel (1900–1984), Caroline Coon (b. 1945), and Marlene Dumas (b. 1953) that show their aging bodies.

Valadon existed at the vanguard of the modern woman. She was self-reliant, ambitious, and, for most of her life, financially independent. *Suzanne*

Valadon: Model, Painter, Rebel explores these personal qualities as well as Valadon’s unconventional approach to drawing and painting, from the frankness and humanity of her female nudes, likely rooted in her own experience as a model, to her classicizing—if still problematic—Black Venus series. This enlightening catalogue captures the essence of one of the first modern female painters, ensuring Valadon’s rightful place in the canon of art history. •

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written for a variety of publications, including *Cultured Magazine*, *The Critic Magazine*, and *Hunger Magazine*.

Notes

1. On Adam and other male nudes by Valadon, see Lauren Jimerson, “Defying Gender: Suzanne Valadon and the Male Nude,” *Woman’s Art Journal* 40, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2019), 3–12.
2. Adolphe Basler, preface to *Suzanne Valadon*, exh. cat. (Lyon: Galerie des Archers, 1928), n.p., translated by Roger Hutchin and Catherine Hutchin, “Selected Texts on Suzanne Valadon,” in *Model, Painter, Rebel*, 149.
3. Valadon in Adolphe Tabarant, “Suzanne Valadon et ses souvenirs de modèle,” *Bulletin de la vie artistique* (December 15, 1921), 628, trans. Hutchin and Hutchin, “Selected Texts,” 147.
4. Valadon in Édouard Herriot, “Suzanne Valadon,” in *Exposition Suzanne Valadon, Maurice Utrillo, André Utter, Georges Salendre*, exh. cat. (Geneva: Galerie Moos, 1932), trans. Hutchin and Hutchin, “Selected Texts,” 151.

Women, Art and Money in Late Victorian and Edwardian England: The Hustle and the Scramble

By Maria Quirk

Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2021

Reviewed by Colleen Denney

The self-portrait on the cover of this new paperback edition of Maria Quirk’s valuable text shows the artist Emily (Milly) Childers (1866–1922) in 1889 in her professional role as painter, complete with artist’s smock, palette, and brushes (Fig. 1). It belongs to a long history of women artists’ self-portraits that includes the miniature by Sofonisba Anguissola (c. 1535–1625) illustrated in Ross’s review in this issue. In Childers’s case, by placing the viewer below her, the woman artist literally elevates herself to the position of nobility, mimicking aristocratic portrait traditions that use a worm’s-eye view to show the sitter’s own high status in society. Such a representation begs the question that

forms the core of Quirk’s study: Just what *was* the status of the woman artist in the late Victorian and Edwardian period (c. 1870–c. 1914)? The journey on which Quirk takes the reader verifies that women’s standing as professional artists was hard-won at best.

Rather surprisingly, Quirk does not bring up Childers in her text, nor does she include any illustrations. Many portraits of the women she does discuss exist and would have been welcome on the cover or as figures in the text, including Frederick Hollyer’s photographic portrait of Anna Lea Merriitt (1844–1930) in her home studio (61), which Quirk cites in part of a chapter devoted to the late Victorian public’s fascination with how artists promoted their studio lives. But then negotiating with publishers about images is one of the struggles of today’s art historians that mirrors the challenges faced by the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century women artists Quirk considers.

The subtitle of the book, “The Hustle and the Scramble,” encapsulates the difficulties that women artists confronted in the patriarchal world of late Victorian



Fig. 1. Emily (Milly) Childers, *Self-Portrait* (1889), oil on canvas, 36" x 27". Leeds Museums and Galleries (Leeds Art Gallery).

and Edwardian England. Quirk is wise to discuss them in comparison with the relatively easier experiences of their male counterparts to emphasize just how unequal the art world was for women.

This book is part of the Bloomsbury series "Contextualizing Art Markets," a subject with a long scholarship history dating back, as Quirk notes, to the critical essay by Harrison White and Cynthia White (1965) on the emergent "dealer-critic" system in the nineteenth century (5).¹ While Quirk acknowledges that this phenomenon of art dealers and authors shaping market trends extended beyond England, she does not situate the particular characteristics of the late Victorian and Edwardian periods in relation to this economic shift beyond a discussion of the rise of professionalism in the arts. The book's introduction, "Money, Professionalism and Reputation," would have been enhanced in this regard by laying out the economic and political changes that gave rise to a middle-class audience that was ready with new money to become connoisseurs of male and female artists alike.

