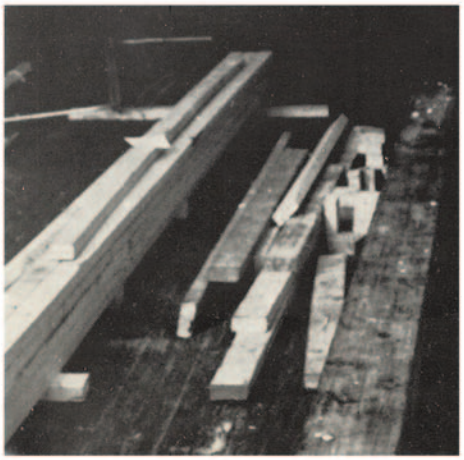
Woman's Art Journal

FALL / WINTER 2026 VOLUME 47, NUMBER 2 $25.00



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Old City Publishing, Inc.

Editorial Offices:
Woman's Art Journal
628 North 2nd Street
Philadelphia, PA 19123, USA
Web: womansartjournal.org
E-mail:waj@womansartjournal.org

Advertising and Subscriptions:
Guy Griffiths
Old City Publishing, Inc.
628 North Second St.
Philadelphia, PA 19123, USA
Phone: +1.215.925.4390
Fax: +1.215.925.4371
info@oldcitypublishing.com

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The pure and autonomous silos of "high art" are subversively infiltrated by the crosscurrents of our Fall/Winter *Woman's Art Journal*. It is impossible to imagine the art of Audrey Flack, Edelmira Boller, and Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz without their lived experiences beyond the studio, in their taxing and rewarding challenges as mothers, caregivers, and partners, for it is in their fidelity to unorthodox techniques, materials, and timelines, cross-pollinated with the home and domestic spheres, that we source their feminist irreverence to artistic hierarchization.

The disarming "flaming" heart at the center of Audrey Flack's last self-portrait from 2022, on our cover, is an embroidered narrative of her expansive life nearing death, one brilliantly recounted in her memoir, *With Darkness Came Stars* (2024). Years earlier, Melissa Mednicov (now *WAJ*'s book reviews editor) had proposed her retrospective article to tackle Flack's complicated legacy as a feminist artist known primarily for her Photorealist *Vanitas* paintings from the 1970s. Arguing that she was *always present* in New York art-world circles, Mednicov traces an arc from her early Proto-Pop to final Post-Pop Baroque paintings to irradiate how Flack's often unpopular allusions to the self and surface embellishments looped repeatedly throughout her career to create her own art-historical timeline.

Ana M. Franco chronicles the creative project of Colombian artist Edelmira Boller, who reinvested traditions of midcentury geometric abstraction with radical sculptural elements from the domestic domain. Franco argues that Boller's career supports a household economy through her "feminine logic of reuse." Boller's "recycling strategy" engaged metal, industrial waste, scrap, and machine fragments that critiqued late capitalist consumerism, in alignment with artists Feliza Bursztyn and Doris Salcedo, for instance, and subverted vernacular languages of modernism in Latin American art. In her 1990s construction of *esculturas para usar* (sculptures to use), Boller fully "produces the domestic" by strategizing her roles as homemaker and mother. Her expansive approach to constructivist abstraction and furniture and interior design simultaneously elevated the sculptural and functional representation of home objects and collapsed distinctions between art, decoration, and domestic utility.

The multidisciplined Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz learned the technical and professional applications of design and craft at Cranbrook Academy in the mid-1940s, and later from the seminal teachings of Anni Albers, who appropriated the ancient loom's potential for modern communication. Cranbrook also kindled Yvonne's relationship with her future husband, Joseph Bobrowicz, an interior architect and painter, a two-way partnership that benefited both, artistically and creatively. Barbara Stehle encapsulates Bobrowicz's dedication to materiality and space, found in her early integration of metal into her weavings, and sensorial attention to textiles that generated architectural collaborations and commissions with Louis Kahn, Anne Tyng, and others. Like Flack and Boller, Bobrowicz developed her artistic career alongside the constraints of motherhood, an experience that structured not only studio time but placed emphasis on her production of commercial household projects. The timely convergence of such highly skilled weaving techniques and functional designs to second-wave feminist ideas on abstraction, sexuality, and self-expression propelled Bobrowicz firmly into the realm of spatial art beyond the loom: in her cosmic and "philosophic sculptures," monofilament and gold work together with light to expose fiber's liberating and erotic potential for volumetric and kinetic embodiment.

WAJ's book review coverage was adroitly steered by editors Melissa Mednicov and Erin Devine. Kimberly Lamm's joint review rewrites "the familiar scripts of disappearance" in feminist practice (performance, craft, abstraction, ecofemism), an invisibilization that has erased the foundational and alternative contributions of feminist and queer collectivities to contemporary art. Turning to Lamm's scholarship, Gabrielle Stecher Woodward registers the pedagogical and poetic relevance of the landmark experimental films, *Riddles of the Sphinx* and *Penthesilea* by Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, and the excavation of filmic histories in feminist counter-cinema and feminist art history. The rigorous field work of artist Barbara Zucker on the wet nurse, heralded as the "second oldest profession and trade," is brilliantly encapsulated by Sally Jane Brown, who, alongside Zucker's own contemporary art works, gives voice to the societal revulsion and reverence associated with the commodification of maternal labor throughout civilizations and medical modernization. Allison Westerfield maps the recent surfacing of biographies dedicated to the avant-garde legacies of women Surrealists, one flowing atemporally from correspondence, memories, and relational spaces surrounding protagonist Jacqueline Lamba, the other tethered to Dorothea Tanning's critical oeuvre via the gendered framework of "Surrealist ecopoetics."

Expanding the theoretical and chronological scope of global modern art histories, Weronika Malek-Lubawski diagrams the radical interventions of women geometric abstractionists that included the visionary, metaphysical, and emotional. Nancy Green sheds light on two highly innovative yet underrepresented Nordic artists of the late nineteenth century, Anna Ancher (Denmark) and Helena Schjerfbeck (Finland), whose light-filled paintings and soulful portraits have recently received well-deserved critical attention. Tori Champion brings definition to the sensorially rich and virtuosic still-life paintings by eighteenth-century painter Anne Vallayer-Coster. More broadly, Oana Stan treats women's sustained involvement and scientific botanical discoveries in the pictorial genre of still life painting from the seventeenth-century and beyond. Turning to the course of women's lives and cultural production in Early Modern Iberia—Spain and Portugal between 1550 and 1706—Elizaveta Kushnareva charts the conscriptive yet panoramic life-paths and experiences of married or widowed women and nuns, deeply researched case studies by Roldán scholar Catherine Hall-van den Elsen.

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

Audrey Flack

The Time is Now

By Melissa L. Mednicov

Audrey Flack (1931–2024) passed away during a period of surging interest in her career and life. Her memoir, *Audrey Flack: With Darkness Came Stars*, was published a few months before her passing, on June 28, 2024, by Pennsylvania State University Press, accompanied by an exhibition of the same title at the Hollis Taggart Gallery in New York City earlier that spring, in March.[1] That fall, her small retrospective, "Audrey Flack: Mid-Century to Post Pop Baroque," planned during her lifetime, opened in October 2024 through March 2025 at the Parrish Art Museum, in Water Mill, NY. While her last decade was filled with renewed interest by scholars, galleries, and institutions, she was already present, *always present*, in art circles and spaces, as her exhibition record and memoir attests.

In some ways, Flack followed a common artistic path for successful postwar American artists based in New York City. She began as an Abstract Expressionist,[2] studied at Cooper Union (1951), then (briefly) with Josef Albers at Yale during her bachelor of fine arts (1952), and moved back to the city after graduating.[3] She worked against the art scene's favored expectations: she pivoted towards realism and used photography as a basis of her paintings, before either genre or medium was popular or even accepted. In addition to her 2024 memoir, she left many records of her own words: in texts, such as *Audrey Flack: On Painting* (1985) and *Art & Soul: Notes On Creating* (1986); in interviews, especially for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (2009), and *The Great Women Artists Podcast with Katy Hessel*; and, in the documentary, *Queen of Hearts: Audrey Flack* (2019). Even so, for years, Flack had been working to persuade the art audience to listen to and see her. Her memoir offers a personal account of her experiences growing up in New York City, her career as an artist, and her insights from contemporary art circles, many of which include descriptions of sexism and bias; the impact of family members' gambling addictions; a difficult first marriage and happy second one; the challenges of raising an autistic daughter when autism was not recognized as a diagnosis; and, in the final chapter, her hopes as she confronts aging and death.

Many of these life events became the subjects of her works. Her daughters, Melissa and Hannah, reappear throughout her career and across her styles. As Flack details in her memoir, thematic representations often relate in parallel fashion to her experiences as a mother. In *Melissa and Me* (1959), Flack uses gestural, expressionist brushstrokes to depict herself and her baby. Flack's return to figural representation during the heights of Abstract Expressionism is just one rebellious moment in her lifetime. As Samantha Baskind characterized the artist's return to representation in the early 1950s, Flack used "abstract expressionist techniques to make representation."[4] This is one primary, early moment where Flack layered styles and timelines within one another. Flack described herself as intentionally losing focus on her own head and face as a sign of her isolation, seeing herself "only as a vehicle for her [daughter's] existence."[5] Presented by Flack as a period of maternal isolation, such as when her husband did not participate in childcare, or she was unable to take part in openings and art-scene expectations, those difficult experiences of "making art" provided her "only solace."[6] Flack intended her later 1964 portrait, *Melissa*, to "make … [autism] look visible," depicting a child looking away from the painter and inaccessible to the viewer's gaze.[7] Hannah appears in similarly painted works in the sixties, such as *Hannah in a Sunsuit* (1962), *Hannah and Annie* (1962), and *Hannah Marie (Mickey Mouse Hat)* (1965), capturing quiet, ordinary moments—Hannah being held by her nanny, looking up the sky, and wearing a Mickey Mouse hat to play. Later, Melissa appears as a framed photograph in Flack's photorealist painting *Wheel of Fortune* (1978). Hannah appears, again, in *Hannah: Who She is* (1982), a veristic portrait with surrealist touches observed in the golden five-pointed star floating upon her forehead, a suspended, halo-like rainbow above her head of orange, yellow, and blue, dotted with stars.[8]

Flack's experiences and memories continue to resonate in her memoir, podcast interviews, and documentary. Important scholarship by Baskind, particularly her 2009 *American Art* article, "'Everybody thought I was Catholic': Audrey Flack's Jewish Identity," provides foundational knowledge of the



Fig. 1. Audrey Flack, *Matzo Meal* (c. 1962), oil on canvas, 14 1/8" x 18 1/4". Purchase: Gift of Martha and Daniel Gillmor, by exchange and Fine Arts Acquisitions Committee Funds (2009–4). © Audrey Flack. Photo Credit: The Jewish Museum, New York / Art Resource, NY. Courtesy of the Audrey Flack Foundation.

artist and her contributions.[9] Katherine Hauser's earlier "Audrey Flack's Still Lifes: Between Femininity and Feminism," in *Woman's Art Journal* from 2001, also offers one of the few arguments for Flack's work as both feminine and feminist (although, as Hauser points out, Flack was not comfortable with either label). Hauser focuses on Flack's *Vanitas* images of women's beauty products and the stakes of products in 1970s feminism.[10]

To further expand our understanding of Flack's career, this article explores another painterly arc, from her Proto-Pop paintings and well-known Photorealist works to her final Post-Pop Baroque paintings. The amplification of her voice—left for us in her memoirs, interviews, and other writings—also serves as a filter through which we may understand an artist who was simultaneously welcomed within New York art-world networks yet held at a distance, as separate or other due to her gender, subjects, and techniques. Through a threefold approach to Flack's pivotal career intervals—Proto-Pop, Photorealism, and Post-Pop Baroque—we can address how such key artistic phases shaped her critical reception and art historical legacy. Flack undoubtedly faced sexism throughout her art career, and her works are often imbued with personal meaning that, particularly in the sixties and seventies, carried political and social resonance by virtue of their existence. Her works show formal exactitude, art history, and the messiness of life. The longevity of her career, its multitudes and referential connections to art history and to Flack's own history, will prove out in her legacy as "afterlives."[11]

Flack grappled with her identity as a feminist and artist, in terms of how both identities came together, or if they even could. In the documentary about her life, *Queen of Hearts*, Flack stated that she was a "feminist and an artist," not a "feminist artist." In her interview for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, she asserted, "Well, I had very strong—you know I was a strong feminist. I had been a feminist long before I realized it."[12] For Hessel's popular podcast recorded before Flack's death, in 2024, and on other occasions, she was photographed in a "Feminist AF" sweatshirt, noting how she playfully read the "AF" doubling as a reference to her initials.[13] She relates on the podcast that she never thought of herself as a feminist growing up. In an earlier interview from 2021, with Hrag Vartanian and Sharon Louden for *Hyperallergic* (wearing a similar sweatshirt), she describes experiences of anti-Jewish bias (for instance, refusing to sign a document at Yale relating

to their Jewish quota); sexism and sexual harassment within the art world (in schools, galleries, and parties, for instance, also detailed in her memoir); and the challenges of maintaining an art career in the sixties after having children.[14] In the same interview, she describes her interest in art and art history that others often dismiss, and that her Post-Pop Baroque works are inspired by printmakers, "completely unsung" artists working in woodcut and engraving, or, as she puts it, "I just love that stuff, and then it turns out that you're not supposed to love [it]," as opposed to what the Museum of Modern Art decreed as canon.[15] Flack sought ways to include *the excluded* as material for her paintings.

Working on my second book, *Jewish American Identity and Erasure in Pop Art*, from 2024, I was drawn to Flack's works of the early sixties, smaller still-life paintings of consumer products that fit, tenuously, within the Pop movement.[16] In many ways, her *Matzo Meal* (c. 1962; Fig. 1) was everything I was looking for and hoping to find in my research, a Jewish artist making a Pop artwork about a Jewish subject. However, as I finished my manuscript, I finally understood that to find such a feat could *only* happen outside the norms of Pop—*Matzo Meal* was one of a handful of 1960s artworks that foregrounded Jewish identity and experience (without a primary religious subject). Flack continued throughout her career to foreground her Jewish identity, not in every work, but in enough examples to make it unusual for a successful artist during the period. In one of her later works, *Self Portrait with Flaming Heart* (2022; see Fig. 5 and cover), she asserts her identity as a Jew with a large silver Star of David pendant.

For a brief moment, Flack made works that "somewhat" fit Pop, with paintings featuring supermarket consumer goods. *Matzo Meal* advertised in its title matzo for cooking alongside other Manischewitz branded sellable goods, such as potato pancake box mix, grape juice, and Mott's applesauce. In the right upper corner, an elegantly painted white cardboard box suggests a tempting array of Jewish baked pastries, and its placement against the painting's white background deftly shows Flack's painterly approach. Other works in the domestic and kitchen domain, such as *Royal Jell-O* (1962), feature non-Jewish consumer goods, the aforementioned Jello packages (three), two different cereal boxes, and other supermarket cooking goods. *Royal Jell-O*'s origins relied on Flack helping to design the company's new box, which she later painted in her work.[17] These smaller paintings, at fourteen by eighteen inches, focus the viewer's attention on the panorama of the still life, one rooted in realism but with a painterly expressive stroke different than what she applies in her later Photorealist works. While not quite Pop, they aren't quite "not" Pop either—rather, they perform in a liminal space and enter part of the timely artistic conversation when Pop began to dominate the American art scene. It's a brief moment of in-betweenness, one that heralds similar vestiges of duality in her later works. In 1985, critic and writer Lawrence Alloway saw in these paintings' "sudden contraction of the scale," a "significant step in the direction of her later still lifes."[18] *Matzo Meal* is rather small in size, while many of her Photorealist paintings are monumental. Alloway argues these early works may be "a response to Pop art," but that her "decision is one that acquires its full meaning only in relation to her later work."[19] He argues that to understand Flack's works in their totality we must see them as a continual dialogue, individually and with her past, present, and even future works.

Time and art history collapse and refuse a linear, chronological presentation. This non-linear temporal mode for understanding her work is poignantly shared by Flack's longtime studio manager, Severin Delfs, who argues that it "always encapsulated what came before."[20] Flack regularly mined art history, whether her own engagement in processes and techniques, or in her critical recovery of forgotten women artists portrayed in her subjects. Looking to recent feminist scholarship on time can help us to reenvision Flack's use of the past and bring her with us into the future. Victoria Browne's *Feminism, Time, and Nonlinear History* argues for *polytemporal* feminist readings of history, to deny the singular chronology of time that dominates history as a discipline. As Browne contends, feminists have sought "as a means of overturning the linear wave model … alternative, nonlinear concepts of historical time … for concepts that are *multilinear*."[21] Browne sees historical time as both "lived time" and polytemporal, the latter described as "multiple, shifting patterns of historical time, as different histories have their own mixes of time and their own temporalities."[22]

Additionally, Catherine Grant seeks to understand how contemporary artists revisit earlier feminist modes to understand contemporary feminism. She argues that, for feminist artists, "the present moment can be understood only through an intense, embodied engagement with history."[23] Flack, in her paintings, particularly the Post-Pop Baroque period, often depicts herself within both her own personal history and a longer art history. Baskind also observed how many works by Flack became self-portraits.[24] Taking on the personas of Queen Elizabeth I and other female and male heroines, Flack re-creates histories, such as Grant argues, in which "reenactment" is a form of "anachronizing,"[25] an intersecting of time and space where figures such as Jackson Pollock, Flack, and the Queen are removed from chronological time. As Grant states, "*to anachronize* is a verb that foregrounds the strangeness of moments of time coming together"[26] Within Flack's works, time comes together in strange and exciting ways.

For many viewers, Flack is mostly identified with the Photorealist movement, and *Marilyn (Vanitas)* (1977; Fig. 2) serves as her most recognized work from that period and long career. As one of a series of *Vanitas* paintings from the late 1970s, Flack used the art historical term of vanitas to connect in title and iconography to early modern vanitas still lifes, particularly Dutch seventeenth-century paintings,[27] whose objects reminded viewers of fleeting lives, and, in an earlier context, the virtuosity of leading a religious existence. Flack used photographs as her source material and described her decision to choose a protean image of Marilyn Monroe "that shows her character in transition,"[28] as she changed from Norma Jean into the Hollywood star, Marilyn. Her photograph is painted in grisaille to appear as a black-and-white reproduction from a book, then appears again in sepia as

reflected in a mirror on the painting's left. The vanitas hourglass, calendar, cut flowers, burning candle, Delft-style ceramic, and picked fruit are the symbolic motifs to the accoutrements of beauty and transformation in the foreground, which display various pots of makeup, perfume, lipstick, and painter's brush. There is an internal play between the brush and paint of makeup and the painter's artistic tools—the latter held up as the mode of painting as a masculine enterprise (if one thinks of the mythos of Abstract Expressionism), and one as the sign of femininity and social norms of beauty (within the historical moment of second-wave feminism but especially the earlier generation of Marilyn's youthful transformation). Additionally, the tragedy of Marilyn, painted by Flack over a decade after the star's early death, in 1962, is always present in the work. This double play of makeup/paintbrush also creates a play on the vanity itself where one prepares their makeup and prepares their palette.

As Flack described Marilyn, "Like an icon she sits, the tools of her trade surrounding her."[29] The canvas takes up space, measuring ninety-six by ninety-six inches, and in photographs of Flack working, it becomes evident that Monroe's face is almost as large as Flack's body. The other photograph painted in *Marilyn (Vanitas)* features two young children, a girl and boy—Flack and her brother,[30] posed and looking like the ideal postwar nuclear family. Art historian Thalia Gouma-Peterson argued that Flack, through the inclusion of her family photograph, changes the work into a kind of self-portrait: "Through this juxtaposition and in the emotional content the painting is a self-portrait, as Flack has acknowledged."[31] Gouma-Peterson applied Laura Mulvey's concepts of the male gaze to *Marilyn (Vanitas)* and Flack's *Marilyn: Golden Girl* (1977), wherein the film viewer takes on the male gaze of the woman as object, to argue that Flack challenges how Monroe's image became the solidified signifier we associate it with: "In Flack's two paintings, the initial photograph of Monroe, taken by a man and a pervasive sign in American popular culture, is put in quotation marks and recontextualized."[32] Gouma-Peterson sees the brush in the center of painting as "dripping (or bleeding)," and as Flack's own brush, "an instrument of her own will, a creative artist."[33]

In addition to how her own childhood references enter and punctuate her Photorealist works such as *Marilyn (Vanitas)*, other major *Vanitas* paintings take on both universal and more personal, emotionally potent meaning. *Queen* (1975–76; Pl. 1) and *Gambler's Cabinet* (1976) are filled to the brim with what we might come to expect for Flack: fruit, flowers, clocks, or other symbols referencing the passage of time and standing in as double signifiers, such as the "makeup" paint for paint pots (in *Gambler's Cabinet* she plays with lipstick and paint tubes instead). In both, the card deck's Queen of Hearts features prominently (also the title of her 2019 documentary). Amplifying her presence, a twin picture frame displays photographs of herself and her mother, and a large keychain with the letter F. In *Queen*, Gouma-Peterson points out, there is a "distortion"[34] to the younger Flack's depiction, similar to what appears to be scratches on the depicted picture frame's glass, which becomes even more so in the photograph depicted in *Gambler's Cabinet*. Both works also include the chess queen, one of the most powerful pieces on the chessboard, and Flack underscores this dynamic power structure by describing *Queen* as a way in which she "reverses the hierarchy of the male over the female in gaming," working in tandem with how other objects are "designed to evoke female sexuality."[35] Such works take on an even more personal significance, with the layering of cards and images of Flack's mother, whose gambling addiction was primarily playing cards, as recounted in her memoir.[36] Throughout, Flack further recalls a difficult relationship to her mother who, for example, disapproved of her continued education.[37]

Particular attention is paid to Flack's still lifes in the important 2024 exhibition catalogue, *Ordinary People: Photorealism and the Work of Art since 1968*.[38] Throughout her career, Flack was placed in a tenuous role within Photorealism: even as she was regularly described as the only contemporary woman painter working in its style, recognized as central to the movement and its acceptance into canonical art institutions, she was also left out of important moments when designated as "other" by not fitting its common modes or tropes. *Ordinary People* reasserted Photorealism's art historical significance and its expansion beyond the seventies into contemporary art.[39] Curator Anna Katz describes Flack's still life subjects as a rebellious act:

> A corollary to photorealism's preoccupation with portraiture is the persistence of still life, which occupied the very bottom of the hierarchy of genres in seventeenth-century academies. Audrey Flack, the only woman in photorealist gallerist and impresario Louis K. Meisel's stable, approached still life with scrumptious irreverence.[40]

Katz argues that Flack's choice of still life or figuration instead of abstraction was a kind of outlier rebellion, and so, too, was her embrace of beauty in her work: "Likewise, it was all but heretical for women artists to paint pretty things ('we have all been brainwashed into believing that *beauty* is a bad word'), let alone personal content, and on this, Flack doubled down."[41] Not only did Flack "double down," she embraced exuberantly a challenge to ideas of beauty, taste, and pleasure in her works, making paintings "of pleasure, in flagrant violation of the protocols of good taste and serious subject matter."[42] Baskind reiterates how this criticism of vulgarity often followed Flack.[43] Hilton Kramer, in his 1976 review in the *New York Times*, used terms such as "kitschy" to describe her work, the use of color photography in Photorealism connecting to the "gaudy," and, the artist, as the "brassiest."[44] Despite negative reviews of her work in the *Times*,[45] Katz states that Flack, "the only woman in the mainstream photorealist cabal in the 1970s," was also "one of the first, if not the first, photorealist painter to enter the Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection," with *Leonardo's Lady* (1974).[46] Recently, she was labeled "a pioneer—and one of the only women painters—of the Photorealist movement," in Phaidon's 2022 *Great Women Painters*.[47]



Fig. 2. Audrey Flack, *Marilyn (Vanitas)* (1977), oil over acrylic on canvas, 8′ x 8′. Courtesy of the University of Arizona Museum of Art. Museum purchase with funds provided by the Edward J. Gallagher, Jr. Memorial Fund. 1982.035.001. Courtesy of the Audrey Flack Foundation.

Meisel, the gallerist key to Photorealism's commercial establishment and art historical legacy, introduced her in his 1980 opus, *Photo-Realism*, with "several important facts" that "distinguish" her standing as "extremely important in analyzing Flack's work and her career in terms of her background and objectives": the first, that "she is the only woman among the dozen or so" artists, and that she is the second oldest member.[48] His third and fourth fact note that she had the most experience within the New York City art world, and her 1964 work, *Kennedy Motorcade*, "was the first true Photo-Realist work produced."[49] These final two truths suggest that Flack, at the movement's forefront with significant experience, should have been heralded as the leading artist of Photorealism. Yet Meisel saw her work as quite different from the other male Photorealists due to Flack's subjective experiences and "female point of view," which imbued it with gendered associations then understood by him as "charismatic and highly emotional—qualities that at one point were thought to be antithetical to Photo-Realism and more characteristic of Pop Art."[50] Meisel points out, she was the first to have a work purchased for the permanent collection by MoMA, in 1975—and she was (at the time of his text) the "only member" to be in the collections of the Guggenheim, Whitney Museum of American Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art, and (still with his third reprinting of the text, in 1985), MoMA.[51] Meisel includes major praise from art criticism and exhibition

catalogues, from John Russell, who extolls Flack's *Vanitas* works in the *New York Times;*[52] from Alloway (writing for a Meisel exhibition catalogue), who connects her early sixties works, despite their size, such as *Royal Jello*, as "premonitory" for her monumental work in still life;[53] and from Gregory Battcock, who sees Flack's realism as a "new chapter in modern art."[54]

Decades later, in its mission to create a history of Photorealism, the Parrish Art Museum's 2018 exhibition catalogue, *From Lens to Eye to Hand: Photorealism 1969 to Today*, places Flack within the movement's development; however, yet again, she is described as *always already* making work different than other Photorealists, even from its beginning. Richard Kalina, in his essay "Hold Still: Looking at Photorealism," describes one of the key tenets of the movement: "Although Photorealism can certainly be seen in connection to the history, style, and semiotics of modern representational painting (and to a lesser extent late-twentieth-century art photography), it is worth noting that those ties are scarcely referred to in the work itself."[55] Flack's Photorealist work are the opposite: often incorporating temporal connections to art history and to other stylistic approaches, it continually challenges the viewer to be aware that they are looking at a painting using photographic tools to create verisimilitudes. In the same catalogue, Terrie Sultan, in "Works on Paper: Luminosity, Intimacy, Immediacy," differentiates the modes of Flack's photorealism deployed in her watercolors and *Vanitas* series, which the artist herself also distinguishes, by viewing the larger *Vanitas* works (that took longer to create), in Flack's words, as "heavy," and her smaller watercolor works as "a delicious treat for viewer."[56] In both modes of Flack's photorealism, Sultan writes she "differs from that of other Photorealist painters: rather than capture natural or man-made objects or landscapes with a camera, her photographs record elaborate still-life setups constructed in her studio."[57] Again, Flack's purview is the interior feminine studio and personal life. Flack uses the interior space of the studio to assert herself in opposition to the dominant narrative of male artist's exteriority typified by their use of the landscape. Flack, too, saw differences among the Photorealists, while "all exploring new territory" together and "sharing information about paint, photography, airbrushes, canvas primers, cameras, and projectors," they chose different ways to exploit and depict light.[58] Artists such as Chuck Close had "no interest in portraying feeling or expression," but Flack "wanted to capture the emotion, the human condition" in her work.[59] Sultan further describes these setups as "mathematically" planned in their composition.[60] Moreover, Flack was the first, if not one of the first, Photorealists to experiment with the use of the airbrush.[61]

Both 2018 and 2024 exhibitions connect Photorealism and Pop art. Art critic and writer Carolina A. Miranda described Photorealism as a "Pop-adjacent impulse" in her review of the later show.[62] Kalina, in his 2018 assessment, described Photorealism as part of "vernacular American realisms … in tune with its more immediate Pop origins."[63] Turning to Ivan Karp, "one of the original champions of Photorealism," and his 1963 writing on Pop, "Anti-Sensibility Painting," Kalina saw Photorealism as "perhaps the earliest" heir to Pop and, amongst other connections, how both styles rejected Abstract Expressionism.[64] In her memoir, Flack recounts attending a slide lecture by Karp defending Photorealism in its early days, but not seeing her work or ideas within his presentation or "definition":

> I left knowing that my work would be excluded from national and international exhibitions. This would also affect what collectors would buy. It was a bitter realization. Once again history was repeating itself; women were being written out.[65]

For Karp, connecting Pop to Photorealism offered a way to ensure the new movement's place in the postwar modern art canon and, likely, his own status as one of its leading gallerists. Kalina writes that "Photorealism carried the same charge as Pop, but [was] unlike Pop, which in due time added a panoply of artistic flourishes and historical references…. Photorealism never abandoned its artless affect, its *look* of utter comprehensibility."[66] While Flack gives the viewer the information within her paintings to understand and appreciate them, it could be argued that she never participated in Photorealism's "artless affect," instead imbuing her works with a "panoply" of personal, historical, and social connections. On the surface, then, perhaps Flack's early Pop-like or Pop-adjacent paintings, such as *Matzo Meal*, are not so far removed from her Photorealist works as one might think, carrying similar emotional charges or impulses? After Karp's exclusion of her, Flack simply continued her photorealist work and "pushed on."[67]

Soon after the Karp lecture, Flack received a postcard from Marcia Tucker, then chief curator at the Whitney, writing during her travels in Seville, Spain. Immediately taken aback by the postcard's decorous image of "The Macarena Esperanza, Patron Saint of Seville," Flack planned a trip to Seville as soon as possible. The postcard and trip to Seville introduced Flack to the Spanish Baroque artist Luisa Roldán (1652–1706). She began to study the Baroque artist's neglected position as a woman artist, write about her significance, and make Roldán's works her subjects.[68] Although Jewish, Flack identified her "own personal sorrow" related to her daughter Missy's autism as reflected in the Madonna figures, and later explored similar ideas in her self-portraiture during her Post-Pop Baroque mode.[69]

After Photorealism, Flack did not paint much for years. Eventually, she turned her attention to sculpture when she returned to her artmaking practice in the 1990s and 2000s. In 1991, she had her first exhibition of sculpture at the Louis K. Meisel Gallery, which featured women from mythology and history. Her works ranged from "small, almost votive objects" to "life-sized and larger."[70] As a result of this exhibition, she began to receive public art commissions for her sculptural work.[71]

Her last series, *Post-Pop Baroque* (2021–24), is a term created by Flack and her last gallerist, Hollis Taggart, to encapsulate

how she often featured contemporary popular culture references combined with her use and re-use of her own art history and canonized art history.[72] Both art historical movements, Pop and Baroque, are intentionally named for the series, immediately suggestive of the main characteristics of each—an often counterintuitive proposition. Pop evokes consumer goods, celebrities, and popular culture prevalent in sixties Pop works, alongside connections to reproductive media, and, while debatable, Pop tends to evoke a lack of emotionally charged content. The Baroque takes the viewer back even further to the early modern era—to the intense emotions, drama, tenebrism, and foreshortened perspectives proclaimed by its greatest seventeenth-century protagonists. In Flack's own chronological art history, the connective temporal tissue between centuries is found in the 1962 suite of "Pop-ish" paintings, as Alloway called them. The understanding of these last works in her long career is further enriched by our capacity to connect or comprehend the sixties works in them—and, arguably, the opposite holds true, too. The Post-Pop Baroque paintings dazzle the eye with bright and bold colors, glitter and rhinestones, and references to popular culture and art history, especially as Flack often treats both visual cultures on equal footing.



Fig. 3. Audrey Flack, *Fiat Lux* (2017), 83" x 83". Audrey Flack Foundation Collection. Courtesy of the Audrey Flack Foundation.

The Parrish Art Museum opened *Audrey Flack: Mid-Century to Post-Pop Baroque* in October 2024, a few short months after Flack's passing, the exhibition becoming an unexpected memorial anchored in her beginnings as an Abstract Expressionist and in her last works. While the title suggests a comprehensive timeline of Flack's art, the small career-spanning exhibit focused primarily on the mid-century and Post-Pop Baroque. It leaned heavily on her very early works, paintings imbued with gestural influences and discordances, and her last pieces, intricate, bright, dazzling, glitter-and-gem encrusted paintings full of Pop, religious subjects, popular culture, and art historical references. There were brief inclusions from the height of her prominence as well as examples of Photorealism and public sculptures. Her mark-making and technical skills bridge the early and later periods in such a way that it appears that Flack's Pop-Pop Baroque "has glanced back in order to go forward," as Baskin observed.[73]

Flack's Post-Pop Baroque paintings are grandiose and bombastic, intertwining the hallows of art history's canon with superheroes and glitter. The blue-and-grisaille-toned *Fiat Lux* (2017; Fig. 3 and Pl. 2) is physically gargantuan at eighty-three by eighty-three inches with a swooping and foreshortened Superman and Supergirl flying upwards at fierce velocity from the center. The superheroes are surrounded by cherubs on the upper register who humorously herald their arrival with flowers and doughnuts. The bottom register, in sepia-tone as if one has uncovered a drawing underneath a wall, is filled with art-historical references particularly reminiscent of the women portrayed by Flemish Baroque painter Peter Paul Rubens, perhaps his *Arrival (or Disembarkation) of Marie de Medici at Marseilles* (1621–25). The arrival of "light" in the Latin title, *lux*, is brought by the superheroes: Superman's head emanates rough lightning shards, and Supergirl's hands hold thunderbolts. Blue is the most prevalent color in the sky, which makes a sharp contrast, particularly in person, to the glitter encrusted doughnuts and cherries and the gold-leaf shards of light and thunderbolts.

Unlike *Fiat Lux*, another large Post-Pop Baroque work, *With Darkness Comes Stars: Melancholia* (2021; Pl. 3), is filled with dynamic jolts of color. The centrally-staged seated figure taking up most of the canvas makes a clear reference to Albrecht Dürer's engraving *Melencolia I* (1514), a famous art-historical emblem of melancholy by the German Renaissance artist, and Flack's young woman fashions similar clothing, wings, headdress, and pose. The large hourglass, also present in the earlier work, makes a nice reference to Flack's *Vanitas* paintings. Unlike the sixteenth-century black-and-white engraving, Flack embraces vivid day-glow "technicolor" colors and adds to the landscape by mixing Disney-like woodland creatures, similar to Thumper, Bambi, and the singing birds often seen greeting and dressing early Disney princesses Snow White and Cinderella. The characters are arranged under a large, lush, green willow (perhaps a play on the "weeping willow") beneath a rain cloud, while sunshine and rays of light break through with showering stars encrusted with silver glitter. Here, in Flack's rendition, the sadness one expects from an image of melancholy, and its references to Dürer, become bombastic, not quite mocking the difficult experiences of depression but looking for the light and ways through it. Her painting, through Grant's theoretical



Fig. 4. Audrey Flack, *A Brush with Destiny* (2023), acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 40" x 40". Audrey Flack Foundation Collection. Courtesy of the Audrey Flack Foundation.

framework, becomes a "reenactment as creating a time of one's own made up of disparate historical moments, that when brought together, become alive and vital for the present and the future."[74] Flack, in her Post-Pop Baroque paintings, creates her own art history, a new timeline.

Two Post-Pop Baroque self-portraits anchor the final space of the exhibition, *A Brush with Destiny* (2023; Fig. 4 and Pl. 4) and *Self-Portrait with a Flaming Heart* (2022; Fig. 5 and cover), acting as partners in Flack's artistic project, two pendants to understand her and her work. Both use self-portraiture and self-fashioning to place Flack within the trajectory of her own art celebrating and foregrounding the work of women artists. *Self-Portrait with a Flaming Heart* portrays an older Flack, concurrent with the time the work was created, while the 2023 painting, from a year before she passed, displays a youthful artist in queen-like adornments. *A Brush with Destiny*, similar to many of her later works, contains a surplus of art historical references. The younger version of Flack is bejeweled as Queen Elizabeth I. Her portrait is in the process of being painted on her right (the viewer's left) by the eighteenth-century portraitist Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun (1755–1842), while the iconic postwar Abstract Expressionist, Jackson Pollock, is conjured on her left. Both artists are in the act of painting Flack's intricate portrait—Le Brun is posed in similar fashion to her own confident 1790 self-portrait (although the work is reversed in her positioning); Pollock is crouched, cigarette perched in his mouth, hand-held can of paint spilling forth while the other holds a dripping paint brush that recalls the photographic outtakes from his 1949 *Life* magazine editorial at work in the studio. Both Pollock and Le Brun's outlines dissolve in a spectacle of colors, specters of art history, present for Flack yet fading into the past. These Post-Pop Baroque references collapse time and space, global and personal histories.

Most interesting are the Pollockian drips in the blue painterly sky and horizontal placement of his paintbrush, held disturbingly under Flack's neck, a sharp cut of line. Pollock, who died tragically at mid-age, framed across from Le Brun (who painted many portraits of Marie Antoinette before her death by guillotine), makes that cut of line a further visual and historical connection suggesting the life-threatening costs of not fitting in or accepting expected norms. Flack moved past Abstract Expressionism to become a pioneer of Photorealism, a movement that faced severe criticisms due to its use of representation and photography. As seen in her *Marilyn (Vanitas),* the brush carries with it the heaviness of art history and loaded expectations of femininity and beauty, as Flack chronically returns and re-uses art history and her "own" art history within her works. Likewise, Gouma-Peterson cited the brush in *Marilyn* as straddling the line between bleeding and painting, which, again, weighs down the brush in *A Brush With Destiny* with references to her past works and her creative identity as an artist.

