WOMEN and ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

Painting and Sculpture, 1945-1959
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Joan Marter, Curator
Preface and Acknowledgments

The Mishkin Gallery's 1994 exhibition Reclaiming Artists of the New York School: Toward a More Inclusive View of the 1950s celebrated the work of twenty-eight artists who helped to establish an avant-garde movement in the United States after World War II. This show reclaimed the work of six women artists: Elaine de Kooning, Perle Fine, Grace Hartigan, Lee Krasner, Joan Mitchell, and Tish Schabad, as well as the work of three African-Americans and nineteen other deserving male artists. With the exhibition Women and Abstract Expressionism: Painting and Sculpture, 1945–1959, the Mishkin Gallery continues to feature artists who have not been fully credited for their contribution to American art. Highlighting seven women whose careers extended from the late 1930s through 1994 (all died between 1982 and 1994), this exhibition identifies them as Abstract Expressionists, presents an opportunity to review their work, and endeavors to place them beside their male colleagues in the history of art.

I would like to thank Joan Matter, guest curator, for her help in organizing Women and Abstract Expressionism. Dr. Matter, who is a professor of art history at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, has written extensively on the work of women artists. Her 1982 exhibition Modern Muses: Women Artists of the First Generation, which was mounted at Douglass College, Rutgers, Included the work of Dorothy Dehner and Perle Fine, two of the artists who are represented in the current exhibition.

Women and Abstract Expressionism will travel to Guild Hall Museum, East Hampton, New York, where it will be shown from May 10 through June 15, 1997. Guild Hall is an ideal setting for this exhibition, since five of the seven artists featured were residents of eastern Long Island. I am grateful to Henry Korn, director, and Donna Stein, interim curator, for their assistance with bringing the exhibition to Guild Hall. I would also like to thank the museums, galleries, and artists' estates and foundations whose generous loans have made this exhibition possible. I would like to express appreciation to Tricia Laughlin, curatorial assistant, and Alexis Boylan, Aliza Riedman, Nikki Johnson, and Gabrielle Rose for their work on the artists' biographies.

It is a great pleasure to acknowledge the encouragement and support of Baruch College President Matthew Goldstein and Provost Lois Cronholm. Their commitment to providing cultural programs at Baruch College has been essential to the success of the Mishkin Gallery.

Sandra Krakin, Director
Sidney Mishkin Gallery

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Exhibition Itinerary
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Baruch College
New York, New York
March 20 to April 17, 1997

Guild Hall Museum
East Hampton, New York
May 10 to June 15, 1997

This exhibition is organized by the Sidney Mishkin Gallery, Baruch College.

The Artists
Dorothy Dehner
Elaine de Kooning
Perle Fine
Lee Krasner
Joan Mitchell
Betty Parsons
Ethel Schwabacher

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Betty Parsons
Untitled, c. 1957
Gouache on paper, 32½ x 30½ in
Collection of the Betty Parsons Foundation
Identity Crisis: Abstract Expressionism and Women Artists of the 1950s

Joan Marten, Professor of Art History
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

Well after Abstract Expressionism had been heralded as an innovative movement in American art, in 1957 the popular press acknowledged that women artists were among those with “serious canvases” as painters 1 but were these artists treated credibly, and what were the motives for the selection of women so honored?

While extolling five women artists, “none over 35” Life magazine’s 1957 article “Women Artists in Ascendancy” resolutely (and inaccurately) noted that only a “handful” of women artists over the centuries had achieved lasting stature. 2 According to this article, a few Americans, such as Mary Cassatt, Georgia O’Keeffe, and Loren Maciver, had significant reputations, but, in the 1940s, “paralleling their achievements in other professions, women in growing numbers began to distinguish themselves as artists.” Among the five young artists included in this article, the dark-eyed beauty Helen Frankenthaler faces the camera as she curls elegantly on a studio floor covered with canvases. Jane Wilson, who according to the article “works as a New York fashion model,” reclines on a curved sofa that echoes the curves of her torso. Joan Mitchell, who holds up one edge of a large, unstretched canvas spread on the floor, is identified as “one of the leading young exponents of the abstract expressionist school. Working in both New York and Paris, she has evolved a spontaneous, complex style to produce energetic images of remembered landscapes which involve my feelings.”