In this context of the economic and political shifts, Quirk's main argument is that late Victorian and Edwardian women artists had to sell their works in order to reach the professional ranks. She organizes her text into two parts, the first being "From Student to Studio." The first chapter of this section, on art training, examines the different types of art education women pursued and the extent to which those paths affected their ability to sell their work. The second, "Commerce and Family in the Home Studio," addresses the degree to which access to a studio location contributed to women's success as professional artists. Linked to this premise is the third chapter's exploration of studio celebrity, that is, the increased attention that artists garnered through their home studios' participation in the public realm of cultural consumption.

The second section, "Commerce, Enterprise, Display," first explores Royal Academy politics and that institution's continual minimizing of women artists. It then addresses the new artists' groups that became a viable, often necessary, option for women seeking professional status. The chapter "Making a Living through Middle-Class Demand" examines the buying public and its representatives, namely art

dealers, and how the kinds of art they demanded dictated what kinds of subjects women artists created. Portraiture was especially important in this context, Quirk argues in the next chapter, as a means for women artists to survive professionally in the art market. The final chapter of the book shifts the discussion from painters—the subject of all previous chapters—to illustrators. Here Quirk explores how the visual culture explosion of the late Victorian period enabled many women artists to succeed as artists in this commercial field. Following a brief conclusion, the book includes an appendix of artists' biographies for some (not all) of the women artists Quirk examines, as well as a second appendix showing price disparities—some by a factor of ten or more—between select paintings by male and female artists in this era.

What is not explained is Quirk's focus on painters. Quirk does not make the case that painting fulfilled women artists' commercial aims better than other media, and I would argue that photography served this function as well as or better than painting. Photography was a burgeoning industry from the late Victorian period onward, allowing women to run their own businesses and thus to sidestep many of the problems that women painters faced in getting the attention of dealers who could promote their work.

Quirk readily admits that the relevant archives on women artists of the period are limited, and she supplements them with artists' own writings to good effect. She identifies many of the women in her study as "not part of England's conventional artistic canon" (11). And yet, by relying on contemporary art criticism, she is able to contextualize and hence justify her choice of these artists, who include, for example, portrait miniaturist Gertrude Massey (née Seth) (1868–1957) and painter and watercolorist Maude Goodman (1853–1938). The criticism places their experiences within the history of the art market and in relation to "attitudes towards women's participation in art education and business" (11).

Quirk says outright that she is not presenting an art-historical survey nor examining art movements (10). What is missing for me, though, as a feminist art

historian well-grounded in the contextualization of Victorian and Edwardian art markets, is a framework of empowerment and a keen discussion of art movements and of specific art. If I were assigning this new paperback edition for a History of Women Artists course, for example, I would make sure to pair it with a source on the art-historical picture itself to prepare students for the work the author does here. Still, Quirk well evokes the frustrations of the continual uphill slog women artists faced—"the hustle and scramble" women endured to sell their art (195, albeit quoting a critic from 1925, well after the span of time her study examines).²

There is much here for both the novice and the scholar to learn. Most intriguing was Quirk's discussion of the home studio within the framework of Virginia Woolf's much-lauded feminist lament about women's lack of access to creative space, "A Room of One's Own." I also gained much from her section "Studios and the single girl," which addresses the purpose-built residences for single women professionals organized starting in 1888 by the Ladies Dwelling Company, some of which offered studios and workrooms and were occupied by woman artists (65–66). Similarly, Quirk's chapter on women press illustrators is incredibly valuable in bringing to light not only the artistic lives of such illustrators, but also how the industry itself worked, among other things frequently requiring that artists adapt their styles to publishers' dictates.

Well into the Edwardian period, Quirk argues, the benchmark for women artists was the Royal Academy. Quirk dwells extensively on the importance of the RA's titles and exhibitions to women artists in helping them to legitimize their work and promote their careers. What Quirk really grapples with, understandably, is that the RA retained this stature among women artists even though so many were denied membership, and even as the ones included as members often saw themselves excluded from events. The reasons that the Academy establishment gave for these exclusions were invested with a veneer of propri-

ety—that all-important value for the Victorians—but truly reveal just how systemic patriarchal discrimination remained. It is a wonder, then, that women artists succeeded at all.