Time operates, as Browne argues, *polytemporally* within Flack's paintings, in the same way that she brings together various moments of her history and art history's canon to create a new vision and timeline where she reigns central. Browne argues for scholars to "continue considering epistemological and ontological questions about historical representation and reality, and outlining alternative ways of conceptualizing historical reality and truth."[75] In reasserting and reinserting herself within the canonical art historical narrative, Flack does not erase history but reimagines it, or, as Browne contrives, she generates "alternative historical narratives."[76] In *A Brush with Destiny* and other art historical narratives, Flack does not merely replace Pollock with Lee Krasner (1908–1984), but acknowledges, following Browne's polytemporality, "the ways in which certain concepts or practices of historical time come to dominate over others, and the effect this has had on feminist relations and politics."[77] Much like the rest of us, Flack is forced "to become aware of the limitations and situatedness of own understandings of historical time: the archives we turn to, the kinds of narratives we construct, the timelines we rely upon, and the generational orders we perpetuate and participate in."[78] Flack's art historical timelines in her Post-Pop Baroque paintings are richly nuanced narratives, ones she constructed to ask the viewer to rethink their own stories. They are also fantasies (fantastical re-imaginings) of the history of art, of Flack's placement within that history and her use of it, especially in her varied capacities to connect Dürer to Disney and to return again. As Grant states, "Artists engaging with the histories and fantasies of feminism are creating a time of their own by bringing together a cast of both historical moments and characters for us to use in the present."[79]

At the same time, Flack challenges these art historical norms and decorum with her Day-Glo colors and rhinestones

applied to the sleeves of her painted visage. These rhinestones challenge ideas of "good taste" versus kitsch, and how mass culture operates in art—an interesting parallel for the acceptance of loose cigarette butts and nuts and bolts that found their way into Pollock's paintings, neither glitter nor rhinestones. In her reference to Pollock and application of store-bought glitter and plastic gems, Flack twists and turns the knife on the "purity" of "Modernist Painting" that ossified Clement Greenberg's 1939 treatise, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch."[80] Baskind stated that Flack would assert there was "no such thing as high and low art."[81] The craft-store embellishments celebrate Flack's skills—they dazzle the eye, but even more so once the viewer compares them to her painted pearls and gems that carry a similar verisimilitude. In her Post-Pop Baroque paintings, she returns somewhere in the middle, absorbing art historical connections and contemporary and historical popular culture with an extraordinary attention to realistic detail.

A younger Flack sits at the center of *A Brush with Destiny*, without naming the work a self-portrait, yet Flack's *Self Portrait with Flaming Heart*, as if the impetus of the painting, places an older, mature, if not elderly persona in an art historical allegory of past and present. Flack appears gently, barely, holding a heart on fire, presenting it to the viewer. The Christian iconography of the sacred heart is tempered by (or perhaps equally matched by) Flack's large Star of David silver necklace right above it. She is described in the Hollis Taggart exhibition catalogue as positioning "herself as the Virgin Mary, a symbol of universal maternal compassion;" moreover, she "resonates with the Virgin Mary as an archetype of the Jewish mother suffering for her child."[82] Flack connected to this archetype through her experiences and "life-long sadness" with her daughter Missy's autism.[83] Flack similarly resonated with "The Macarena Esperanza" from Seville. Flanking Flack's inset image are two women dressed in Greco-Roman clothing amidst flowers, reinforced by an illustratively drawn and carved frame decorated with flora, fauna, and little cherubs playing music or frolicking in the corners, similar to the ones found in many religious paintings of the early modern period. Another frame of gold paint further emphasizes its precious quality, a reliquary harkening back to religious imagery as well as to works from the early modern period. Decorative "A" and "F" initials rest at the top right and left corners, medieval, script-like letters that remind the viewer of Dürer's monogram branding (with much more flourish by Flack). Additionally, Baskind cites the painting as Flack's "last self-portrait," and that the two women positioned behind Flack offer another art historical citation, "the lost and forgotten Pre-Raphaelite Emma Florence Harrison [1977–1925]."[84] She also signs the canvas on the gold bottom-edge. Centrally framed above Flack's visage is "ars longa" and "vita brevis," "art long" and "life short," respectively. Flack conveys how time wrinkles our skin and morphs its shape, as brown sketch-like strokes accentuate her face and bodily creases, and black and gray lines create movement for her shock of full white hair. Against the vibrant, celestial blue background, her hair glimmers with blue underlying strokes, and she visibly shifts where lines in blue appear to suggest a "mistake." However, the blue lines are no such error, for they suggest a halo or head covering, perhaps a version of what the other pictured women wear.



Fig. 5. Audrey Flack, *Self Portrait with Flaming Heart* (2022), acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 40" x 30". Photography Provided Courtesy of the Columbia Museum of Art. Collection of the Thomas H. and Diane DeMell Jacobsen Ph.D. Foundation. Columbia Museum of Art. Courtesy of the Audrey Flack Foundation.

When one looks at Flack's career through her paintings, one sees multiple timelines or art histories, or, even, superheroic multiverses. In *Audrey Flack on Painting*, Alloway similarly described her use of art history: "By acknowledging art history's precedents, Flack adds a sense of time to the space she creates in her paintings. Space can act as a metaphor of an artist's absorption in the present moment of the creative act (the responsive field of painting) or of the unity of the end-product (the work in which everything fits)."[85] The Parrish Art Museum's exhibition labels describe Flack's bringing together different visual cultures, art history, and popular references from many time periods as her "'timestream,' a great pool of visual references she had absorbed over the course of her life."[86] We see her own life, her motherhood, her interests, passions, formal explorations, and, arguably, her feminist views. We also see how she absorbs and uses art history to understand both the canonical past and how to critically receive the present—her present, in its big and tumultuous

changes, and in its more quiet, daily expressions. Flack, in her memoir's moving epilogue, describes "facing death at ninety-two," and life after her ovarian cancer diagnosis.[87] She ends her book with her title's origins: "Art kept me alive and still helps me cope with the most heartbreaking situations in my life. Art does that; it is the ultimate healer. In the midst of all the darkness that life can bring, art reminds us that with darkness can come stars."[88] Baskind recently observed that the "running theme" in Flack's memoir was how she "always idealistically believed in the power of art to heal and tender hope."[89] Just as Flack likens art to the stars when in the darkness of universal painful experiences, her paintings operate as a constellation within which to understand the career and life of a woman, mother, and an artist since midcentury. ●

Melissa L. Mednicov is professor of art history at Sam Houston State University. She published two monographs on Pop Art, *Pop Art and Popular Music: Jukebox Modernism* (2018), and *Jewish American Identity and Erasure in Pop Art* (2024), both by Routledge. Her essays have appeared in *Art Journal*, *Panorama*, *Imago Musicae*, and *The Global Sixties in Sound and Vision: Media, Counterculture, Revolt*. Her contemporary art criticism has been published in *Glasstire*. A graduate of Smith College, she received her Ph.D. from Pennsylvania State University, in 2012.

Notes

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1. Audrey Flack, *Audrey Flack: With Darkness Came Stars* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2024), and Hollis Taggart Gallery's similarly named exhibition, "Audrey Flack: With Darkness Comes Stars," March 23–April 20, extended to May 11, 2024, New York, NY.
2. Flack describes her experiences as a young artist in New York City around the Abstract Expressionist movement in her memoir, *Audrey Flack: With Darkness Came Stars*, 14–79. Some experiences were exhilarating, others disturbing. Flack describes the sexually aggressive scene, experienced firsthand by her and other women (21, 24, 28–29, 75). Within the same chapter, she describes a fraught, difficult experience (and difficult women, too) for the women of Abstract Expressionism (33–70). Hollis Taggart's *Audrey Flack: The Abstract Expressionist Years*, a brief exhibition brochure published by the gallery, offers in-depth analysis of Flack's work in Abstract Expressionism: *Audrey Flack: The Abstract Expressionist Years*, intro. by Irving Sandler, contribution by Robert S. Mattison (Hollis Taggart Galleries, 2015).
3. According to the Hollis Taggart exhibition catalogue, Flack received her BFA from Yale University in 1952, and graduated in 1953 from the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University (*Audrey Flack: With Darkness Comes Stars*, 46). The Audrey Flack Foundation website states: "Ms. Flack earned a Graduate Certificate in Fine Arts from the Cooper Union in 1951. She also received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Yale University and attended New York University's Institute of Fine Arts," https://www.audreyflack.com.
4. Samantha Baskind, "Audrey Flack, Painter and Sculptor of Monumental Proportions," recorded lecture, *Unruly Visions: A Century of Jewish Women Artists Series*, Jewish Women's Archive, March 19, 2026, https://jwa.org/online-history-courses.
5. Flack, *Audrey Flack: With Darkness Came Stars*, 131.
6. Flack, 131–32, quote 131.
7. Flack, 136–37.
8. Patricia Hills describes the intersection of life and motherhood within Flack's paintings in Hills, "The Person, the Studio, the World: Audrey Flack in the 1960s," in *Breaking the Rules: Audrey Flack, A Retrospective, 1950–1990*, ed. Thalia Gouma-Peterson (Harry N. Abrams, 1992), 48–50.
9. Samantha Baskind, "'Everybody thought I was Catholic': Audrey Flack's Jewish Identity," *American Art* 23, no. 1 (2009): 104–15, https://doi.org/10.1086/599066. Baskind's essay demonstrates the importance of Flack's Jewish identity to the artist and to understanding her work. Additionally, Baskind briefly describes Flack's intense and extensive focus on the Spanish Baroque sculptor Luisa Roldán, featuring Flack's paintings of her sculptures of the Virgin Mary as personal in its reflection of sorrow, but not without possible feminist connections. Baskind, 111.
10. Katherine Hauser, "Audrey Flack's Still Lifes: Between Femininity and Feminism," *Woman's Art Journal* 22, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2001): 26–30, https://www.jstor.org/stable/i258890.
11. On the "afterlives" of American feminist artists, see Jennifer Griffiths, "Artemisian Afterlives in American Feminist Art," *Woman's Art Journal* 47, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2026): 15–26.
12. "Oral history interview with Audrey Flack, Feb. 16, 2009," by Robert Morgan, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, https://sirismm.si.edu/EADpdfs/AAA.flack09.pdf.
13. Katy Hessel, host, *The Great Women Artists Podcast with Katy Hessel*, "Audrey Flack (1931–2024)," episode 142, October 29, 2024, https://www.thegreatwomenartists.com/katy-hessel-podcast.
14. Hrag Vartanian and Sharon Louden, hosts, *Hyperallergic* podcast, "Audrey Flack and the Last of the New York School," July 16, 2021, https://hyperallergic.com/audrey-flack-and-the-last-of-the-new-york-school/.
15. Flack, *Hyperallergic*.
16. Melissa L. Mednicov, *Jewish American Identity and Erasure in Pop Art* (Routledge, 2024), https://www.routledge.com/Jewish-American-Identity-and-Erasure-in-Pop-Art/Mednicov/p/book/9781032318028.
17. Flack, *Audrey Flack: With Darkness Came Stars*, 79.
18. Lawrence Alloway, "Introduction" in *Audrey Flack: On Painting* (Harry N. Abrams, 1985), 16.
19. Alloway, 16.
20. Severin Delfs, phone interview with author, August 16, 2024.
21. Victoria Browne, *Feminism, Time, and Nonlinear History* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 1.
22. Browne, 2.
23. Catherine Grant, *A Time of One's Own* (Duke University Press, 2022), 4.
24. Baskind, "Audrey Flack, Painter and Sculptor of Monumental Proportions."
25. Grant, *A Time of One's Own*, 5.
26. Grant, 5 (Grant's use of italics).
27. Hauser, "Audrey Flack's Still Lifes: Between Femininity and Feminism," 28.
28. Flack, *Audrey Flack on Painting* (Abrams, 1985), 84.
29. Flack.
30. Thalia Gouma-Peterson, "Reflections in a Mirror: The Self-Portraits of Audrey Flack: 1952–1982," in *Breaking the Rules: Audrey Flack, A Retrospective, 1950–1990*, 19.
31. Gouma-Peterson, 19. Josephine Withers also argues that Flack's still

life works are "her vision of the personal and the historical," in Audrey Flack and Josephine Withers, "Monumental Still Lives," *Feminist Studies* 6, no. 3 (Autumn 1980): 524–29, 525.

32. Gouma-Peterson, "Reflections in a Mirror," 19–26.
33. Gouma-Peterson, 26.
34. Gouma-Peterson, 33–36.
35. Flack, *Audrey Flack: With Darkness Came Stars*, 201.
36. Flack, 111.
37. Flack, 9, 72.
38. Anna Katz, "What's So Real about Photorealism?," in *Ordinary People—Photorealism and the Work of Art since 1968*, ed. Anna Katz (The Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles and DelMonico Books, D.A.P), 15–35: 23.
39. Carolina A. Miranda, "Photorealism, a Cast-Off Movement, Gets a 21st-Century Update," review of "Ordinary People: Photorealism and the Work of Art since 1968," *Art in America*, January 15, 2025, https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/aia-reviews/photorealism-survey-exhibition-moca-la-1234730191/.
40. Katz, "What's So Real about Photorealism?," 23.
41. Katz, 23. Katz quotes Flack from Cindy Nesmer's *Art Talk: Conversations with 12 Women Artists* (Scribner, 1975), 316. Nesmer's use of italics.
42. Katz, 23.
43. Baskind, "'Everybody thought I was Catholic': Audrey Flack's Jewish Identity," 109.
44. Baskind, 109–110. As Baskind points out, Kramer further aligns Flack with "Barbra Streisand," which Flack saw as using the star to not only amplify Flack's boldness but also her Jewishness.
45. Katz, "What's So Real about Photorealism?," 34n36. Katz describes Hilton Kramer's negative 1976 *New York Times* review.
46. Katz, "What's So Real about Photorealism?," 34n34.
47. Alison M. Gingeras, introduction, *Great Women Painters* (Phaidon, 2022), 110.
48. Louis K. Meisel, *Photo-Realism* (Harry N. Abrams, 1985 [1980]), 241.
49. Meisel, 241.
50. Meisel, 242.
51. Meisel.
52. Meisel.
53. Meisel, 243, 242–44.
54. Meisel, *Photo-Realism*, 244.
55. Richard Kalina, "Hold Still: Looking at Photorealism," in *From Lens to Eye to Hand: Photorealism 1969 to Today* (Parrish Art Museum and DelMonico Books/Prestel, 2017), 12.
56. Terrie Sultan, "Works on Paper: Luminosity, Intimacy, Immediacy," in *From Lens to Eye to Hand: Photorealism 1969 to Today* (Parrish Art Museum and DelMonico Books/Prestel, 2017), 92. Flack is quoted in both instances on the same page.
57. Sultan, 92.
58. Flack, *Audrey Flack: With Darkness Came Stars*, 189.
59. Flack, 189–90.
60. Sultan, "Works on Paper: Luminosity, Intimacy, Immediacy," 92.
61. Flack, *Audrey Flack: With Darkness Came Stars*, 186–87.
62. Miranda, "Photorealism, a Cast-Off Movement, Gets a 21st-Century Update," *Art in America*, January 15, 2025, https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/aia-reviews/photorealism-survey-exhibition-moca-la-1234730191/.
63. Kalina, "Hold Still: Looking at Photorealism," 14.
64. Kalina.
65. Flack, *Audrey Flack: With Darkness Came Stars*, 188–89. Her works were also not included in Karp's slide lecture.
66. Kalina, "Hold Still: Looking at Photorealism," 14. Kalina's use of italics.
67. Flack, *Audrey Flack: With Darkness Came Stars*, 190.
68. Flack, *Audrey Flack: With Darkness Came Stars*, 190–94. See Flack, "The Haunting Image of the Macarena Esperanza," repr. *Audrey Flack on Painting* (Abrams, 1985), 32–41.
69. Flack, *Audrey Flack: With Darkness Came Stars*, 194. Additionally, Baskind addresses the two years Flack spent painting Madonna figures in terms of how Flack identified with the "sorrow" depicted. Baskind, "'Everybody thought I was Catholic': Audrey Flack's Jewish Identity," 111–112.
70. Flack, *Audrey Flack: With Darkness Came Stars*, 228. There is little scholarship published on Flack's sculptures. Gouma-Peterson's *Breaking the Rules: Audrey Flack, A Retrospective, 1950–1990* includes two chapters, one by the author ("A Gateway to the City of Rock Hill Civic Pride in a Fragmented World"), and "Breaking the Mold: Audrey Flack's Sculptures" by Susan P. Canteras (who also wrote the exhibition catalogue essay for *Audrey Flack: A Pantheon of Female Deities,* the 1991 Louis K. Meisel Gallery sculpture exhibition), which offer an overview of Flack's sculptural process and her public art commissions.
71. Flack, *Audrey Flack: With Darkness Came Stars*, 228.
72. Delfs, phone interview with author, August 16, 2024.
73. Baskind, "Audrey Flack: With Darkness Comes Stars, An Exhibition," in *Audrey Flack: With Darkness Came Stars* (Hollis Taggart, 2024), 9. Baskind's exhibition catalogue essay remains the most recommended, and currently, the only in-depth scholarly discussion of the Post-Pop Baroque works.
74. Grant, *A Time of One's Own*, 68.
75. Browne, *Feminism, Time, and Nonlinear History*, 55.
76. Browne, 68. Browne sees this as an "*active* mode … toward opening up the past." Browne's use of italics.
77. Browne, 144.
78. Browne.
79. Grant, *A Time of One's Own*, 69.
80. Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch [1939]," repr. *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*, ed. Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White (The Free Press, 1957), 98–107; and Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," repr. *Artists, Critics, Context: Readings in and Around American Art Since 1945*, ed. Paul F. Fabozzi (Prentice Hall, 2002), 201–208.
81. Baskind, "Audrey Flack, Painter and Sculptor of Monumental Proportions."
82. *Audrey Flack: With Darkness Came Stars* (Hollis Taggart, 40). No author listed for the brief plate descriptions. The description also cites connections in composition and use of self-portraiture to Dürer.
83. I am grateful to Samantha Baskind for this connection.
84. Baskind, "Audrey Flack, Painter and Sculptor of Monumental Proportions."
85. Alloway, "Introduction" in *Audrey Flack: On Painting*, 14.
86. Wall label at Parrish Art Museum exhibition, "Audrey Flack: Mid-Century to Post-Pop Baroque," October 14, 2024–March 30, 2025. No author given, general information about Post-Pop Baroque wall label.
87. Flack, *Audrey Flack: With Darkness Came Stars*, 244–46.
88. Flack, 248.
89. Baskind, "Audrey Flack: With Darkness Comes Stars, An Exhibition," 15.

Abstraction, Decoration, and Domestic Life

The Radical Practice of Colombian Artist Edelmira Boller

By Ana M. Franco

The creative project of Edelmira Boller (b. 1936; Fig. 1 and Pl. 5), based in Bogotá, is one of the most powerful statements of late twentieth-century art in Colombia, as it redefined the practice of modernist sculpture—in particular, abstract geometric sculpture—and inserted the sphere of the domestic into the realm of contemporary art. Yet her name and work are rarely mentioned in discussions of Colombian and Latin American art at the turn of the century. Indeed, as cultural journalist Fernando Gómez announced in 2022, "Edelmira Boller [is] the great mystery of Colombian art."[1] In his review of the artist's most recent exhibition, the critic confirmed the story of Boller's invisibilization within the history of Colombian art: a look at the histories of abstract sculpture in the country reveals that, in effect, she was overlooked and erased from those accounts. Gómez's remark, however, points not only to the exclusion of the artist but also to the uniqueness of her artistic project, which does not easily fit within the dominant narratives of twentieth century art in Colombia.

Boller started making abstract geometric sculpture in metal in the late 1970s and early 1980s, producing pieces that placed her as a latecomer to an already well-established tradition of abstraction in Colombia. By the mid-1980s she introduced industrial waste and machine fragments in her work as part of a recycling strategy that points, in her case, to a critique of late capitalist consumerism. Through this work, Boller subverted dominant interpretations of midcentury geometric abstraction as a symbol of progress and postwar modernization. In doing so, she aligned herself with contemporary Colombian artists pursuing similar goals, including Danilo Dueñas (b. 1956), Doris Salcedo (b. 1958), and María Fernanda Cardoso (b. 1963).[2]

In the early 1990s, Boller further evolved her practice by bridging fine art with the domestic realm. Moving fluidly between abstract sculpture and furniture design, she crafted home objects that were sculptural and functional at the same time—what she termed *esculturas para usar* (sculptures to use). In doing so, she dismantled the rigid dichotomy between art and decoration, abstract sculpture and domestic utility. This approach to abstraction can be considered radical in nature and, once again, brings Boller closer to Colombian artists of the 1980s and 1990s who were also redefining, subverting, and amplifying the languages of modernism. Unlike these artists, however, her radicality was achieved from the margins of the artistic establishment. Boller's transition and reorientation from autonomous modernist sculpture to the design of utilitarian and decorative objects was not driven by the prevalent anti-institutional critique or the political implications pervasive in most contemporary Colombian art of the time. Instead, it emerged from her role as a homemaker, marking a significant departure from the dominant artistic discourse of the era.

This article examines Boller's creative practice across the 1980s and 1990s as an example of how incorporating new voices into art history can reveal hidden stories, challenge hegemonic narratives, and expand the horizons of abstraction in the Americas. First, the text analyzes Boller's sculptural practice and technical transformation during the 1980s, focusing on her integration of industrial waste and machine fragments. Second, it explores her 1990s decision to move freely between the construction of autonomous abstract sculpture and utilitarian interior design—a move that challenged the strict division between the fine arts and the "merely" decorative. Ultimately, it could be argued that Boller was not merely a latecomer to an established tradition, but rather a radical contemporary artist operating from the margins of exclusion and invisibility to disrupt official artistic hierarchies.

This examination of Boller's practice is informed by feminist art historian Griselda Pollock's lengthy proposals on "signs of difference" and the "inscriptions of the feminine" in art made by women. Pollock's framework helps reveal how gender shapes practices of abstraction and challenges its canonical definitions. In her seminal 1999 book, *Differencing the*



Fig. 1. Edelmira Boller in her junk library, 2023. Photography Jorge González. © Edelmira Boller; © Galería Salón Comunal. Image source: BADAC, Universidad de los Andes Colombia.

Canon, Pollock argues for the need to "stress the active re-reading and reworking of that which is visible and authorized in the spaces of representation in order to articulate that which, while repressed, is always present as its structuring other."[3] Applied to Boller, this framework requires re-interpreting Latin American geometric sculpture beyond its traditional canon—a realm long-dominated by male artists embodying ideals of modernization and progress. By dismantling the strict separations among fine art, decoration, and the domestic sphere, this approach centers the contributions of women artists and demonstrates how they challenge and expand art-historical narratives even when operating from marginal positions.

The uniqueness of Boller's creative project extended to her own career trajectory, which did not follow the usual path of most twentieth-century Colombian artists who received professional training in their youth. Instead, she began her artistic career at age thirty-seven following her divorce and her children's transition to elementary school. Between 1973 and 1977, she pursued training in drawing and painting at David Manzur's studio in Bogotá—an artist known for his meticulous figurative paintings of knights and still-lifes—a space popular among local women exploring creative practices outside the home. Boller, however, decided to do more than take up a hobby and became a professional artist. In several interviews, the artist recalls that Manzur saw a sculptural rather than painterly quality in her work, an observation leading her to experiment with three-dimensionality and to become eventually a full-blown sculptor.[4] Likewise, Manzur had worked in the 1960s and '70s on abstract sculptural projects inspired by his direct contact with Constructivist Naum Gabo when he was his assistant in New York.[5] Motivated by her conversations with her teacher and by the example of his sculptural practice, Boller began her own three-dimensional experiments in a clear constructivist vein, characterized by the use of acrylics and metals and a preference for geometric planes.[6]



Fig. 2. Edelmira Boller, *Equilibrando #1* (1980), folded plexiglass sheet and painted metal sheet, 23 1/4" x 8 1/4" x 8 1/4". Photography Óscar Monsalve. Artist's collection. © Edelmira Boller. © Galería Salón Comunal. Image source: BADAC, Universidad de los Andes Colombia

Boller first presented her sculptures at Galería Belarca in Bogotá in 1979. These early works use acrylic and basic geometric shapes, as shown in *Sin título #522* (Untitled #522) (1979; Pl. 6), which consists of plexiglass sheets folded into smooth edges to create a vertical, open, triangular arrangement. The following year, in works such as *Equilibrando #1* (Balancing #1) (1980; Fig. 2), she began to combine the acrylic with folded sheets of metal in ways that share a similar compositional strategy based on triangular and vertical shapes. As Boller herself recognizes, her early sculptural practice was clearly nourished by the work of Edgar Negret and Eduardo Ramírez Villamizar, the pioneers of geometric abstraction in Colombia and prominent figures within the context of postwar Latin

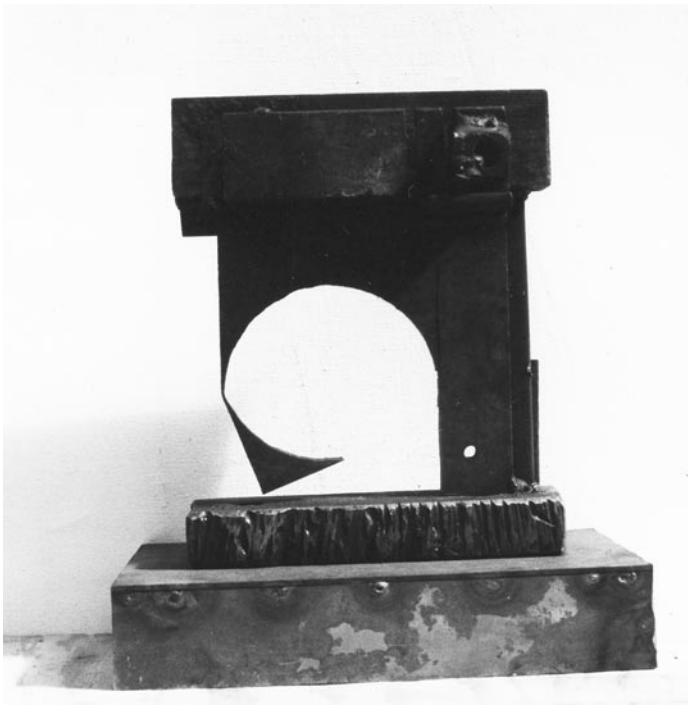


Fig. 3. Edelmira Boller, *Arco roto* (1984), industrial waste, 91/8" x 7 7/8" x 7 7/8". Photography Jorge González. DC Family Collection. © Edelmira Boller. © Galería Salón Comunal. Image source: BADAC, Universidad de los Andes Colombia.

American art.[7] Negret and Ramírez Villamizar had embraced abstraction during their sojourns in Paris and New York throughout the 1950s—the former in metal sculpture and the latter in paintings, reliefs, and, sculpture—and soon became leading figures in Colombian artistic modernism. By the late 1950s and early 1960s, thanks to their work, geometric abstraction had become the official voice of the modernizing and developmentalist ideals pursued by the Colombian government and private corporations alike.[8]

When Boller publicly presented her sculptures in the early 1980s, they were interpreted as part of the same movement as the work of Negret and Ramírez Villamizar. Her inclusion as the only woman artist in two versions of the show *Six Abstract Sculptors in Metal*, first in 1980 at the Museo de la Universidad Nacional and later in 1982 at Galería Centro Colombo Americano, both in Bogotá, confirmed her place within the sculptural scene of that period and revealed her plastic affinities with the works of Colombia's most renowned abstract geometric artists. These exhibitions, as the title suggests, gathered the work of six abstract sculptors who worked with metal: Negret, Ramírez Villamizar, Carlos Rojas, John Castles, Alberto Uribe, and Boller.[9] In the exhibition catalogue for the show at the Universidad Nacional, Colombian art critic Germán Rubiano Caballero explained that it brought together "those who carry on the constructivist tradition" in sculpture with concepts that also transform said tradition.[10]

For the most part, reviewers of her early exhibitions insisted on the dependency and formal similarity of her works

with those of the great "male" masters, sometimes even labeled their epigone, her work characterized as no more than derivative.[11] In essence, she was seen as a latecomer to an already established tradition in Colombia, and one that had lost by the 1980s its radicality and had become dogmatized. In a way, Boller's personal history contributed to these views. In addition to her late arrival on the scene with no significant formal training, she had a personal connection with Ramírez Villamizar, who became a close friend and mentor. That relationship, no doubt, reinforced the critics' image of her as a follower of the master, an image echoing traditional readings of the work of women artists where they are portrayed as having an inevitable dependence on masculine models. This is evident, for example, in the case of abstract artists such as Sonia Delaunay (1885–1979), Lee Krasner (1908–1984), or María Freire (1917–2015), whose contributions to the history of abstraction are often evaluated in light of their relationship to their male partners.[12] Perhaps, in response to these negative comments, by the mid-1980s Boller moved on to a new material and creative strategy that distanced her from the work of the well-established male sculptors with whom she had been associated.

In 1984, for her third solo show at Galería Santa Fe in Bogotá, Boller introduced her recent explorations with industrial waste, scrap, and fragments of machinery. *Arco roto* (Broken Arch) (1984; Fig. 3), for example, uses welded pieces of industrial waste to create a heavy rectangular form that rests on a square base of the same material. The central, open arrangement suggests a broken circle that refers to the work's title and lends lightness to the entire composition. *Destiladora* (Distiller) (1984; Fig. 4), on the other hand, uses fragments of machinery. Here we see a more complex construction organized around a vertical axis in several interlocked, concentric circular pieces. The mechanical nature of the work is evident even as it has lost its identity as part of a concrete machine.

Boller encountered such manufactured materials in 1983, and from that moment onwards she began to collect industrial waste and machine parts, acquired on her visits to the warehouses of factories in Bogota, such as Centrales—the staple Colombian brand of household appliances—and subsequently organized in her "junk library" (Fig. 5). More specifically, Boller worked with the scraps leftover from industrial production, pieces that could be assembled into larger structures. She is interested in working, for instance, with iron sheets from which parts are cut out to be used in a machine, or with discarded machine parts themselves. Her own house and studio began to fill up with these materials, which she very carefully began to organize and classify to later include in her pieces.

Boller explains that her approach to these materials is always intuitive. As opposed to other abstract geometric sculptors, she does not plan her sculptures in advance. In her own words:

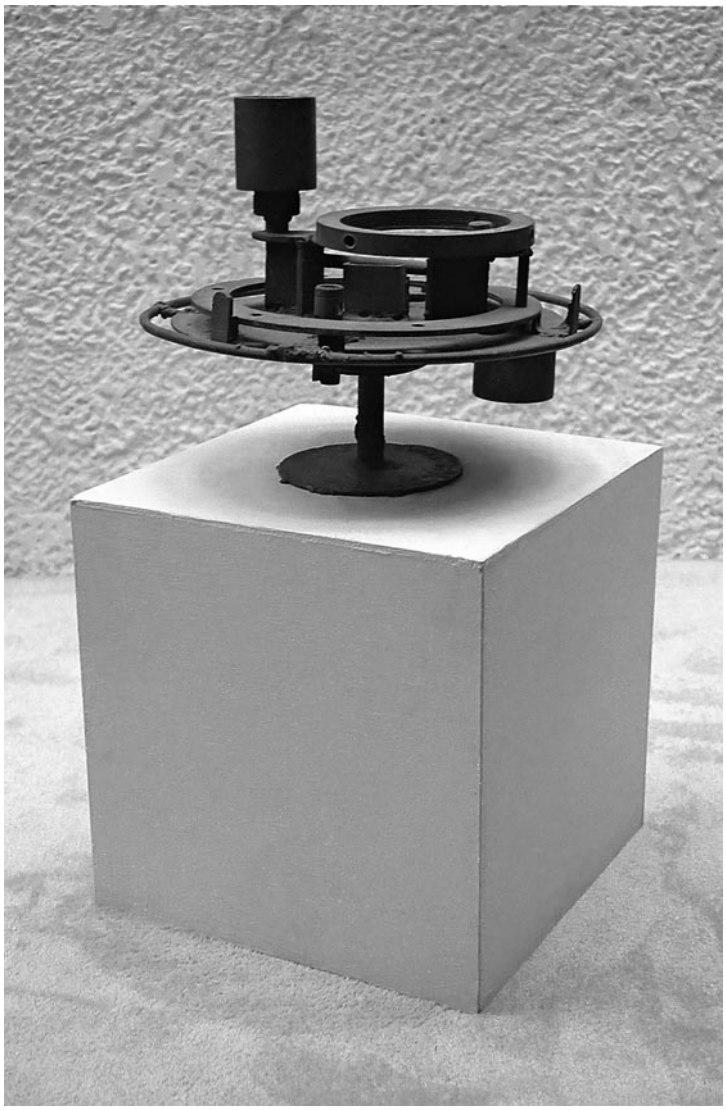


Fig. 4. Edelmira Boller, *Destiladora* (1984), machine parts, 13 7/8" x 17". Photography David Ramirez M. Private collection. © Edelmira Boller. © Galería Salón Comunal. Image source: BADAC, Universidad de los Andes Colombia.

> The process begins when I select the pieces in the factory. They are premade pieces that I don't want to alter, subtract or add to, they just have to assemble precisely. I store them and, generally, place them in pairs. Later, they start to speak on their own, or to each other. I bring them close together to see what's happening, and if they don't tell me anything, I put them back in their place. Maybe they insist and I start to study them. Or maybe I find the solutions somewhere else. It's like a jigsaw puzzle.[13]

At first glance, Boller's use of waste and metal junk places her artworks within sculptural developments after the Second World War, such as Nouveau Réalisme and assemblage. In the Colombian context, these materials closely connect her to Feliza Bursztyn (1933–1982), who introduced junk for her sculptural practice in the 1960s and 1970s.[14] Bursztyn's early



Fig. 5. Edelmira Boller's junk library. Photography Jorge González. © Edelmira Boller. © Galería Salón Comunal. Image source: BADAC, Universidad de los Andes Colombia.

chatarras (junk sculptures) embraced the dirty, rustic, and ragged quality of the material, as a commentary on the growing inequalities brought forth by modernizing and progressive official agendas. As art historian Gina McDaniel Tarver explains, Bursztyn's junk sculpture is a "rusted reference, to a failed modernity of waste and deterioration, in great contrast to the clean, utopian view of modernity advanced by other Colombian sculptors like Negret and Ramírez Villamizar."[15]

Boller, however, adopts a different approach to industrial waste, and it is important to highlight the contrast to understand how her work fits within the history of geometric abstraction in Colombia and beyond. First, in contrast to Bursztyn's early junk pieces, Boller's sculpture retains some of the constructive and geometric approach of her earlier work. In this sense, she adopts a unique approach both to geometric abstraction and to waste and machine fragments precisely because she juxtaposes two seemingly antipodal worlds: while geometric abstraction suggests a clean, ordered, and rational language, industrial waste and junk points to the abject, the dirty, and the chaotic.

Second, and more importantly, while Boller's use of junk and waste aligns with a broader critique of modernization undertaken by artists from the 1960s onward,[16] her approach carries distinct, gender-marked implications. As she later emphasizes, the practice of creating sculptures out of these materials is part of a recycling economy, one that cannot be understood independently from her identity as a woman. In Boller's admission, "I try to use things before throwing them away … to show that a piece of iron has traces, it has a particular beauty. It's a shame to melt it down when someone can use it again."[17] We can see here the feminine logic of reuse operating as a way to support a household economy—a common practice among homemakers who need to economize, reuse, and recycle. In fact, the artist herself has emphasized this aspect of her creative project in relation to her position as a homemaker. In an interview, Boller explained that she connected her practice of recycling to her mother's habit of mending and reusing old dresses for her before buying new ones, particularly her memory of seeing her mother make special, unique dresses from the scraps of other used dresses.[18]

In this sense, Boller's work of the 1980s can be seen as a critique of the industrialized capitalist world. But whereas some have been concerned with homogeneity and the alienating features of industrial and mass production (Andy Warhol, for example), Boller is concerned with worries about the overproduction of new things in the context of capitalist consumerism. As the artist offered, "[My struggle] is to help

change the practice of excessive consumption, of 'use it and throw it away.'"[19] This aspect would become even more apparent in her later practice of producing furniture and utilitarian objects for domestic interiors.

In addition, the way in which Boller acquires her materials in factories like Centrales also possesses a specific inscription of her gender and subverts the stereotypes of women at that time. She describes the experience of visiting this factory as similar to that of shopping for groceries—a predominantly feminine and domestic activity in the 1980s—or like entering a fashion boutique and trying on all of their dresses—also an experience associated with the feminine.[20] At the same time, however, her presence in these contexts subverts the expectations and stereotypes of women: in the 1980s and '90s, it was unusual to find women working in warehouses for industrial materials and waste. Their place in a factory was generally in the office as secretaries, typists, or cleaners, with the occasional exception of managers or coordinators. Furthermore, her use of these materials and her experience with them—for example, with the waste from the household appliances that Centrales produced—is radically different from what was expected from a woman: Boller does not passively operate the machine and the household appliance as tools for domestic work. Instead, she takes an active role as a transformative agent by turning them into sculptures.