None of the women is actually shown painting, but each poses appealingly for Life’s cameras. Although the article places Joan Mitchell, Grace Hartigan, and Helen Frankenthaler among the “Young Group [that] Reflects Lively Virtues of U.S. Painting,” it mentions Abstract Expressionism only in passing—and only in connection with Mitchell. Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning, and Perle Fine—the chronological contemporaries of the acknowledged first generation Abstract Expressionists—are not included. 3

The exhibition Women and Abstract Expressionism is intended as a corrective to the long-standing marginalization of women artists active in the 1940s and 1950s. The paintings, drawings, and sculpture presented were created by abstract artists who were contemporaries of the “canonical” Abstract Expressionists but are seldom identified as members of that group. Abstract Expressionism has been defined as the art practice of a select number of white males, but the abstraction and gesturalism explored by these women have similar intellectual and artistic roots as those of their male counterparts. Recent scholarship probes the sources, political ideologies, and individuated art practices of the Abstract Expressionists, but many writers still focus on the few artists deemed the pioneers of this mid-century development. 4

Other artists—including most of the women presented in this exhibition—are dismissed as derivative, as painters who rework in an empty and mannered fashion the heroically authentic forms of the pioneers. Yet, some of these artists, notably Lee Krasner, Perle Fine, and Elaine de Kooning, were already working in an Abstract Expressionist idiom in the 1940s. Elaine de Kooning’s famed abstract Black Mountain series dates from 1948. Affirming Krasner’s unique contribution to Abstract Expressionism, Stephen Polcari has stated, “Krasner’s art extended the boundaries of Abstract Expressionist art to articulate more fully than the others the search for the primal units of communication as well as of myth and experience.” 5 Yet some historians refuse to recognize anything innovative or consequential in the art practices of these women.

The use of gestural brush strokes or the color-field modes of abstraction favored by women painters of the New York School does not constitute the debasement of an established style but a challenge to the modernist notion that “women’s” and “legitimacy” are only the prerogatives of a select few. Significant art was produced by a number of women associated with Abstract Expressionism, but no study has been devoted exclusively to their works. 6 A point of contention is the determination of criteria that identify artists as Abstract Expressionists. Paintings, drawings, and sculpture by these seven women artists range far beyond the recycling of earlier forms. These works expand approaches to the unconscious, the “primitive,” and the use of metaphoric and metonymic references in abstraction.

Perle Fine
The Wind and the Sea, 1958
Oil on canvas, 37 x 79
Courtesy of Hirschl & Adler Galleries, New York
A Restricted Canon

Many questions arise from the attempt to situate the women among the Abstract Expressionists. What are the reasons, socially and culturally, for marginalizing women who were active as Abstract Expressionists? Why has the roll call of the movement included only white, urban males? If Abstract Expressionist painting negotiates visual metaphors for disorder, chaos, materiality, and other issues of postwar America, what is the position of women artists who appropriate this language? Can women be identified with this "heresy"? Is there a place within the metaphysics of Abstract Expressionism for women to demarcate the language of difference? And, finally, should the canon of Abstract Expressionism be reconstructed to include these women artists?

Even as some art historians acknowledge the difficulties of women artists affiliated with Abstract Expressionism, they continue to construct their discourse to exclude women. In Refocusing Abstract Expressionism, Michael Leja establishes parameters for a treatment of gender in the New York School. In his discussion of Modern Man discourse as the culturally based initiative for a new subjectivity, he asserts:

Abstract Expressionism has been recognized from its first accounts as a male domain, ruled by a familiar social construction of "manliness" as tough, aggressive, sweeping, bold. These functions served by Abstract Expressionism's aura of masculinity have also come into clearer focus. It was a crucial component of cold war U.S. national identity, differentiating the nation politically and culturally from Europe portrayed as weakened and effeminate. 8

The Issue of Second Generation Artists

In the 1950s only a few articles were published that acknowledged women artists as part of the New York School. In addition to the Lift feature mentioned above, Art News published a perceptive article by Irving Sandler entitled "Joan Mitchell Paints a Picture." Both artist and author were willing to identify her paintings with the New York School, but the designation "Abstract Expressionist" was not directly applied to her. In his serious and respectful assessment of her art (accompanied by photos of the artist at work), Sandler claimed that Joan Mitchell assimilated some of the methods of Arshile Gorky, Willem de Kooning, and Franz Kline and that she experienced "a kindred involvement with space." 9 Mitchell was compared to the "elders of Abstract Expressionism." Sandler noted: "She not only appreciates the early struggle of the older painters whose efforts expedited acceptance for those following them, but finds a number of qualities in their work that have a profound meaning for her." 10

Younger women, such as Mitchell, Frankenthaler, and Hartigan, who were born in the 1920s and began exhibiting in the 1950s, were more easily championed by the "elders of Abstract Expressionism" and their critics. These women came to their artistic maturity at a time when the canonical Abstract Expressionists were already well established. Therefore, the women could be more acceptably considered as disciples, or "second generation," artists.