Quirk also spends considerable time recreating the exhibition world to help us understand both the opportunities open to women and the ones dealers and gallery owners frequently denied them. She notes that there were alternative spaces with great sway in the late Victorian period that aided women artists specifically, chief among them the Grosvenor Gallery, which displayed women's works as prominently as men's. Quirk only discusses Grosvenor co-founder Sir Coutts Lindsay, not his gallery co-founder and wife Lady Blanche Lindsay (née Caroline Blanche Elizabeth Fitzroy). A watercolorist and violinist, Lady Lindsay drew upon her considerable network of women watercolorists for the annual displays in the Grosvenor's specially created watercolor gallery, and she enhanced the careers of rising women musicians by inviting them to play at gallery openings, one of

the Grosvenor's many modern innovations.³ Quirk could also have linked her discussion of alternative galleries to one of the book's key arguments: that women artists suffered a lack of artistic freedom because they had to cater to the demands of the art market (or, for illustrators, the reading public), driven in large part by a newly moneyed middle-class audience, which set up significant obstacles to the artists finding room for their modern, forward-looking voices. Many venues, like the Grosvenor and the New English Art Club after it, offered exhibition opportunities for young modern artists to pursue new visions.

Perhaps Quirk intends to spend more time on this modernist shift in future studies; it needs more unpacking than she is able to do in this survey text. The reader is left to contemplate what late Victorian and Edwardian women artists would have produced if they had been given the advantages that their male counterparts enjoyed. This question is just one of many provocations that Quirk raises in the important study, which gives us, for the first time, a

woman's-eye view (although a worm's-eye view would not be amiss) of the gendered inequities of the late Victorian and Edwardian art market. •

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Notes

1. Harrison White and Cynthia White, *Canvases and Careers: Institutional Change in the French Painting World* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1965).
2. "A Word to the Dealers," *The Burlington Magazine* 47, no. 272 (1925): 221.
3. See Colleen Denney, "Emergence of Women Artists and Audience: Temple as Safe Haven," in *At the Temple of Art: The Grosvenor Gallery, 1877–1890* (Madison, NJ and Teaneck, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 2000), 127–60.

Luisa Roldán (Illuminating Women Artists Series)

By Catherine Hall-van den Elsen
Getty Publications and Lund Humphries, 2021

Reviewed by Liya Okroshidze

The Getty's new Illuminating Women Artists series aims to shed light on worthy women painters, sculptors, and other artists who have long been relegated to oblivion or have been viewed in contexts where men were central. Like the Neuf Preuses, the late medieval cycle of nine women belatedly introduced alongside the Neuf Preux to embody military virtue, women artists step onto equal footing with their male counterparts in the Getty's project. Inaugurating the series is *Luisa Roldán*, on the early modern Spanish sculptor (1652–1706) who specialized in polychromed wooden statues and small polychromed terracotta groups.

Author Catherine Hall-van den Elsen is perhaps the foremost expert on Luisa Roldán, and the Getty volume fully reflects her colossal erudition.¹ The author presents Luisa as a strong, independent woman from the very first lines of the introduction, opening with the nineteen-year-old's statement of intent to marry despite her father's disapproval (11).² It becomes clear over the course of the book, however, that even as she produced a large body of sculpture, Luisa was often forced to work within the spheres of the principal men in her life: her father, sculptor Pedro Roldán; her husband and collaborator, sculptor Luis Antonio de los Arcos; and her mostly male patrons (when they can be identified), although she also corresponded about her position as a court sculptor with the Spanish queen.

Hall-van den Elsen begins the first of her five chapters with a discussion of women in early modern Spain: their lives, their roles in society, and the



Fig. 1. Luisa Roldán, *St. Michael Smiting the Devil* (1675–80), carved wood with polychrome decoration and gilding, 23 1/4" x 7" x 7". Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, 922.19.6.

opportunities they received to develop their talents. The author pays particular attention to two sixteenth-century treatises, Juan Luis Vives's *De Institutione Feminae Christianae* (1524) and Luis de León's *La Perfecta Casada* (1583), that addressed the place of a woman in society and the lifestyle she should lead. The first author, while accepting that women's position in society was different from men's, advocated for the education of girls. León, on the contrary, insisted that girls should receive only a primary education and that women's principal duty was to marry and ensure their husband's comfort in the house. Since no documentary evidence about Luisa is known from before the 1670s, Hall-van den Elsen reconstructs young Luisa's experience in her father's workshop in Seville based on known apprenticeship practices at the time: she would have learned the techniques for sculpting wood and, almost certainly, would have discussed contemporary Sevillian art as well as the Italian and Northern European prints circulating in the city. Luisa's level of education reveals itself to an extent in later letters, which show that she was fully literate and wrote with "a confident hand, although not an elegant one" (22).