Boller's critical approach to geometric abstraction—both materially and conceptually—was not readily recognized in Colombian art circuits of the 1980s, and her work was largely overlooked. Even though her sculpture *Otro proyecto para el olvido* (Another Project for Oblivion) (1989; Pl. 7) received an honorable mention at the 32nd National Artists' Salon in Cartagena, critics dismissed her, again, as a latecomer to an established tradition dogmatized in art historical and commercial markets. As art historian Briony Fer observed broadly of this decade: "Abstraction became a taboo subject, remaindered by other more critical forms of practice from Conceptual art onwards. Abstract art might have continued to occupy acres of corporate wall space but was no longer within the critical forum as a transgressive force."[21] This was equally true in Colombia, especially for an artist who was not venturing in the more experimental avenues of installation art. By the end of the decade, however, Boller found another avenue for her practice with industrial waste and scrap metal and proposed a new and radical approach to both sculpture and abstract art from the margins of domesticity and the decorative arts.

In 1989, Boller's artistic practice underwent yet another transformation: in addition to her sculptures, she began to design and produce furniture and objects for domestic use. She made these with the same materials she used for her sculptures—that is, industrial waste and machine parts—creating hybrids on the border between the artistic and the decorative. For example, in *La mitad del sol* (Half of the Sun) (1994; Pl. 8) she used a washing machine drum that simultaneously functions as wall relief, light source, and dial. And, in *Sin título #157* (Untitled #157) (1989; Fig. 6), the industrial scrap serves as both support and sculpture.

Boller's transition to the applied or decorative arts was organic—she began designing furniture and objects for her own home and her daughter's as they began to need them. From her practice, her own house began to be filled with strange tables, chairs, lamps, armoires, dressing tables, and coat racks, which were designed to serve a function and to fit harmoniously into the domestic interior (Pl. 9). Some of these objects are simple geometric forms, like the table *Guardalunas #2* (Moonkeeper #2) (1994; Fig. 7), for which Boller welded four sheets of industrial scrap and covered the top with glass. Others are more complex, such as *Imagínese* (Imagine) (1994; Pl. 10), a vanity stand with several parts to hold different elements, and a movable mirror, resting entirely on an unusually shaped furniture base.

Since 1992, Boller has exhibited her sculptural works alongside furniture and utilitarian objects for the domestic interior in the same exhibition spaces. This approach has resulted in a synthesis between abstract and applied art, and an integration of the domestic realm into the domain of professional art. Her practice is especially interesting in the context of abstraction, since it transgresses the strict separation and hierarchy between the artistic and the decorative. In the history of twentieth century art, such a separation has served to preserve the place of abstraction within the so called "high arts" and to distinguish it from the world of everyday things and, especially, from the feminine sphere of the domestic and decorative arts.

As art historian Elisa Auther has explained, "Between 1897 and 1908 the decorative was transformed from that of a positive feature of the Modernist aesthetic to its antithesis through the demonization of mass culture, ornament, and femininity."[22] Avant-garde artists, especially those associated with abstraction, strove to distinguish between serious abstract art and "the merely decorative."[23] Such was the case of Bauhaus artist and teacher Wassily Kandinsky, who warned in his 1911 book, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (translated into English in 1914 as *The Art of Spiritual Harmony*), that forms and colors on their own were no more than "geometric decoration" and not true works of art.[24] Likewise, Cubist artists and theorists Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger argued that the decorative threatened the independence of painting as a particular kind of aesthetic object and consequently endangered the traditional role of the painter as an intellectual creator of high art. In their influential treatise on Cubism, Gleizes and Metzinger claimed that "the decorative is … essentially, dependent, necessarily incomplete…. It is an organ. [While serious art] carries within itself its *raison d'etre*.… Essentially independent, necessarily complete…. It does not harmonize with this or that ensemble, it harmonizes with the totality of things, with the universe: it is an organism."[25]

Whereas these interpretations shaped the notion of the decorative as the antithesis of serious abstract art during the first half of the twentieth century, they left a lasting impression well after World War II. One prominent example was the American art critic Clement Greenberg, who saw decoration as a ghost haunting abstract painting,[26] even declaring, "When the abstract artist grows tired, he becomes an interior



Fig. 6. Edelmira Boller, *Sin título #157* (1986), industrial waste, machine parts, and glass, 24" x 20 1/2" x 20 1/2". Photography Jorge González. Artist's collection. © Edelmira Boller. © Galería Salón Comunal. Image source: BADAC, Universidad de los Andes Colombia.

decorator."[27] Accordingly, Greenberg posited that the engagement of the true abstract artist—almost always male in his narrative—had to avoid at all costs any association with the decorative in an effort to find pure, self-sufficient art. But it was not just Greenberg, and his implications for male subjectivity in art, thinking this way. Some female artists also tended to disdain the decorative. Eva Hesse (1936–1970), for example, claimed in 1970, "I don't want [the decorative] to be used in any interview of mine, connected with my work. To me that word, or the way I use or feel about it, is the only art sin."[28] Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010), in a similar vein, stated in 1979, "[W]hen you work in the school of abstraction, you have to avoid … the decorative…."[29]

This association between abstraction and decoration was equally alive in the context of Colombian art. In 1964, the celebrated Colombian artist Fernando Botero attacked abstraction in an interview, claiming that "abstract painting is only used for upholstering furniture and decorating curtains."[30] Botero's statement clearly reflects his belief that the association with decoration undermines abstraction's artistic value, and he appears to advocate for a hierarchy in the arts, positioning the decorative as inferior to true art. As a result, he dismisses abstraction as mere decoration, effectively excluding it from the domain of "high art." Botero's claim seems to have struck a chord, and Colombian abstractionists such as Negret and Ramírez Villamizar quickly organized themselves to launch a counteroffensive, defending abstraction's legitimate claim as serious art and not 'mere decoration.'[31]

Within this panorama, Boller offers an interesting counterpoint by locating her practice precisely on the fringes between abstract and decorative art and explicitly denying the separation between sculpture and utilitarian object. As such, she moves fluidly between the practices of both. In 2001 she asserted, "My intention is to make neither a sculpture nor a lamp. It is simply to assemble, harmonize and disharmonize. The idea that functional things stop being sculptures isn't so true."[32] Her functional objects, thus, are labeled by the artist *esculturas para usar* (sculptures to use). This, in addition to the



Fig. 7. Edelmira Boller, *Guardalunas #2* (1994), industrial waste and glass, 20 1/2" x 32 3/4" x 16 5/8". Photography Jorge González. Artist's collection. © Edelmira Boller. © Galería Salón Comunal. Image source: BADAC, Universidad de los Andes Colombia.

exhibition of stand-alone sculptures and design objects within the same space, eliminate the traditional value scale for the artistic and the utilitarian and assumes a *de-hierarchization* of the arts, design, and the decorative.

This was especially evident in Boller's international exhibitions in the mid-1990s. In May 1996, she exhibited at the Galería Durban (later Durban Segnini) in Caracas, and in November of the same year, at the Angelika Harthan Gallery in Stuttgart. Both galleries demonstrated the radical nature of Boller's proposal: by showing her utilitarian and decorative objects in the same space as the sculptures, she broke down hierarchical valuations of art and decoration and brought the domestic into the realm of art.

Boller, of course, is not the first artist to engage in this kind of de-hierarchization. In the history of abstract art of the first half of the twentieth century, the practitioners of the Bauhaus (the revolutionary art, architecture, and design school in Germany) and Russian Constructivism can be seen as precedents for this intersectionality between abstract art and utilitarian object design. Unlike the artists associated with these groups, however, Boller's practice is not implicitly a model of industrial and technological progress. The nature of the materials she chooses, as well as the specifics of her process at the domestic scale, distance her from those enterprises produced by broader institutional and industrial structures. The creative projects of Delaunay and Sophie Taeuber-Arp (1889–1943) are perhaps closer to Boller's case. Both artists navigated the fundamental principles of abstract geometric art while also engaging in the innovative production and design of utilitarian objects, including textiles, garments, jewelry, and housewares. Their multifaceted oeuvres, however, employed a different set of materials than Boller's, and they did not promote their varied outputs in the same institutional spaces. Only recently have curators begun to merge these entrepreneurial artists' cross-disciplinary productions in the same New York shows, as in *Sophie Taeuber Arp: Living Abstraction* at the Museum of Modern Art (2021) and *Sonia Delaunay: Living Art* at the Bard Graduate Center (2024).

A more recent case formally similar to Boller's is that of American Minimalist artist and writer Donald Judd, who also made sculptures from industrial materials and began designing furniture for personal use in the 1970s, expanding his business into a small-scale production and sales operation in the 1980s. However, both artists differ in terms of the type of industrial materials utilized: while Judd preferred new, clean, smooth materials, Boller uses industrial waste, scrap metal, and machine parts. More significantly, unlike Boller, Judd always insisted on the separation of art from the utilitarian

object. In his 1993 text "It's Hard to Find a Good Lamp," written for an exhibition of his wood and metal furniture in Rotterdam, he claimed: "I am often asked if the furniture is art…. The furniture is furniture…. We try to keep the furniture out of art galleries to avoid this confusion, which is far from my thinking."[33] Judd's statement is grounded on the strict separation between high art and the decorative. For him, the utilitarian character of furniture distinguished it from the autonomous status of the art object. He continued, "The configuration and the scale of art cannot be transposed into furniture.... The intent of art is different from that of the latter, which must be functional."[34] In her desire to blur the boundaries between abstract sculpture and the utilitarian object, Boller moves a step further and radicalizes her approach to abstraction. Her proposal of 'sculptures to use' radically defies traditional notions that separate art and design, abstraction and decoration. In doing so, Boller breaks down the modernist credo of purity and high art.

In contrast to Judd, a significant aspect of Boller's deliberate approach is the insertion of the domestic within the field of the artistic, a strategy that allows her to challenge and subvert the modernist credo and dominant interpretations of abstraction. As art historian Christopher Reed explains, "When we think of modern [or abstract] art … we do not generally think of domestic imagery or objects for the home."[35] Indeed, the hegemonic histories of modern art, and especially the narratives surrounding abstraction as the epitome of modernism, have banished the domestic sphere from the artistic, positioning the home as "the antipode to high art."[36] However, as art historian Gill Perry explains, "As notions of the avant-garde have evolved throughout the twentieth-century with the emergence of a more fragmented, post-modern and globalized map of artistic activities, such binaries are difficult to sustain."[37] In this respect, the insertion of the domestic into the sphere of art has a long history. Since the nineteenth century, with the invention of the modern concept of family, the domestic has been considered the privileged space of women, and our stereotypes of femininity surround familial and household labors. Inevitably, for women artists the strategic insertion of the domestic into the artistic has been a common thread.[38] That Boller—as a woman artist—should insert the domestic into the artistic sphere supposes a particular inscription of the feminine and the privileged spaces of femininity suited for her place and positionality in Colombia: at the end of the twentieth century, activating a threefold model, she brings the domestic space to artistic practice, the gallery, and the art museum. In this respect, Boller's work can be seen as part of what Perry calls "a turn to the domestic" in contemporary art.[39]

In contrast to other women artists in her country, Boller moves beyond representing or referencing domestic space and its objects in art. In her artwork she actively produces the domestic. A comparison with Colombian artists Bursztyn and Beatriz González (1932–2026) clearly illustrates this point. In the 1970s, González began to introduce furniture and domestic objects into the artistic space as frames for her paintings. Yet, unlike Boller, she strips away the domestic object's functional character—one cannot lie in González's beds or eat food from one of her trays. Similarly, in 1974, Bursztyn made her *Beds*, in which she takes the frames of metal beds and covers them with multicolored satin sheets, beneath which amorphous shapes suggest human bodies. Additionally, Bursztyn attached electric motors to the beds making them move and produce cacophonic sounds that evoke sexual connotations. Even though Bursztyn's beds suggest a human presence, as a spectator one cannot lie on her beds or use them in any way. In this respect, both González's furniture and objects and Bursztyn's beds remain firmly rooted in the realm of autonomous art. Boller, by contrast, blurs the distinction between art and utilitarian objectness, and instead of referencing or representing the domestic, she actively produces it with her *esculturas para usar*. She not only presents viewers of her exhibitions with a projected image of the home but actually produces the spaces of the home inside the gallery walls and vice versa (Pl. 11), inviting us to a new experience of an artwork that can be used and adapted or assimilated simultaneously in our daily lives. For instance, when one switches on the light and *La mitad del sol* (see Pl. 8) illuminates the space, or when one places a cup of coffee on top of *Guardalunas #2* (see Fig. 7).

Significantly, Boller's seamless integration of the domestic within artistic practice places her within the contemporary context of Perry's "turn to the domestic." Perry defines this turn "as an engagement with the activities, spaces, materials and tropes of the 'home,'" and argues that it "has been identified as a distinguishing feature of the practice of many women artists working in Britain at the turn of the twentieth century."[40] Additionally, the British art historian observes that many European and American women artists are equally concerned with the deployment of domestic iconography in a wide range of sculptural and experimental practices.[41]

Latin American and Colombian artists of the late twentieth-century also explored themes related to the domestic and the home. One notable example is Colombian artist Maria Teresa Hincapié (1956–2008), who, in 1990, presented her performance *Una cosa es una cosa* (A Thing it's a Thing), which clearly foregrounded quotidian labors, rituals, and the spaces of humble women. In her performance, Hincapié lays down one by one all her belongings (clothes, kitchenware, make-up, food, and so-forth) in neat lines that form the shape of a rectangular spiral inward. She performs this action with care and follows a steady rhythm. When she finishes laying down her 'things,' Hincapié stores them following the same procedure. Once this is finished, she starts over again and repeats this cycle for eight hours, or a typical workday.[42] According to Cuban-American artist and writer Coco Fusco, "*Una cosa es una cosa* is the culmination of a series of performances centered on the traditional *habitus* of women, particularly women of modest means.… [Hincapié] created choreographies of the feminine rooted not in the female *form*, but rather in the activities, perceptions, and sensibilities of those whose work is bound physically to the domestic sphere."[43] Like Boller, Hincapié inserted the domestic within

the artistic space, in her case through the objects and actions of women bound by the home. Unlike Boller, however, she produced ephemeral pieces through performance that invited reflection on the realities of women in domestic spaces and not actual objects to be consumed in our daily experiences at home.

The sculptural projects of Doris Salcedo (b. 1958) serve as a much closer point of comparison for Boller's work. Beginning in the late 1980s, and throughout the 1990s, Salcedo produced sculptures using reclaimed domestic furniture—chairs, dressers, tables, beds, armoires—which she transforms, joins together, solidifies through applied concrete, covers with organic materials (hair, for instance) or fabrics, and merges with metallic pieces. Her works bear witness to lives disrupted and silenced by conflict; they function as an indexical presence of those who have suffered, vanished, or been displaced by incessant violence in Colombia.[44] Salcedo's *Unland* (1995–98), for instance, is a gallery-based installation, in which tables are merged and fused with metallic objects to suggest homelessness or loss of place—its title alludes to the thousands of *desplazados* (the displaced) who were forced to leave their lands and homes due to the war.

Another prime example of Salcedo's practice in the 1990s is the series of untitled installations (1989–2008) in which wooden furniture (drawers, cupboards, shelves, and bed frames) is covered in cement and bits of fabric. According to Perry, these works suggest an absent body: "Worn out, distressed, marked and disappearing furniture could refer to past human use, and also to the absence or loss of human activity."[45] The series readily invite comparisons with Boller's "sculptures to use," but, whereas Salcedo's pieces allude to absent bodies, the latter implicate a living body and human presence. Moreover, Salcedo's installations reference abandoned homes and domestic spaces no longer safe, while Boller's installations of sculpture and furniture invite us to imagine new, vital living spaces and suggest the experiential integration of art and the decorative into our daily domestic lives.

A significant aspect of Boller's strategic spatial blurring of art and domestic boundaries implies the inclusion of her own personal experiences as homemaker and as professional artist and her challenges to this strict separation. This separation was embedded for women artists in the context of late twentieth-century Colombian art. We rarely hear artists openly discussing their lives as mothers or homemakers, nor do they often integrate these experiences into their work. Taking González and Salcedo again as examples, even in pieces that clearly address domestic themes or objects, they focus on broad social or political commentaries largely independent of their personal life. Boller, in contrast, has often asserted her simultaneous reality as a homemaker and an artist, emphasizing the fluidity between these two domains. She engages in artistic activities, for instance, when creating objects for her own home or those of her grown children. At the same time, she assumes the role of a homemaker when she supports her creative project through the reuse and repurposing of materials and objects, a practice that aligns with the logic of saving and reusing that is prevalent in many women's domestic lives. This duality is evident not only in her creative practice, which bridges the two realms, but also in some of her statements. In an interview from 1989, she declared, "I'm still a run-of-the-mill homemaker and mother. I like being one and it doesn't stop me from being an artist."[46] In doing so, Boller challenges the stereotype of the professional female artist and proposes a radical practice of abstraction by decisively merging the spaces of domesticity and art precisely from the margins of domestic life.

An examination of the work of Edelmira Boller from the 1980s and '90s reveals a previously uncharted territory in Colombian abstract art of the late twentieth century and expands hegemonic narratives in the history of art. This reading of her work echoes Pollock's remark, quoted at the beginning of this article, concerning the need to give voice to the "signs of difference" in the work of female artists with an eye towards uncovering new approaches and re-reading familiar languages and practices. The use of industrial waste and machine fragments in Boller's sculptural work challenges the modernist canon of Latin American geometric abstraction as a symbol of modernization during the second half of the twentieth century. Instead, they point to a critique of late-capitalist excessive consumerism. Boller's concept of *esculturas para usar* (sculptures to use) and her exhibition strategies destabilize the rigid boundaries between the artistic and the decorative, as well as between objects that are considered art and those that are part of domestic life.

This study of Boller's creative project is part of a larger research initiative aimed at elucidating the hitherto hidden histories of women artists working in abstraction in Colombia and Latin America. One of the main goals is to integrate these voices into the global history of abstract art. Furthermore, it responds to a broader interest among academic and museum circles in highlighting the contribution of women artists to the history of twentieth-century abstraction. In recent years, there has been a proliferation of exhibitions and publications on this phenomenon, which have revealed a more complex and nuanced understanding of the origins and development of abstraction in the twentieth century.[47] These have demonstrated that the history of abstract art is far from a monolithic process of artists in search of pure, autonomous form. Instead, these studies have demonstrated that the search for abstraction has been shaped by a diverse array of interests that extend beyond the conventional interpretations of its purported purity and detachment from daily life. Boller's abstract practice serves as a striking example of this. •

Ana M. Franco is associate professor of art history at Rice University. She authored *Neoclásicos* (2019) and co-edited *New Geographies of Abstract Art* (2019). Her expertise centers on the history of postwar abstract art across Latin America. She is currently researching late twentieth-century Colombian abstract art by women artists. Her work explores the intersections between artistic abstraction, decoration, and craft.

Notes

All translations by the author unless noted otherwise.

1. Fernando Gómez, "Edelmira Boller: el gran misterio del arte colombiano," *El Tiempo* (Bogotá), March 12, 2022, https://www.eltiempo.com/cultura/arte-y-teatro/edelmira-boller-el-gran-misterio-del-arte-colombiano-657795.
2. See Jens Hoffmann, "Space Oddity," in *Danilo Dueñas. El espesor de la superficie*, ed. José Roca and Alejandro Martín (Seguros Bolívar, 2014), 13–22; María Margarita Malagón, *Arte como presencia indéxica. La obra de tres artistas colombianos en tiempos de violencia: Beatriz González, Oscar Muñoz y Doris Salcedo en la década de los noventa* (Ediciones Uniandes, 2010), 145–87; and Tanya Barson, "Mark but this Flea. María Fernando Cardoso Zoomorphic Micro-aesthetics," in *Animalario de María Fernanda Cardoso*, ed. José Roca and Alejandro Martín (Seguros Bolívar, 2013), 13–29.
3. Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (Routledge, 1999), 8.
4. Edelmira Boller, interview with author, March 23, 2022. Boller recalls how, though she no longer took formal classes with Manzur, she would bring him her sculptural experiments to receive his comments and advice.
5. Diego Montoya Chica, "David Manzur: el pulso de la memoria," *Revista Credencial*, January, 2022, https://www.revistacredencial.com/noticia/personajes/david-manzur-el-pulso-de-la-memoria.
6. Boller, WhatsApp voice message to author, November 23, 2022.
7. Boller, interview with author, March 23, 2022.
8. See Ana M. Franco, *Neoclásicos: Edgar Negret y Eduardo Ramírez Villamizar entre París, Nueva York y Bogotá, 1944–1964* (Ediciones Uniandes, 2019).
9. For the second edition of the show, held at the Colombo-American Center, Alberto Uribe was replaced by Ronny Vayda.
10. "[…] los continuadores de la tradición constructivista," cited in German Rubiano Caballero, *Seis escultores abstractos en metal* (Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 1980), n.p.
11. See Francisco Gil Tovar, "Lo abstracto: cansino pero vigente," *El Tiempo* (Bogotá), September 14, 1984, 7; Galaor Carbonell, "Edelmira Boller," *Revista Semana*, 1986; and Ana María Escallón, "El Arte de hoy: Tres escultores," 1987, unidentified newspaper clipping, Edelmira Boller Archive, Bogotá.
12. See Whitney Chadwick, "Living Simultaneously: Sonia and Robert Delaunay," in *Significant Others: Creativity and Intimate Partnership*, ed. Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron (1993; repr., Thames and Hudson, 2018), 31–48; Anne M. Wagner, "Fictions: Krasner's Presence, Pollock's Absence," in *Significant Others*, 223–43; Ana M. Franco, "Fighting Stereotypes: The Industrialist Aesthetic in María Freire's Concrete Production," Latin American Collection Fellowship, Instituto Cisneros, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/research/cisneros/cisneros-fighting-stereotypes.pdf; and Gabriel Pérez Barreiro, Ana M. Franco, and María Amalia García, *María Freire y José Pedro Costiogliolo: Una relación constructiva* (Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Atchugarry, 2023).
13. "El proceso comienza cuando escojo las piezas en la fábrica. Son piezas ya hechas que no quiero variar, ni quitar, ni poner, simplemente tienen que ensamblar exactamente. Las guardo y por lo general las pongo de dos en dos. Después empiezan a hablar solas, la una con la otra. Las acerco para ver qué es lo que está pasando y si no me dicen nada las devuelvo otra vez a su puesto. De pronto insisten y me pongo a estudiarlas. O de pronto encuentro las soluciones en otra parte. Es como un juego de rompecabezas." Boller, unclassified text, Edelmira Boller Archive.
14. The use of junk also places Boller's practice in close connection to Venezuelan artist Elsa Gramcko, who also started introducing industrial refuse and scraps into her work in the 1960s. See Mari Carmen Ramírez, "Of Things and Machines: Elsa Gramcko's Journey from the Void to the 'Real,'" in *Contesting Modernity: Informalism in Venezuela, 1955–1975*, ed. Mari Carmen Ramírez and Tahía Rivero (The Museum of Fine Arts, 2019), 122–36; Gabriela Rangel, ed., *Elsa Gramcko. The Invisible Plot of Things* (Sicardi, Ayers, Bacino; James Cohan, 2022); and Devon Zimmermam, "Corroding Geometries: Elsa Gramcko, Automobility, and the Paradoxes of Venezuelan Modernity, 1955–1965," *Modernism/*modernity 8, cycle 1(2023), https://modernismmodernity.org/articles/zimmerman-corroding-geometries-gramcko-automobility-paradoxes-venezuelan-modernity.
15. Gina McDaniel Tarver, "The Art of Feliza Bursztyn: Confronting Cultural Hegemony," *Artelogie*, no. 5 (2013): 5, https://doi.org/10.4000/artelogie.5561.
16. In addition to Bursztyn and Gramcko, some of these artists include the Brazilian Jac Leirner, American artist Thornton Dial, and Ghanain artist El Anatsui, among many others.
17. "Trato de utilizar las cosas antes de desecharlas … de demostrar que un pedazo de hierro ha dejado huellas, tiene una belleza particular. Es una lástima que se vaya a fundir si alguien lo puede utilizar otra vez." Boller, unclassified text, personal archive of the artist.
18. Boller, quoted in an unpublished interview with Bernardo Montoya, November 2021, Edelmira Boller Archive.
19. "¿Su lucha? Contribuir a que se modifique la conciencia de consumo desmedido del 'úselo y tírelo.'" "Edelmira Boller: La dama del hierro," *Axxis. Diseño, decoración y moda* (1995): 66.
20. Boller, interview with author, March 23, 2022.
21. Briony Fer, *On Abstract Art* (Yale University Press, 1997), 155.
22. Elisa Auther, "The Decorative, Abstraction, and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in the Art Criticism of Clement Greenberg," *Oxford Art Journal* 27, no. 3 (2004): 339–64.
23. Nancy J. Troy, "Domesticity, Decoration, and Consumer Culture: Selling Art and Design in Pre-World War I France," in *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture*, ed. Christopher Reed (Thames and Hudson, 1996), 114.
24. See Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1914; repr. Dover Publications, 1977).
25. Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, "Cubism," in *Modern Artists on Art: Ten Unabridged Essays,* ed. Robert L. Herbert (Englewood Cliffs, NJ., 1964), 5.
26. Clement Greenberg, "Milton Avery," in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism,* vol. 4, ed. John O'Brian (University of Chicago Press, 1988), 43.
27. Clement Greenberg, "Review of Exhibitions of Joan Miro, Fernand Léger, and Wassily Kandinsky," in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism,* vol. 1, 64.
28. Eva Hesse, quoted in Auther, "The Decorative," 339.
29. Louise Bourgeois, quoted in Auther, 339.
30. Fernando Botero, quoted in Byron López, "La pintura abstracta se quedó para forrar muebles y decorar cortinas," *El Tiempo*, February 21, 1964, 13.
31. See Ana M. Franco, "Capítulo 5: Negret y Ramírez Villamizar: Nuevo Clasicismo en Nueva York y Bogotá, 1960–1964," in *Neoclásicos: Edgar Negret y Eduardo Ramírez Villamizar entre París, Nueva York y Bogotá, 1944–1964*, 225–71.
32. "Mi intención no es ni hacer una escultura ni una lámpara. Simplemente es armar, armonizar y desarmonizar. La idea de que las cosas funcionales dejan de ser esculturas no es tan cierta." Boller, quoted in "Vacío y chatarra," *La Revista Diners*, n. 378, September 2001.

33. Donald Judd, "It's Hard to Find a Good Lamp," *Donald Judd Furniture: Retrospective* (Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, 1993), 7–21; repr. https://judd.furniture/philosophy/.
34. Judd.
35. Cristopher Reed, *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture* (Thames and Hudson, 1996), 7.
36. Reed, "Introduction," 7.
37. Gill Perry, "Introduction," *Playing at Home: The House in Contemporary Art* (Reaktion Books, 2014), 16.
38. Some studies on this topic include Griselda Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," in *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and the Histories of Art* (Routledge, 1988), and Frances Borzello, *At Home: The Domestic Interior in Art* (Thames and Hudson, 2004). For a general discussion of the domestic in Colombian women artists, see Carmen María Jaramillo, "Lo personal es político," in *Mujeres entre líneas: Una historia en clave de educación, arte y género* (Museo Nacional de Colombia, 2015), 65–70.
39. Perry, "Introduction," *Playing at Home*, 7 –29.
40. These include Rachel Whiteread, Tracy Emin, Mona Hatoum, Cornelia Parker and Sarah Lucas, among others. Perry, "Introduction," 17.
41. The French-American artist Louise Bourgeois is an obvious reference here, as she was concerned with domestic topics and allusions to the home early on in her career. American artists such as Laurie Simmons, Ann Hamilton, and Roni Horn all explored themes connected to domestic labor and the home.
42. Coco Fusco, "The Road is Made by Walking: The Performances of María Teresa Hincapié," in *María Teresa Hincapié: Hacia lo Sagrado*, ed. Jose Roca and Sylvia Suárez (Seguros Bolívar, 2017), 13–25.
43. Fusco, "The Performances of María Teresa Hincapié," 17.
44. Malagón, *Arte como presencia indéxica*, 149.
45. Gill Perry, "Dream Houses: Installations and the Home," in *Themes in Contemporary Art,* ed. Gill Perry and Paul Wood (Yale University Press and The Open University, 2004), 266–68.
46. "Sigo siendo una señora de casa común y corriente. Me gusta serlo y eso no impide que sea artista." Boller, quoted in María Margarita García, "Gato como no es," *La Prensa VIVIR,* January 28, 1989, 17.
47. Some of these shows include *Women of Abstract Expressionism* (Denver Art Museum, 2016); *Making Space: Women Artists and Postwar Abstraction* (MoMA, 2017); *Women in Abstraction. Another History of Abstraction in the 20th Century* (Centre Pompidou, 2021), and *Action, Gesture, Paint: Women Artists and Global Abstraction, 1940–1970* (Whitechapel Gallery, 2023). Additionally, there have been several solo shows featuring women abstract artists including *Lygia Clark: The Art of Abandonment* (MoMA, 2014); *Lygia Pape: A Multitude of Forms* (Met Breuer, 2017); *Gego: A Linha Emancipada* (Museu de Arte de Sao Paulo, 2019); *Sophie Taeuber-Arp: Living Abstraction* (MoMA, 2021); *Gego: Measuring Infinity* (Guggenheim New York, 2023); *Composing Color: Paintings by Alma Thomas* (Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2023); and *Sonia Delaunay: Living Art* (Bard Graduate Center, 2024).

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Beyond Weaving

The Work of Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz

By Barbara Stehle



Fig. 1. Yvonne Palmer (Pacanovsky Bobrowicz) in the back of the weaving studio of Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, late 1940s. Photographer unknown. Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz Archive. Courtesy of Bobrowicz Studios.

For over seventy years, Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz (1928–2022) worked with a wide variety of fibers, plastics, and metals to author a new kind of sculpture. Bobrowicz belonged to a generation of weavers that changed the perception of the technique. The actors on the textile art scene in the second part of the twentieth century were still mostly women—Anni Albers (1899–1994), Lenore Tawney (1907–2007), and Olga de Amaral (b. 1932), to name only a few—with some remarkable exceptions, such as Jack Lenor Larsen and Ed Rossbach. They knew each other, or of each other, and showed their work even as they struggled to enter museum collections and achieve the "art" label. By the late 1960s, the isolation of weavers ceased. Fibers, knots, and weaves entered the vocabulary of Process art, and the rise of feminism pushed the works forward into the public sphere. Some of the most powerful sculptors from this period emerged out of the textile field. Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz was one of them.

Bobrowicz (née Palmer) was born in 1928 in Maplewood, New Jersey. In her letter to a Korean craft magazine, in 2003, she wrote: "My interest in threads really goes back to my family—my grand-mother in Slovakia wove the linen she grew and spun it into material for family use."[1] Yvonne's father, Karl Pacanovsky, was Slovakian, and had been trained as a wood carver and furniture maker in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.[2] In 1913, he left his job in Vienna and

walked across Europe to board a ship to America. After his arrival, he changed his name to Palmer, and passed it on to his three daughters, before going back to Pacanovsky, in 1950.[3] Yvonne would switch from Palmer to Pacanovsky a couple of decades later. These changes explain why she is at times identified variously as Yvonne Palmer, Pacanovsky, or her married name, Bobrowicz, or a combination of the last two.

Yvonne's mother, Evelyn Hunkele, had grown up in Newark, NJ.[4] Yvonne recalls: "My mother's family were guild weavers in Baden-Baden, Germany. My maternal grandmother sewed beautifully and this talent she passed on to her daughters. My mother went to art school—she designed wonderful, unique clothing—tie-dyed, batiked, embroidered, and appliqued."[5] She was a "great colorist."[6] At home, her mother made clothes for the family and filled every aspect of their life with a sense of esthetic and purpose that inspired Yvonne. While pregnant, Evelyn had wished for Yvonne to be an artist, naming her after a painter in a novel she was reading.[7] Her mother was Yvonne's first role model and supporter.

Until the Depression made it impossible to continue working, Bobrowicz's parents ran a wood and upholstery business. They made furniture mostly, and a few objects, and shared the philosophy of William Morris, believing in the superiority of handmade works. In 1944, after the business had closed, Yvonne's father became the wood-working professor at the Hill School in Pottstown, Pennsylvania, and, in 1952, the head of the arts and crafts department.[8] During the summertime, the Pacanovskys would teach at Camp Arcadia, an all-girls summer camp in Otisfield, Maine, where Yvonne and her sisters participated in the program. It is there that Yvonne was initiated to weaving and, in time, became a counselor.[9] It sparked in her the desire to become an art teacher and continue in her parents' lineage.

Bobrowicz's brother-in-law taught on the Cranbrook campus in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, and the Pacanovskys went to visit; they were interested in the art school for Yvonne.[10] Cranbrook Academy of Art was created as a co-ed artists' colony devoted to architecture, craft, and design. Inspired by the commitment to quality of the Arts and Crafts movement, it aimed at bringing to American arts the same lasting values and ideals. Students were expected to achieve mastery in their field by exploring and shaping their own path. They were given a large amount of freedom. Two departments were headed by female artists, Loja Saarinen (1879–1968) and Marianne Strengell (1909–1998) for textiles, and Maija Grotell (1899–1973) for ceramics. These departments held the core of the women's population. Both would become legendary. It was a good fit for Bobrowicz, and in 1946 she enrolled and graduated in 1949. At Cranbrook she wove and made "metal and hand-wrought silver jewelry."[11] The metalsmith workshop was conveniently located next to the weaving studio, so Yvonne would spend an extensive amount of time working in both (Fig. 1).[12] She prepared to integrate metal into her weavings. Like at the Bauhaus and Black Mountain College, Cranbrook was at the forefront of design thinking. The Finnish architect Eliel Saarinen, father of Eero Saarinen, had created an avant-garde program, and after his retirement in 1946, his legacy lived on with Zoltan Sepeshy


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Fig. 2. Newspaper clipping of Cranbrook Academy of Art annual student show, *Detroit News*, 22 May 1949. Illustration of living room with "Rya Rug" by Yvonne Palmer and printed wall textile by Joseph Bobrowicz. Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz Archive. Courtesy of Bobrowicz Studios.

running the school. Many Cranbrook graduates defined mid-century modernism, and campus life kindled friendships and lifelong creative partnerships. Ray and Charles Eames met on campus in 1940, and, in 1947, Yvonne met her husband, the interior architect and painter, Joseph (Joe) Bobrowicz (1925).[13] A photograph of their year-end exhibition from 1949 shows on the floor Yvonne's "Rya Rug" (a Scandinavian-inspired rug made with long thick pile of natural fiber) (Fig. 2), and a silkscreened printed fabric on the wall by Joe.[14] They married in 1952 and moved to Philadelphia.

In 2011, Bobrowicz wrote about her education:

> Cranbrook Art Academy, an extraordinary educational school—a place where beauty is everywhere transcending daily life. I basked in the growth of its experiences. I majored in weaving; in those years, arts and crafts, less is more, and form follows function predominated the learning process. We became sensitized to this making. The character of our materials was imbued with lots of texture and simple structure. We wove by hand but had a power loom class and were encouraged to sell our designs to industry. The leaders of the design world, Saarinen, Milles, Eames, Bertoia, and Strengell influenced us and we felt their forms and spirit.[15]

Bobrowicz credits two eminent weavers and teachers for defining her path in weaving: Strengell, a Finnish artist who served from 1937 to 1961 as professor and department head of weaving and textile at Cranbrook, and Anni Albers, who gave a workshop at the Philadelphia Museum and School of Industrial Art (now University of the Arts). Strengell herself was "the daughter of an architect and an interior designer [who] placed utmost value on the functional application of the art of weaving."[16] In her progressive instruction, Strengell discarded pictorial weaving yet "stressed both the technical and professional aspects of craft." She introduced her students to all aspects of the process, from yarn dying to merchandising and client relations. Strengell's rigor initiated Bobrowicz to the high demands of the weaving profession: she had to create prototypes for upholstery, rugs, drapery, household, and



Fig. 3. Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz in her Philadelphia studio working at the Cranbrook-style loom her father made for her. Photographed for the exhibition *Craftsmen '67* at the Philadelphia Civic Center Museum, 1967. Photographer unknown. Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz Archive. Courtesy of Bobrowicz Studios.

wearable fabrics. Strengell encouraged mixing natural and synthetic fibers and exploring new techniques. Her early influence would define Bobrowicz's dedication to materiality.

When Bobrowicz studied with Albers, from 1955 to 1956, she was already a mother of two.[17] Yvonne took Albers's lectures between work and her duties as a mother. It was a challenge. Albers herself had chosen not to have children to concentrate on her art. In the mid-fifties, she had become a reference in the field, and her seminal book, *On Weaving*, would be published in 1965. In her teaching Albers shared her extensive knowledge of ancient techniques from all over the world. She loved small mobile looms like the ones used in Peru. The Bauhaus artist was not only a technician, but she also believed in the capacity of weavings to convey meaning. She fostered Bobrowicz's desire to travel and develop her artistic expression. "Well, the woman had talent," Bobrowicz remembered decades later.[18]

After Cranbrook, Bobrowicz opened "Yvonne Palmer Handweaves" out of her parents' house in Pennsylvania. Her father had constructed for her a Cranbrook loom (Fig. 3) like the ones she operated at school.[19] She offered wearables and household fabrics. Her first creations were met with commercial success and awarded several prizes.[20] In 1950, in Los Angeles, she took first prize with her black open drapery, ahead of Larsen. In 1954, Bobrowicz met Bertha Schaefer, the renowned New York City interior designer and gallerist. Schaefer was enthusiastic and made a first order of "11 yards of black and white linen, gold and green plastic."[21] She became a mentor to Bobrowicz. Schaefer herself designed furniture, one of the few women in the business.[22] Her commissions were important for Bobrowicz's career; it made her work visible in high circles.