Identifying Pioneers of Abstract Expressionism

With the exception of Joan Mitchell, the women artists considered in this exhibition are of the same generation as the canonical Abstract Expressionists but were ignored in the earliest critical reception of the movement. Ultimately the younger women discussed above shared the fate of these older women: all were expelled from the annals of Abstract Expressionism.

Feeding manifesting definitions of what constituted "originality," organizers of Abstract Expressionist exhibitions excluded women artists. By 1978 the exhibition Abstract Expressionism: The Formative Years at the Whitney Museum of American Art had reclaimed Lee Krasner for the group. Nearly a decade later, however, the recognition of women's achievements had not improved significantly. In the acclaimed 1987 exhibition Abstract Expressionism: The Critical Developments, held at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, sculptor David Smith was added to the roster of painters, but Lee Krasner remained the only woman artist to be included. Several years later, the 1994 show Reclaiming Artists of the New York School at Baruch College included six women artists. 12

Most of the women appropriate to the roll call of Abstract Expressionism were born in the first decade of the twentieth century. Like their male counterparts identified as first generation Abstract Expressionists, these women were practicing artists in the 1930s. Some studied at the Art Students League; others—notably Lee Krasner and Perle Fine—were students of Hans Hofmann. Three women artists, including Dorothy Dehner, Perle Fine, Lee Krasner, Betty Parsons, and Ethel Schwabacher, were middle-aged in the 1950s. Their careers had followed a similar course although they had exhibited regularly in group and solo shows (many at the Betty Parsons Gallery), they struggled to construct an identity separate from other defining circumstances.

For Lee Krasner, Dorothy Dehner, and Elaine de Kooning, writing their position as wives of artists associated with Abstract Expressionism impeded acceptance on their singular merits indeed, Krasner's critical recognition predated Jackson Pollock's death in 1956. Similarly, Dehner's first solo exhibition and critical reviews followed her divorce from David Smith in 1952. Elaine de Kooning and Ethel Schwabacher were first recognized as writers. Elaine de Kooning wrote art criticism for Art News beginning in 1948. Schwabacher was preparing a book on Abstract Expressionism throughout the 1950s. Although this project was never completed, she did publish a biography of Arshile Gorky in 1952. 13 Betty Parsons was known primarily as an art dealer, yet she had regular solo exhibitions of her own paintings at the Midtown Galleries during the forties and fifties.

All of these women were seriously committed to their art and sought critical recognition for their work. Many attended meetings at the Eighth Street Club (also called "The Club"), a gathering place for

Dorothy Dehner

Long Landscape 1955
Bronze, 48½ x 38½ x 17½
Collection of the Dorothy Dehner Foundation for the Visual Arts

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The discourse on women's abstract art can be explored through the artist's own statements, by critical reactions, and by the reality of the works themselves. Perle Fine's career offers one example. She started showing her abstractions in the 1940s. Her solo shows began in 1945 at the Marion Willard Gallery and continued at the Betty Parsons Gallery from 1949 onward. In 1947 a critic wrote of her paintings:

"The language of Miss Fine's art is completely personal. She has in her pictures established a private reality that is as totally unrelated to sense as that to a mathematical formula.

Because Miss Fine has very nearly eliminated allusions to nature and has instead limited her means of expression to those elements indigenous to the spatial arts, the meaning of her pictures cannot even be approximated in words.

Their emotional and ideological impact must therefore vary considerably with the beholder and must in any case be as real and as intangible as are all experiences sub-literary and psychological."

Now, fifty years after this article was published, writers have begun to elucidate the language of difference to be found in the "private reality" of women artists.

In this show, women artists are recognized for their contributions to Abstract Expressionism. Women and Abstract Expressionism reassesses their role within the movement. Although these women artists shared the thematic and formal concerns of previously acknowledged members of this group, their "difference" caused their forms to be presented as to preclude their inclusion within the dominant discourse. This opportunity to see works created by women active in the 1940s and 1950s affirms that the artists, largely forgotten by history, participated in a radical new aesthetic. Their art practice was a language of abstraction that well served their subjectivity.
Notes

1. I wish to thank seven graduate students at Rutgers who participated in my seminar "The Women of Abstract Expressionism" and engaged in research on these artists. To Alannah Bryan, Jessica Lefebvre, Asia McKenna, Nikki Jensen, Jessica Leach, Hillary Romano, and Gabe-flf, whose support was invaluable. Gratias is also extended to the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, Rutgers University for a grant to support research and field trips for this dissertation on women artists.