Luisa first figures in the historical record at nineteen, when she successfully petitioned to marry Luis Antonio, a fellow apprentice in her father's studio, against Pedro's will. The earliest documentary reference to Luisa as a sculptor is a note found in the head of a life-size wooden *Ecce Homo* statue in Cádiz Cathedral (1684). Significantly, the note also refers to Luisa's spouse as her collaborator; they are believed to have worked together as sculptors on numerous projects, even ones for which only Luis Antonio signed the contract, including works from as early as the mid-1670s.

The book's second chapter is devoted to sculpture in the early modern period in Seville and to the sociocultural environment in which Luisa's creative process developed. Seville was an important trade center between the Old and New World, and its prosperity supported a strong demand for works of art,

among them monumental church altar-pieces as well as *pasos*, floats, commissioned by religious brotherhoods to carry in Holy Week processions. Such works often made a powerful emotional appeal to the viewer. Sevillian painter and theorist Francisco Pacheco, a censor for the Inquisition, urged artists to represent Biblical subjects faithfully (28–29). These factors helped to form a local artistic dialect of multimedia works incorporating polychromed and gilded sculpture, oil paintings, and architectural elements. One contributor to this artistic culture was Luisa's father, Pedro, also a native of Seville. Hall-van den Elsen devotes a large section—too large, I would argue—to describing Pedro's activities as a master in Seville. This section does serve to illustrate, though, that Luisa was involved even during her childhood in the cultural life of Seville and exposed to the creative interactions of her father with his fellow Sevillian artists, an environment that clearly influenced her.

Hall-van den Elsen comes to the personality and work of Luisa herself in chapter 3. The author explores Luisa's activities as a sculptor in Seville, Cádiz, and elsewhere in Andalucía from the early 1670s through the late 1680s. Many works have no written evidence of Luisa's authorship, and in such cases, Hall-van den Elsen must rely on comparative and stylistic analysis to support attributions to the artist, some as independent works, others as collaborations with her husband. Identifying who was responsible for the polychrome painting is difficult; for some later sculptures, at least, the painter was Luisa's brother-in-law Tomás de los Arcos. One of the first works that can likely be considered exclusively Luisa's—again, though, only on stylistic grounds—is *St. Michael Smiting the Devil* (1675–80; Fig. 1). Hall-van den Elsen provides an excellent critical analysis of the work, demonstrating that Luisa developed her own language while adhering both to the realism of her father's style and to the recommendation by Francisco Pacheco that the devil be shown already subjugated (46). The author points out features that continued to characterize

Luisa's style throughout her career: thin, arched eyebrows; a long, straight nose; and a small, slightly open mouth. In some works of the period, Hall-van den Elsen notes, Luisa could be bold in her vision of religious subjects, as in a lost wooden sculpture group of Mary Magdalene visited by an angel (1680–88). The artist portrayed the Magdalene emaciated and visibly helpless, lying on stones as if breathing her last breath. For this statue's context, the chapel of the orphanage at Cádiz, Luisa was not afraid to depart from traditional iconography.

The move of Luisa and her family to Madrid, seat of the Spanish court, in 1688 provides material for the fourth chapter. The Madrid period represented a new stage in the artist's career, one in which wooden statuary gave way to small-format polychrome terracotta sculpture. The new medium and scale allowed for more intimate compositions that were intended for quiet, meditative contemplation and personal communication with God within royal and elite domestic settings. These groups may be exclusively by Luisa's hand, since her husband's name does not appear on works of this kind. Among them are numerous images of the Virgin Mary and Christ Child surrounded by plump-faced cherubim, sometimes within larger narrative groups, as in two sculptures of the *Rest on the Flight to Egypt* (1691; 1691–1705). Alternatively, the Christ Child can appear without his mother, holding the hand of the infant St. John the Baptist or carrying the cross as the *Niño Nazareno*. Perhaps in part because Luisa had observed children closely in her own life (records indicate that she and Luis Antonio had seven children, of whom three survived infancy), she depicted children's facial expressions and movements with great sweetness and liveliness. She thus moved confidently in creative directions that her father had never explored.