Until the early 1980s, Bobrowicz produced textiles for architectural purposes. She had been prepared at Cranbrook to collaborate with architects, and in her professional life, she was closely associated with Philadelphia architectural networks. She attended talks, visited architecture exhibitions, and in the 1970s she was an early participant at architect and urban planner Paolo Soleri's conferences at his visionary Arcosanti project in the Arizona high desert.[23] Bobrowicz knew the field and its contemporary actors very well. She was friends with Tony Moody (who built Larsen's home) and with the young and promising Philadelphia-born Robert Venturi, who then worked for Louis Kahn. Throughout her life, Bobrowicz worked with many architects, including her husband Joe, who had an interior architecture office in Philadelphia.[24] From 1951 to 1961, Joe Bobrowicz taught alongside Paul Rudolph and Kahn in the design and architecture department at the University of Pennsylvania. Kahn was already a major figure. He was a consultant for the Philadelphia City Planning Commission; in 1951, he had won the contract to build the Yale University Art Galleries. Anne Tyng (1920–2011), the first woman architect to be licensed in the state of Pennsylvania, was working with Kahn, and her knowledge of the platonic elements was crucial to the Yale project.[25] Tyng was an architect of exceptional talent—Buckminster Fuller called her "Kahn's geometrical strategist."[26] She was to become one of Yvonne's closest and most inspiring friends.

In 1953, the Bobrowiczs had their first born, Shelly; Kahn and Tyng had a daughter, Alexandra. Tyng, not married to Kahn, left for Rome to have the baby and returned to Philadelphia a year later. When the kids were toddlers, the mothers met in Fitler Square and became the closest of friends.[27] Yvonne had met Kahn through the local design circles a couple years earlier, but her friendship with Anne had more to do with their continuous contact, off and on work.[28] Bobrowicz's working relationship with Kahn started in 1951.[29] The architect commissioned Bobrowicz to make a bedspread as well as other woven textiles for the Lenore and Morton Weiss House in East Norriton, PA. For decades, Bobrowicz collaborated as a maker and consultant on several of his residential and institutional projects. Yvonne was "the weaver he knew."[30] As he often reached out for help last minute, she recalled with affection: "Lou was adorable, [but] his timing was a little off." In 1969, when she could not take on the Unitarian Church project, she introduced Kahn to Larsen, but Bobrowicz remained Kahn's preferred textile artist.[31]

Throughout her youth, Alexandra Tyng had been a witness to the creative processes of Yvonne, and her father, Louis. Tyng remarked: "My father would stand in space and take it in. He could feel how it was created. What energy was there…. You cannot analyze it, you have to feel it. And Yvonne could do that very well. She would feel the things and respond to it. She would listen, not analyze it, she would respond, and she

would just do it. In that way she was just brilliant."[32] Kahn knew he could rely on Bobrowicz to solve problems. At the end of the 1960s, when he was working on the Exeter Library, Yvonne received a call: "The acoustics in the Exeter dining room [dining hall] were not right."[33] So, he asked her to come as soon as she could: "You know, they think of fabric for acoustics," she would point out.[34]

In 1972, Kahn turned again to Bobrowicz for the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas. He needed acoustic panels for the auditorium. Bobrowicz remembers: "I went to see Lou, and the brick was talking to us. And it was just a matter of the scale and what colors."[35] The luminous orange and large, yellow grid referred to the bricks Kahn was so fond of. The design was a warm and humorous nod to the architect, a compositional brightness that feels related to the colorful textiles worn by Tibetan monks. Like much of Bobrowicz's later production, it carries both heightened energy and spirituality. It would turn out to be one of Bobrowicz's last functional designs, and one of the few preserved on site.



Fig. 4. Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Yellow Abakan* (1967–68), installation view of the exhibition "Wall Hangings," February 25, 1969–May 4, 1969. Photographic Archive. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. IN882.1. Photograph by Stan Ries.

At the end of the 1960s, during the second wave of feminism, Bobrowicz's practice entered a new phase carried by the spirit of the times. The artist, whose children were now teens, devoted longer stretches to her career and expanded her reach. In 1968, she participated in her first World Craft Council (WCC), Third Biennale Meeting, in Lima, Peru.[36] She finally experienced what Albers had described: In Peru, she discovered a plurality of approaches to weaving, from the small, mobile, back-strapped looms to the sedentary large ones. Yvonne traveled every two years for the WCC, first to Dublin, then Istanbul, Toronto, Oaxtepec (Mexico), and Kyoto. Her final council was held in Vienna, in 1980, and it was a sort of homecoming, revisited with her father's legacy. Through her travels, Bobrowicz connected to an international community and created a place for herself on the scene.

In New York, Postminimalism was recontextualizing how fibers could be used. In 1968, the seminal exhibition, *Soft and Apparently Soft Sculpture*, curated by Lucy Lippard, challenged the notion that sculpture was solid. The show featured works that were soft and pliable, made of unconventional textures like latex, rubber, paper, threads, and vinyl. Sculptures by artists as diverse as Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010), Jackie Winsor (1941–2024), Yayoi Kusama (1929–2026), and Claes Oldenburg were shown. Out of all the artists included, Bobrowicz was particularly interested in the work of Eva Hesse (1936–1970), whose latex, wire-mesh, hanging wall sculpture, *Area* (1968), was created for the exhibition.[37] Here was a non-weaver who was using premade textile like cheesecloth to reinvent sculpture. Hesse and others in the show were creating an opening for people like Bobrowicz to enter the art world.

In 1969, a year after Lippard's statement exhibition, Bobrowicz's dear friend Larsen, the textile designer and Cranbrook graduate, and his co-curator, Mildred Constantine, associate curator in the architecture and design department, followed up with their groundbreaking fiber exhibition, *Wall Hangings*, at the Museum of Modern Art.[38] Their press release announced that the objects presented are "devoted to the contemporary weaver whose work places [them] not in the fabric industry but in the world of art."[39] Female artists dominated the selection of twenty-eight participants, and their works, including monumental pieces by Sheila Hicks (b. 1934) and Magdalena Abakanowicz (1930–2017)—*The Evolving Tapestry* (1967–68) and *Yellow Abakan* (1967–69; Fig. 4), respectively—matched the audacity of the Postminimalist scene.[40] The expressive monumentality of *Yellow Abakan* was overwhelming, blurring the lines between abstraction and anthropomorphism. Sexuality and mystery were both present in the disquiet piece made of woven sisal. Nothing like this had been seen before. The ancient textile tradition was rejuvenated and brought onto the contemporary art scene. Neither craft, nor design, the works on view were a new form of art. This was a pivotal moment.

Bobrowicz saw *Wall Hangings* at MoMA. "Philadelphia's connection with New York was fortunate," for it was just "a train ride away,"[41] she remarked. On Larsen, "What can I say?.... He was wonderful…. We were taught to be weavers, to be functional. And it evolved within twenty years into personal self-expression."[42] She continued, "Women [were] evolving in the sixties, and they made bigger and stronger weavings. The weaving was an archetype for women [over] thousands and thousands of years."[43] "Abakanowicz, from Poland, used big jute, very heavy, very thick yarn.... That was a symbol of women evolving…. I thought that was fascinating."[44]

Women confronted rigid societal structures; they needed freedom and flexibility. As Albers underlined these concepts in her visionary 1957 essay on textiles, fabric is the antithesis of "the fixed, the permanent," it is "the pliable plane."[45] That flexibility was the exact opposite of the stifling society



Fig. 5. Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz, pencil drawing on envelope for *Vulva Object* (ca. 1965–70). © Bobrowicz Studios Collection. Courtesy of Bobrowicz Studios and Sapar Contemporary.



Fig. 6. Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz weaving one of the room dividers for the Faculty Lounge of the University of Pennsylvania Chemistry Building, 1973. Photo: Joseph Bobrowicz. © Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz Archive. Courtesy of Bobrowicz Studios.

feminists were rising up against. Until then, textile had been undervalued as the sphere of "woman's work," but now things were flipped around, and fiber art became symbolic of women's empowerment. This was a validation for female fiber artists, as they were ideally placed to push women's representation forward. Bobrowicz concurred, "The medium was the right message at the right time."[46]

For centuries, weavers had been fashioning identity, making cloth and accessories. The human body, public and private, had been, in part, defined by them. With the women's liberation movement, the sexual body became a central topic: Kusama and Abakanowicz engaged with erotic abstractions (male and female tropes) by using fabric in sculptures. At the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, in 1966, Niki de Saint Phalle (1930–2002) invited visitors to enter her gigantic architectural and sculptural *Hon – en katedral* (She – A Cathedral), a colossally reclined pregnant woman, one of her first "Nanas," where visitors entered through its vagina portal. Women were leading the "sex-talk" of the art world. They were claiming agency over female sexuality, making vaginal forms very visible. While Hannah Wilke (1940–1993) is usually credited with the first vaginal imagery, the form appeared literally and metaphorically everywhere in art spaces.

In the late 1960s, Bobrowicz, too, started to express herself on topics of sexuality and represent female organs. She created a small *Vulva Object* (ca. 1965–70; Pl. 11) of woven linen with a dark golden orifice in the center and on each side flossa (a hand-knotting technique for shorter pile) mimicking pubic hair. It could be hung in space or worn as a necklace. The small object, twelve by six inches, almost feels like a talisman. This magical incantation is something it shares with the much larger, wool fiber sculpture by Faith Wilding (b. 1943) called *Sea Womb* (1969). These hanging pieces function as symbols of fertility akin to those found in Indigenous cultures. Their aesthetic appears influenced by South and Central American crafts and related to the female divine. In the same spirit, Bobrowicz made several small pendants with linen, metal threads, and feathers with slit openings. The preparatory drawings (Fig. 5) for these pieces show a totemic organization of vulvas topped over each other. Fun, colorful and stringy, they could be described as a crossover between an amulet and an ornament, with shapes clearly referring to the female organ.

In the same period, Bobrowicz made for her home a red and black sexy *Doorway* (late 1960s). Constructed out of strips of linen, wool, silk, feathers, brass and bronze elements, it featured dangling kinetic parts and the allure of a nuptial chamber entryway. Bobrowicz posed in its frame in a leotard and tights, emphasizing the erotic connotation. Soon she would create a new architectural piece that would develop further her playful eroticism.

With her yellow *Vulva Room Divider* (1971; Pl. 12), Bobrowicz transferred the iconography of her small fertility objects to a large weaving suspended in space. In her hands, the divider becomes female, fertile, and wondrous. Made of a warm yellow wool and reddish linen weave with gold threads, it features abundant flossa framing a large open vagina. The piece, measuring one hundred by eighty inches, is spectacular, at once ancient and bold. Bobrowicz's varied textural effects have great three-dimensional presence. The sexual

iconography is as explicit as Abakanowicz's woven *Abakan Orange* of 1971, a sisal vulva floorpiece with sperm suspended over it. Both artists magnify the female organ and turn it into a central piece of architectural scale.

Bobrowicz furthered her explorations of sexual symbolism for a 1973 commission for the faculty lounge of the Chemistry department at the University of Pennsylvania. Bobrowicz made four large room dividers in yellow, orange, red and blue (Pl. 13). Their openings create windows for the professors' gaze, guiding the male and female occupants as they "look through the space."[47] The artist recalled, "That was supposed to be room dividers, […] that was big for me, […] that was the vaginas … that was mine."[48] The piece is arguably Bobrowicz's first installation and wittily addresses the chemistry between genders (Fig. 6). The first preparatory drawings (Fig. 7) for the yellow *Vulva Divider*, which eventually led her to the concept for the Faculty Lounge, indicate that the abstract shapes originally derived from a composition of several standing figures: at least one is male with a penis, and some appear to be female with larger thighs. Bobrowicz eventually magnified the size of these vulva and penis signifiers. These shapes would come to define the final negative spaces in the University of Pennsylvania weavings. All these openings in the textile play out like cutouts. One cannot help thinking of the evolution of Matisse's three mural panels, *The Dance* (1932–33), at the Barnes Foundation, certainly a masterpiece Bobrowicz knew about.[49] The opening of the textile mass was something Bobrowicz had always been interested in. Earlier at Cranbrook, Bobrowicz had noted the quality of work by one of her classmates, referred to as Priscilla, who was concentrating on openings in her textiles.[50] Later, she noted that Tawney was one of the seminal artists who "opened up the mass."[51] Bobrowicz's admiration for Lucio Fontana's slashed canvas stems out of this too. His cuts carried deep cosmic connotations, another common interest.

In 1966, Bobrowicz began instructing classes in weaving, knitting, and history of textiles as an adjunct professor at Drexel University, a post she held until 1997. Yvonne loved teaching and was, by all accounts, a beloved professor. In an artist statement from 1990, she credits both her travels abroad and her students for teaching her.[52] "I learned with and through them,"[53] she recalled. She introduced her students to multiple philosophies and techniques: "We went from the floor loom into ... off-weaving or off-floor weaving. And it gave you more possibilities to create the form."[54] It was a direct and intuitive approach. Bobrowicz wanted her students to be hands on. "The students came to 'threads' using minimal equipment."[55] In the early 1970s, Bobrowicz had each of them create their own strips: "We put the weavings up on the wall. And then we changed them all around. They could be changed, they could be separated, put together, whatever.… That was when the whole idea of the rigidity of the weave opened up for me."[56]

During the fall or winter of 1970–71, Bobrowicz saw the major New York solo exhibition *Woven Walls* on the Colombian fiber artist Olga de Amaral (b. 1932), held at the Museum of

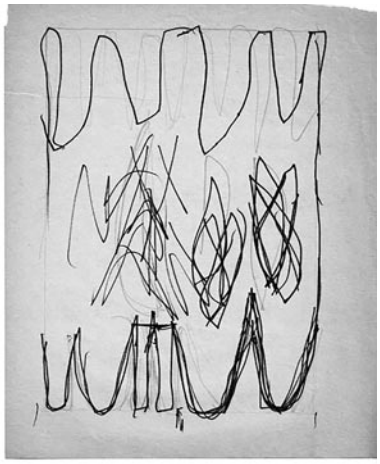


Fig. 7. Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz, preparatory drawing for *Vulva Room Divider* (1971). © Bobrowicz Studios Collection. Courtesy of Bobrowicz Studios and Sapar Contemporary.

Contemporary Crafts of the American Crafts Council (now the Museum of Arts and Design), and it comforted her ways of thinking.[57] Amaral had studied at Cranbrook between 1954 and '55, a few years after Bobrowicz, and exhibited in *Wall Hangings* at MoMA. Bobrowicz saw in that show a reflection of her own work: "She [Amaral] was in the strips.… They separated and they came together, and then she masked them. It was smashing, and nobody else was doing that. And, of course, I was teaching that, we were doing strips because we couldn't do anything else.... It was so wonderful for me."[58] Bobrowicz and her students were embracing the zeitgeist.

The idea of small individual units combined to make a whole was theoretically and practically appealing to Bobrowicz. Each piece was independent and yet connected. The concept conveyed a philosophical statement: all entities depend on each other. This was something that Bobrowicz wanted to express. She embraced the opportunity of two large commissions to develop this idea at architectural scale. For RCA Corporation (Radio Corporation of America), in 1975, Bobrowicz made a long, red, acoustic wall hanging combining several independent wool-and-brass units that could be rearranged in any order. In 1977, for the Friendship Federal



Fig. 8. Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz with *Stuffed or Woven Object #1* (mid-1970s), wool, linen, silk, and fur, 86" x 30" x 12". © Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz Archive. Courtesy of Bobrowicz Studios and Sapar Contemporary.



Fig. 9. View of Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz's Lombard Street Loft, Philadelphia, 1980. © Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz Archive. Courtesy of Bobrowicz Studios.

Bank commission, strips combining fiber and metal constituting the wall hanging were "lit from the back and the front to highlight the differing yarn textures." The light would "add a three-dimensional look."[59] Bobrowicz stated to this effect that the interchangeability of the strips reflected the "mobility, interaction, flexibility, change, and growth of friendship, federal, and society."[60]

Beyond these large commissions, Bobrowicz focused on developing volumetric soft sculptures. Starting in the early seventies, she made *Stuffed Objects* (mid-1970s, precise dates unknown) out of wool and other yarns (Pl. 14). These small volumetric objects are hairy, bright, and colorful, and they could be placed anywhere. She also conceived of a funny extra-large one; a photograph shows her in a black leotard and tights lounging on a sofa with the latter, an enormous *Stuffed Object* (Fig. 8) made of wool, linen, silk, and fur. (The piece looks like a hybrid between a body pillow and a stuffed lizard with fur pocket where you could slide your hand.) Bizarre yet cool, it could be understood as an eccentric fashion accessory wrapped over your entire body. Bobrowicz enjoyed dressing up and made multiple wearables: multicolored yarn and metal neck pieces, and glamorous boa scarfs and shoulder wraps with dense furry dangles and knots that looked like gigantic pubic hair. Her art was as strange and sexy as her self-made outfits—she merged with it.

During this time, Bobrowicz's traditional conception of space shifted: "We threw pillows on the floor, we sat on the floor. So, it became a space we looked at differently…. The floor was not flat anymore. It was going to go up and down and move around and you could lie on it, screw on it, whatever."[61] Yvonne had always loved making rugs. "I could express more with rugs. Because of the color field and the heights."[62] Bobrowicz thought of her yarns as a painter, she loved Joan Mitchell (1925–1992) and found her work so inspirational. With yarns and flossa of uneven length, movable and overlapping each other, Yvonne animated the color field and played the colors against each other. Her husband, Joe, compared it to using washes and overlays in painting.[63] She reflected that, in the late 1960s, "My work evolved from the functional to wall hangings, body elements, and sculptural forms."[64] If, in the early sixties, Bobrowicz's rugs looked like otherworldly maps, with tightly cropped yarns, by the seventies her rugs were epic topographical reliefs: "Instead of a flat rug, it could be a dimensional thing. A floor piece."[65] They were sculptural. Some evoke coral reefs, others rugged terrains or the surface of the moon with varied textural zones of different densities and heights. Most were polychromic, but Bobrowicz also made three white-on-white floor pieces out of wool, fur, and linen for Judith and Nathaniel Lieb's house designed by Venturi.[66] The works transformed the floor into a sculptural wooly landscape. Bobrowicz referred to her new rug pieces as "floorscapes." The ground was her first space of determination. The artist would move up to the ceiling by the end of the decade.

The first step was her seminal *Nebula Floorscape* of 1974–76 (Pl. 15), in wool, linen, fur, and rayon. The three large sculptural units composing her floorscape could be installed together or separately, anywhere. At times, they were placed off the ground and perched on furniture. *Nebula* referenced the space of the sky brought to the floor. It mimicked the logic of connectivity attained by architect and set designer Frederick Kiesler, whose biomorphic *Endless House Project* (1950–60), a "human-centered living space," Bobrowicz had seen at MoMA in 1966.[67] She noted her own parallels with Kiesler: "Like the Endless House, everything moved in space, and the parts that make up the whole."[68] The work expressed a new way of "understanding space, feeling space."[69] You "could move them around the room, whatever you wanted…. That was part of the round, moveable space."[70] And it could be adjusted to create different environments.

In February 1974, one of the units of *Nebula Floorscape* was exhibited at the opening of Helen Drutt Gallery in Philadelphia. Drutt was one of Yvonne's good friends, and her space was one of the first galleries in the US dedicated to modern and contemporary craft.[71] In 1976, *Nebula Floorscape* was presented as a three-unit piece at the Philadelphia Museum of Art's Bicentennial Exhibition with the following description:

> The basic technique is that of woven-rya, made in a tubular form on the loom and then stitched and stuffed. It is a non-utilitarian object: a textured form in an environment of many surfaces. The object has a quality



Fig. 10. Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz, drawing of wrapped insulation foam executed in her Lombard Street Loft, Philadelphia, c. 1980. © Bobrowicz Studios Collection. Courtesy of Bobrowicz Studios and Sapar Contemporary.

> of mobility, not being assigned a specific place or purpose: *Floorscape* conceivably might be draped, hung, or worn. The textural variation may stimulate the beholder to manipulate the environment in response to personal needs. In working out personal feelings, the artist finds herself moving toward red.[72]

Floorscape marked a point of no return, and Bobrowicz never went back to functional design. "By the late 1970s, I was feeling the need for newness—a new space, place—wondering, trying, integrating fresh ideas and materials," she wrote.[73] Facing a turning point in her life, Bobrowicz took a day at the beach to reflect and decided she needed a change.[74] "I was forty-nine, and I thought, 'This is the first day of the rest of my life.'"[75] Throughout her life, she had, in her husband, Joe, a supportive partner and somebody to talk to about work process. Joe says fondly, "We always had our best conversations at 2am."[76] "But in the late '70s, I wanted more. I wanted my own space. So, it came to me, this wonderful loft in Lombard Street,"[77] Yvonne recalled in 2022, adding, "This was my whole rebirth."[78] Bobrowicz stayed four years at the Philadelphia loft on Lombard, from 1978 to 1982. She moved in without her looms and started afresh. "When I got there, I decided I did not want to weave anything functional."[79] The loft was this incredible open space that was all hers; Bobrowicz never had such freedom. It allowed her to take on new scales, and her productivity took off.

Several photographs dated January 1980 show Bobrowicz's loft (Fig. 9). Since her youngest years, Bobrowicz had always drawn and later sketched all details of her textiles. She used pastels, crayons, and pens. Series of drawings illustrate her thinking. A few notes indicate materials or symbolisms, but mostly the drawings speak for themselves. They bring clarity to the concept and structure of the piece. Bobrowicz drew a lot during this transitional period, and her loft drawings show lines transformed into densities, becoming abstract sculptural forms. Threads remained un-woven but worked into volumes, the gestures radical. A complete departure from her functional, earthy, first phase, she moved toward sculptural weightlessness. Lines were long, freed, knotted, tied, suspended. Drawings show detailed studies of branching, looped lines, gold wrappings, knots, and structural systems (Fig. 10). Bobrowicz's ball pen lines are reminiscent of Fontana's abstract drawings. Fast and sketchy, they are notes to the self.

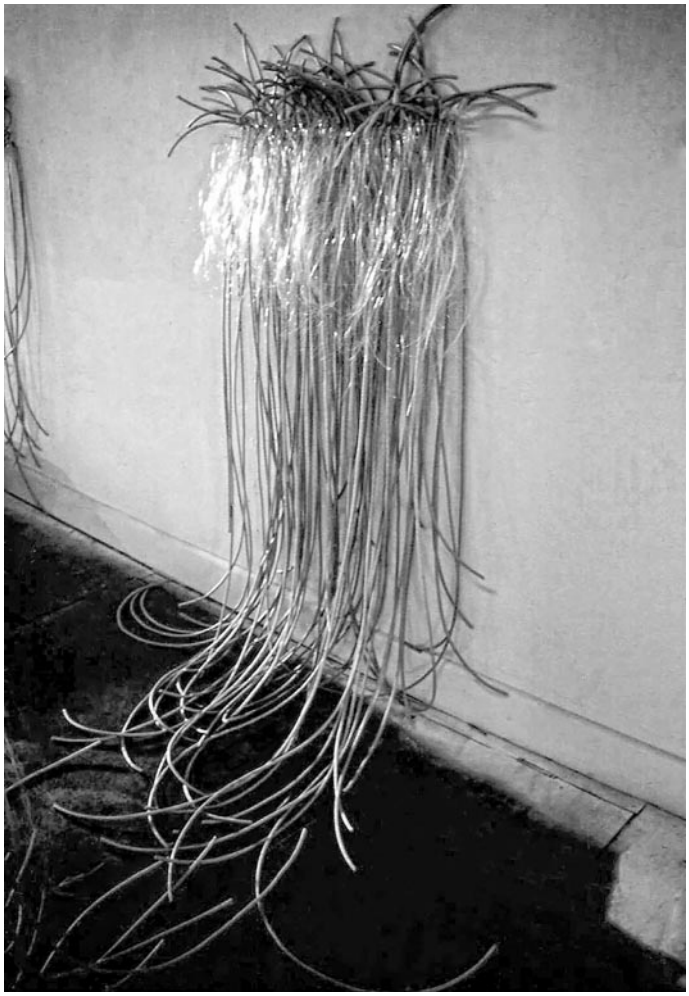


Fig. 11. Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz, *Loft Series #3* (c. 1980), monofilament and insulation foam wrapped with gold thread. © Bobrowicz Studios Collection. Courtesy of Bobrowicz Studios and Sapar Contemporary.

Searching for materials for her art, Bobrowicz ended up repurposing industrial ones. Postminimalism was made with unconventional supplies: Chryssa (1929–2013) used neon tubes;[80] Alice Adams (b. 1930), chicken wire; Kazuko Miyamoto (b. 1942), nails and cotton threads. Bobrowicz looked for lines with which she could create sculpture. Joe had come across half-inch diameter gray insulation foam extrusions. Starting sometime before January 1980, Yvonne took these foam lines and turned them into art (Fig. 11 and Pl. 16).[81] She wrapped a small part of the insulating line with gold threads, tied them together in rows (just below the gold), and added a monofilament fringe. It was flexible, permitted movement, and had a striking presence. Wrapping was used by many fiber artists at the time, notably Sheila Hicks. Bobrowicz had her own way to go about it, a few drawings show her detailed studies of the different parts. The resulting piece was a great example of "eccentric abstraction." It would have made good company to Hesse's *Ennead* (1966).

Bobrowicz chose materials for their sensory qualities as well as emotional and symbolic meaning. She loved metallic



Fig. 12. Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz in her Lombard Street Loft with an assistant working on the New York Sheraton Hotel Lobby commission, 1981. © Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz Archive. Courtesy of Bobrowicz Studios and Sapar Contemporary.

threads and elements, and did her own metal work. Her gold thread wrappings uniquely captured light. She used gold, the most precious earthy material, in symbolic opposition to the foam's plastic, the most common man-made material. In other pieces, Bobrowicz's choice of linen referenced her paternal grandparents who grew flax at home in Slovakia and spun it into linen. Linen was the material of her upbringing: "It is earthy.… But there's an elegance to it."[82] Linen followed her into a new life phase at the loft and beyond. Its line has a copper tone that beautifully glowed.

When Bobrowicz moved into the loft, she contacted the chemical company DuPont, and they sent her samples of their clear monofilament. Bobrowicz fell in love with its translucency and strength. She looked to employ the line in new ways—free hanging, knotted, associated with other fibers. The monofilament—essentially a fishing line—redirected Bobrowicz's work. It led her to look at light as the primary element with which to interact. She remarked: "Light, with all its metaphors and special meaning for man, was especially significant at this time with our new technology and information explosion."[83] The old upholstery factory space had great working surfaces, ten-foot-high ceilings and eight large windows.[84] The luminosity delighted the artist: "The light was coming in from the West. So, it was glorious!"[85] On the ceiling were several shop lights with a double row of cool fluorescent lights. Bobrowicz commented: "Of course, fiber is generally light[weight],"[86] so it could be thrown over the fixtures; "My God, it lit up."[87] "The building had industrial lights and combining them with the clear monofilament was an awakening. The beauty of the fiber capturing the light, gathering it, permeating the yarn—[created] an inner glow."[88] There were rows of suspended works of all sizes occupying the entire space. The loft was inhabited by kinetic light sculptures.

In 1965, the colorful blinds she designed had made her aware of the transformative power of backlighting. In 1977, the wall hanging at the Friendship Federal Bank was illuminated from behind to give the work dimension. But now, light was something she channeled into shimmering manes and weightless cascades of monofilament. In some experimental wall pieces, the artist mixed wool and monofilament flossa extending the range of textures of her piles. Luminosity would get trapped in the lines and the monofilaments moved easily in the breeze. Bobrowicz had discovered her material of choice—it would become her signature. The early loft works are dense and bold; the feeling of the earth is still present in them. With time, Bobrowicz evolved toward something more airy, mysterious, developing in sculptural form the feeling she was already looking to express in her open weave, light reflecting draperies from the 1950s.

Bobrowicz's major commission of 1981 was for the Sheraton Hotel Lobby in New York. The artist combined white wool tapestry strips with monofilament flossa and brass elements in a floor-to-ceiling installation of ten by twelve feet (Fig. 12). Each three-dimensional strip had independence and mobility. They came together to create a monumental curtain of dangling, white hybrid sculptures (Pl. 17). They could slide on the wooden support like they did in her studio on the neon tube from which they were suspended. The piece had taken so long to make, that, for the first time, Bobrowicz had needed an assistant.[89] The result was conclusive; it lit up the room.

By 1982–83, Bobrowicz could no longer afford the expense of the loft. She moved back to her studio at home, but she had established the basis for her new work and its main themes, which, for the following decades, kept evolving and interconnecting. She had lifted off the floor and moved to space. Bobrowicz had become a sculptor engaged with fiber, kinetics, and lights.

"When I was fifty," Bobrowicz recalled, "it was a time of rebirth for me…. I went from the heavy to the light,"[90] from the weight of wool to the weightless monofilament. The discovery of the Dupont Chemical material shaped the artist's career. From her loft period until the end of her life, the monofilament superpolymer would become Bobrowicz's main mode of expression. It defines her maturity and becomes the material associated with her name and her thematics of light and space.

Nylon monofilament, invented in 1939, was initially stiff, but in 1959, a new, thinner, and more flexible version named "stren" was released. Stren was used for fishing lines and musical instrument strings. The San Francisco-based artist Kay Sekimachi (b. 1926) was probably the first to use it in her practice. In the mid-1950s, Sekimachi weaved monofilament with other materials and, in 1963, she made her first three-dimensional monofilament hanging. At MoMA, in the 1969 *Wall Hangings* curated by Larsen and Constantine, Bobrowicz probably saw Sekimachi's *Interlace* (1967), a monofilament hanging made of quadruple and tubular weave.[91] Years later, when Bobrowicz took on monofilament as her main material, she reinterpreted its use to move beyond weaving.



Fig. 13. Installation view of "Yvonne Bobrowicz: Recent Fiber Works," Gross McCleaf Gallery, Philadelphia, 1984. © Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz Archive. Courtesy of Bobrowicz Studios.

Monofilament lines were designed to have an extraordinarily high knot-strength. The line had been designed for knots to be resistant to strenuous pulling forces. Knotting has been used since antiquity in textile making, netting, knitting, and more recently by Yvonne's own German lacemaker ancestors. By integrating it into her practice, Bobrowicz was adapting a familiar and ancestral practice to her new form of art. She developed a peculiar technique using monofilament strands to create volumes. Slender and weightless as a line, knotted monofilament transformed into an extremely dense volume.

Bobrowicz was interested in creating mass while preserving lightness. Postminimalist artists like Fred Sandback and Miyamoto had used yarn to create linear tension systems pinned to the architectural walls and floors. Their sculptures were massless and architecturally based; they were also static. Bobrowicz was interested in space and kineticism. She was looking for energy and light's interaction with linear-based volumes. Her path was closer to that of Alan Saret and Ruth Asawa (1926–2013), but with an emphasis on translucency. All these artists repurposed industrial material for their work and knew their medium intimately. They capitalized on their use of idiosyncratic properties to create new shapes and author a new type of sculpture and space.

Each physical line has its own properties. Linen and wool yarns behave differently than metallic ones. Nylon monofilament does not have the same attributes as cotton, sisal, or wire. It is luminous, light, and, most importantly, supple and strong. Sisal is fragile but has high tensile strength and a lovely shine. Brenda Miller (b. 1941) let her blonde sisals cascade from a concealed grid matrix. Asawa, Gego (1912–1994), and Nancy Koenigsberg (b. 1927) developed new esthetics of linkage with their metals. Wires retain form, monofilaments do not have such architectural capacity. Bobrowicz had to rethink structure to build her volumes. Her challenges were unique and had not been solved before she tackled them.

While Bobrowicz explored her material, she tended to work in series, concentrating on the details of each piece as much as the effect of their groupings. Making her sculptures was only the beginning of the process—authoring her own space and creating an environment became the ultimate goal. Bobrowicz had partaken in so many architectural projects her mastery of space was instinctive.

Reflecting on women in the art and architectural world, Bobrowicz remarked to Louise Bradford that "Women were always supposed to deal with details. Only men created space."[92] But feminism brought a definite change of perspective: "Here were women dreaming of big installations in a non-functional way."[93] Bobrowicz materialized her dream. Authoring space was something she had not allowed herself to do until she moved into her loft on Lombard Street. She needed a studio of her own to get there. In solitude, with nothing to compromise, things changed. Bobrowicz created works that were space definers. As a group, they took over the architecture. They changed depending on the light and moved in the airflow. The works glowed, suspended in the dark with strategically positioned lights. Bobrowicz enjoyed curating her loft. By controlling her work's setting, she could transform architectural space into a personal artistic expression. For the first time, her studio was an immersive environment, one entered and experienced her concepts and philosophy.

Bobrowicz developed a vocabulary of form that enabled her to share propositions about cosmology and human psychology. Bobrowicz's statements formulate how her works reflect "the artist's evolution in awareness, of particle physics, and the nature of mankind. Materials with their inherent basic qualities are used to represent and identify with her philosophic observations."[94] The series *Randomness and Order* and *Opposites Attract* were conceived as philosophical series during and right after the loft period. They were Bobrowicz's first experiments with natural fibers combined with nylon monofilament. They initiated thirty years of "philosophic sculptures."[95] Both series, focused on expressing duality, would become central to her oeuvre. They were presented at her first solo show in 1984 at the Gross McCleaf Gallery in

Philadelphia titled "Yvonne Bobrowicz: Recent Fiber Works," which opened on December 5 in the presence of the artist.[96] The rooms invited the viewer into Bobrowicz's world.

Archival photographs document the eccentric pictoriality of *Randomness and Order*: each wall hanging features monofilament piles attached to an abstract, woven-wool tapestry backing (Fig. 13 and Pl. 18). The monofilament is used in a Rya technique, as flossa. The wild translucent piles extend out. In a classic rya configuration, wool piles would come out of the tapestry plane, and here, a shift takes place: out of the wool comes out the monofilament piles. Bobrowicz's *Randomness and Order* embraced hybridism. The pieces are bright and totally wild. "Order" is symbolized by the quadrangular tapestry (each piece has a different one), while "randomness" is symbolized by the hairy monofilaments poking out of it (similar for each). In her review of the show, artist and writer Deborah Curtiss wrote: "These backings may be of natural/neutral colors, or vibrant saturated colors. From each square, ranging in size from one to four feet, a riot of 'random' monofilament strands spews forth, curling, waving, and halating as they catch the light and dance with exuberant life."[97] Vital and confrontational, the pieces of *Randomness and Order* have the energy of a ritual mask. Lined against the wall, they face us, and we face their power. Their aura is ancestral.

The terms *randomness* and *order* refer to chaos theory. Chaotic systems are not truly random; they follow deterministic laws. Indeed, there is a mathematical logic and order to chaos. This interconnectedness is part of the functioning of the universe. Stability and instability operate in a constant feedback loop. Bobrowicz never quite liked the word chaos, for she always preferred randomness, a more mathematical concept. The artist's engagement with the mystique of the cosmos and celestial dynamic echoed the ethos of her time.

Bobrowicz's friend, Anne Tyng, had a brilliant mathematical mind. The artist and architect, immersed in contemporary research on chaos theory, often discussed physics and scientific cosmic principles.[98] The scientific and quasi-mystical dynamic between order and randomness was central to Tyng's study. It ended up becoming a topic of reflection for Bobrowicz, too.[99] In parallel to her study of the cosmos, Bobrowicz was deeply engaged with Jungian psychology. The feminist movement explored psychoanalytical themes as part of the search for self-determination. If Bourgeois called herself Sigmund Freud's daughter, Bobrowicz was Carl Jung's daughter. Less at war with her father than Bourgeois, Bobrowicz was focused on individuation and the dynamics between opposite principles, fascinated by psychological patterns and evolution cycles. Bobrowicz was very active in Jungian circles, reading and going to talks (both she and Tyng frequented the Philadelphia Jungian Society and belonged to a mostly artist-led Jungian group that debated his theories). As women searching to define themselves through their creative work, they were especially interested in the topic of individuation. In Jungian terms, individuation is a lifelong psychological process of developing a distinct, authentic identity, separate from familial, social, or cultural influences. It involves integrating conscious and unconscious aspects of the psyche to achieve wholeness and self-actualization. To some extent, this process was also the path each artist took to find their personal voice. The overlap was stimulating.

In 1983, Tyng published an essay linking Jung's archetypes to architecture.[100] A universal, recurring symbol or character, the archetype appears across diverse cultures and narratives. Drawn from the Greek "archétypon," meaning original pattern, Jung proposed several archetypes (the Self, the Shadow, the Anima/Animus, and the Persona) that structure the functioning and development of human psychology and the mind from unconscious behavior to conscious awareness. Contrary to the Freudian school focused on the expression of personal stories and traumas, Jungians, like Bobrowicz and Tyng, in their quest for self-knowledge, were interested in collective patterns and shared ancestries open to the multicultural, the universal, and the cosmic.

In 1990, in a second article on Jung and creativity, Tyng eloquently summarized these relationships: In the astral universe, "Jung's cycles, in four stages of transformation and renewal … [has] an extraordinary correspondence with a cycle of individual creativity and with the much larger scale cycles of creative attitudes…."[101] Tyng diagramed Jungian cycles and annotated them. Planets, numbers, human life all came into interconnectedness. Bobrowicz's notes are in the same vein. Yvonne took interest in numerals, and she often returned to the number four, which is central to many typologies, including Greek philosophy and the classification of elements. However, Bobrowicz's own variation focused on the nature of being and materiality: "I used the four different materials…. Vegetable, animal, man and metal."[102] For her, linen, wool, monofilament, and gold illustrate a perfectly balanced association of four materials referring to four elements.

