

Women and Abstraction: 1741–Now

Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, MA • addison.andover.edu • Through July 30, 2023

There is a freshly nuanced narrative on display at the Addison Gallery that attempts to portray a new tone, form, and texture to the well-established understanding of what abstract art is. Curator Gordon Wilkins wants to set old constructs aside. *Women and Abstraction: 1741–Now* pushes to the forefront voices that have existed sparingly, if not in whispers, until now—the female voices of under-represented and overlooked abstract artists.

Wilkins aspires to create a visual experience not a didactic one, where the art performs a type of visual poetry. “I hope to break down that notion that abstraction equals abstract expressionism. A lot of people have that idea, that abstraction is Pollock and Rothko. They have added women to that list however it’s still a limited understanding. When you liberate yourself from that framework and looking at 18th century textiles to line, color, and breaking things down to geometric form, by women that engage with the visual language of abstraction, a new understanding is set. The show will not be chronologically installed, it’s more about creating these groupings that will speak across time with the core tenants of line, color, shape, and texture to tell the story about abstraction without including male artists. We hope to present a new construct of the story of abstract art.”

Non-objective form abstract artist, Liz Whitney Quisgard, whose work is included in the exhibition, feels that she is finally arriving—at 93. “This is the century that women artists will get a big leap forward and it’s about time. I have



Liz Whitney Quisgard, *Scrambles*, 2010s, yarn on buckram, dimensions variable. Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, MA, gift of anonymous donor, 2022.15.1-60. Image courtesy of Jason Roy, Addison Gallery of American Art.



Hedda Sterne, *Untitled*, 1989, oil and pastel on canvas, 52 x 52". Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, MA, partially purchased as the gift of Roger E. Kass (PA 1979) and partial museum purchase. Image courtesy of Van Doren Waxter and the Hedda Sterne Foundation.

ing a female artist. “We don’t want to separate women from the narrative as we have in the past. However now the catch-up is happening, we are now filling in the holes that so many museums and curators are starting to recognize are present. Wilkins is trying to show such a wide range of artists to give them all that well-deserved attention.”

been fighting the fixed, masculine art world ever since my 20s and it’s been a very difficult struggle. For truly ambitious women artists who dare to want to be considered absolutely first rate, my ambition is as lofty as it could possibly be. Women have been almost systematically excluded in making important connections, that is only now being reconsidered. Finally, women artists are getting the credit that they so rightfully deserve.”

The late artist Libbie Mark is also on display. Mark went virtually unrecognized during her life and is only now, some 50 years later, receiving attention for her distinctive plays on color and texture. Jennifer Uhrhane, the curator and consultant to the Libbie Mark Provincetown Fund, notes Mark treated her paintings as if they were her children. “I would hope that her getting some attention now for this work, would be gratifying. One of the disadvantages to her artistic vision was being a woman in the ’50s; she was not given the opportunity to show as much as the men did. There were a number of things that didn’t quite help her get that attention when she was alive. Now she is getting recognized.”

Uhrhane is quick to respond that Mark would not want to be recognized with the caveat of be-

Curator Shaina Larrivee of the Hedda Sterne Foundation agrees with the statement that these women are artists in their own right. “Hedda Sterne was incredibly active in the New York art world from the mid-1940s into the 1950s. She had solo exhibitions nearly every year at the Betty Parsons Gallery and she was a very well-known, established abstract artist at the time, but she was largely overlooked in the histories of this era. To have exhibitions like this look more broadly at the history and find some of these missing narratives, it’s exciting to see her inclusion by Wilkins and the Addison.”

Shows like *Women and Abstraction* are now filling in the missing remnants of a history that expands the conversation of abstract art in America. These artists have always had a voice, albeit, as a single hand raised at the back of a crowded room; simply wanting to speak to the art that they worked tirelessly to create. Larrivee poses that these quiet shifts now speak volumes. “This Hedda Sterne: *Untitled*, 1989—oil, pastel on canvas, 52 x 52, is a (pending) acquisition by the Addison Museum and this is significant and incredible. To have this museum add a work by Hedda Sterne to their collection, that is the sign of change and progress.” — Maureen Canney