The final stage of Luisa's work in Madrid, after the arrival of the Bourbon king Felipe V in 1701, was very fruitful. Luisa continued to work in terracotta and produced her last dated large-scale wooden statue, an adult *Jesus the Nazarene* (c. 1701). She enjoyed more reli-

able payments from the royal court, gained the patronage of nobleman Juan de Dios de Silva y Mendoza, and received the title Accademica di Mérito from the Roman Accademia di San Luca. She also created her most unusual sculptural group, the *Cavalcade of the Magi* (c. 1701), comprising twenty-three small polychrome terracotta figures on individual pedestals of the splendidly dressed Three Kings and members of their entourage traveling to bow to the Christ Child (perhaps depicted as part of a separate, unidentified Nativity group). Still, despite her professional successes, Luisa declared in her last testament that she could not afford to pay for her funeral. A few years later, the same fate befell her husband, Luis Antonio.

The abundance of information about the artist's father in the early chapters of *Luisa Roldán* contrasts sharply with the lack of attention directed toward the legacy of Luisa herself at the end of the volume. One wonders, for example, what became of her surviving children: Did any adopt the profession of their mother and father? There is also no line in the study that would trace Luisa's influence on more recent masters, including the artists sometimes described as her followers: José Montes

de Oca, a pupil of Luisa's father;³ Pedro Duque Cornejo, Luisa's nephew, also educated in Pedro's workshop;⁴ and Cristóbal Ramos, another a native of Seville, some of whose work was previously attributed to Luisa.⁵ Somewhat unexpectedly, Hall-van den Elsen gives a historiographical overview in the last chapter. Such material typically, of course, appears at the beginning of the study, anticipating the questions that arise from the reader (particularly from specialists) concerning source materials about the artist and studies by other scholars.

Hall-van den Elsen's study is, with no doubt, a most valuable contribution to the history of Spanish seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century wooden and terracotta sculpture, even as it provides an impetus to find answers to the remaining questions about Luisa Roldán and her legacy. Endowed with eighty-eight illustrations of excellent quality, it reveals the technical mastery and distinctive style of this talented woman sculptor as well as her determination to persevere in her chosen profession. *Luisa Roldán* is thus a fitting start to the Getty's larger project of reclaiming women's names within art history. •

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Notes

1. Hall-van den Elsen's other studies on the artist include *Fuerza e Intimismo: Luisa Roldán, Escultora (1652–1706)* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2018), and "Life at Court: Luisa Roldán in Madrid 1689–1706," in *Women Artists in the Early Modern Courts of Europe, c. 1450–1700*, ed. Tanja L. Jones (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 161–86. Also on Luisa Roldán, see Casey Gardonio-Foat, "Daughters of Seville: Workshops and Women Artists in Early Modern Andalucía," *Woman's Art Journal* 31, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2010): 21–27.
2. Hall-van den Elsen employs the artist's first name throughout the book to differentiate her from her father, Pedro (8).
3. Antonio Torrejón Díaz, *El escultor José Montes de Oca* (Seville: Excelentísima Diputación Provincial de Sevilla, 1987).
4. Gardonio-Foat, "Daughters of Seville," 21–27.
5. Jesús Porres Benavides, "La técnica en el escultor Cristóbal Ramos (1725–1799)," *UCOARTE: Revista de Teoría e Historia del Arte* 8 (2019): 95–108.

By Her Hand: Artemisia Gentileschi and Women Artists in Italy, 1500–1800

Edited by Eve Straussman-Pflanzer and Oliver Tostmann
Detroit Institute of Arts, 2021

Reviewed by Sarah Gwyneth Ross

This catalogue of an exhibition at the Wadsworth Atheneum and the Detroit Institute of Arts treats women artists working in two-dimensional media in sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and eighteenth-century Italy. It offers much to early modernists across disciplines for our research and teaching, as well as to audiences of interested but nonspecialist readers.

Beautifully produced, and at a price point a bit below what similarly extensive and amply illustrated exhibition catalogues in hardback typically demand, *By Her Hand* should find a place on many shelves.