Bobrowicz continuously created and thought of her work within a larger artistic context. "Many of us are doing the same things in different ways," she commented. Her tight circle in Philadelphia inspired her as well as her experience of the New York art scene. In the winter of 1971 and '72, Bobrowicz had seen the first large-scale Barnett Newman retrospective at MoMA. She would see his works again in his 2002 exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where Newman's "zips" made a powerful impression.[103] She could relate to his work that dwelled on duality and complementarity, and touched on spirituality. As a result, she created a black and white monofilament ovoid to pay homage to Newman as part of her *Cosmic Series* (2002; Fig. 14).[104]

Interested in interconnections, Bobrowicz developed works expressing Jung's concept of the union of opposites. She focused her series *Opposites Attract* on principles of opposition and complementarity. In postmodern times, structuralist anthropologists placed an emphasis on binaries. Bobrowicz's practice engages the pairing of oppositional concepts that hold simultaneous truths. Her *Opposites Attract* series address complementary principles of female and male, yin and yang, darkness and light, culture and nature. This focus on duality

found a perfect expression in her works with bifacial surfaces, hanging away from the wall. Joe Bobrowicz constructed a vertical loom so that Yvonne could weave on each side simultaneously. She imagined the bifacial series of opposites as a variation on *Randomness and Order*. The tapestry is in the center, and the monofilaments cover it up on both sides, with intense, fur-like piles. Hung from a small metal rod made by Bobrowicz, *Odd and Even* of the series *Opposites Attract* (1983; Pl. 19) is an interpretation of the yin and the yang with piles of black and white visible on each side. Combining an animalistic presence and spiritual aura, the piece's metaphysical aesthetics may be characterized as intersecting those by Indigenous and Native artists, forging connections between human, animal, and plant relations. In Jungian terms, it is numinous, meaning it inspires an almost primitive awe, akin to the experience of the divine in myth. All works in the series *Opposites Attract* put forth the message of non-unilateral meaning. This is also Bobrowicz's first series to emphasize movement and kineticism: hanging from two points, they swing; from one point, they spin.

In the later works of the series, Bobrowicz simplified the construct, discarded the loom, and just tied linen and monofilament strands together. She made hangings of different length and configurations, from ponytail to cascading formations. The construction of *Odd and Even* (1983) accents the contrast between artificial monofilament and natural linen, with tiny brass elements weighing the ends of the strands. Without them the lines would be too light and hard to order. The piece finds its elegance in the vertical fall capturing light. The artist explained the meaning of the strands: "Natural linen is of the earth, opaque, absorbent. Monofilament as a fiber is lite, lights up, is flexible, expressing movement, light energy."[105] She continues: "Seeming[ly] opposite, inherent characteristics of the materials merge into each other both visually and physically."[106] To allow light to pass through, Bobrowicz suspended the works in the center of rooms, near windows, or under a light well (projected, artificial light lit them well in exhibition galleries). They shone, their presence expanded, a new take on chiaroscuro.

The monumental *Fibers in Space* (1984; Pl. 20), measuring eighty-eight inches long, is the first publicly exhibited large-scale work of Bobrowicz, suspended in the middle of the gallery at Gross McCleaf from several parallel ceiling rods, creating layers of hanging lines, separated by airy light. The upper part of each layer is made of thousands of monofilament lines knotted lengthwise; linen threads, descending and skirting the ground, continue the lower section. Strand by strand, the artist tied monofilament to linen, linking the space above to the one below. When air blows, the lines move gently before resting, their sound soft, like the movement of a curtain. The sculpture's striking presence defines its surrounding space.

Fibers in Space is the first of Bobrowicz's exhibited work to eschew duality and shift focus to light's interaction and fiber perception. Each hanging layer interacts with the other and the space and light between them. *Fibers in Space* constitutes a major transition for Bobrowicz. It stands at the end of *Opposite Attract* and opens up the *Energy Field* series. The *Fields* are



Fig. 14. Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz, *Homage to Barnett Newman* from the *Cosmic Series* (2002), black and white monofilament, linen, and gold leaf. © Bobrowicz Studios Collection. Courtesy of Bobrowicz Studios and Sapar Contemporary.

architectural monofilament and linen works that occupied the artist during the second part of the 1980s. They inaugurated a new area, one in which Bobrowicz dedicated herself to the study of cosmic space.

The luminous and kinetic qualities of *Fibers in Space* recall the *Cloud Series IV* (1978) by Bobrowicz's friend, Lenore Tawney (1907–2007). According to Bobrowicz, they met in Philadelphia in the late 1950s, when Tawney was invited to speak at the Philadelphia Guild of Handweavers at the University of Pennsylvania (Bobrowicz was the youngest member). "They asked me to take her out to dinner, so I lucked in!," the artist remembered. This was the start of a long friendship until Tawney passed.[107] The sculptural *Cloud Series*, the first of its type for Tawney, were conceived to hang from the ceiling, made from thousands of unwoven linen and acrylic threads individually tied up to a canvas grid. They fall straight down, like rain from a cloud. Bobrowicz without a doubt admired their ethereal quality.

While Tawney remained within the realms of Romanticism, expressing Monsoon rains and lunar shifts in fiber, Bobrowicz reached to the heart and matter of the universe. In 1996, the recipient of an illustrious Pew Foundation grant, her work was described as follows: "It is as if sheets of rain are too confused to fall from the light, tangled knots of monofilament, linen, and gold-leaf structures that shine like stationary, indoor clouds. It's hard not to think of nets of neurons or, in this age of webs with worldwide reach, of that currents of information might be flowing along these convoluted superhighways."[108] Bobrowicz embodied both the atmospheric and the cosmic. Her early monofilament sculptures that touched the ground articulated a continuum between the earth and the astral spheres. Knotting was to some extent the manifestation of these and other interconnections. It became an essential part of Bobrowicz's creative gestures.

During the summer of 1983,[109] Bobrowicz remembered: "I sat in my loft and I knotted and knotted."[110] By the fall, she had perfected her knotting technique and created diverse textures.[111] A close look reveals Bobrowicz's ingenious and numerous modalities of knotting. Reviewing the 1984 exhibit, Curtiss observes how "several different methods of knotting the monofilament strands have been utilized so that some twist and kink and bounce in a jazzy way, while others drizzle lyrically and sinuously."[112] The knots created animation along the lines. They expressed connectivity while transforming monofilaments into structural elements. Bobrowicz had met Buckminster Fuller in Philadelphia and gone a few times to his studio to hear him talk.[113] His theory on structure and interconnection influenced her knotting.

Photos and films of Bobrowicz knotting typically show her sitting, knotting her strands. For the large pieces, lines are tied up, hanging in front of her; for smaller ones, she gathered them on her knees. When not being worked on, the lines rested in a basket. Knotting is a bit like knitting; you can pick it up anywhere. Bobrowicz could knot in public or private. In the same way that the portable backstraps accommodated the Peruvian weavers, knotting fitted her lifestyle. Bobrowicz's husband remarked that Yvonne would knot so quietly, you would barely notice she was doing it.

In 1999, Bobrowicz met Nicole Venice, a young Philadelphian interested by the arts and fashion. Venice became her first intern. She admired the way "Yvonne made it all look so easy," as they spent hours together around her kitchen table knotting while talking about feminist ideas and art.[114] Venice was impressed by Bobrowicz's fashion style and could not help by noticing how her accessories often matched her art works. Bobrowicz made jewelry in monofilament, alluring, featherlight earrings with impressive dynamic lines. With her knots, the artist had impeccable control of line movements, reorienting the trajectory of the nylon, so that it would frame a face, like wild antennas. Many sketches show her looping patterns and other techniques. Her drawings help decipher what remains almost illegible to the viewer. Close-ups point to the incredible variety of Bobrowicz's unique approach. They capture the ziggurat lines of their frizz, the loose loops and multiple curves. The complex knots and the simpler ones, the angular and the curvilinear. Bobrowicz's range is uncanny.

Over the years, Bobrowicz's technique evolved: "I was going to do one knot, and I thought, … it's not big, … it does not make a statement. So, I took the two together and tied the two, and then I tied the two together, so that made four…. The way I tied them were always opposites, …. I do three on one side, and two on the other, you could do five, I did a couple of five."[115] Bobrowicz usually preferred four knots to five because four represented the four elements. She also thought of four knots as a reference to the gravitational force of physics, weak and strong, and electromagnetic fields. After many years of practice, she finally settled on a system: "My process is to knot fibers 2+4 elements to create texture incorporating many of them to create masses."[116] But, of course, Bobrowicz could not stick to simple repetitions, there were always variations.[117]

She found her process to be most satisfying when it also conveyed meaning. "Jung talks about the masculine/feminine principles. The anima/animus that everybody has in them," she offered.[118] These principles were integrated into her knotting, which tied her earlier *Philosophical* and *Cosmic* series and the geometry of space. Lines unite, turn at the knot, and redirect vectors before progressing to the next knot. The curve of the knot is a female principle, redirecting energy, while the linear vector is masculine, repulsing and attracting at the same time. The artist would often summarize it simply: the lines function like a penis and the hole as a vagina. [119]

As her fascination with astrophysics became her primary source of inspiration, Bobrowicz would "knot in a certain way to get dimension and texture and express energy."[120] Albert Einstein famously said, "Mass and energy are both but different manifestations of the same thing."[121] The artist found his studies on the nature of light riveting. Light is energy, it flickers and plays with textures and volumes: "I think the knotting created a movement, and it picks up light. And the light moves."[122] "These are energy bundles that float in space and connect with each other."[123] Intensely immersed in cosmology, Bobrowicz saw knots as symbols of light particles: "The knots become particles with the vectors that connect them as the force of attraction and separation become a cosmic energy field catching the light."[124] The program of her *Lebenswerk* was in place, and from 1984 to the end of her life, she kept on developing and refining it. It will build up to her magnum opus: the *Cosmic* series. ●

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 and is the founder of Art Intelligentsia. Previously, she worked at the Pompidou Center in Paris. She curated "Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz: The Cosmic Series" at Sapar Contemporary, in 2024.

Notes

1. Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz to Hyun-Jung Kim, letter, June 11, 2003, *CRART*, Monthly Craft Magazine, Seoul, KOREA, Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz Archives (hereafter cited as YPB Archives).

2. Karl Pacanovsky (1894–1989).
3. Yvonne's father had changed his name under pressure and resented it. He was proud of his heritage and wished to keep his Slovakian name.
4. Evelyn Hunkele (1897–1990).
5. Bobrowicz to Kim, CRART, Seoul, KOREA, YPB Archives. Mark Bobrowicz notes that her family was in fact from Neuhausen, Baden-Württemberg.
6. Bobrowicz, interview by Senior Artists Initiative, 2011, audio file transcript, YPB Archives.
7. Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz (hereafter cited as YPB), video, IMG 1788, May 2022, YPB Archives.
8. "'Good Enough' is never good enough," *The Hill School Dial* (n.d.), YPB Archives.
9. Joe and Mark Bobrowicz, Zoom interview with author, August 16, 2025.
10. Bobrowicz, Senior Artists Initiative interview.
11. Janet Allison "The Art of Hand Weaving Revived by Yvonne Palmer," *Pottstown Mercury* (month unknown; 1952), 22. YPB Archives.
12. Mark Bobrowicz, conversation with author, September 11, 2025.
13. A photograph of the year-end exhibition from 1949 shows Yvonne's *Rya Rug* on the floor and a silkscreened printed fabric on the wall by Joseph Bobrowicz. Joy Hakanson, "Academy Hangs Large Exhibition," *Detroit News*, May 22, 1949. The drawing for the Rya Rug is in the YPB Archives.
14. Hakanson, *Detroit News*.
15. Bobrowicz to Hyun-Jung Kim.
16. Marianne Strengell, Collections, Cranbrook Art Museum, https://cranbrookartmuseum.org/artwork/marianne-strengell/.
17. Bobrowicz's daughter, Shelly, was born in 1953; her son, Mark, in 1955. In 1962, she would have another daughter, Kira.
18. YPB, video, IMG 1788, May 2022, YPB Archives.
19. Bobrowicz, Senior Artists Initiative interview. These Countermarch looms were of a Scandinavian style, initially designed for Loja Saarinen (wife of Eliel Saarinen), the first head of the weaving department at Cranbrook Academy, by the Swedish woodworker John Bexell in the 1930s, https://schachtspindle.com/blogs/discontinued-schacht-cranbrook/the-cranbrook-legacy-of-a-loom?srsltid=AfmBOorAZ0ELF2eE23XgNZ57g6M-Ul0p4KUE2QRYyXYlpw_MKWBxNQ9v.
20. The competition, "Young Americans Competition for Craftsmen under 30," was held at the Los Angeles County Fair in 1950; Bobrowicz won again in 1954 and 1958. See Certificate of Merits, YPB Archives. See also, ORDER NO. 21234 of the University of Pennsylvania Purchasing Department to Yvonne Palmer Handweaves, Nov. 14, 1952; and The Philadelphia Art Alliance gallery listing for the 1953–54 season, YPB Archives.
21. Yvonne Palmer Handweaves to Bertha Schaefer, order number 505–8, 32 East 57th Street, New York, NY, June 26, 1954, YPB Archives.
22. Christine Vilalta, "Designer's Spotlight: Bertha Schaefer," *Mid-Century Modern Finds*, https://www.midcenturymodernfinds.com/blog/2016/10/24/designer-spotlight-bertha-schaefer.
23. On the experimental, architectural history of Paolo Soleri, see https://www.arcosanti.org/history/.
24. Bobrowicz created textiles for the reconfiguration of the offices of the museum of the University of Pennsylvania, a project led by her husband, Joe Bobrowicz.
25. Hired in 1945, Anne Tyng would become a partner in Louis Kahn's firm before parting ways in 1964. See also Mary Anne Hunting and Kevin D. Murphy, *Women Architects at Work: Making American Modernism* (Princeton University Press, 2025), reviewed by Kathleen James-Chakraborty in *Woman's Art Journal* 46, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2025), 70–72.
26. Robin Pogrebin, "Anne Tyng: Theorist of Architecture, Dies at 91," *New York Times*, June 7, 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/07/arts/design/anne-tyng-architect-and-partner-of-louis-kahn-dies-at-91.html?_r=0.
27. Alexandra Tyng, interview with author, August 20, 2025.
28. YPB, video 05, IMG 2871, May 5, 2022; YPB, video 11, IMG 1458, 1459, 1460, 1461, March 19, 2022, YPB Archives.
29. Invoices to Louis Kahn from Yvonne Bobrowicz dated 1951, YPB Archives.
30. YPB, video 11, IMG 1458, 1459, 1460, 1461, March 19, 2022, YPB Archives.
31. YPB, video 11.
32. Tyng, interview with author, August 20, 2025.
33. YPB, video 11, IMG 1458, 1459, 1460, 1461, YPB Archives.
34. YPB.
35. YPB.
36. Information on the World Crafts Council may be found at https://www.wccinternational.org.
37. Lucy Lippard's touring exhibition, "Soft and Apparently Soft Sculpture," was produced in 1968 by the American Federation of the Arts. Hesse's *Area* (1968) is in the Collection of The Ohio State University, Wexner Center for the Arts.
38. Mildred Constantine and Jack Lenor Larsen, *Wall Hangings* (The Museum of Modern Art, 1969), https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_catalogue_1800_300062374.pdf.
39. *Wall Hangings*, press release, Museum of Modern Art, February 25, 1969, https://assets.moma.org/documents/moma_press-release_326605.pdf.
40. See exhibition labels, *Brute Material: Fiber into Form*, Museum of Modern Art, April 5–September 8, 2013.
41. YPB, video 05, IMG 2871, May 5, 2022, YPB Archives.
42. YPB.
43. YPB, interview by Mark Bobrowicz, "Metaphor of Light," video 01, IMG 5102, April 27, 2022, YPB Archives.
44. YPB, video 05, IMG 2871, May 5, 2022, YPB Archives.
45. Anni Albers, "The Pliable Plane; Textiles in Architecture," *Perspecta: The Yale Architectural Journal* 4 (1957); abridged and repr., "Fabric. The Pliable Plane," *Craft Horizons* 18 (July–August 1958), https://www.albersfoundation.org/alberses/teaching/anni-albers/the-pliable-plane-textiles-in-architecture.
46. YPB, video 11, IMG 1458, 1459, 1460, 1461, March 19, 2022, YPB Archives.
47. YPB, video 007, May 4, 2022, YPB Archives.
48. YPB, video 007.
49. On Albert Barnes's 1930 commission of *The Dance* by Matisse, see https://www.barnesfoundation.org/whats-on/exhibitions/matisse-dr-barnes-the-dance.
50. YPB, video, IMG 1788, May 2022, YPB Archives.
51. YPB, video, IMG 1788.
52. Bobrowicz, catalogue entry in Contemporary Philadelphia Artists Exhibition, Philadelphia Museum of Art (April–July 1990),138.
53. YPB, video 05, IMG 2871, May 5, 2022, YPB Archives.
54. YPB.
55. Bobrowicz to Hyun-Jung Kim.

56. YPB, video 05, IMG 2871, May 5, 2022, YPB Archives.
57. *Woven Walls by Olga de Amaral*, Museum of Contemporary Crafts, New York, Sept. 30, 1970–Jan. 3, 1971, https://digital.craftcouncil.org/digital/collection/p15785coll7/id/5171.
58. YPB, video 07, IMG 2808, May 4, 2022, YPB Archives.
59. "Friendship Federal New Bank Office at Mall Will Have Original Wall Hanging," *Greensburg Pennsylvania Tribune Review*, February 23, 1977, YPB Archives.
60. "Friendship Federal New Bank Office."
61. YPB, video 11, IMG 1458, 1459, 1460, 1461, March 19, 2022, YPB Archives.
62. YPB.
63. Mark Bobrowicz, conversation with Joe Bobrowicz, August 2025.
64. Bobrowicz to Hyun-Jung Kim.
65. Bobrowicz to Hyun-Jung Kim.
66. Bobrowicz to Hyun-Jung Kim. The Lieb house was designed by Venturi for Judith and Nathaniel Lieb in 1967, on Long Beach Island, New Jersey. Judith was Bobrowicz's patron for the rugs. She wanted to donate them to a museum but her son Lee kept them.
67. See *Frederick J. Kiesler*, exhibition, Dec. 31, 1965–March 20, 1966, https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/3480; *Endless House Project*, MoMA, https://www.moma.org/collection/works/82405. Yvonne Bobrowicz mentions Kiesler's endless house in the video interview with Mark Bobrowicz; see transcript of video 07, IMG 2808, May 4, 2022, Philadelphia, YPB Archives.
68. YPB, transcript of video 07, IMG 2808, May 4, 2022, Philadelphia, YPB Archives.
69. YPB.
70. YPB, transcript of video 11, IMG 1458, 1459, 1460, 1461, March 19, 2022, YPB Archives.
71. Helen Drutt (b. 1930) is an art historian and Philadelphia gallerist who promoted American craft. Bobrowicz remembered: "I met Helen Drutt. And she started PCPC [Philadelphia Council of Professional Craftsmen]. She gathered us together and had wonderful exhibitions. And, also, the stimulus of each other was very provocative. So, my work changed." YPB, video 05, IMG 2871, May 5, 2022, YPB Archives. We are grateful to the Bobrowicz estate for sharing the details about the different states of the piece for its 1974 and 1976 showing.
72. Catalogue entry for Yvonne Bobrowicz, Bicentennial exhibition, *Philadelphia: Three Centuries of American Art* (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1976; 1990), 629. The show was designed by Venturi and Rauch.
73. Bobrowicz to Hyun-Jung Kim.
74. Joe Bobrowicz, interview with author, August 16, 2025.
75. Leigh Werrell, "Interview Series: Yvonne Bobrowicz," December 15, 2017, https://www.phillystewards.art/blog-archive/2017/12/15/interview-series-yvonne-bobrowicz.
76. Bobrowicz to Hyun-Jung Kim.
77. YPB video 05, May 5, 2022, IMG 2871, YPB Archives.
78. Leigh Werrell, "Interview series: Yvonne Bobrowicz."
79. Werrell.
80. See Gemma Cirignano, "Precarity in Pop: Chryssa's Cent Sign," *Woman's Art Journal* 46, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2025): 32–41.
81. Photographs taken in January 1980 show pieces using foam tubes.
82. YPB, video 09, IMG 5282, May 3, 2022, YPB Archives.
83. Bobrowicz to Hyun-Jung Kim.
84. YPB, video 07, IMG 2808, May 4, 2022, YPB Archives.
85. YPB, video 05, IMG 2871, May 5, 2022, YPB Archives.
86. YPB.
87. YPB.
88. Bobrowicz to Hyun-Jung Kim.
89. Mark Bobrowicz, conversation with author, September 12, 2025.
90. Judith Zausner, "An Interview with Yvonne Bobrowicz: Fiber Artist of the Almost Ethereal," *Creativity Matters*, June 30, 2014, https://agingandcreativity.blogspot.com/2014/06/an-interview-with-yvonne-bobrowicz.html.
91. Kay Sekimachi's *Interlace* (1967) is illustrated in Constantine and Larsen, *Wall Hangings*, https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_catalogue_1800_300062374.pdf.
92. Bobrowicz, quoted in Louise Bradford, "Weaver's Lib," *The Press* (c. 1992), 4, clipping, YPB Archives.
93. Bradford, "Weaver's Lib," *The Press*.
94. Bobrowicz, artistic statement and inspiration for the work *Opposites Attract* (2022), YPB Archives.
95. Bobrowicz.
96. Announcement card for *Yvonne Bobrowicz: Recent Fiber Works*, Gross McCleaf Gallery, Dec. 5–22, 1984, YPB Archives.
97. Deborah Curtiss, "[Review] Yvonne Bobrowicz: Recent Fiber Works. Gross McCleaf Gallery, Dec. 5–22," *Art Matters* (December 1984), clipping, YPB Archives. Curtiss informed the author that the publication was published monthly.
98. In 1975, Tyng defended her dissertation on "Simultaneous Randomness and Order: The Fibonacci-Divine Proportion as a Universal Forming Principle." See Ingrid Schaffner and William Whitaker, "A Life Chronology," in *Anne Tyng: Inhabiting Geometry* (ICA, Philadelphia, 2011),105.
99. James Gleick's *Chaos: Making a New Scienc*e of 1987 was on Bobrowicz's bookshelves. By the time she read it, she already knew most of what was written in the text.
100. Anne Tyng, "Resonance between Eye and Archetype," *Via: Architecture and Visual Perception*, vol. 6 (The Journal of the Graduate School of Fine Arts, University of Pennsylvania and MIT Press, 1983): 47–67.
101. Anne Tyng "Individuation, Entropy, and Creativity: Recurring Cycles in the History of Architecture," in *C.G. Jung and the Humanities: Toward a Hermeneutics of Culture*, eds. Karen Barnaby and Pelligrino D'Acierno. Quoted by Ingrid Schaffner and William Whitaker, "A Life Chronology," in *Anne Tyng: Inhabiting Geometry*, 108.
102. YPB, video 09, IMG 5282, May 3, 2022, YPB Archives.
103. The 2002 catalogue of the Barnett Newman exhibition, curated by Ann Temkin at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, is in the YPB Archives.
104. Mark Bobrowicz, conversation with author, October 2025.
105. Bobrowicz, artistic statement and inspiration for *Opposites Attract*, 2022.
106. Bobrowicz, artistic statement and inspiration for *Opposites Attract*, 2022.
107. Bobrowicz, quoted in Leigh Werrell "Interview Series: Yvonne Bobrowicz."
108. In 1996, Bobrowicz received a $50,000 grant from the Pew Fellowship in the Arts, and a $20,000 grant from the Leeway Foundation, in 1997.
109. YPB, video 09, IMG 5282, May 3, 2022, YPB Archives.
110. YPB, video 05, IMG 2871, May 5, 2022, YPB Archives.
111. YPB, video 09, IMG 5282, May 3, 2022, YPB Archives.
112. Curtiss, "Yvonne Bobrowicz: Recent Fiber Works."
113. YPB, IMG 0014, part 2, May 17, 2022.

114. Nicole Venice, interview with author, October 6, 2025. They would speak of Venice's own path, and Bobrowicz was always supportive. Venice remembers being impressed by Bobrowicz's fashion sense and touched by her kindness. For many years that followed, Venice would help Bobrowicz in the studio. The two women remained friends until Bobrowicz passed.

115. YPB, video 07, IMG 2808, May 4, 2022, YPB Archives.

116. Bobrowicz, undated handwritten notes, YPB Archives.

117. YPB, video 09, IMG 5282, May 3, 2022, YPB Archives.

118. YPB, IMG 1788, May 2022, YPB Archives.

119. Venice, interview with author, October 6, 2025. Venice describes the process step by step: "She would take a strand of monofilament and knot them into variation that would create a box. We would create knots on the very long strands. So, you would take one knot and go about an inch and make another knot. Then you go a bit further, keeping the same distance, because you want to be square, and knot again to have four knots. And you take the last knot and put back the line in the original first knot, and it becomes like a floating square. And then you proceed again."

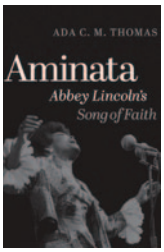
120. Jane Holahan, "Fiber artist captures 'Cosmic' energy in array of knots and monofilament," *Lancaster New Era* (Jan. 22, 2004). This review was written at the occasion of the exhibit "Cosmic Series," The Philips Museum of Art, Franklin & Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

121. Albert Einstein, audio recording from 1948, included in the documentary film "Atomic Physics" (1948), produced by the J. Arthur Rank Organisation, Ltd. The original audio recording is preserved and accessible through the American Institute of Physics (AIP) History Exhibit.

122. YPB, video 05, IMG 2871, May 5, 2022, YPB Archives.

123. YPB, IMG 1788, May 2022, YPB Archives.

124. Bobrowicz, artist statement and inspiration for *Opposites Attract*.



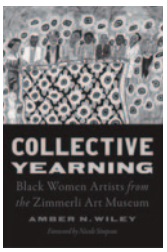
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Ada C.M. Thomas



JANE FONDA
There's a Great Deal to Say
Marilyn S. Greenwald



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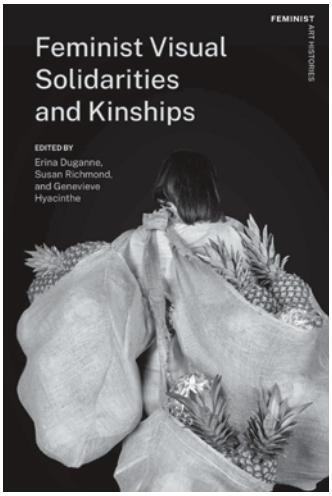
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Junctures: Case Studies in Women's Leadership



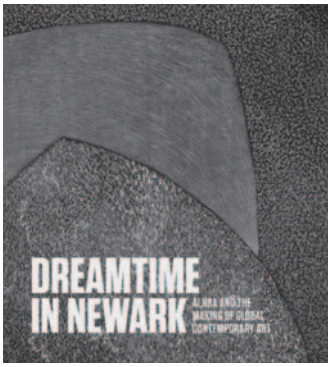
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Mothers of Invention: The Feminist Roots of Contemporary Art

By Eleanor Heartney, Helaine Posner, Nancy Princenthal, and Sue Scott
Lund Humphries, 2024

Taking Place: Building Histories of Queer and Feminist Art in North America

By Erin Silver
Manchester University Press, 2023

Reviewed By Kimberly Lamm

What would the world look like if our imaginations were freed from the hierarchies of gender and sexuality? Visual artists aligned with feminism and queer liberation offer us a glimpse of the possibilities. We know collective political efforts gave rise to such visions, but as two recent books devoted to feminist and queer art remind us, collectivities are also needed to sustain them. *Mothers of Invention: The Feminist Roots of Contemporary Art* and *Taking Place: Building Histories of Queer and Feminist Art in North America* document and enact forms of collectivity as dynamic aesthetic practices that create, maintain, and expand feminist and queer art shaped by social movements. Both studies, transforming how gender and sexuality are collectively understood, are rooted in the feminist art practices that emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s. The fact that scholars and artists continue to tell this history and track its reverberations in the present attests to the wide reach of this revolutionary event—the emergence of "feminist art" as a discernible category—and the strength and efficiency of its suppression.

Mothers of Invention is a book collectively written by four notable art critics—Eleanor Heartney, Helaine Posner, Nancy Princenthal, and Sue Scott—each of whom have made substantial contributions to the study of feminist art. As the third book they have composed together, it begins with a conversation, "Breaking the Rules, Rewriting the Script: Feminist Influences on Contemporary Art." The writers identify the assertion that guides their analysis—feminist art is the *origin* of contemporary art's innovations, not its recipient. Because, as Heartney puts it, "the feminist influence sometimes seems almost invisible," even readers with feminist sympathies might find this claim surprising (23). Responding to Princenthal's pronouncement that women were at the "forefront" of performance art but were not acknowledged when this transgressive genre developed, Scott describes how erasure happens: "They started it, it was on the edge, it was minimized as an art form, and then it was taken over and brought into the mainstream by men" (7). The assumption that women are not aggressive enough to force inventive breakthroughs into being serves as the (mostly unconscious) foundation for a process of extinction that begins with historical diminishment, leads to incorporation, and results in disappearance. But given past and present restraints on women's lives, doesn't it make sense that when feminism started "g[iving] all artists the freedom to do things," (23) at least a few women would begin, as the chapter title references, "breaking the rules" and "rewriting the script"?

To rewrite the familiar scripts of disappearance, each author takes up a visual practice that defines contemporary art and tracks how the "feminist revolution also sparked an artistic one" (175). Posner examines performance art; Princenthal looks at craft; Scott delves into abstraction; Heartney explores ecofeminism. Together, the four chapters show how often women's contributions have teetered on the edge of oblivion—this is their shared point—but each topic also tells a unique story about the specific ways feminism enabled and pushed contemporary practices in revolutionary directions. Fitting for the opening chapter, Posner argues that performance is the feminist genre par excellence: this "provocative, often visceral, newly energized medium" crystallizes feminism's work of "[d]efying the boundaries between public and private, between art and daily life" (25). Turning to the "handmade," Princenthal demonstrates that artists working in craft traditions defied its feminization by recalibrating the built-in, categorically negative assessments that justified their dismissal—quotidian, decorative, ornamental, utilitarian, and domestic. By enlarging the scale of their artwork, but keeping the imprint of the handmade, artists lifted centuries of craft work assigned to women into contemporary art's spaces of sophistication and revealed the "spirit of resistance … simmer[ing]" within its textures (87). Scott tackles the notoriously macho realms of abstract painting and Minimalism, where men engineered the rules elevating other men into symbols of rugged and lofty heroism. That abstraction is devoid of political content, auto/biographical statements, and arguments (at least how we are taught to understand them) compounds the challenge, and consequently, the work produced by women was not considered feminist. Scott draws from the insights of Harmony Hammond to argue that feminism is at play when women artists, in Hammond's words, "'claim the process for themselves'" (102). The idea that women are closer to nature—and therefore sites of exploitation—has deep roots in Western culture, but, as Heartney shows, this conflation gave women artists an entryway into ecofeminism's challenge to patriarchal "Dominionism," the doctrine that humans are entitled to dominate nature. Heartney presents an impressive array of artworks that do more than represent an "entangled, interconnected and interdependent" world that counters Dominionism, but actually repair the environmental damage of human exceptionalism and clean up the messes of capitalist extraction (141). Though the chapters are discretely focused, their horizontal arrangement allows readers to see the echoes and overlaps among these practices, which for these writers, suggest shared feminist values of "connectivity, interaction, interrelation" (22). The forty-seven images included in the book—large, glossy, many in color—help readers see these correspondences.

To compose alternative histories that foreground women's originary contributions, the authors draw on their extensive knowledge of the artwork as well as the exhibitions, criticism, theories, and histories (of art, feminism, and their overlaps) pertinent to it. In her chapter on abstraction, Scott demonstrates the consequential influence of male critics, whose assessments reflect the patriarchal criteria of choice and taste and established hierarchies that helped to keep women artists submerged and secondary. By working with "feminized" styles and materials, and by engaging with the subject matter of emotion, memory, and autobiography, women who worked in abstraction managed to cut through the aura of masculine authority. The lyricism of Helen Frankenthaler's (1928–2011) *Mountains and Sea* (1952), composed when she was twenty-three-years old, is a case in point (Fig. 1). With its "soft-edged forms" and "pastel palette"—"rose pink, sage green, and robin's-egg blue"—*Mountains and Sea* lets the styles and materials associated with femininity "stain" the masculinist tenets of Abstract Expressionism and, as Scott argues, brought Color Field painting into being (110, 112). Along with Joan Mitchell (1925–1992) and Grace Hartigan (1922–2008), Frankenthaler started working just as second-wave feminism was appearing on the horizon, and Scott sees the need for it in Harold Rosenberg's description of Frankenthaler as a passive medium for paint. The difference feminism's political and cultural presence made for the subsequent generation of artists who started working in the late 1960s and 1970s—Joan Snyder (b. 1940), Jennifer Bartlett (1941-2022), Mary Heillman (1940-2026), and Pat Steir (1938-2026)—is a notable contrast. As Scott explains, "Whether they identified as feminists or not, they believed it was possible for them to achieve what Frankenthaler had: being included in the critical conversations and exhibitions of the day, accepted as working, professional artists, being shown in galleries and museums" (119). By overcoming "exclusions based on gender," Scott tracks how these artists paved the way for those, whether male or female identified, who wanted to bring abstraction and political content together even more explicitly (137). Mark Bradford is one such artist. He grounds abstraction in the materials, attachments, and forces shaping his life. To pay homage to Black women's hair salons, Bradford used permanent-wave end papers that create thickly textured surfaces, and his large-scale abstractions enact the history of the freeway system cutting through Black neighborhoods in Los Angeles (134-136).



Fig. 1. Helen Frankenthaler, *Mountains and Sea*, 1952, (1952), oil and charcoal on unsized, unprimed canvas, 86 3/8" x 117 1/4". On extended loan to the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

The writers of *Mothers of Invention* do not aim to be encyclopedic, yet their chapters feel comprehensive. I admire the ease with which they introduce artworks, render stylistic details, evoke formal and thematic complexities, and link to multiple contexts—qualities that make *Mothers of Invention* a fantastic resource for teaching feminist art history. The writing consistently models clarity, precision, and nuance. Princenthal's chapter on craft is one of many examples. After outlining the "dark view" of contemporary craft movements—how they reflect neoliberal capitalism through images of purity and authenticity—Princenthal describes new work in craft that sustains its feminist promise (93). Notice how vividly she characterizes the signature styles of individual artists while situating their artwork in a collective story:

> The busts that Elise Siegel creates in glazed ceramic, while grounded in historical form, are clearly personal, their emotional complexity as vivid as their specificity. Siegel's work is also endowed with the equally specific character of clay, its mutability, the unpredictability of glaze, its paradoxically fixed fluidity. Kathy Butterly's send-ups of fine chinaware, beaded and banded, thin-lipped and wasp-waisted, are glazed in the most ravishing shades and then engorged, slumped, and slammed into parodies of elegance. Elisa D'Arrigo's ceramic sculptures bring a wry humor to the deformation of form, often incipiently human, that clay undergoes in the process of being built up, bent, propped, fired and glazed—processes whose metaphorical associations are decidedly relevant (93).

Princenthal sculpts words into sentences that emulate how the artists engage with the tangible qualities of their materials. Heartney, Posner, Princenthal, and Scott insist on close attentive writing that becomes an intimate companion to the artworks, one of many ways the writers confer their place in the world and show that feminism is not a category to transcend but a foundation for contemporary art, discernable at every innovative turn.

While the authors of *Mothers of Invention* create feminist collectivities by bringing interrelated artistic practices together and revealing the inventions they share, Silver's *Taking Place* maps the histories of alternative spaces in Canada and the United States that have created room for the collectivities making such interventions possible. It would be hard to come away from *Mothers of Invention* without understanding feminist art's wide-ranging impact, but that impact is consistently threatened and haunted by fragility. With a deep understanding of this precarity, Silver examines the "institutions, organisations, collectives, and structures" that have worked to "secure and legitimise" feminist art as a collective enterprise, particularly as it transformed into and is transformed by queer art practices (1). The establishment of security and legitimacy is a necessary but ultimately conservative act, and in *Taking Place*, Silver holds in tension the need to "build up" the histories of these places with the need to "tear down" the "dominant narratives" constructed around them (3). Moving between these acts creates the rhythm of the book's inquiries.

The introduction, "building histories," outlines the methodologies Silver deploys to compose *Taking Place*. As Silver explains, she works at the intersection where "historiography, social geography, feminist theory, queer theory, and institutional critique meet" (1). This wide range of methods is needed to read artwork through the "spaces, communities, and cities that provide the conditions for their cultivation" (1). Silver proves to be fluent in all of them, but I think the most interesting dimension of her method is her own "peripatetic" wanderings through the cities she encounters—Los Angeles, New York, Toronto, Montreal—on the way to the places she studies (2). Drawing on Guy Debord's idea of the "*dérive*"—a porous response to the contingencies of urban encounters—she includes "psychogeographic opportunities and invitations" that arose while pursuing her research (2). Silver's descriptions of her movement ground the study in tangible details and bring her wide-ranging theoretical inquiries down to scale, valuable for a complicated book that moves in layers and thinks in multiple directions simultaneously.

"[B]uilding histories" is also the place where Silver makes the case for connecting feminist and queer art practices. She does so by way of Amelia Jones's formulations from *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification and the Visual Arts* (2012) that address the links and distinctions between the two. According to Jones, feminism has exposed the power that shapes the production of meaning, and in response, queer thought and politics reveal the impossibility of fixing meaning to one place.[1] This difference becomes part of Silver's interest in the tension between "building up" and "tearing down," and although *Taking Place* is intellectually invested in the latter, I admired how the book acknowledges the necessity of their dialectical relationship.

"Alternative" is an important concept in *Taking Place* and points to the book's political investments. While the literal meaning—"another possibility"—is of course pertinent, Silver has her sights set on a deeper and more capacious definition of the word, one that is "radical[ly] emancipatory" and "destabili[zes] conventions of power" (5). This definition of the alternative entails creating spaces that erode the hierarches and break down the borders organizing social life in late capitalism. Silver pursues this in the first chapter by looking at the building and renovation of key institutional sites for feminist art: the A.I.R Gallery in New York, the Women's Building in Los Angeles, and La Centrale galerie Powerhouse in Montreal. As Silver portrays them, these spaces became training grounds for cultivating discourses and perspectives that allowed people to exist as feminists and practice its politics of emancipation as artists. Doing the work of building these spaces was part of their pedagogy, and Silver includes appropriately grainy black-and-white photographs of women in the process of constructing them—taking down real estate signs, putting together scaffolding, moving sheet rock, taping the walls—acts of collective ownership as important as performances and openings. As is well known, the visions of equality animating these spaces were incomplete, and while they may have "offered a neatly packaged history" so feminist art could enter the canon, this history nevertheless had "dangling threads for subsequent generations of feminist and queer artists to unravel" (30).

The next chapter, "Dangerous developments," follows that unraveling by turning to Brooklyn's Dumbo neighborhood where the queer arts collective "dUMBA," which began in 1996, thrived as a "live/work" loft, and was then undone by eviction in 2007 (67). Silvers places the dissipation of "dUMBA" in relationship to the forces of gentrification, which contemporary art has been complicit in, and the AIDS crisis, a catastrophe for the artists invested in making contemporary art speak to sexual politics. By examining the sparse and ephemeral traces of social bonds that gave rise to a space in which people could queer life and work, Silvers reveals the complexities of supporting non-normative sexual practices and identities against the encroachment of rampant capitalism and its logic of disposability. And by reading the artwork of Ryan Conrad, Every Ocean Hughes (b. 1977), and Ira Sachs as palimpsests inscribed over a history of losing artists and places to both gentrification and AIDS, she shows how to create sites of preservation that do not block out loss and actively include struggles against erasure.

The third and fourth chapters take up protest and dance respectively to deepen Silver's commitment to understanding bodies as vectors of movement that push against the barriers of inequality to create more just worlds.

Chapter three, "Border Zones," looks at the porous relationships among cities, protests, and gallery spaces. Silver begins with the 2012 student protests against tuition hikes, austerity measures, and the criminalization of free speech that erupted in Montreal. It was called "Printemps érable" (Maple Spring), echoing the Arab Spring protests, and came to be known as the "largest act of civil disobedience in Canadian history" (98). Symbolizing the widespread support for this large heterogenous movement "born of shared experiences of marginality broadly encompassed by anti-capitalist activism," a red felt square circulated through the city (98). Like the movement of the square, Silver seeks to explore how the protest reverberated with feminist and queer artwork, and she gathers an array of exhibitions that meditate on the overlaps of inside and outside, expand the borders of art practice (along with gender and sexuality), and evoke the gathering of collectivities. To conclude the chapter, Silver returns to the red felt square of "Printemps érable" by foregrounding Sheena Hoszko's *Red Light Monument: Floor Area of Café Cléopâtra Stages (500 square feet)* (2012), situated across from a queer- and trans-friendly strip club whose owner resisted developers. *Red Light Monument*, which only really becomes visible at night, is resolutely "outside" and expresses a desire to be in contact with historical change (120). Here Silver beautifully describes it as a medium for reflecting on protest: "Hoszko's red zone spectrally evoked bodies in movement, transaction, infraction" as well as a "series of relational encounters, but also as a site marker, a trace, and a witness of the invisible, pulsating histories lying beneath its translucent surface" (121).

It makes perfect sense that Silver would take up dance in the fourth chapter, "Everyday and extraordinary Movements": what genre better exemplifies the movement of the body through space? Her specific focus is the corporeal hierarchies of avant-garde dance, and she begins with an observation by the dancer taisha paggett (b. 1976). During her dance training, paggett witnessed people of color exiting the elevator on the floor for the Alvin Ailey School and white people exiting the elevator for Trisha Brown's. As an "everyday space" both "liminal" and "overlooked," the elevator becomes a starting point for examining the work of artists who engage with choreography to "resist and reveal the social organisation of space" that reinforces such segregations (126, 127, 130) and enacts instead a "complex embodiment," a concept from disability studies scholar Tobin Siebers (130). They do so by bringing "punctuated bodies" into the field of vision and sensation (133). These are the "extraordinary" bodies made to serve as objects that buttress the image of the universal subject. By working with those objects and choreographing their "complex embodiment," artists expose the neutrality of postmodern dance and Minimalism. Brendan Fernandes's *Free Fall 49* (2017) reveals the severe consequences of a universality that requires punctuated objects for the fiction of its neutrality, as Fernandes arranges "fallen bodies" to mourn the Orlando Shooting at the Pulse Nightclub in 2016, when forty-nine people were massacred in the name of homophobia. Silver's readings in these chapters are dense with events, ideas, reflections, citations, and images, and as I moved with the lines and turns of her thought, I realized she built each one into a space that models the radical inclusivity for which her chosen artists strive.

The art world is always inside a bigger world that is hard to control, and in the epilogue, "enter the virtual," Silvers looks at the internet as an alternative space for feminist and queer becoming but also as a portal to witnessing disaster. As she notes, the politicization of the virtual for feminist and queer politics circles back to the lesbian feminist activism of the 1970s, a history she transposes onto her own movement across Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic. This trek allowed Silvers and her partner to live together in Toronto's Junction neighborhood. Against a historical background of disease, crisis, and upheaval, where the hierarchies of gender, sexuality, race, and class were exposed for the logics of disposability they produce, lives continue to unfold and another understanding of space comes into view:

> While our cramped living quarters were doing double duty as our office space and movement studio, we read about acts of mutual aid and fundraising, virtual innovations allowing art programming to continue and institutions to keep afloat. Most of it happened from the confines of the screen, our architectures transformed into the one-dimensional space of our virtual worlds, our faces and rooms organized into grids, our social lives reduced to representation. One silver lining was the way by which our geographies not only contracted, but also extended—space was nowhere and everywhere; queer innovations abounded … [s]ocialities spread their surfaces virtually (150).

Overlapping the physical and the virtual, this domestic scene becomes a figure for the ability of the imagination to exceed limits and keep knowledge of emancipatory alternatives alive against their disappearance. Visions of feminism and queer liberation, *Mothers of Invention* and *Taking Place* renewed my hope in this possibility. •

Kimberly Lamm is Associate Professor of Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies and Art, Art History, and Visual Studies at Duke University. She is the author of *Addressing the Other Woman: Textual Correspondences in Feminist art and Writing* (2018) and the BFI Classics book *Riddles of the Sphinx* (2025). Forthcoming books include *Writing in the Kitchen with Martha Rosler and Carrie Mae Weems: From Reproductive Labor to the Affective Labor of the Image* (2026) and *Laura Mulvey: Feminist Legacies* (2027), co-edited with Anna Backman Rogers.

Notes

1. Amelia Jones, "Queer Feminist Durationality: Time and Materiality as a Means of Resisting Spatial Objectification," in *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification and the Visual Arts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 174–75.

Riddles of the Sphinx

By Kimberly Lamm
Bloomsbury Publishing on behalf of the British Film Institute, 2025

Reviewed by Gabrielle Stecher Woodward

Watching *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977) fifty years after its release, it is difficult not to be struck by its vitality as both a historical artifact and ongoing provocation. Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's film registers the textures of feminist discourse in the 1970s in ways that privilege women's voices while pushing cinema's narrative and visual possibilities. Kimberly Lamm's installment on *Riddles of the Sphinx* in the esteemed BFI Classics series offers a concise, yet highly accessible account of this landmark experimental film, situating it within the filmmakers' collaborative practice and making a strong case for its continued relevance. This dual focus is particularly welcome, as the pair are often encountered primarily through their theoretical writings rather than their filmmaking. At a moment when feminist art history continues to expand its engagement with moving-image media, Lamm's assessment of *Riddles of the Sphinx* underscores the film's importance not only as a touchstone of feminist cinema but also as a formally inventive work whose poetic strategies invite renewed critical and pedagogical attention.

The collaboration between Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen interweaves experimental film production with feminist theory, a dynamic that Lamm carefully reconstructs through her contextualization of their early work. Particularly useful is her coverage of *Penthesilea: Queen of the Amazons* (1974), a 16mm film produced by the pair at Northwestern University's School of Radio, Film, and Television, which reworks Heinrich von Kleist's 1808 play. Lamm presents Penthesilea as an exercise in unearthing myth's feminist possibilities: the film "layer[s] images, text and sound to excavate the stories buried in the images of the Amazons" (19). This insistence on excavation frames the film as a kind of archaeological intervention into patriarchal visual culture, a reading Lamm extends through her attention to what she later describes as the "museum world of Mulvey and Wollen's imagination" (24). By curating a sequence of ancient and modern art-historical artifacts depicting the Greeks' defeat of the Amazons, the film exposes the visual codification of female aggression within the very art traditions that simultaneously stage and suppress it. As Lamm proposes, *Penthesilea* exemplifies the possibilities of feminist counter-cinema, not least in its reframing of myth. By reimagining a version of the story in which Penthesilea kills Achilles, cinema is foregrounded as a site for interrogating fantasies of powerful, even threatening femininity.

This emphasis on excavation also points to a productive but underdeveloped tension in Lamm's account: the relationship between feminist counter-cinema and art history. In *Penthesilea*, meaning emerges not only through narrative voice and formal experimentation but through the curation and recontextualization of art-historical objects, suggesting that feminist film practice here is inseparable from strategies of archival and museological critique. Lamm gestures toward this interplay, particularly in her invocation of a "museum world." Whereby feminist cinema produces meaning through the reworking of art-historical material, the implications of this method are only briefly articulated.

Penthesilea's engagement with antiquity as an archive latent with feminist potential carries forward into *Riddles of the Sphinx*, where Egyptian (and Egyptian-inspired) visual culture and museum spaces similarly anchor the film's exploration of the speech and silence of women's voices, as well as historical memory. In *Riddles*, antiquity is not simply cited or quickly glossed over but actively reworked. The Sphinx, for example, is mobilized as an actor through which entrenched narratives of femininity, motherhood, and spectacle are recalled and unsettled. In this sense, the film situates a particular encounter with the past, one that foregrounds how cultural memories of antiquity are mediated, circulated, and reimagined within modern visual culture. While Lamm is primarily interested in how these strategies reveal a politics of voice—most notably through *Riddles'* emphasis on female narration—the broader implications of this transhistorical mode of feminist adaptation receive comparatively less sustained attention. In particular, the film's reliance on and reconfiguration of familiar images and myths might be understood as requiring an active, critically engaged spectatorship, one that not only recognizes inherited visual codes but participates in their transformation and codification. Greater attention to how these adaptive practices generate new associations between past and present would further illuminate the stakes of Mulvey and Wollen's project and clarify how their feminist counter-cinema operates simultaneously as a reworking of cultural memory and as an intervention into its ongoing formation.

If *Penthesilea* turns to antiquity as a key source of feminist critique, *Riddles of the Sphinx* develops this engagement more fully through its sustained attention to voice and cinematic memory, most notably in its recurring invocation of a female Sphinx. Lamm positions the figure at the center of the film's interpretive framework, tracing her emergence in the opening sequence, where a woman silently flips through *Midi-Minuit Fantastique*, a French film magazine filled with images of monstrous and hybrid women who, as Mulvey and Wollen suggest, embody "male fears and fantasies" (13). Clarence Sinclair Bull's photograph of Greta Garbo as the "Sphinx Moderne" introduces ancient Egypt as a narrative throughline while foregrounding Hollywood's role in mediating and recirculating racist and imperial imagery (Fig. 1). In Lamm's hands, the composite of Garbo's pale face superimposed onto the eroded body of the Sphinx clearly condenses and intertwines histories of early cinema, imperial archaeology, and racialized visual culture. Lamm's discussion is particularly compelling when she attends to the Sphinx as both narrator and *acousmêtre*, a disembodied voice that "defies synchronisation" of voice and image (27). By foregrounding the Sphinx's sometimes overlooked role

within the Oedipus narrative as a figure of inquiry and resistance, the film reorients psychoanalytic discourse toward women's experience, using voice to reinsert women into histories from which they have been excluded. At its most effective, Lamm's account demonstrates how this strategy unsettles both gendered representations and cinematic conventions, as the Sphinx's voice circulates beyond the visible frame, disrupting the expectation that a woman's voice must be anchored to a stable, knowable body.

The theoretical density of Lamm's framework—spanning psychoanalysis, star studies, and colonial histories—is frequently condensed into suggestive but rapidly sketched connections. The reappearance of Garbo's "Sphinx Moderne," for instance, links early twentieth-century cinema to even earlier imperial encounters with Egypt, implying a recursive dynamic in which Western culture repeatedly repurposes the Sphinx for its own representational ends (26). While a revealing gesture, it remains only briefly developed, leaving somewhat underexplored the extent to which feminist counter-cinema engages not only patriarchy but also the racial and imperial logics embedded in Western visual culture.

Such compression becomes more apparent in Lamm's treatment of the film's Egyptian sequences and museum spaces, where questions of voice, history, and spectatorship converge. The film's use of the Egyptian galleries of the British Museum situates its formal experimentation within an institutional context marked by histories of theft and display, linking feminist critique to broader questions of cultural inheritance, ownership, and historical narration. Lamm observes that the film's imperial histories are not explicitly foregrounded but instead operate at the level of implication (78). This subtlety is central to Mulvey and Wollen's method; however, the significance of these sequences is difficult to realize within the confines of the book's brief analyses. This is particularly evident in the treatment of the Sphinx's extended monologue in the museum scene, introduced via intertitle as "a detour through these texts, entombed now in glass, whose enigmatic script reminds her of a forgotten history and the power of a different language" (1:06:38–1:06:46). Here, the film stages a meditation on memory as fragmented, embodied, and resistant to easy reconstruction. The voice moves between partial recollection, tactile descriptions suggestive of feminized forms of labor and craft, and intimate scenes of childhood, collapsing distinctions between personal and cultural memory. Although Lamm reads this sequence as a gesture toward anti-racist and feminist futurity, her discussion moves quickly past the relationship between narration, the imperial afterlives of the displayed objects, and the film's broader political commitments, which remain more evocative than fully analyzed.

This tendency toward conceptual compression carries into Lamm's treatment of the film's form, particularly in her sustained description of *Riddles* as a "poetic" work. Emphasizing its non-linear structure, chapter-based organization, and affinity with the essay film, she offers a persuasive account of the film as a kind of "cinematic palimpsest" that invites viewers to read actively rather than passively consume its voices and images (12). By linking the film to a process of psychoanalytic "working through," Lamm situates its formal strategies within a feminist project of self-reflection and transformation. This emphasis on process is one of the study's central strengths, particularly in its articulation of how the film cultivates an engaged, participatory viewership. She identifies "poetic" features—such as stanza-like chapter divisions and the use of intertitles—at the level of form. Elsewhere, the term shifts to describe a "poetics of interpretation," aligning the film with the essay form and emphasizing spectatorship as an active, meaning-making process (17). At times, this movement between formal, interpretive, and psychoanalytic uses of "poetics" seems insufficiently differentiated. As a result, the term risks operating as a critical shorthand for formal innovation and interpretation rather than as a fully developed analytical framework.



Fig. 1: Clarence Sinclair Bull, *Greta Garbo as The Sphinx* (1931), bromide print, 13 x 10 1/2". © Reserved; Collection National Portrait Gallery, London.

Lamm's study succeeds as both an informed appreciation of *Riddles of the Sphinx* and an accessible introduction to its theoretical and sociopolitical contexts. By foregrounding the film's engagement with voice, psychoanalysis, and feminist politics, she demonstrates how Mulvey and Wollen reconceived cinema as a medium capable of making women's experiences newly audible and visible. If the book's brevity limits the depth of its most generative insights—particularly those concerning antiquity, adaptation, and cinematic poetics—it also contributes to its pedagogical value. As such, Lamm's study provides a strong point of entry for scholars and students alike, inviting further engagement with a film that continues to challenge the narratological possibilities of feminist art and cinema. •

Gabrielle Stecher Woodward writes essays and criticism interrogating the stories we tell about creative women. Her book reviews have been published in *Film Quarterly*, *Harvard Review Online*, and *American Book Review*, among other venues. She received her doctorate at the University of Georgia.

The Second Oldest Profession: The Wet Nurse, Revered and Reviled

By Barbara Zucker
Abbeville Press, 2026

Reviewed by Sally Jane Brown

Barbara Zucker (b. 1940) opens her multifaceted exploration by charting the profound, global history of a vital yet systematically marginalized occupation: wet nursing. Across *The Second Oldest Profession: The Wet Nurse, Revered and Reviled*, Zucker highlights the international ubiquity of the trade by scattering the phrase "wet nurse" in various languages throughout the chapters, demonstrating how mammalian sustenance has crossed linguistic, cultural, and geographic boundaries for millennia, a context driven deeper by the inclusion of one hundred twelve color images in the book, including works on the subject by the author. The title itself performs a crucial feminist reclamation. By invoking "the second oldest profession," Zucker directly pairs wet nursing with prostitution, centering both of civilization's foundational service economies squarely on the commodification of women's bodies and biological labor. Furthermore, the subtitle, *Revered and Reviled*, encapsulates the cultural paradox at the heart of her study. It exposes how patriarchal and class institutions simultaneously idolized the wet nurse as an indispensable life-giver and demonized her as a moral and hygienic threat, reducing a complex, skilled labor force to a site of societal anxiety and institutional control.

The artist, writer, and curator's journey into this subject began over thirty years ago when she encountered an essay by scholar, curator, and feminist writer Linda Nochlin. Nochlin's analysis of Berthe Morisot's (1841–1895) painting *Wet Nurse and Julie* (1879) prompted Zucker to re-examine a profession she had never previously considered.[1] Since then, Zucker has researched wet nursing extensively, seeking out former wet nurses in Europe, incorporating the subject into her own multi-disciplinary artwork, and committing to advocate for women who were historically silenced. Early in the text, Zucker reflects on her decades-long dedication to this specific account of women lost to history: "It bears repeating that by ignoring the wet nurse, history has silenced hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of women who saved countless lives…. The entire body of work devoted to wet-nursing is loaded and suffused with contradictions" (9). Researching the wet nurse, it seems, meant unearthing a silenced global history of maternal labor, forcing a confrontation with the patriarchal structures that commodified women's bodies across centuries.

The volume balances Zucker's personal narrative, artistic perspective, and a rigorous historical review. A foundational member of A.I.R. Gallery and a seasoned sculptor, Zucker brings a material sensitivity and conceptual rigor to her inquiry. The book features an impressive array of visual art and historical artifacts on nearly every page, ranging from a Nineteenth-Dynasty Egyptian painted relief depicting the goddess Anuket suckling Ramesses II to Tintoretto's *The Origin of the Milky Way* (c. 1575), Peter Paul Rubens's *Roman Charity* (1612), and Cardi B's (b. 1992) 2020 music video featuring a golden lactating fountain. Zucker also prominently showcases her own contemporary art, such as *The Rock Test* and *Red Headed Wet Nurse* (both undated), providing a rich contextual dialogue between text and image. Pairing historical artifacts with Zucker's contemporary sculptures allows the reader to see that the exploitation and reverence of lactating bodies is not a relic of the past, but an ongoing continuum. The book as an object itself is very accessible, with most images granted an entire page and minimal accompanying text, while an enticing portrait of a wet nurse graces the cover.

The book is historically comprehensive, moving from ancient mythologies to modern medical practices across a brief preface and eighteen approachable chapters. Structurally, Zucker creates a sharp juxtaposition between mythic elevation and material reality. Early chapters examine wet nursing in ancient civilizations, where human milk was essential for survival and divine figures like the Egyptian goddess Hathor served as wet nurses to pharaohs, establishing how ancient societies aestheticized and sacredly framed maternal sustenance. However, as Zucker transitions to lactating public fountains in Europe and the operational realities of American and European wet nursing, her analytical eye demystifies this romanticism. Refusing to sentimentalize the practice as passive sacrifice or pure maternal instinct, Zucker exposes the stark socioeconomic pressures driving impoverished peasant women to sell their milk. She frames these workers as clear-eyed economic actors, writing, "With few exceptions, the reason she nursed was financial. Her impoverished family needed money; typically, they wanted to buy land or purchase a few animals for the small farms they owned with their husbands" (69). Through this interdisciplinary lens blending material history, civic architecture, and economic analysis, Zucker underscores how wet nursing functioned as a brutal yet calculated survival strategy, forcing rural women to abandon their own infants to nourish the offspring of the privileged.

One of the most striking sections of the book is chapter five, "Testing, Testing, Squirt and Sip," which details the draconian medical rules and absurd "milk tests" devised by historical male authorities—such as Soranus, Galen, and Avicenna—to evaluate the quality of a woman's body and milk. As Zucker explicitly writes, "These heavy-handed rules were used virtually unchanged for more than a thousand years, until late in the nineteenth century" (55). To illustrate this centuries-long medical absurdity, Zucker juxtaposes historical archival prints with her own contemporary artworks. The chapter delightfully includes a series of 1866 French illustrations from *La Vie Parisienne* depicting nineteenth-century bourgeois men awkwardly tasting a prospective nurse's milk and even being squirted directly in the face (52). Alongside these archival satirical prints, Zucker inserts her own expressive line drawings on paper, visually animating tests such as "The Bay Leaf Test," "The Nail Test," and "The Sword Test" (54). While her

text concisely summarizes that "many of the tests were essentially the same: plop a drop on a surface and watch the results" (55), her illustrations—paired with historical lore where milk was judged by whether a droplet held its shape on a fingernail, leaf, or blade—lay bare the pseudoscience involved. By organizing these tests around physical surface tension, color, firmness, and male taste-testing, the medical establishment erected humiliating barriers to quantify a woman's physical worth. Through both her historical narrative and her whimsical, critical line work, Zucker demonstrates how male authorities operated under the patriarchal delusion that they could scientifically police, measure, and control the purity of maternal milk.

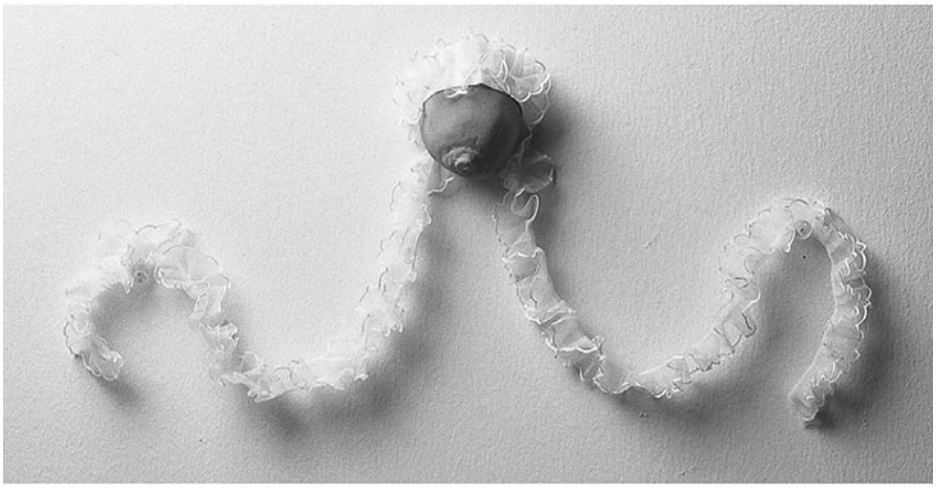


Fig. 1. Barbara Zucker, *French Wet Nurse (La Nourrice)* (undated), from a series of Portrait Busts. Cast and pigmented rubber latex, fabric, and lace. Collection of the artist.

Men not only controlled the hiring practices through agencies and bureaus, but as Zucker reviewed, historical texts also harbored bizarre misconceptions, such as the belief that breast milk was transformed menstrual blood or that the uterus competed directly with the brain for blood. Zucker aptly highlights the severe class and racial disparities inherent in the system, noting how African American women in the United States and enslaved women historically carried the burden of nursing white children. She writes, "We as a nation [United States] have yet to atone for the oppression of slavery and are only just beginning to confront this enormous reckoning" (157).

Other chapters address the tragic realities of infant mortality, infanticide, and abandonment alongside unconventional themes like interspecies nursing and the broader cultural evolution of the breast. Among the most poignant and vital moments in the book are Zucker's personal accounts of traveling to Europe in the 1990s to interview former wet nurses, such as Iolanda Pittocco in Italy, capturing their lived experiences firsthand. Here, Zucker functions as a dedicated feminist oral historian, recovering voices that traditional, male-dominated archives routinely ignored or erased. Her research journey itself exposes the ongoing cultural stigma surrounding women's bodily labor: she includes an image of a letter rejecting her classified ad to locate former wet nurses, which a French newspaper deemed "inappropriate, distasteful, salacious" and unworthy of publication (126). That Zucker had to navigate institutional censorship in the late twentieth century to document a centuries-old care economy underscores the radical nature of her project. Yet, her oral history field notes remain thoroughly grounded, vivid, and detailed. By incorporating direct quotes, personal correspondence, and unvarnished, humorous anecdotes such as a prospective employer who selected a wet nurse after she aggressively squirted milk directly into his eye (135), Zucker celebrates the messy, unruly realities of bodily agency, transforming forgotten care workers into fully realized, defiant historical subjects.

Zucker touches upon the historical phenomenon of paper dolls in the chapter, "Why did the Wet Nurse Nurse?," a fascinating domestic medium that deserves deeper consideration within the lineage of women's creative expression. She notes that "little girls in France played with wet-nurse paper dolls, and some of them even dressed up in elaborate wet-nurse costumes to tend to their 'babies'" (69). Historically, paper dolls served as miniature, portable canvases through which young girls rehearsed societal expectations of fashion, decorum, and maternal labor, sometimes romanticizing working-class caretakers in the process. Yet, through alternative outfits and flexible roles, these dolls also offered a subversive space for private world-building and autonomy. Integrating paper dolls into the broader conversation of mediated femininity adds a compelling layer to Zucker's exploration of how gender roles are constructed, dressed, and performed across generations.

Throughout the book, Zucker's own artistic background as a pioneer of feminist installation and sculpture informs her analytical eye, bridging the gap between her historical scholarship and her visual practice. Her featured sculptures and drawings, which investigate the history of breastfeeding, the wet nurse, and institutional structures, mirror her written commitment to uncovering the hidden architectures of care. By examining how art objects and archival ephemera collide, Zucker establishes herself not just as an objective social historian, but as an active participant in the ongoing feminist project of rewriting patriarchal art history. In sculptures such as *French Wet Nurse (La Nourrice)* (Fig. 1) she replaces the traditional portrait bust with a breast form carved from pigmented rubber latex and crowned in delicate lace styled after national headwear. The nipple protrudes as a surreal, displaced "face," confronting the viewer with how institutional systems reduce working-class women strictly to functional anatomy. Furthermore, the material friction between industrial, fleshy

latex and refined, cascading lace captures the stark paradox of the wet nurse, whose raw, commodified body labor was shrouded in the status-signaling ornamentation of the elite families employing her. As the lace cascades downward to suggest secondary breast forms beneath, Zucker visually manifests the compounding, relentless demands of caregiving labor, transforming a historically erased figure into an uncanny monument to systemic exploitation.

While Zucker's volume achieves a remarkable breadth of historical recovery and artistic perspective—such as the inclusion of her own work, Niki de Saint Phalle (1930–2002) and her husband, Jean Tinguely's *Stravinsky Fountain*, and sculptures by Pat Lasch (b. 1944)—the text might have been further enriched by drawing explicit connections to contemporary feminist art practices that engage directly with bodily traces and maternal systems. For instance, Zucker does include *Deuce Nutrix* (2020), painted breast prints by her friend, artist Leslie Fry (b. 1954) (158), but the inclusion of Brigid Berlin's (1939–2020) infamous *Tit Prints*, where Berlin painted breasts as printing plates from 1966–96, would have offered a brilliant historical bridge between bodily and conceptual art. Similarly, integrating Ana Mendieta's (1948–1985) body and blood works, such as *Body Tracks* (1982), which explore violence inflicted on women, would have contextualized the visceral, primal connection between the female body and identity explored throughout Zucker's thesis. Micol Hebron's (b. 1972) ongoing activist projects addressing the hyper-regulation, censorship, and commercial policing of female nipples and breasts also provide a vital contemporary framework for understanding the ways in which society remains deeply uncomfortable with lactating and nursing bodies.

A critical question undercurrents Zucker's study, though one that invites deeper structural analysis, is why the profession ultimately disappeared. The decline of the practice was not simply changing attitudes toward maternal labor; rather, it was systematically erased and rendered obsolete by industrialization, the commercialization of infant care, and the rise of the medical-industrial complex. As mass-produced rubber nipples, glass bottles, and standardized commercial formulas flooded the market in the early twentieth century, capitalist modernization offered a sanitized, mechanized alternative to human milk.[2] This technological shift conveniently allowed society to sweep the complex web of class exploitation, racialized wet-nursing, and the messy realities of lower-class women's bodies under the rug, replacing an intimate, exploitative human economy with an industrialized one; thus, Zucker's determination to write this book.

Zucker closes on a grounded, unromanticized note, reflecting that the history of women's bodily autonomy and labor remains deeply fraught and unfinished. As she writes in the book's final line: "There is no pure, unblemished story, and this one in particular, being intrinsically bound to commerce, is rife with sadness and cruelty. But, overall, the wet nurse is a heroic figure who must be emphatically written back into history and become part of the greater story of our lives" (157). Ultimately, *The Second Oldest Profession* succeeds precisely because Zucker does not approach her subject merely as an objective historian, but as an artist deeply attuned to the physical, emotional, and political weight of the female body. By pairing rigorous archival recovery with her own contemporary sculptures and line drawings, Zucker effectively constructs a counter-monument to these forgotten care workers. In doing so, she ensures that the wet nurse, long commodified, fetishized, and pushed to the margins of culture, is finally recognized as a central, heroic force in the history of human survival and creative resilience. •

Sally Jane Brown is an artist, writer, and curator. With a passion for women and feminist artists, her writing is published in *WAJ* and *Panorama*, among other publications. Her art, which consists heavily of breast and body prints, is in public and private collections and included in exhibitions in the US. She curates independently and for West Virginia University Libraries.

Notes

1. Linda Nochlin, "Morisot's Wetnurse: The Construction of Work and Leisure in Impressionist Painting," in *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (Harper & Row, 1989), 37–56.
2. Emily Stevens et al., "A History of Infant Feeding," *The Journal of Perinatal Education* 18, no. 2 (2009): 32–39.

Jacqueline Lamba: The Forgotten Surrealist

By Salomon Grimberg
Merrell, 2026

Dorothea Tanning: A Surrealist World

By Alyce Mahon
Yale University Press, 2026

Reviewed by Allison Westerfield

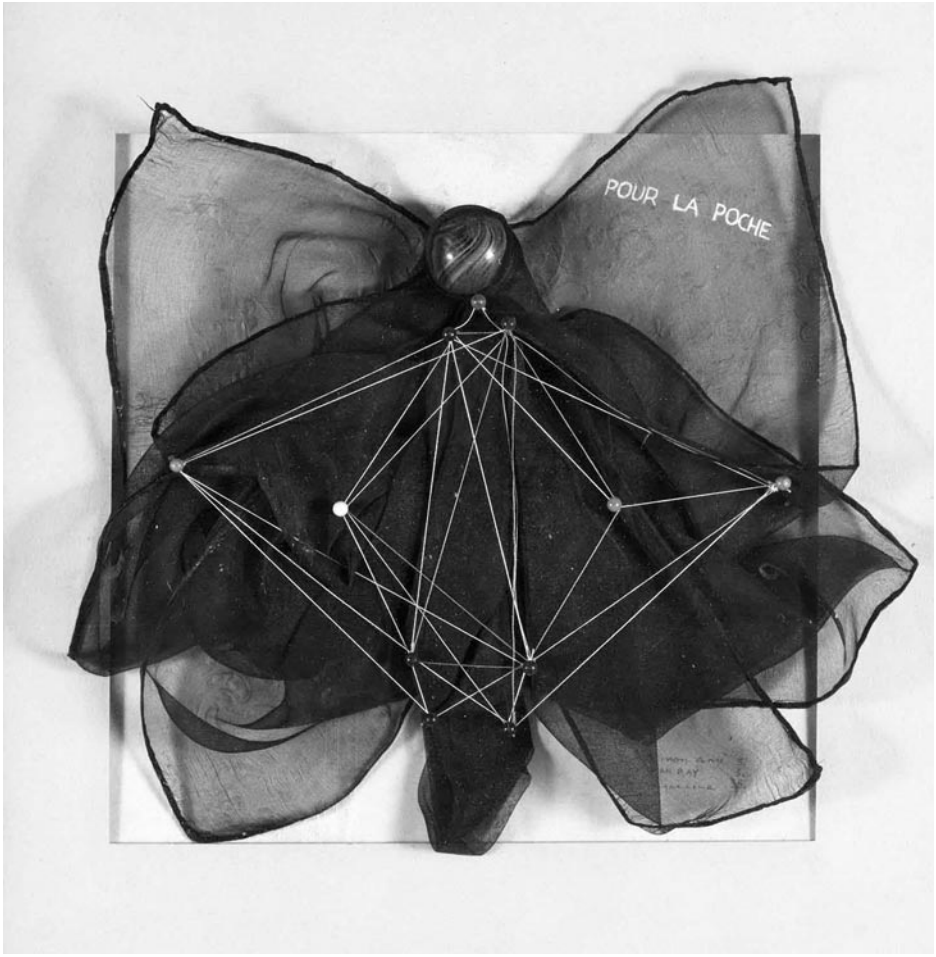


Fig. 1. Jacqueline Lamba, *Pour la Poche* (1935), object box: pins, colored threads, black silk square and glass bead mounted on cardboard, 13" x 13" x 1 4/5".

Jacqueline Lamba (1910–1993) struggled for recognition as a painter. While fiercely independent in character, she nonetheless remained entangled with male counterparts who occupied the stage as artistic geniuses, most notably her husband, André Breton (1896–1966). As Breton's wife, Lamba's intersection with a masculinist Surrealism has obscured her legacy, even though she eventually disentangled herself and deliberately transformed her artistic style from that restrictive movement. Through archival ephemera that allows his protagonist and her circle to speak directly to the reader, Salomon Grimberg reconstructs Lamba's relationships to prominent figures in modern art, namely within Surrealism. This biography eschews chapters for an uneven chronological narrative, divided into short sections that flow from one relational space and memory to the next—sometimes confusingly so—as they move forwards and backwards on an unclear timeline. However, it also sustains a firm commitment to the study of women working within and tangentially to the Surrealist movement, and Grimberg affirms Lamba's place in the legacy of the avant-garde.

As throughout the book, the prelude opens with a quoted correspondence between Lamba and a friend, reflecting the volume's principal strength which is its inclusion of meticulously recorded and translated letters by Lamba and her circle. The prelude drops the reader immediately into the early life of its subject, and Grimberg then organizes the sections that trace this period into "Childhood," "Adolescence," "Art School," and "Jane Dies" (the death of Lamba's mother). Drawing upon the diary entries of Lamba's childhood friend, Marianne Clouzot, he reveals that the two teenagers were suspected of a relationship cast as nefarious, an allegation that hints towards Lamba's later bisexuality. Like many other relationships in the artist's life, this one eventually ended with a tense close. Clouzot described Lamba as tomboyish, stubborn, wild, and yet intellectually acute. This characterization is further emphasized by Lamba's adoption of a masculine persona, Jack, with family and close friends, prompted perhaps by her parents' expressed desire for a son.

The mostly chronological narrative frequently lingers on liminal moments between life stages that perplexingly slip backward and forward in time. For example, at one distinct point Lamba and André Breton have already had their daughter, Aube, but in the next section the couple have not yet met. Using Clouzot's diary in "Jane Dies," Grimberg recounts Lamba's visit to her friend after her mother's death. By this time, Lamba had been married to Breton for two years and four months and Aube was about one year old. In the following section, "André Breton," Grimberg skips backward to the couple's first introduction and then proceeds forward through their relationship, shifting from Clouzot's diary to Breton's letters and then to interview recollections by Lamba and Aube. The writing itself is an eloquent weaving of source material, through which Grimberg traces Lamba's and Breton's nine-year marriage, a period during which Surrealism flourished then declined. Although the movement was cemented into the art historical

canon, its global influence dissipated significantly after WWII.

In later sections, such as "A Fortunate Coincidence," "Surrealism," "Surrealism in London," and "Surrealism in Paris," the tumult of Lamba and Breton's relationship emerges through extensive correspondence, where Grimberg infers that a letter from Breton prophetically warns Lamba that she will regret choosing him (41). Grimberg uses one of Lamba's few surviving early works, *Portrait of André Breton as Saint-Just* (1937), to illustrate the tensions of their relationship. He states, "Jacqueline used as her model an iconic portrait of the 'wild, handsome, and transgressive' leader of the Jacobins to reflect both admiration for the personage and resentment of the man [Breton]" (39). These sections underscore the problem of two strong personalities colliding and, more particularly, Lamba's desire to make art while Breton might have preferred a homemaker, especially after the birth of Aube (37). Regardless, Lamba actively participated in contemporary Surrealist exhibitions, notably documented in catalogue plates that include her contribution, *Pour la Poche* (1935; Fig. 1), to the *Surrealist Exhibition of Objects* in 1936.