Let me begin with what I see as the volume's broadest and most important interpretive contribution, an expansion of the exhibition's own structuring principle: sheer inclusivity. Readers enjoy here a satisfying three-century chronological sweep and a wide embrace of different artistic genres and media. This wide-angle approach creates a sufficiently capacious framework for a granular and illuminating treatment of eighteen women artists. Studies of early modern women working in different fields of endeavor still tend to treat them

singly. In so doing, we make creative women of the past seem isolated or marginal, even when evidence indicates that they were quite well integrated with contemporaries, and even aware of joining a tradition of women cultural producers. I am thinking, for instance, of Caroline Murphy's masterful study *Lavinia Fontana: A Painter and Her Patrons in Sixteenth-Century Bologna* (Yale University Press, 2003), which certainly situates the artist deeply in context and makes illuminating reference to (among other phenomena) the ways she affiliated with traditions of learned women and built networks of patronage and friendship among her contemporaries. Still, the individual case study will always leave readers wanting to know in a fuller way how a given figure might



Fig. 1. Sofonisba Anguissola, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1556, oil (?) on parchment, 3 1/4" x 2 1/2". Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Emma F. Munroe Fund, 60.155.

builds, colleagues who saw it at the Wadsworth last winter relay that the intimacy of the setting and the organization of the show had the effect of making the Gentileschi pieces loom large; this is certainly not the effect of the publication, however. While Gentileschi stands as an important point of reference for the prefatory essays, she appears in the catalogue itself as one among many important artists. The media employed by these artists range from large-scale paintings to engravings, etchings, miniature pastels, portrait medallions, and chalk drawings. The artists' chosen subject matter proves equally expansive, with concentrations of work in still-life and domestic scenes; portraiture (including many fascinating self-portraits); representations of individual saints and the Holy Family; and mythological, Biblical, and historical scenes.

This wide array of artists and media permits this volume to address and furnish new answers to Linda Nochlin's famous question "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" (1971). The first introductory essay by volume editor Eve Straussman-Pflanzer ("Why Have There Been No Exhibitions of Early Modern Italian Women Artists in Hartford or Detroit?") engagingly sets up the problem of why exhibitions centered on women artists like the one from which this volume grew are still so unusual. Straussman-Pflanzer remains in close conversation with Nochlin's article, positioning it as an artifact of second-wave feminism that, for all we might criticize it now, nonetheless brought crucial attention to the presence of so many women artists hitherto unappreciated (or at least undervalued) by art historians, curators, and art dealers. As Straussman-Pflanzer underscores, while Italian women artists have certainly received greater notice from scholars, viewers, and collectors in recent years, the inequalities in valuation originally highlighted by Nochlin persist even now.

The second introductory essay, by volume coeditor Oliver Tostmann ("The Advantages of Painting Small: Italian Women Artists and the Matter of Scale"), works against the dismissal of small-scale artworks by women as

be situated within broader social, cultural, and professional contexts.

Taking us from the singular to the aggregate, *By Her Hand* positions one well-known Baroque luminary, Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1654 or later), in complex conversation with seventeen other early modern women artists (with many other cultural producers referenced in passing): Sofonisba Anguissola (c. 1535–1625); Diana Scultori (c. 1547–1612); Lavinia Fontana (1552–1614); Fede Galizia (c. 1574–c. 1630); Isabella Catanea Parasole (active 1585–1625); Orsola Maddalena Caccia (1596–1676); Giovanna Garzoni (1600–1670); Virginia da Vezzo (1600–1638); Anna Maria Vaiani (1604–c. 1655); Elisabetta Sirani (1638–1665); Ginevra Cantofoli (1618–1672); Caterina de Julianis (c. 1670–c. 1742); Rosalba Carriera (1673–1757); Marianna Carlevarijs (1703–after 1750); Maria

Felice Tibaldi (1707–1770); Veronica Stern Telli (1717–1801); and Anna Bacherini Piattoli (1720–1788). The decision to exclude work by the sculptor Properzia de' Rossi (c. 1490–1530) from the catalogue, while understandable given the emphasis here on women painters either represented in or directly relevant to the exhibition, still seems a shame, given how much the editors engage with and critique the conceptual categories established in Giorgio Vasari's (in)famous *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (1550; 1568), a work in which de' Rossi stands as the only woman artist with a discrete *vita* (as the editors stress). Still, the range of protagonists in this volume is outstanding, offering a few case studies that I suspect will be unfamiliar even to many art historians. Although I was not able to view the exhibition upon which this catalogue