Both the most nuanced and the seemingly problematic sections describe Breton's introduction of Surrealism to Mexico and the relationships that developed between Breton, Lamba, Diego Rivera, and Frida Kahlo (1907–1954). Most fascinatingly, Grimberg chronicles the alleged romantic relationship between Kahlo and Lamba. Producing extensive correspondence and other writings, including a two-page letter from Kahlo to Rivera during her travels, Lamba's passion for Kahlo is evident throughout these sections. However, Grimberg does not clarify whether Kahlo reciprocated these feelings, as none of her included letters are to Lamba. Therefore, the narrative reads as one-sided. Grimberg's own writing suggests this as he includes a letter from Lamba to Dora Maar (1907–1997), in which she claims an "exaggerated attachment" to Kahlo (79).

In the spring of 1939, Roberto Matta and Gordon Onslow rented the Château de Chémilieu in the south of France on the Swiss border. Grimberg deftly fuses the collective emotions of a tightly-knit group of artists working together in a countryside retreat at the onset of war. In Chémilieu, Lamba had space to paint and to participate in group critiques, and Grimberg discusses the experience as transformative for Onslow, Matta, Esteban Francés, and Lamba, who had not painted in a group setting like this previously. In these brief sections, Grimberg continuously hints at Lamba's passion and ambition for painting, but her drive as an artist is veiled behind her relationships. Despite Lamba's hardened, self-assured exterior, she repeatedly destroyed her own paintings; few works survive, though numerous photographs included in the plates document her output.

On March 25, 1941, Lamba, Breton, and Aube fled to the United States via Marseille. Grimberg identifies this displacement as a catalyst for the Bretons's eventual separation and divorce. Subsequent sections explore Lamba's relationship with sculptor David Hare, whom she met in New York through Breton and later married on September 8, 1945. Grimberg illuminates Lamba's influence on Hare's artistic practice and argues that she was a driving force behind his success as a sculptor, even as her own legacy as a painter was fading. These sections document the couple's travels, exhibitions, and growing tensions. After hardships with Hare, the couple separated and Lamba returned to France in 1951, never to return to the US.

The publication includes thirty-one pages of plates that combine black-and-white portraits, reproductions of letters and lost artworks, and later works by Lamba that are held in various collections today. Several valuable images trace stylistic shifts in Lamba's oeuvre. Grimberg consistently links biographical experience to artistic output in the final sections that are devoted to Lamba's return to France, her episodes of depression, and a creative productivity that continued against a backdrop of loss, such as her divorce from Hare. In chapters "Simaine-la-Rotonde" and "Cityscapes," Lamba's work takes a stylistic turn characterized by bright, vivid colors that Grimberg equates to a state of "meditative absorption" (184). "A Princess from Far Away" and "A Visit from the Past" consider Lamba's resurfacing, contentious relationships, such as with Clouzot, and her deep anxieties about aging that sit in complex tension with her excitement at becoming a grandmother.

Grimberg concludes his account of Lamba's life, difficult at times but powerful in scope, with the voice of Aube, who insists, "*C'est mon devoir de mémoire*" (It is my duty to remember) (202). Aube's voice carries particular significance in the conclusion; while her presence remained largely on the periphery of Lamba's biography, she was one of the few people present in the closing years of Lamba's life, lending an intimacy and authority to her account. Although the volume does not follow a conventional art-historical methodology or present a singular, deeply developed thesis, it offers a valuable glimpse into the shared networks of artists of the period and contributes to Surrealist studies by tracing Lamba's tension-filled trajectory, from her central yet tenuous place within Surrealism to her rebellious, self-determined shift toward abstraction.

While Grimberg offers a biography of a titularly "forgotten" artist, intimately situated at the heart of Surrealism, Alyce Mahon furthers Surrealist scholarship with a new, comprehensive account of an American artist whose renowned contributions epitomize the movement's global reach. Mahon deftly weaves together biography and visual analysis in order to develop and solidify her argument that "Surrealist ecopoetics" are uniquely tethered to the legacy of Dorothea Tanning (1910–2012).

The introduction opens with Tanning's 1944 oil on canvas, *Self-Portrait* (Fig. 2). A genre-defying approach, Tanning centrally positioned her diminutive figure from behind and within a vista of the American West. Mahon rightfully compares it to the *Rückenfigur* most notably associated with the works of German Romantic landscape painter Caspar David Friedrich, and a stylistic choice to which Tanning would return on occasion, as

Mahon details in her account of the later work, *Max in a Blue Boat* (1947). This shared sublimity constructs an important element of Mahon's critical framework by which she asserts a broader analysis of Tanning: through a synthesis of landscape, portraiture, literary and poetic histories, and politics emerges a distinctive form of Surrealist ecopoetics across the artist's oeuvre. Mahon draws upon the methodology of the 2018 volume, *Ecopoetics: Essays in the Field*, edited by Angela Hume and Gillian Osborne, in which the term is defined as "the incorporation of an ecological or environmental perspective into the study of poetics."[1] She then reorients this definition to her own ends, developing a dialogue around Tanning's synthesis of landscape, domestic interiors, and portraiture of women, thereby "advancing Surrealist ecopoetics in new gendered directions" (21). Mahon situates Surrealism within ecopoetics through a metaphysical, Bretonian reading, which is an exchange between the material and the mind (20). Mahon includes other scholars of note within the field of study, such as Donna Roberts's intersections of ecology and Surrealism, in which she argues that Surrealism has the ability to remake the world and draw "poetic thinking into the process of knowledge." (20). Jonathan Skinner's reading of ecopoetics as house making contributes to Mahon's discussion of Tanning's architectural compositions (21) and later with craft materials and domestic objects hewn together into what she called her "family" of soft sculptures (167).

Mahon's formidable prose integrates biography and critical analysis of Tanning's work throughout the book. The first chapter details Tanning's upbringing in Illinois and, most significantly, the formative influence of her early interests in art and literature, particularly Gothic novels, that would come to define her sustained concern with the interplay of language, landscape, and the mundane. Tanning's early works repeatedly employ a Gothic sensibility that, through what Mahon calls "agitated brushstrokes" and "disorienting perspectival schemes"



Fig. 2. Dorothea Tanning, *Self-Portrait* (1944), oil on canvas, 24" x 30". San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

(32), subvert the more known foreboding nature of Gothic motifs for those that are seemingly more open and that welcome the viewer, further constituting an ecopoetics.

It is in the exploration of girlhood and the politics of space that Mahon addresses Tanning's ability to "advance these shared concerns with ecopoetics and to proto-feminist ends" (79). Thereby, the next chapter is suffused with the Surrealist sensibilities that would orient Tanning's practice toward a more gender-conscious ecopoetics. Her early paintings of young girls in fantastical domestic spaces, with intimations of a distant landscape, "augment the dynamic between the human and non-human" (79). The chapter argues not only for an ecopoetics arising from these thematic mergers, but also from iconographic inclusions such as the sunflower, a motif that morphs from its previous Symbolist and Surrealist traditions (Breton's *L'Amour fou,* 1937) towards Tanning's own inclusions, as well as doorways and chessboards, throughout her oeuvre.

Chapter three addresses the cross-cultural significance of Tanning's longstanding interest in the American West, considerably deepened after moving to Arizona with her husband, Max Ernst, in February 1946. Mahon examines the influence of native artifacts on Surrealism at large and particularly the couple's shared interest in the works of the Hopi people. While Surrealism was ascending its global reach, a "fertile exchange" (110) between tribal artifacts and Surrealist thought merged within Tanning's most intimate, domestic concerns. Life at their Sedona homestead consequently shifted Tanning's practice toward a more expansive engagement with landscape that incorporated her own distinctive mode of mythmaking.

Ernst and Tanning were compelled to leave their desert home due to Ernst's inability to renew his visa. The couple relocated to Paris in 1949, where a new set of visual motifs emerged within Tanning's ecopoetics. Mahon argues that Tanning turned toward an "urban containment" (142) that supplanted her more expansive landscapes with close-

cropped compositions of erotic play. This highly stylized period offers a different sort of vastness than her Western landscapes. Tanning's play with ideas of *eros*, once again turning to literature to fuel an *érotisme noir*, continued to intersect with other Surrealist preoccupations, such as animism. These themes coalesced into a distinctly Surrealist ecopoetics that, as argued by Mahon, is expressed through Tanning's characteristically stylized gesture of kaleidoscopic color blending with sensuous, curvilinear forms.

In the final chapter, place once again becomes the impetus for a transformation in Tanning's practice, when along with Ernst she moved to the French countryside and shifted to textile forms. She returns to the domestic, though now at the level of material process, producing sculptures from fabric and "emphasising the sense of touch to elicit a corporeal response from the viewer" (163). She does not forget the landscape in these works but rather plays with how sensory objectives and formal perception can morph an object into suggestive scenes. In a distinctly Surrealist mode, she appropriates and subverts everyday objects and materials, destabilizing their conventional associations. It is within this body of work that an ecopoetical eroticism matured through the convergence of soft sculpture and domesticity, once again unsettling prevailing gender politics.

Mahon concludes as she began with a painting: Tanning's *Woman Artist, Nude, Standing* (1985–87) "employs Surrealist ecopoetics to problematise the categories of woman artist and canonical nude" (194). The composition is suffused with a golden hue that Mahon connects to the previously recurring sunflower motif and, by extension, to Tanning's later floral paintings. The interrelation of language and visual art takes center stage, as the interchangeability of the term "language" with "landscape" is foregrounded with respect to both interiority and exteriority. Mahon concludes that it is through these various "landscapes" that a Surrealist ecopoetics may best be apprehended.

A particularly significant dimension of this book is Mahon's insistence on moving away from a "psychobiographical" reading of the artist's work. On the other hand, Grimberg's biography is vital for anyone interested in primary source material, as the monograph details Lamba's legacy as grounded in the letters and diary entries provided. Rather than treating biography as a mere catalyst for artistic subject matter, Mahon employs Tanning's life narrative to support an account of the formative influences of language, landscape, and the fantastical, thereby further consolidating the book's central argument for Tanning as not only a Surrealist but a groundbreaking artist of ecopoetics. •

Allison Westerfield is a doctoral candidate at the University of Florida. Her dissertation, tentatively titled *Queen of Pentacles: Women Surrealists & The Tarot of Pamela Colman Smith*, argues that a sustained engagement with occult symbolism, specifically the iconography of tarot, shaped the visual practices of twentieth-century artists, in particular, women Surrealists. She is a recipient of a number of awards and fellowships, most recently in 2026 as a Beinecke Fellow at Yale University. Outside of academia, she works as an independent curator, and in 2023–2024, she co-curated *Surrealism at the Harn: A Centennial Celebration* and curated *Double Space: Women Photographers and Surrealism* at the New Orleans Museum of Art.

Notes

1. Angela Hume and Gillian Osborne, eds., *Ecopoetics: Essays in the Field* (University of Iowa Press, 2018), 3.

We Will Go Right Up to the Sun: Female Pioneers of Geometric Abstraction

Edited by Astrid Ihle, Julia Nebenführ, and René Zechlin
Wilhelm-Hack-Museum / Hirmer, 2025

Reviewed by Weronika Malek-Lubawski

Since the time of Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* (1915), geometric abstraction was self-historicized by male artists who often described their practices as singular, radical, and first of their kind. As curators and historians replicated such narratives, geometric abstraction was canonized from a male perspective and women artists sidelined from the modernist canon. Subsequent historical revisions dispelled these myths of originality and emphasized abstraction's artistic networks. Accompanying the exhibition at the Wilhelm-Hack-Museum (Ludwigshafen am Rhein, Germany), the bilingual catalogue, *We Will Go Right Up to the Sun: Female Pioneers of Geometric Abstraction*, corrects the erasure of women artists from the histories of abstraction. Edited by the museum's curators Astrid Ihle and Julia Neben-führ, alongside Director René Zechlin, the publication argues for the important interventions by women artists in geometric abstraction.

As Zechlin explains in the introduction, *We Will Go Right Up to the Sun* fills a historiographic gap in which women's radical contributions to the history of abstraction were omitted and neglected. The richly illustrated catalogue presents short essays, biographies, and over two hundred high-quality color reproductions of abstract artworks created by women. The curatorial essays emphasize women's participation in groups, networks, and theoretical discourse connected to abstraction. The chronological scope of the case studies spans the 1910s to the 1970s, encompassing art by Sonia Delaunay (1885–1979), Sophie Taeuber-Arp (1889–1943), Alexandra Exter (1882–1949), Vera Molnár (1924–2023), Carmen Herrera (1915–2022), Lygia Pape (1927–2004), and many others. The catalogue includes artists of diverse backgrounds, with a particular focus on Latin American and European artists. Despite its ambition for a global scope, it usually spotlights artists active in major art centers, especially Paris.

Collectively, the five curatorial essays from the first half of the catalogue argue for women's continued presence in the history of abstraction, demonstrated in the sheer number of artists featured—sixty—invested in proto-abstraction, formal interventions, global contexts, and artistic networks; this is followed by thematically grouped reproductions spotlighting individual artists. The authors emphasize how formal solutions implemented by women artists were as radical as those of their male contemporaries and often preceded them. For example, Marlow Moss (1889–1958) introduced the double line to Neoplasticism a few years before Piet Mondrian decided to do so in his paintings (164, Fig. 1). Moss's compositions seemingly follow Mondrian's formal principles, like straight angles and primary colors, but her double line makes the composition more vibrant and less rigid than his single-line paintings. The authors reassess techniques traditionally associated with women, especially those often relegated to the category of "craft," such as in the weavings of Anni Albers (1899–1994), which required meticulous, rational planning not only at the level of formal compositions but as an inherent quality of fiber and textile practice and teaching (102). The exclusion of male artists, except when relevant to women's histories, is a curatorial choice granting women the spotlight and correcting inequalities arising from researching underrepresented women artists and privileged male artists together, a bias prevalent in the historiographic discussions of artist couples (44–45).

Maria Lluïsa Faxedas' essay, "The Medium is the Message: On a Feminist Reading of Geometric Abstraction," further elaborates the omission of women from these histories. Faxedas contextualizes how the universalist, formal language of geometric abstraction was considered incompatible with women artists, for whom patriarchal society and discourse attributed emotional attitudes in contradiction to "rational" art-making, mathematical rigor, or intellectual distance (24–25). This resulted in gendered binaries wherein women were permitted to approach abstraction only through direct "feeling." Geometric abstraction's patriarchal discourse was even replicated in feminist scholarship in the 1970s, which distanced itself from formalism and nonobjectivity, focusing on women's role in other avant-garde movements (24). Women artists' involvement in geometric abstraction, Faxedas argues, was radical and political, and even though abstraction did not appear to openly reference the real world and its problems, it was politically relevant that women continued to express themselves in a visual language that society believed they were incapable of pursuing (27).

While Faxedas' essay is a key historiographic text of the catalogue, the publication opens with Julia Voss's "Female Abstraction: The Last Nine Hundred Years." Voss discusses selected examples of abstract images produced by women before abstraction emerged as a modernist concept. Beginning with the medieval miniature based on the visions of Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1179), Voss demonstrates that abstract imagery was always present in women's artistic production. Unlike Faxedas, who emphasized rationality in women's abstract art, Voss introduces examples drawn from the visionary and the metaphysical. She discusses female psychics and artists who were inspired by them, calling forth Georgina Houghton (1814–1884) and Wilhelmine Assmann (1862–c. 1932), who worked in a trance state. She draws a compelling connection between von Bingen and Hilma af Klint (1862–1944), a Swedish artist now well-known as one of the precursors of modern abstraction, who produced *Paintings for the Temple* (1906–15), an extraordinary series of non-representational works. Af Klint's personal notes list von Bingen and other female visionaries as possible sources of inspiration (18). Voss and Faxedas' essays complement each other, showing that for women artists geometric abstraction can be rooted both in visionary experiences and feelings and in rationality and rigor.

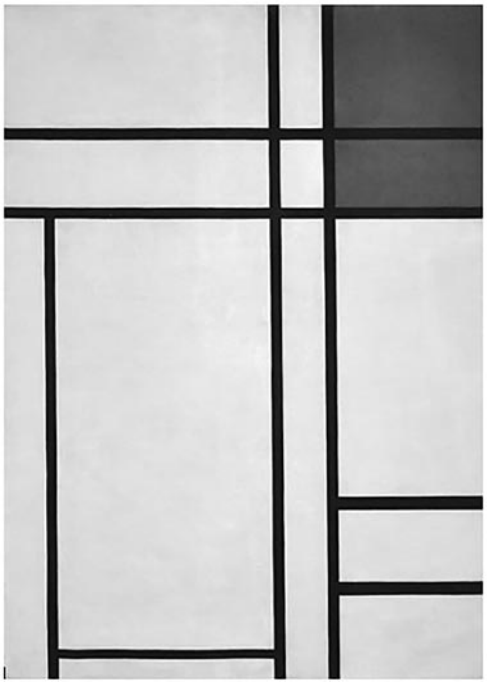


Fig. 1. Marlow Moss, *Composition à double trait et plan bleu* (1934), oil on canvas, 28 1/2" x 21 1/2". De Vleeshal Collection, Middelburg, Netherlands.

The following three short essays engage with the concepts of networks and geographies related to women works and careers. Julia Nebenführ's "The Absolute Freedom of Abstraction: Thoughts on the Line in Works by Sophie Taeuber-Arp and Marlow Moss" examines the line as key formal element in the oeuvre of both artists, noting the increase of its formal significance after they networked with like-minded artists in Paris. In her chronological and geographical presentation of Latin American women abstractionists, Andrea Giunta resists center-periphery narratives, briefly recapping careers in Uruguay, Venezuela, Argentina, Cuba, Chile, and Guatemala. Finally, Astrid Ihle's "Paris—City of Women? Women Artists in the Post-war Period," argues for this major metropolis's destination for women artists in the late 1940s and the early 1950s, despite losing its relevance as a hub of modern art after World War II. Moving there allowed Molnár, Herrera, and Loló Soldevilla (1901–1971) to interact with artists active on the Parisian scene before the war, generating encounters with interwar works helpful for their careers

and their thinking about art. Together, these essays show the artistic impact of circuits of movement and migration (Nebenführ, Ihle), and the development of abstraction outside of European artistic centers and global urban metropoles (Giunta).

The second part of the catalogue includes an impressive set of over two hundred artworks spanning the revolutionary avant-garde in Russia to the global rise of geometric abstraction in the 1960s. Sections focus on broader topics, for example "Female Bauhaus Modernism," and formal developments like "The Field of Tension Between Color and Form," introduce general contexts, and more fully discuss the lives and works (with separate subsections) of selected artists. Brief biographical entries are included as well as a chronology of geometric abstraction from the 1870s to 1980. The catalogue concludes with an illustrated list of avant-garde periodicals related to abstract art, which were presumably featured in the exhibition; however, their significance is not contextualized beyond briefly captioned information on which women artists contributed to or were featured in each magazine.

The wealth of images and artists in *We Will Go Right Up to the Sun* is a strong starting point for non-specialist readers hoping to gain a broad overview, and especially useful to educators wishing to incorporate women's abstraction into their lectures. What feels like a missed opportunity, however, is the catalogue's unrealized potential to fully present a history of geometric abstraction that is complete without any contributions by male artists. To do that, however, this publication would require more historical contextualization (i.e., more sustained discussion of various movements, the place of abstraction within the broader art scene and social context, etc.), and the current catalogue entries are quite general. Additionally, a reader not yet familiar with the history of modernism will not necessarily gain a sufficient overview of the stakes and challenges of abstraction in the twentieth century. For example, some sections reference the involvement of women artists in the groups Cercle et Carré and Abstraction-Création in Paris. Without additional information about the Parisian art scene, the reader only learns in passing that the group emerged in opposition to Surrealism and its members had worried about the dwindling interest in abstraction in the 1930s (126). This so-called fading interest provided opportunities for artists, who had formerly belonged to different movements (or no artist-groups), to unite for discussion. In this case it would be beneficial to highlight this background, as it explains how women artists integrated themselves more easily into Abstraction-Création than more exclusionary groups. Similarly, a desire for deeper contextualization is especially pressing in the catalogue's engagement with the hierarchy of artistic centers and (likely unintentionally) replicates Imperial histories. The focus often feels Eurocentric: most of the spotlighted non-European artists had either studied or lived in Paris, and this narrative cherishes artists physically present in France (i.e., Delaunay, Taeuber-Arp, Moss) but excludes those who networked with Parisian art movements while living elsewhere, most notably Katarzyna Kobro (1898–1951). This focus may be dictated by the availability of artworks for the exhibition yet it prevents a fuller global history.

On Imperial themes, the term "Russian Avant-Garde" deserves greater critical interrogation, an omission due to space but nevertheless important at a time when other museums, scholars, and publications have dismantled narratives that historically obscure the ethnonational diversity of artists from the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. The section about Exter focuses on her stage designs, travels to the West, and ties to Constructivism and Cubo-Futurism but overlooks her education and work in Kyiv (current Ukraine), her Jewish heritage, and her involvement in the Jewish cultural organization Kultur-Lige. The artist's personal identity and diverse artistic networks should introduce the richness of Exter's experiences and art.

We Will Go Right Up to the Sun is an impressive and beautifully published history that successfully showcases the radical, diverse, and pioneering formal strategies implemented by women artists in a variety of geometric modes of abstraction, proving that this history is complete without men. •

Weronika Malek-Lubawski is a Lecturer of Art History, Theory, and Criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and an Adjunct Faculty at the College of DuPage. She holds a Ph.D. in Art History from the University of Southern California. Her research concerns the avant-garde artistic networks of the 1920s and the 1930s, their subsequent historicization in the postwar era, and the theories of abstraction formulated in Poland as a result of the artists' intellectual dialogue with both France and the Soviet Union.

Anna Ancher: Painting Light

By Helen Hillyard and Mette Harbo Lehmann
Dulwich Picture Gallery, 2025

Seeing Silence: The Paintings of Helene Schjerfbeck

Edited by Dita Amory, with contributions by Patricia G. Berman, Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff, Zoe de Bretagne, Silvia A. Centeno, Charlotte Hale, Max Hollein, and Elizabeth Peyton
The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Yale University Press, 2025

Reviewed by Nancy E. Green



Fig. 1. Anna Ancher, *Harvesters* (1905), oil on canvas. 22 1/8" x 26 1/2". Skagens Museum.

Two recent museum exhibitions and catalogues tell the tales of two strong Nordic women who successfully navigated late nineteenth-century gender expectations to become recognized—then and now—for their talent and their artistic creativity. Anna Ancher and Helene Schjerfbeck were respected for their innovation and perseverance, and they emerge as shining stars of their era, creating works that still strongly resonant with viewers today. Though they never met, they shared many similar experiences despite how different their lives were, and how disparate the art works they created. They traveled to the same places, admired the same artists, and had friends in common, and they were successful woman artists at a time when this distinction was rare. But Ancher operated within a supportive community of like-minded artists; Schjerfbeck flourished while working in isolation.

Most women artists born in remote Denmark in the 1860s would never have reached the heights that Anna Brøndum Ancher (1859–1935) achieved. She was one of the few lucky ones: Born into a supportive family, she married a non-competitive artist-husband who encouraged her to keep painting, even after the birth of their daughter. Additionally, she was raised and lived her entire life in one of the most beautiful areas in Scandinavia, the northernmost town of Skagen, which Hans Christian Anderson referred to as the "desert" situated between two seas of the Skagerrak and the Kattegat. Ancher understood the grandeur of this place, "as a site of confluence and intersection,"(115) with its unique light that enticed artists during the glorious summer months.

Artists first "discovered" Skagen and created an artist community in 1872, when Anna was still a child. Many visiting artists boarded at her mother's Brøndums Hotel, still in existence today, sparking an interest that turned into a life's passion; some took time to informally instruct the young girl, and on such summer visits she admired their work, long before they were entered in the Salon. It was an intimate introduction to the creative arts, and she reveled in it. In her essay "An Artist in Her Own Right," Mette Harbo Lehmann describes these early years in detail, describing how the Skagen community and her family, particularly the female members, formed a supportive cocoon for the aspiring artist.

Michael Ancher arrived from Copenhagen in 1874, befriending and encouraging Anna. A year later, when she was just sixteen, he courted her, though her mother encouraged her to pursue art studies in Copenhagen before settling down. The Royal Danish Academy did not accept female students at the time, so for three winter seasons she studied with painter Vilhelm Kyhn. Soon after she arrived, her mother, whose own marriage was less than happy, wrote to her: "For future, you must write and say what you need. Nothing is dearer to me than to pay for your learning; you know that" (23). She wanted Anna to experience independence and to pursue her dreams, as she had not been able to herself.

This support continued throughout her life. When her only child, Helga, was born in 1883, Anna's mother and sisters helped care for the child, and while some, including her former teacher, Kyhn, expected her to give up her art to put her energies into domestic obligations, her husband wasn't among them. In a letter to his friend Georg Brandes, "Michael Ancher was furious, expressing his outrage at length" (24). He was always proud of his wife's work and would never have expected her to give up her career, and was taken aback

that her former teacher would even suggest it.

And why should she be expected to give up her calling? From the beginning, the critics noticed her and marked her promise, especially her use of light. As Lehmann notes in her second essay, "Life in a Sunbeam," "For Ancher, the entirety of Skagen was her studio, and its residents were her models. Her 'life in a sunbeam' extended beyond artistic choices and preferred motifs—it also reflected her privileged position in a broader sense. This privilege was not defined by monetary wealth but by being surrounded by a supportive network of family, friends, and colleagues who provided her with the opportunity and framework to flourish as an artist" (81).

Beyond Skagen, it is clear that an extended visit to Paris in 1889 with her husband had a momentous effect on her development. She attended the school of Alfred Phillippe Roll and received corrections from Puvis Pierre de Chavannes. Together the Anchers attended the Exhibition Universalle, where she would have seen the work of Monet, Pissarro, and Cézanne as well as the work of Japanese artists. She may also have seen Schjerfbeck's painting, which won a bronze medal at the Exposition. Hereafter, Anna employed more vibrant colors, and she felt emboldened to experiment more and to expand her repertoire to include paintings made en plein air, something usually associated with male artists of her generation. As a woman artist she was expected to adhere to the "assigned" topics available to women—domestic scenes and homely interiors. This was not Anna's way and had never been.

In one of her best known paintings, *Harvesters* (1905; Fig. 1), Ancher offers a sun-infused field with three figures moving horizontally across the space, right to left. The perspective, with its high horizon line, is striking. The viewer appears to be seated below, directly in front of the action, peering through the tail grass. The figures are less important though than what they represent: nostalgia for an agrarian society on the wane, the front figure with a scythe, harbinger of death, as a counterpoint to the fertility of the golden wheat, ready to harvest.

As co-author Helen Hillyard points out in her essay, "Looking Back, Looking Forwards: Anna Ancher's Artistic Influences," Ancher remained open to new ideas, new artists, and new places. She states, "One of Ancher's greatest strengths was the way in which she was able to combine visual influences from both past and present, weaving them together, while also pulling on certain threads, to create work that was entirely original. Through this, she was able to create fresh interpretations of historic themes, riffing on Old Masters while incorporating the colour, light and atmospheric effects being pushed in French art of the period" (111). The Old Masters and contemporary French artists would also prove a huge influence on Schjerfbeck when she studied there throughout the 1880s.

Ancher admired the work of the Dutch Masters and particularly the paintings of Rembrandt as well as Pieter de Hooch and Johannes Vermeer. Among the Anchers' collections were many reproductions by Rembrandt: she commented on the "glow" he affected "deep within her" (91). Hillyard notes that "The decision to depict people's faces as they truly were, unvarnished and with an emphasis on truth to nature, was shared by both Rembrandt and the Skagen painters. Their focus on the, often harsh, reality of working life stood in contrast with the more romanticized attitude of the previous generation of Danish artists, the painters of the so-called Danish Golden Age (c. 1815–1850)" (102).

Finally, Hillyard notes in "'The Desert Between Two Roaring Seas': Anna Ancher and Skagen," that though Ancher travelled extensively in Europe, and she and her husband kept a place in Copenhagen, Skagen was ever her subject. As art historian Karl Madsen wrote in 1929, "She was the first in Danish art to really understand how to capture a ray of sunlight" (38). Whether an empty interior or a view of workers in a field of grain, her command of that extraordinary light is ever present: "Anna Ancher had the courage to stand out. She did so every day of her life. Her many repetitions of similar motifs and her many sketches reveal her persistence and dedication" (81).

The catalogue is beautifully illustrated and opens with a comprehensive timeline of her life. For those who are just learning about her, the catalogue proves a thorough introduction, and for those who are already familiar with the artist, it provides many details to help appreciate Ancher on a whole new level. She was blessed with great love, from family and friends, but also great talent that was allowed to soar because of that love.

Though her contemporary shared many common experiences, it does not appear that Ancher and Finnish artist Helene Schjerfbeck (1862–1946) ever met. Like Ancher, Schjerbeck had a close relationship with her mother, although perhaps not as congenial, for she was her mother's caretaker for much of her adult life, and many of her personal decisions had to be made taking this situation into consideration; although, when Helene was sick herself, it was her mother who stepped into the nursing role.

In "All I Desire to Do is Paint," Dita Amory explores the trajectory of Schjerbeck's life, whose artistic talents were recognized at an even younger age than Anna's. At the precocious age of eleven, she was accepted into the Drawing School of the Finnish Art Society. Four years later, she entered the private academy of Adolf von Becker who had trained in Paris with Thomas Couture, Léon Bonnat, and, for a short time, Gustave Courbet. Courbet taught his students to paint only what they could see in Nature, a tenet central to the writings of English artist and critic John Ruskin, and the Pre-Raphaelite artists who admired him.

Like Ancher, Schjerfbeck was born in a Nordic country, far removed from European art centers. As she matured, she won several government grants that allowed her to study in Paris with a coterie of young Finnish women artists, her "painter sisters," (11) as she referred to them. These grants were a lifeline and introduced her to another world. As Amory notes, "She pursued painting for a lifetime with a tenacious will to

answer her own calling, to realize her own singularity, despite adversity. She prevailed in a country wracked for much of her life by civil and world war. She largely resisted trends in art—whether the late-nineteenth-century history painting that glorified Finland, or a new modernism germinating in Paris and in the ascendency in Europe's capitals" (15).

Over the years, Schjerfbeck admired and copied the work of many artists, but the Old Masters were of greatest importance to her. While traveling to paint works by them for the Finnish Art Society, she found herself "increasingly enraptured by the Old Masters. I experience a certain kind of revelation when I study their works for a long time, and this is done best by drawing them" (44). In her essay, "In and Out of Register," Patricia G. Berman notes "The artist was exceptionally and cannily receptive to confrontations with historical works of art; whether through direct study or via reproductions, they were equally generative" (43). She first mentions El Greco in 1912, and a few years later would take up his muted palette of white, black, yellow ochre and cinnabar. But she never slavishly copied—she consciously picked and chose the elements in other artists that attracted her and that could help her achieve her own vision.

With her "painter sisters" in Paris, Schjerfbeck studied at the school for drawing and painting run exclusively for women by the eccentric Madame Trélat de Vigny. Tutors included Bonnat, Jean-Léon Gérôme, and Jules Bastien-Lepage, the latter widely popular among the young art students studying in Paris.

Over the next ten years, Schjerfbeck would receive new government grants and spend her time purposefully pursuing her calling, traveling to Paris and Brittany. It was in Pont Aven that she met and became engaged to a young, unnamed British artist. But he backed out when he heard her father had died of tuberculosis, afraid the disease was hereditary. She also befriended the Austrian painter Marianne Preindlsberger (1855–1937), who married the British artist Adrian Scott Stokes.[1] They invited Helene to join them in St. Ives in 1887, where the sea light mesmerized her, much as Skagen light attracted Ancher.



Fig. 2. Helene Schjerbeck, *Girl from Eydtkuhne II* (1927), oil on canvas. 27 1/2" x 21 1/2". Finnish National Gallery Collection, Ateneum Art Museum, Yrgö and Nanny Kaunisto Collection, Jenni Nurminen, photographer.

In 1883, Schjerfbeck had her first painting accepted at the Paris Salon, *Fête Juivre (Sukkot, Feast of Tabernacles)*. While in Paris, she saw the newly discovered Tornabuoni frescoes by Botticelli that were acquired by the Louvre. Copying them, she began to blend a softened palette and matte surfaces into her own work, and eventually, through years of experimentation, such techniques led her towards an increasingly pared-down approach utilizing scrapping and scrubbing of the canvas surface with palette knife and sandpaper.

In 1889, Schjerfbeck's painting, *The Convalescent* (1888), done in St. Ives, was bought by the Finnish government and sent to the 1889 Exposition Universalle, where it was awarded a prestigious bronze medal. It was the first year that Finland had its own pavilion at the Exposition and, interestingly, it was the same year in which new Finnish laws gave women the right to financial independence.

Schjerfbeck suffered from periods of debilitating ill health that forced her to give up her teaching commitments and, often, her painting. Eventually, in 1902, she moved with her mother to the small town of Hyvinkää. When she could paint, it was often difficult: "Full of self-doubt all her life, she found painting agonizing at times and often spent years

on a particular picture. She told her models to look away as she painted them, demanding their silence and refusing to show them the results" (27–28).

In 1915, Schjerbeck's art caught the eye of the forester, artist, and writer Einar Reuter, who traveled to Helsinki to purchase a few of her works from her dealer, Gösta Stenman. Upon meeting in person, they discovered many areas of common interest and began an intense correspondence that over the years included over a thousand letters from her. Reuter was twenty years her junior, and when he announced his engagement to a young Swedish woman, Schjerbeck was devastated, although she eventually picked up her correspondence and renewed their friendship. Under the pseudonym H. Ahtela, Reuter published the first biography of Schjerfbeck in 1917. It was the same year as her first solo exhibition of one hundred fifty-nine works, orchestrated by Stenman and her brother, architect Magnus Schjerfbeck. It was a success.

In 1923 Schjerfbeck's mother passed away and, two years later, the artist moved to Tammisaari where she remained until her final move to Sweden in 1944. By this time her work was much sought after though her style continued to evolve as she experimented with a variety of tools and a pared down surface. Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff's essay, "Reflections of Time," examines the development of Schjerbeck's portrait style as it evolved throughout her life. In her later years she produced a remarkable series of twenty self-portraits, scrapping, manipulating, and reducing herself to the point of disappearing. While seemingly simple, these paintings are anything but: "Painting is difficult, and it wears you out body and soul when it doesn't come out right—and yet, it is my only joy in life" (33).

Charlotte Hale and Silvia A. Centano's essay, "'A Harsh Painting with a Strong Expression,'" provides an in-depth look at Schjerfbeck's experimental techniques in which all the elements of creation are exposed, "so that for viewers the final appearance of the work is inseparable from its materiality" (67). The scrapping, rubbing, and scratching on her surfaces provides an immediacy and rawness to her compositions, particularly the later works, as she becomes more confident. This is particularly apparent in her later still lifes, self-portraits, and portraits, such as *Girl from Eydtkuhne II* (1927; Fig. 2), in which some areas of the canvas seem as if they have been scrapped raw, while other areas, like the blue of the figure's dress, are layered more thickly. The figure seems tentative, as if she would prefer to not be here, confronting us; parts of her seem to be literally melding into the weave of the canvas, released from our intrusion into her sphere.

The final section of the catalogue, "Schjerfbeck and Portraiture: A Conversation," records a discussion between the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Max Hollein, and the contemporary portrait artist, Elizabeth Peyton (b. 1965), discussing Schjerfbeck's work. Peyton had not previously encountered Schjerfbeck's paintings, and she initially found the early work, from the 1880s and 1890s, the more accessible and easy to intersect with, connecting Schjerfbeck's freedom to that of Georgia O'Keeffe (1887–1986), who found her own place of productive solitude while teaching in an isolated community in West Texas. Zoe de Bretagne's very thorough "Chronology" provides a useful timeline of the artist's life.

For Ancher and Schjerfbeck, place mattered considerably, but what they needed from that place was wildly different. Ancher thrived in a community of artists and family members while Schjerfbeck needed quietude and the relative peace of isolation, with few distractions. Both have left us with the impression of their own completeness within their work. These two catalogues, *Painting Light* and *Seeing Silence* offer readers a wonderful opportunity to get to know these important women artists on their own terms. ●

Nancy Green was the Gale and Ira Drukier Curator of European and American Art, Prints, and Drawings, 1800–1945, at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University. She joined the Johnson Museum staff in 1985, and during her thirty-seven years there, organized dozens of exhibitions at the Johnson Museum and elsewhere. While the subjects of these exhibitions are wide-ranging, her principal interest is in American and European art from the nineteenth century to the present. She has published numerous articles, exhibition guides, and catalogues including *Japan*/America and *A Room of Their Own: The Bloomsbury Artists in American Collections*; other traveling shows include *Byrdcliffe: An American Arts and Crafts Colony;* and *Susan Rothenberg: Drawings and Prints* (1998). She continues to teach for the Cornell Adult University summer and travel programs, lectures for Smithsonian Associates, is a certified appraiser of prints, and is working on a book about couples of the Arts and Crafts Movement.

Notes

1. Even though Schjerbeck and Ancher never met, they most likely knew of each other through the Stokes, who spent the summers of 1885 and 1886 in Skagen where they became close friends of Michael and Anna Ancher.