unworthy of serious attention, a position we have inherited from nineteenth-century art history and criticism. By attending seriously to small-scale works, we come to better appreciate not only the skill and creativity involved in their production but also the *strategic* uses to which early modern women artists put such works (including miniature self-portraits). “Painting small” offered a means for these artists to quickly and economically broadcast their talents, obviating the need for larger workshop structures and regulatory systems that larger-scale works often required but that were often (though by no means always) inaccessible to women artists. Thinking about women “painting small” as a necessity in some cases and as a strategy more generally, as well as considering the seriousness with which early modern critics, viewers, and patrons approached small-scale works, ultimately moves us beyond the problematic metrics for “great” art that even Nochlin retained in her own interpretive framework. *By Her Hand* thus invites us to reconsider the significance we still attach to scale, medium, and the range of an artist’s influence in our conceptions of “greatness” (and in determining, by extension, what artists have or have not made it into the canon). Proceeding this way, the viewer/reader finds themselves in a much better position to assess what is actually there. Perhaps most cheering of all, Sheila Barker’s essay “Art as Women’s Work: The Professionalization of Women Artists in Italy, 1350–1800” affords a refreshing interpretive possibility carefully documented from the archives: a larger number of early women artists than formerly realized seem to have participated in and contributed to the broader processes of professionalization by matriculating in artists’ confraternities and academies.

Before voicing my only significant criticism of the volume, I ought to come clean about my *deformazione professionale*, as Italians aptly characterize disciplinary biases: I am a cultural and intellectual historian of Renaissance Italy who specializes in the study of women and gender, with particular reference to women writers, but I am not an art his-

torian. As such, I find it puzzling, given the volume’s laudable orientation toward inclusivity, that the contributors did not make even a brief connection to the hundreds of early modern Italian women writers and intellectuals whose works remain. We see in *By Her Hand* women artists sometimes depicting themselves in scholarly and literary modes, and some, among them Sirani, duly receiving credit for their depth of learning (Barker, 44). Yet half a century of research by historians and literary critics on Italian women of the pen goes without mention. So far as I could find, the only work cited here on the pan-European *querelle des femmes* (the debate on women’s merits and potential equality to men) comes from a general reference to a survey text by Merry Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Tostmann, 37 and 41n80); missing entirely is that Italian women writers not only contributed to but indeed led this debate from the early fifteenth century onward. When women artists like Anguissola or Fontana (albeit less so Gentileschi) presented themselves holding books or objects with Latin inscriptions, or in the act of writing, or in their studies, they affiliated themselves with this powerful cultural matriline. One senses the cultural capital to be gained through claiming that lineage in the miniature self-portrait of c. 1556 by Anguissola (Fig. 1). The young artist holds a charmingly out-of-scale medallion announcing to viewers in the prestige language of Latin that the image we see is “Sofonisba Anguissola, a maiden, painted with her own hand using a mirror, in Cremona” (*Sophonisba Angussola vir[go] ipsius manu ex [s]peculo depictam Cremonae*; Tostmann, 31, and cat. 2). Much more could be made of the ways Anguissola and other women artists leveraged their connections to the humanistic world, thereby asserting their worthiness to be taken seriously, a technique dozens of celebrated Italian women intellectuals and writers had already used to good effect. In segregating these different cultural zones, the catalogue could leave readers with a misapprehension that women artists were the first (or even the only) type of woman before 1800 to take active steps

in challenging misogynous social systems. Even more problematically, this disjuncture causes the occlusion of some important elements in women artists’ broader cultural formation and (in some cases) their self-perceptions.

This issue aside, *By Her Hand* offers an accessible, nuanced, and manageably encyclopedic treatment of Italian women artists that will make for fruitful consideration by early modernists across fields and by the interested reading public. Rising art historians on the hunt for research projects will find much nutriment here, as will educators with an eye to complicating the image of the boundaries of the possible in early modern art that students ordinarily encounter in the classroom. All those interested in the broader theoretical and conceptual questions surrounding creative women of the past, too, should make haste to get their hands on *By Her Hand*, as well as on another innovative new study of Western historical women artists and their significance: Paris Spies-Gans, *A Revolution on Canvases: The Rise of Women Artists in Britain and France, 1760–1830*. Volumes like these, and no doubt the many others that will be inspired by their models, answer in ever-better and more nuanced ways the foundational but in some senses troublingly limited call for attention to women artists that Nochlin offered more than half a century ago. •

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Pl. 1. Ione Robinson,
The Family (La Familia) (1931),
oil on canvas, 41 1/2" x 52".
Museo de Arte Moderno de
México, INBA, Mexico City,
Mexico.

Pl. 2. Marion Greenwood,
*Landscape and Economy of
Michoacán (Paisaje y economía de
Michoacán)* (detail) (1933–34),
fresco. University of St. Nicolas
Hidalgo, Morelia, Mexico.
Photo: the author.