Anne Vallayer-Coster

By Kelsey Brosnan
Lund Humphries / Getty Publications, 2026

Reviewed by Tori Champion

The gush of a ripe tomato, the reflective glint of a sickle, the crack of a smoking rifle, the cool surface of a marble sculpture, the crisp scent of freshly harvested celery stalks. To linger over a still life painting by the eighteenth-century French artist Anne Vallayer-Coster (1744–1818), such as *The Attributes of Hunting and Gardening* (1774; Fig. 1), is to be pleasantly inundated by sensorial prompts, triggering imagination and memory. In the first monograph dedicated to the artist in more than two decades, Kelsey Brosnan illuminates the extraordinary range of virtuosically-rendered textures in Vallayer-Coster's work, textures that "are directly inspired by the embodied acts of looking, touching, smelling, and tasting" (11).

Across six chapters largely designated by subject matter, Brosnan situates Vallayer-Coster's paintings and practice within Enlightenment philosophical and cultural discourse on the senses.

Following a brief introduction that sets out basic biographical details, reviews prior scholarship, and introduces the book's focus, Brosnan outlines the theories surrounding Vallayer-Coster's early training and her admission to the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture. Like many women artists of the period, details of her instruction are scarce. Madeleine Françoise Basseporte (1701–1780), draughtswoman of the Royal Botanical Gardens in Paris and godmother to Vallayer-Coster's eldest sister, is often thought to have been her instructor. There are competing period claims, however, that Vallayer-Coster was trained by Marie-Thérèse Reboul Vien (1735–1806), royal academician and natural history artist. Reboul, like Basseporte, advertised training in flower painting in the press, and it was Reboul who accompanied and sponsored Vallayer-Coster on the day of her admission to the Académie.



Fig. 1. Anne Vallayer-Coster, *The Attributes of Hunting and Gardening* (1774), oil on canvas, 60" x 54". National Trust, Basildon Park, Berkshire. © National Trust Images.

As Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun (1755–1842) would do four years later, Vallayer-Coster submitted works with allegorical subject matter as her reception piece to secure admission to the Académie in 1770. Though Vallayer-Coster would engage with a range of non-figural allegorical iconography, these first two pertained specifically to the arts (*The Attributes of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture* and *The Attributes of Music*, both 1769). Brosnan employs the former, a still life featuring sculptural models, architectural plans, paintbrushes and a loaded palette, paper, and a porte-crayon holding red and white chalk, to argue that that the balanced presence of painting and drawing tools in the composition demonstrates Vallayer-Coster's awareness of some of the most prominent theoretical debates on the merits of line versus color that had rung through the Académie's halls for over a century. The allegories prompt us to consider the ways in which Vallayer-Coster is thinking metaphorically about her subject matter and pushing at the boundaries of her genre when the study moves on to the artist's more traditional still life paintings.

In a chapter on food, Brosnan contextualizes Vallayer-Coster's paintings within the culinary culture of eighteenth- century France, "which linked the philosophers of the French Enlightenment and the fishwives of Les Halles food market" (42). Proceeding painting by painting, Brosnan connects the varied elements of gastronomic

subject matter through a survey of culinary treatises, cultivation manuals, and guidance for selecting foodstuffs at the market, such as Antoine-Joseph Dezallier d'Argenville's instructions for how to judge the ripeness of produce. Brosnan productively relates the culinary still lifes to networks of exchange and the marketplace, highlighting working class women's labor, which Vallayer-Coster would probably not have been engaged in but certainly witnessed, and examining how and where households would have sourced the various foods and dining accoutrements the artist represented. For example, Brosnan makes the remarkable observation that lobsters, which feature as a rare delicacy in highly-prized Dutch still lifes of the previous century, were readily available in Paris given their greater prevalence along French coastlines. Thus, in Vallayer-Coster's compositions, lobsters could allude to a more accessible, regional cuisine at the same time that they evoked the lavish, sought-after paintings of the Dutch Golden Age. The artist was also actively making more contemporary references—Brosnan compares her paintings throughout with those of Jean-Siméon Chardin, from whom Vallayer-Coster borrowed a number of motifs across her career in what must have been acts of both homage and rivalry.

Largely excluded from the practice of hunting on the basis of her gender, "Vallayer-Coster was obliged to imagine the hunt's pleasures from a distance," (66) Bronsan observes, and in doing so the artist turned the focus of her paintings of guns and game towards the textures of its material culture. While Brosnan's choice to focus on the still lifes at the expense of Vallayer-Coster's figurative work is effective for the contextualizing aim of this study, it seems less necessary that the book should lack discussion of the auditory sensations that could be prompted by the artist's still lifes. Inclusion of period conceptualization of the aural sciences and perceptions of sound would have been a welcome addition to an already robust discussion. One fascinating exception is Brosnan's recognition that the gun's explosive noise was often claimed in the period as a principal deterrent to women's participation in shooting.

Vallayer-Coster turns the gun as phallic symbol (almost literally) on its head by picturing firearms lying prone, often underneath other objects or animals, and from oblique angles. Brosnan compellingly argues that these instances of "visually frustrating" (71) perspective suggest a knowledge acquired by observing these weapons directly whilst simultaneously compromising the gun's "legibility and potency" (73). Moreover, by affording unprecedented attention to the range of textures available in a hunting still life, Brosnan demonstrates that Vallayer-Coster may have been "subtly undermining [the firearm's] lethal function and its proud symbolism of masculine violence and power" (73).

In eighteenth-century Paris, shells were objects of fascination and aesthetic attraction for members of elite taste-making communities. From the 1730s, they became a shared pursuit of artists, scientists, and collectors. The book's chapter on shells contextualizes one of Vallayer-Coster's most famous paintings, *Still Life with Seashells and Coral*, within this cultural environment of polite collecting and the publication of three major texts: the luxury merchant Edme-François Gersaint's *Catalogue raisonné des coquilles et autres curiositiés* (1736), which accompanied the first major auction of marine specimens; Dezallier d'Argenville's collecting guide and connoisseurship treatise *La conchyliologie* (first edition 1742); and Carl Linnaeus's multi-volume classificatory text *Systema Naturae*.

Throughout, Brosnan describes Vallayer-Costers's "seductive" paintings with equally delicious descriptive language, writing of the large conch shell in the foreground of the 1769 painting that "thick, coagulated touches of white impasto highlight the slick outer lip and a delicate seam of a darker pink stands for the conch's interior fold," which "appears as soft and slippery as the body of the sea creature that was once housed within it" (89). This acknowledgement of the shell's living inhabitant places the artist in even closer dialogue with Dezallier d'Argenville, who included the mollusk body in illustrations for the second edition of his treatise published in 1757, and Reboul, who in the same year produced hundreds of detailed etchings of specimens, many including their animal maker, to accompany a volume on Senegalese shells by the naturalist Michel Adanson. Brosnan also examines the associations between shells and female anatomy, placing Vallayer-Coster in conversation with Marie-Marguerite Biheron (1719–1795), a student and close friend of Basseporte's who gained recognition for producing highly-accurate wax anatomical models, including life-size models of the female reproductive system with moveable parts. The two women shared a common patron in Queen Marie Antoinette and may have known each other.

Flowers and the pleasing scents they exuded were a welcome escape from even the luxurious halls of Versailles, which, to quote Marie Antoinette's perfumer, "could turn the stomach with its dreadful odors" (96). In a chapter focused on scent and perfume, Vallayer-Coster's floral still lifes speak to another element of women's lived experience in early-modern France: the cultivation of knowledge pertaining to the medicinal, cosmetic, and metaphorical uses of flowers. Flowers, both real and artificial, as well as the perfumes derived from them, were carefully chosen by women as means of bodily adornment and self-expression.[1] Brosnan asks how smell informed Vallayer-Coster's process, indicating that these painted forms may not only have evoked particular scents for viewers, but that the artist employed an "olfactory texture" in which "fluid touches of color specifically imitate the liquid sources of a flower's natural, ephemeral scent, as well as the artificial, concentrated perfumes derived from them" (99). Flower paintings represent around a third of Vallayer-Coster's oeuvre, yet she has become most known for this genre—Brosnan suggests that it is not simply because she was prolific, but because of the

association of flowers with women and their "ephemeral beauty" (114).

Vallayer-Coster's practice diminished towards the end of her life, in the years after the Revolution, which may have been the result of several factors, including a marriage that "eliminated the urgency of painting to support herself" (109) and the drying up of royal and aristocratic patronage. Floral studies were the only area of her practice she maintained, perhaps owing to the perceived apolitical nature of modestly sized flower paintings. However, in these years she also pursued a more diverse array of activities. Vallayer-Coster created designs for tapestries and produced pen-and-ink drawings of flowers for a series of prints engraved and published around 1810. Her floral watercolors were collected by the Empress Josephine.

Across her career, Vallayer-Coster regularly displayed her work in academic salon exhibitions, from 1771 until 1817, the year before her death at age seventy-three. An Appendix, which concludes the book, documents the dozens of paintings the artist exhibited in a forty-six-year span. Compiling subject and size information from printed exhibition guides, Brosnan meticulously provides up-to-date titles and current locations for over eighty paintings. The thorough research and attention dedicated to the artist, as well as the generatively contextual approach applied to the study of her compositions, all achieved by Brosnan in this richly-illustrated volume, will be an invaluable resource for current and future scholars of Vallayer-Coster's oeuvre. ●

Tori Champion is the Andrew W. Mellon Curatorial Fellow in Prints, Drawings, and Photographs at the RISD Museum, and recently completed her PhD in the School of Art History at the University of St Andrews. Her research focuses on the histories of women's artmaking, patronage, and representation, as well as the practice of natural history illustration and traditions of shared authorship in the early modern period. Her scholarship has been published in *Journal18*, and forthcoming articles will appear in the *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* and the edited volume, *Captivity: Assembling Nature's Histories* (University of Toronto Press).

Notes

1. Zara Kesterton, "Artificial Flowers in the Credit Records of an Eighteenth-Century French Fashion Merchant," *The Historical Journal* 67, no. 5 (2024): 974–1003.

A Feast of Fruit and Flowers: Women Still Life Painters of the Seventeenth Century and Beyond

Edited by Bryn Critz Schockmel with contributions by Catherine Powell-Warren, Joaneath Spicer, and Eve Straussman-Pflanzer
The Hyde Collection, 2025

Reviewed by Oana Stan

Still life, and women artists' prominent role and involvement in the history of this genre, is the surprising subject tackled by The Hyde Collection. The museum's recent exhibition and accompanying catalogue focuses *only* on works by female artists, an introductory treatment to the subject in light of its virtual novelty that describes the origin of still-life and why women, at the forefront of its creation, occupied a sizeable part. *A Feast of Fruit & Flowers* analyzes in broad brushstrokes the subgenres of floral and fruit still life as well as scientific botanical illustration at the very start of botanical science.

Indeed, the history of still life has been deeply marked by women's sustained participation. The historiographical trope that explains their extensive presence in this pictorial genre rests on the fact that the artistic establishment, expressing itself through art theory, constructed a hierarchy of genres that placed still life at the very bottom. This hierarchy, first formulated in ancient Roman texts, such as Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, was then reiterated by Leon Battista Alberti, and, famously, by the first art historian in the history of Western art, Giorgio Vasari. All ensuing art theory, produced either in the Italian peninsula or in the Low Countries—to name only two prominent artistic centers of the Early Modern period—perpetuated this hierarchy. At the top sat *historia*, which designates the rendering of biblical or mythological narratives and conferred the highest cultural value, and consequently social prestige, upon its practitioners. Then came portrait painting—the other genre in which women artists excelled—followed by genre painting (scenes of everyday life), landscape, and, lastly, still life.

Why did portraits, landscapes, and still lifes rank below history painting? According to most art treatises, they were considered inferior because of their heavy reliance on the observation of nature, a practice thought to call upon sophisticated faculties or knowledge to a minimal or nonexistent degree. Strict imitation of nature was, in this view, a servile exercise, whereas *historia* alone demanded genuine intellectual labor, drawing on invention and learning rather than mere observation—which is precisely what made it the most intellectually prestigious of the genres. As such, still life and portraiture were deemed appropriate pursuits for women who wished to produce art, whether as professionals or amateurs.

The introductory catalogue essay authored by curator Bryn Critz Schockmel deals with this commonplace approach to women artists' specializations and explains why women were hindered from following institutionalized career paths. Schockmel divides her argumentation in two sections: one tracing the overall presence of women in the history of art, the other focusing on the emergence of still life as an independent pictorial genre in sixteenth-century Europe. Her tone sets the editorial vision that caters almost exclusively to an audience mostly unfamiliar with his-

torical women artists, an ambitious undertaking requiring some generalization and turn to the celebrated feminist scholar Linda Nochlin, such as the polemicizing of such modern "male" writers of introductory textbooks, e.g., Jansen and Gombrich, who overlooked women's contributions. Schockmel treats both strands of the essay with the whole of Europe in mind. For practical reasons of brevity, the claims are often applied indiscriminately to different European milieus, such as Italy, the Low Countries, France, or the Iberian Peninsula, suggesting a cultural homogeneity that the actual histories of these regions do not necessarily support. Greater engagement with the cited sources would support her arguments.

What stands out is the insistence on conduct and propriety. While women's exclusion from artistic education had plenty to do with moral prescriptions, Schockmel claims that women producing still lifes in the comfort of their own household "allowed women artists to maintain an unblemished reputation" (11). Indeed, women artists did specialize primarily in specific genres, such as still life or portraiture, but the essay should emphasize more strongly this relationship between coercion and agency. Still life was a popular specialty for women artists also due to its marketability (especially in the Low Countries), therefore, it was not chosen over concern for modesty management, but rather as a sound professional strategy. Stressing the multicausal backdrop of women's preeminence or absence in certain artistic media is a primary discussion in current scholarship, an approach that circumvents moralizing explanations in art history.

Catherine Powell-Warren's essay provides an alternative formulation on women's specialization in still life, arguing for its practicality due to the genre's novelty and lack of ties to historical tradition. Here it is important to keep in mind that women could not access art production through institutional pathways (such as the guild system or emergent art academies), hence women entered still-life "unbound by painterly conventions" (28). A seasoned researcher in botanical illustration and a pioneering specialist in the work of Maria Sybilla Merian (1647–1717) and her workshop, Powell-Warren provides the readers with an overview of women's overwhelming contribution to scientific illustration in the early modern period, connecting the dots between still life and the visual knowledge of nature. In terms of gender, Powell-Warren traces concisely how appreciation for women artists fluctuated over the centuries, how the institutionalization of botanical science pushed women to the margins in the second-half of the seventeenth century, and how women's networks defined the study of botany during the early modern era. The essay equally explores the crucial role of Agnes Block (1629–1704) in the transfer of extra-European species to the Netherlands in her Vijferhof Garden Estate, and situates the position of women in the network surrounding the creation of the extravagant Moninckx Atlas.[1] Powell-Warren succeeds in stating distinctly that the women artists presented made major contributions to the visual culture of their time, generating art full of innovation, skill, and even scientific knowledge, turning women into active participants within a network of art and knowledge production, rather than perpetuate the trope of their participation dictated by social and professional norms.

A Feast of Fruit and Flowers is a modestly sized publication, and the remaining catalogue comprises ten entries that expand exhibition wall descriptions through monographic visual analysis. Among these are the larger repertoires of Fede Galizia (1579–1630), Clara Peeters (1589–1657), Margaretha de Heer (ca. 1600–1658), and Louise Moillon (1610–1696). One finds many potential avenues of art historical study, for example, Galizia's connection to patronage networks in Lombardy, networks which seem to have led to the production of the first free-standing still lifes in the history of European art, produced first by Caravaggio, and then crystallized by her. Another possible avenue for future research stimulated by the catalogue would be a gender and comparative lens on how and why still life emerged in Lombardy at the end of the sixteenth century.

Placing Galizia in a larger artistic geography, for instance, might dispel the persistent trope of the spiritual connotations of flower and fruit painting. A strong comparative thematic model focusing on cultural history is found in the recent exhibition catalogue for *In Full Bloom* (Mauritshuis, 2021), exploring the foundational role women in botany have played, such as Block, Rachel and Anna Ruysch, and the Merian family, and the larger male and female networks of botanical science. There are, naturally, many excellent publications occasioned by exhibitions, such as the *Rachel Ruysch: Nature into Art*, which took on the task of presenting Ruysch monographically for the first time very earnestly, approaching her legacy from a truly pluri-disciplinary perspective.[2]

In her entry on Louise Moillon (c. 1610–1696), Schockmel discusses the French still-life painter's apprenticeship and her activity within the Saint-Germain-des-Prés district of Paris, a milieu distinctly shaped by the community of Flemish artists working there. This is another promising course of discovery: a dedicated study of this specific artistic network—one that produced one of France's few still life painters—and a welcome addition for future scholarship. Moillon was part of the generation of artists that saw the interest in still life grow on the French market, which was particularly slow in accepting it as a genre with cultural caché. Along these lines, another fascinating topic deserving exploration is the Flemish community of artists working in seventeenth-century France that counted very talented women artists among their ranks.

A little known yet captivating artist skillfully presented is Josefa de Óbidos (ca. 1630–1684), a Seville-born artist who became the most famous name of the Portuguese Baroque and whose lasting fame in historiography boasts an extensive line of exhibitions and scholarly publications dedicated to her before the feminist turn in art history of the seventies. Interestingly, despite her considerable domestic popularity, Josefa

remains unknown to the European public. In the same vein as Rachel Ruysch, whose work never fell out of fashion, Josefa does not fit the standard "neglected until recently" narrative. The catalogue provides an introductory platform to share light on the Iberian peninsula, particularly the political environment that led to the formation of the Iberian Union—the administrative polity under which Spain ruled the entire peninsula from 1580 to 1640—and whose artistic geographies are worth exploring in greater detail, placing Josefa within a tradition related to, but divergent from, that of Francisco de Zurbarán.[3]

The epilogue takes the reader through the afterlives of the early modern still-life tradition, offering a few examples of how women artists interacted with this genre in the modern and contemporary period. Again, perhaps conservatively in tone, following the appropriateness of still-life painting for women, in the case of Elizabeth Blachrie Blackwell, for example, a captivating figure that took Merian's experience and work ethic even further during the eighteenth century. Theoretically, however, the book positions the topos of the socially sanctioned participation of women in the genre of still life and botanical illustration. The legacy of still-life painting is manifold, and the field must continue to build the collective biographies and gaps in knowledge that deserve greater scholarship. ●

Oana Stan is a Haarlem-based art historian specializing in early modern Dutch and Italian art. She holds an MA in Renaissance Studies from Utrecht University, where she completed her degree with a thesis on the institutional representation of Dutch and Flemish women artists in collections across the Netherlands and Belgium. After graduation, she worked as assistant researcher in the RKD (Dutch Institute for Art History). She currently focuses on educational programs aimed at increasing the visibility of women's history through the Women of Haarlem project.

Notes

1. The ambitious atlas consisted of 420 watercolor illustrations of botanical species found in the Amsterdam Hortus Medicus. The beautifully illustrated compendium had the same function as an herbarium, but instead of displaying dried, pressed plant species, the atlas boasted the highest skill in scientific imagery that could be made by hand. At least four draughtsmen worked on the atlas: Jan Monincks produced 273 of the watercolors, and Maria Monincks (1673–1723), possibly his daughter, made 101 plates, which explains why the atlas took their name; Alida Withoos (ca. 1661–1730) painted 13 species, and Merian's daughter, Johanna Helena Herolt (1668–1723), produced 2 sheets; 31 watercolors are unsigned, leaving plenty of space for attribution speculation. The Moninckx Atlas therefore carries importance for several reasons: it is valuable for its taxonomic and botanical historical component, while also carrying art historical merits.
2. See Oana Stan, review of *Rachel Ruysch: Nature into Art*, edited by Robert Schindler, Bernd Ebert, and Anna C. Knapp, in *Woman's Art Journal* 47, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 26): 40–43.
3. In 2025, Lund Humphries published the first English-language monograph dedicated to Josefa de Óbidos by Carmen Ripollés.

Gender and The Woman Artist in Early Modern Iberia

By Catherine Hall-van den Elsen
Routledge, 2024

Reviewed by Elizaveta Kushnareva

In 2001, Merry Wiesner-Hanks, a historian of early modern Europe, sharply remarked that we "began to investigate the lives of women in the past, first fitting them into the categories with which we were already comfortable—nations, historical periods, social classes, religious allegiance—and then realizing that this approach, sarcastically labeled 'add women and stir,' was unsatisfying."[1] This exact refusal to simply "stir women into history" is the impetus for Catherine Hall-van den Elsen's monograph on the lives and artistic production of women artists in Spain and Portugal between 1550 and 1706.

This study sets out to contribute to feminist art-historical scholarship as well as to English-language publications on artists in Early Modern Iberia—a task that, at times, proves challenging given the fragmentary evidence available. Hall-van den Elsen nonetheless pieces the records together, examining the social constructs of the period through the lens of gender and vocation to illuminate the lives and artistic production of sixteen women living in Early Modern Iberia. The book consists of six chapters, inclusive of introduction and conclusion, that clearly set out and subsequently summarize the author's findings. Each chapter concludes with an extensive list of references in the endnotes to facilitate further enquiry.

The introductory chapter reaffirms the author's commitment to gender studies, a field of research not only useful to but necessary for the interpretation of cultural production because it supports and furthers our understanding of the circumstances that surrounded, accompanied, and often dictated the course of women's lives. However, gender cannot encompass the complexities of such lives without the comprehensive analysis of political, religious, economic, and social contexts. Placing sixteen case studies into three categories or life-paths available to women at the time—the married woman, the unmarried woman, and the nun—Hall-van den Elsen offers a "panoramic perspective on women's creative output" (5) across three corresponding chapters.

The second chapter lays the groundwork for the individual case studies by contextualizing the various circumstances and experiences of early modern Iberian women. The complex and at times contradictory gender-based



Fig. 1. Josefa de Ayala, *Reading the Fate of Christ Child* (1667), oil on copper, 9" x 11.4". Detroit Institute of Art, Detroit.

laws permeated this environment, prompting some women to object to their unequal status. In 1610, Nunes de Leão observed that "if women had had access to the same opportunities as men they would have excelled, or even surpassed them" (12)—an idea fueling Linda Nochlin's landmark essay three hundred sixty-one years later, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" While the early modern period saw multiple treatises published by men that endorsed the practice of female silence, some women found the means to push back, as exemplified by Luisa de Padilla, Countess of Aranda (1590–1646). Not only did she publicly encourage women's engagement with ideas, but she also wrote conduct treatises in which "she examined male behavior against standards and even found room for improvement" (13). Opportunities to hear women's voices inevitably stemmed from their social standing, exemplified by the different experiences and expectations of women from noble and working-class families. Hall-van den Elsen supports this in her exploration of the legal framework that subjected women until marriage to the guardianship of their fathers, after which responsibility passed to their husbands. Compared to their Spanish counterparts, married Portuguese women were "recognized as separate legal entities," and "had the right to their own property, and to inherit in their own names" (14). Further examples are offered through the nuanced circumstances of Cecilia de Morillas (1539–1581), María de Zayas (1590–c. 1661), and Queen Isabel of Castile (1451–1504) as well as contemporary women—playwrights, intellectuals, and rulers—whose lived realities juxtaposed the restrictive and categorizing frameworks of existing treatises.

Hall-van den Elsen argues that "the nun, the married woman, and the widow are the most frequently mentioned categories of women in early modern Iberia" (30). An unmarried status was a rare option afforded to women of higher social standing and, even then, a woman was not granted the luxury of independence—legally she remained someone else's daughter (30). The third chapter's detailed account of the life of Sofonisba Anguissola (c. 1532–1625), an established name in the art historical canon, offers a glimpse into the highs and lows of securing a place as a painter at the Spanish court. In her late teenage years, Sofonisba earned acclaim in the dictionary of Cremonese nobles as "one of the great painters of our time," which facilitated her candidacy for a position as lady-in-waiting to Isabel de Valois, the third wife of Philip II and queen consort. For the ten years of Isabel's reign, Sofonisba, an unmarried woman, received portrait commissions from the royal family, the pope, ambassadors, and noble families. Her fortunes took a different turn when the queen died, and customary practice precluded the artist from retaining her role as lady-in-waiting to the new queen. Five years after losing her position at court, in her late thirties, she left royal service and married Fabrizio Moncada, pursuing a quieter life producing religious works for private clients.

A more unconventional example is that of Josefa de Ayala (Josefa d'Óbidos) (1630–1684), who remained unmarried her whole life and became a renowned painter in her own right. Hall-van den Elsen's iconographic analysis and examination of de Ayala's collaborative relationship with her father reveals a mature artistic talent and drive to succeed professionally in a society that prioritized marriage (Fig. 1). María Josefa Sánchez (n.d., active c. 1639–1652) is the third and final example of an unmarried woman who remains an elusive figure due to the scarcity of documentary evidence relating to her life. Her creative output, however, survives in the form of beautifully painted small crucifixes, the signatures on which, the author argues, demonstrate the painter's intention to be acknowledged. The scarcity of married women artists points to their relative rarity, yet these women carved out professional careers and found their respective clients, markets, and spaces within early modern Iberian society.

The fourth chapter shows the author at her best, as it includes a lengthy and eloquent study of the lives of the Roldán sisters—María Josefa (1654–1716), Francisca (1650–1712), and Luisa (1652–1706). Hall-van den Elsen's indisputable

expertise on Luisa Roldán—in 2021 she published the first English-language monograph on the artist in the Illuminating Women Artists series by Lund Humphries—enlivens the account of the artist's life and career, revealing an ambitious woman who used marriage to her advantage and continually fought for her place in the artistic community.[2] All three sisters married artists who worked with their father, sculptor Pedro Roldán, and all did so without his consent, resulting in no dowries to secure their financial stability. A comparative analysis of the lives and careers of these three women who, by virtue of being born into the same family, shared similar circumstances and resources, yields an enlightening investigation into the paths accessible to a married artist at the time. This account is framed by four other case studies, as well as an illuminating analysis of the structure, function, and prevailing views on marriage in Spain and Portugal at the time. Artists such as Ana Heylan (1615–1655), María Eugenia de Beer (c. 1621–active until c. 1652), Mariana de la Cueva (1623–1688), and Luisa Rafaela Valdés (Luisa de Morales) (1654–after 1699) are drawn upon to illustrate the diverse and unique trajectories taken by married women artists. All but one, Mariana de la Cueva, came from families already established in artistic communities, which allowed them to develop their abilities in family workshops where they subsequently met their future husbands. In these cases, marrying a partner working within the same field offered an alliance and partnership that facilitated, and even actively supported, their own artistic practice. And while all these women had to negotiate their roles as wives and mothers alongside their professional ambitions, Heylan's expert engravings, de Beer's botanical studies, de la Cueva's inquiring replicas, the Roldáns' sublime sculptures, and Valdés's vibrantly colored drawings testify to their talents and contributions to the development of the arts in early modern Iberia.

Chapter five makes a significant contribution to the growing scholarship on artistic production in early modern European convents, spanning embroidery and lacemaking to painting. Following their establishment in the medieval period, a vast variety of these communities operated across the two countries, from houses that operated in close alignment with convents and autonomous houses with no ecclesiastical ties, to those founded and supported by noble families (98). These foundations dictated their activities, rules, and degree of austerity—a source of ongoing concern for male ecclesiastical authorities ever since Pope Boniface VIII published a decree in 1298 to address the perceived lack of conformity in women's religious practice. Mendicant nuns traditionally spent time outside the convent, usually engaging in charitable activities, but even these limited liberties were subject to constraint. In 1536, the Council of Trent affirmed the importance of enclosure as a "primary obligation of nuns," yet these directives were frequently challenged and dismissed in practice (100). Motivations to enter these communities varied, from deep religious vocation to opting out of a life defined by marriage and motherhood. Families or sponsors were required to pay a dowry and an annual sum to cover the expenses of convent life, though the dowry could be waived for women who possessed particular skills or talents beneficial to the community. A woman's artistic talent could therefore guarantee her financial security and, to a certain degree, a measure of independence and autonomy.

This chapter delves into the lives of six women—María de Córdoba y Fuentes (Sor María de la Santísima Trinidad) (1610–1653), Cecilia Sobrino de Morillas (Sor Cecilia del Nacimiento) (1570–1646), Estefanía Guarre de la Canal (Sor Estefanía de la Encarnación) (c. 1597–1665), Jerónima Meneses (Soror Joana Baptista) (c. 1570–1650), Josefa Lourenço da Nunes Varela (Soror Josefa María dos Anjos) (1631–1677), and Andrea de Mena (Soror Andrea de la Encarnación) (1654–1692)—to illuminate the different experiences and destinies of women who assumed artistic practice within the confines of religious institutions. Three of these nuns left an autobiography or a dictated biography that affords access to their motivations and, at times, the inner conflicts between embracing a spiritual vocation and the pursuit of artistic practice. It is in this chapter that Hall-van den Elsen's commitment to investigating the lives and circumstances of these women bears the most fruit, deepening our understanding of their experiences and thus elucidating their artworks.

Gender and the Woman Artist in Early Modern Iberia offers an inspiring introduction to the lives of its sixteen artists, consciously identifying research gaps and successfully advocating for further study on the subject. While the premise of the book centers on the constraints such women faced, the author also highlights the opportunities and degrees of autonomy available to those who, in assuming the gendered roles afforded to them, succeeded in exploring their artistic talents and forging their own professional paths. These daughters, wives, mothers, and nuns claim their rightful place within an art historical canon that for centuries marginalized them in favor of male artists—a silence this publication decisively redresses. ●

Elizaveta Kushnareva is an independent researcher and art historian. She holds BA and MA degrees from the Courtauld Institute of Art, where she specialized in Italian Renaissance Art. Her research focuses on the visual arts and culture of fifteenth-century Florence, with particular interest in female patronage and Christian iconography.

Notes

1. Merry Wiesner-Hanks, *Gender in History: Global Perspectives* (Blackwell, 2001), 13.
2. Liya Okroshidze, review of *Luisa Roldán* by Catherine Hall-van den Elsen, *Woman's Art Journal* 43, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2022): 65–67.



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Pl. 1. Audrey Flack, *Queen* (1976), acrylic on canvas, 80" x 80". Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Louis K. and Susan P. Meisel. Courtesy of the Audrey Flack Foundation.



Pl. 2. Audrey Flack, *Fiat Lux* (2017), 83" x 83". Audrey Flack Foundation Collection. Courtesy of the Audrey Flack Foundation.



Pl. 3. Audrey Flack, *With Darkness Comes Stars: Melancholia* (2021), acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 72" x 72". Audrey Flack Foundation Collection. Courtesy of the Audrey Flack Foundation.



Pl. 4 Audrey Flack, *A Brush with Destiny* (2023), acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 40" x 40". Audrey Flack Foundation Collection. Courtesy of the Audrey Flack Foundation.



Pl. 5. Edelmira Boller in her junk library, 2023. Photography Jorge González. © Edelmira Boller; © Galería Salón Comunal. Image source: BADAC, Universidad de los Andes Colombia.



Pl. 6. Edelmira Boller, *Sin título #522* (1979), folded plexiglass sheet, 15 3/4" x 19 1/4" x 11 7/8". Photography Óscar Monsalve. Artist's collection. © Edelmira Boller. © Galería Salón Comunal. Image source: BADAC, Universidad de los Andes Colombia.



Pl. 7. Edelmira Boller, *Otro proyecto para el olvido* (1989), industrial waste, 31 1/2" x 27 1/4" x 35 1/8". Photography Óscar Monsalve. Salazar Hernández's Collection. © Edelmira Boller. © Galería Salón Comunal. Image source: BADAC, Universidad de los Andes Colombia.



Pl. 8. Edelmira Boller, *La mitad del sol* (1994), machine part (washing machine drum) and welded iron, 19 3/4" x 11 7/8". Photography Óscar Monsalve. Artist's collection. © Edelmira Boller. © Galería Salón Comunal. Image source: BADAC, Universidad de los Andes Colombia.



Pl. 9. Casa Edelmira Boller. Artist's personal archive. © Edelmira Boller. © Galería Salón Comunal. Image source: BADAC, Universidad de los Andes Colombia.



Pl. 10. Edelmira Boller, *Imagínese* (1994), industrial waste and mirror, 53 5/8" x 29 1/2" x 10 1/4". Photography Jorge González. Private collection. © Edelmira Boller. © Galería Salón Comunal. Image source: BADAC, Universidad de los Andes Colombia



Pl. 11. Installation view of the view of the Edelmira Boller exhibition *Habitar el espacio*, 2023. Galería Salón Comunal, Bogotá. Courtesy of Salón Comunal.



Pl. 11. Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz, *Vulva Object* (ca. 1965–70), linen, wool, and gold yarn, 6" x 12". © Bobrowicz Studios Collection. Courtesy of Bobrowicz Studios and Sapar Contemporary.



Pl. 12. Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz, *Vulva Room Divider* (Yellow) (1971), wool, linen, jute, silk, and brass, 85" x 95" x 4". © Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz Archive. Courtesy of Bobrowicz Studios.



Pl. 13. View of Faculty Lounge at the University of Pennsylvania Chemistry Building with Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz's room dividers comprised of four elements (yellow, orange, red, and blue), 1973, wool, linen, jute, silk, each 90" x 95" x 4". © Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz Archive. Courtesy of Bobrowicz Studios.



Pl. 14. Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz, *Stuffed* or *Woven Object #1* (mid-1970s), wool, linen, silk, and plastic. © Bobrowicz Studios Collection. Courtesy of Bobrowicz Studios and Sapar Contemporary.



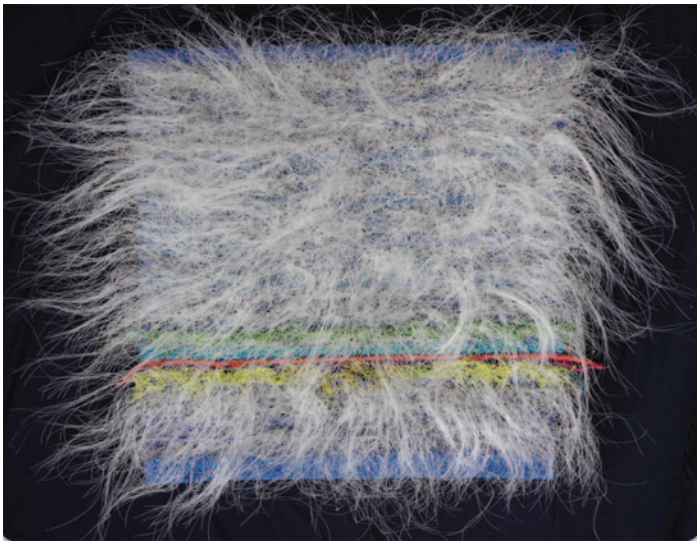
Pl. 15. Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz, *Nebula Floorscape* (1974–76), wool, linen, fur, rayon, in the Bobrowicz living room circa 2020, now in the collection of Nationalmuseum, Stockholm. Photo: Mark Bobrowicz. © Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz Archive.



Pl. 17. Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz, installation view, commission for lobby of New York Sheraton Hotel (1981), wool tapestry, monofilament flossa, and brass elements. © Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz Archive. Courtesy of Bobrowicz Studios.



Pl. 16. Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz, detail of *Loft Series #3* (1980), monofilament and insulation foam wrapped with gold thread. Collection of Bobrowicz Studios LLC. © Bobrowicz Studios Collection. Courtesy of Bobrowicz Studios and Sapar Contemporary.



Pl. 18. Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz, *Randomness and Order – Blue* (1983), wool, linen, silk, and monofilament, 36"x36". Photo: Mark Bobrowicz. Courtesy of ASOM Collection, Luxembourg.



Pl. 20. Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz, *Fibers in Space* (1984), monofilament and linen, 42" x 84" x 14". Photo: Mark Bobrowicz. © Bobrowicz Studios Collection. Courtesy of Bobrowicz Studios and Sapar Contemporary.



Pl. 19. Yvonne Pacanovsky Bobrowicz, two-sided view of *Odd and Even* (1983) from the series *Opposites Attract*, monofilament, linen, and brass. © Bobrowicz Studios Collection. Courtesy of Bobrowicz Studios and Sapar Contemporary.

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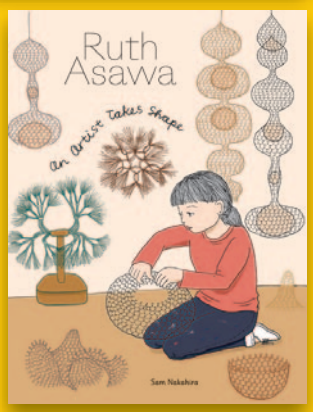












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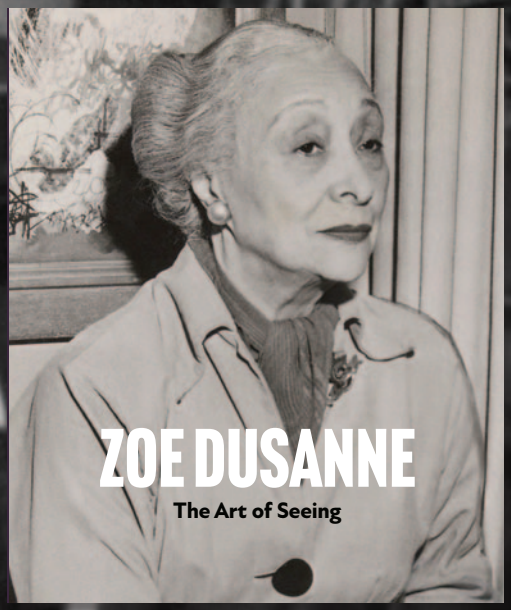
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