Pl. 3. Grace Greenwood, *Men and Machines* (Hombres y máquinas) (1934), fresco. University of St. Nicolas Hidalgo, Morelia, Mexico. Photo: the author.



Pl. 4. Marion Greenwood, *The Industrialization of the Countryside* (La Industrialización del Campo) (detail) (1935), fresco. Mercado Abelardo L. Rodríguez, Civic Center, Mexico City, Mexico. Photo: courtesy Ellen G. Landau.

Pl. 5. Marion Greenwood, *Construction Worker* (detail from *Blueprint for Living*, a Federal Art Project mural, Red Hook Community Building, Brooklyn, NY) (1940), fresco mounted on board, 18 x 24 1/2". Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY, 1976.44.11.





Pl. 6. Alice Trumbull Mason, *Emergent Form* (1945), oil on board, mounted on wooden strainer, 28" x 23". The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY; Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection (45.996). © 2022 Emily Mason | Alice Trumbull Mason Foundation/ARS.



Pl. 7. Alice Trumbull Mason, *Free White Spacing* (1939), oil on canvas, 22 1/8" x 28". Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY (75.49). © 2022 Emily Mason | Alice Trumbull Mason Foundation/ARS.



Pl. 8. Alice Trumbull Mason, *Ionic Magnitude* (1960), oil on canvas, 36" x 24". Photo: Gavin Ashworth. Courtesy of Washburn Gallery. © 2022 Emily Mason | Alice Trumbull Mason Foundation/ARS.



Pl. 9. Alice Trumbull Mason, *Magnitude of Memory* (1962), oil on canvas, 36" x 26". Photo: Gavin Ashworth. Courtesy of Washburn Gallery. © 2022 Emily Mason | Alice Trumbull Mason Foundation/ARS.



Pl. 10. Alice Trumbull Mason, *White Parenthesis* (1965), oil on canvas, 42" x 33". Photo: Gavin Ashworth. Courtesy of Washburn Gallery. © 2022 Emily Mason | Alice Trumbull Mason Foundation/ARS.



Pl. 11. Alice Trumbull Mason, *Magnitude of Regions* (1962), oil on canvas, 42" x 39". Photo: Gavin Ashworth. Courtesy of Art Bridges Foundation. © 2022 Emily Mason | Alice Trumbull Mason Foundation/ARS.



Pl. 12. Alice Trumbull Mason, *Suspension Points (Surface Winds)* (1959), oil on canvas, 29 7/8" x 36 1/8". Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, Lawrence H. Bloedel Bequest (77.1.31). © 2022 Emily Mason | Alice Trumbull Mason Foundation/ARS.



Pl. 13. Mila Gokhman, *Tulip* (1967), leather and leather dyes, 7 3/4" x 7 3/4".
© Mila Gokhman.



Pl. 14. Mila Gokhman, *Spheres* (1972), leather and leather dyes (triptych), each panel 5 1/2" x 5 1/2". © Mila Gokhman.



Pl. 15. Mila Gokhman, *Symphony* (1972) (quadriptych, left to right): *Galaxies of the Heart*, *Rhythms*, *Dawning*, *Etude*, leather and leather dyes, each panel 9" x 7 1/4". © Mila Gokhman.



Pl. 16. Mila Gokhman, *Sunset in Golosievo Forest* (1972), leather and leather dyes, 8 1/2" x 17". © Mila Gokhman.



Pl. 17. Elisabeth Perrault, *Ma peau de 24 ans* (My Skin at the Age of 24) (2020), canvas, polyester, and pressed flowers, 72" x 50" x 5". Collection of the artist; courtesy of Projet Pangée, Montreal.
Photo: Jean-Michael Seminaro.



Pl. 18. Elisabeth Perrault, *Ces petites morts domestiques* (Little Domestic Deaths) (2020), canvas, polyester, pressed flowers, and inflatable mattress, 36" x 60" x 84". Collection of the artist; courtesy of Projet Pangée, Montreal. Photo: Jean-Michael Seminaro.



Pl. 19. Elisabeth Perrault, *Les Napperons* (The Doilies) (2021), installation view at Projet Pangée, Montreal (2021). Table, canvas, polyester, and pressed flowers, each 3 1/2" x 19 1/2" x 12 1/2". Collection of the artist; courtesy of Projet Pangée, Montreal. Photo: Jean-Michael Seminaro.

Dr. Kyra Belán

BFA MFA Ed.D

Global Climate Strike 2022 acrylic on canvas 40"x30" 2022



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