3. The artists profiled were Peggy Guggenheim, Helen Frankenthaler, Joan Mitchell, and Joan Whelan. It is impossible to note that only young women were chosen in the profile, despite the wider careers of many women artists who were over forty at the time of its publication.

4. Ibid., 76.

5. The current exhibition represents the injection of women artists from those also invisible in the 1950s. All of the artists included, with the exception of Joan Mitchell, are historically identified with the first generation Abstract Expressionists. Most were born in the first decade of the twentieth century, and all of these women died between 1982 and 1994.


12. Same as note 8, 1990, 117.


16. Ibid.


18. As quoted in ibid., 1957, 44-45.


20. Ibid.


Dorothea Dehner
Bibliography
66 and exhibition on paper, 18" x 22.5 x 10" Collection of the Dorothy Dehner Foundation on the Visual Arts


Betty Parsons
Rhythm, 1957
Oil on linen, 36 x 36½
Collection of the Betty Parsons Foundation

Ethel Schwabacher
Tempus, 1951
Oil on canvas, 30 x 36
Private collection
Dorothy Dehner (1901–1994)

Working in an improvisational method called “direct wax construction” for her sculptures of the 1950s, Dehner can be situated within the sphere of Abstract Expressionism. Also, like other artists in this group, Dehner exhibited at the Marian Willard Gallery and attended meetings of the Eighth Street Club. Born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1901, Dehner spent her adolescence in Pasadena, California. After one year at the University of California, Los Angeles, she moved to New York to study drama. She appeared in several off-Broadway productions before leaving for Europe. Her 1925 European tour included Paris, where she saw avant-garde art at the Exhibition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Modernes. Stimulated by her contact with European modernism, she enrolled at the Art Students League upon her return to New York in the fall of 1925. In 1927 she married David Smith, and the two studied with Jan Matulka from 1929 to 1931. A trip to Europe in 1933 had a profound impact on her art. She and Smith went to France, Belgium, Greece, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain. The drawings that she made while in Europe became the basis for sculpture years later, even though they were chosen to acknowledge the enduring impression of her travels. By the late 1940s, Dehner made a new series of abstract drawings inspired by Ernst Haeckel’s seminal study of natural forms, *Kunstformen der Natur*, 1904. In her series Dehner introduced a repertoire of biomorphic forms that related to the works of Paul Klee, Joan Miró, and Mark Rothko, among others. Unlike the surrealists, Dehner did not emphasize the disquieting aspects of her imagery but celebrated the animate energy of unicellular forms of life.

In 1952 Dehner was divorced from Smith. Her first solo exhibition in New York was held that same year at Rose Fried Gallery. In the early 1950s, she studied engraving at Stanley William Hayter’s Atelier 17.

Dehner also began experimenting with wax, deriving her imagery from earlier abstract drawings and paintings—recalling her organic abstractions of the 1930s. In 1955 she began working at the Sculpture Center and had her wax studies cast in bronze. For the next thirty-nine years, Dehner’s predominant interest was creating sculpture in wax, wood, and fabricated steel. She assembled her sculptures from disparate parts and approached the use of wax as a constructive medium, using planar elements. Beginning in the late 1950s, she braised and drew on the wax slabs, introducing other textures by adding small pieces of metal.

Although Dehner’s sculptures are abstract, they consistently reference the natural world. Vertical compositions evoke a cosmic presence, while horizontal formats can be viewed as landscapes. Like the artists of the New York School, Dehner produced works of art that communicate personal content and universal meaning through abstract symbols. From the 1950s through the 1970s, Dehner had twelve solo exhibitions in New York City. Later in her career, she was honored with many fellowships and awards. Skidmore College awarded Dehner an Honorary Doctorate in Human Letters in 1982. In 1983 the National Sculpture Conference conferred on her its Award of Distinction. That same year she received an award from the Women’s Caucus for Art for outstanding achievement in the visual arts. In 1984 her work was shown with the work of David Smith in a joint exhibition at the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers. In 1993 a solo exhibition of her art (a retrospective) was organized at the Katonah Museum of Art and traveled to the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Her work is currently represented in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Cleveland Museum of Art, and the Museum of Modern Art.

J.M.
Elaine de Kooning (1918–1989)

As critic for Art News magazine, Elaine de Kooning was a major voice in the dialogue that documented the Abstract Expressionist movement in the 1950s. Born in New York City, de Kooning attended the University of New Mexico and later held the Lamar Dodd Chair as professor of painting at the University of Georgia. The University of Georgia organized a retrospective of her work in 1992. In the course of her career, she was to have over fifty solo and group exhibitions. de Kooning's works are represented in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City and the Neuberger Museum in Purchase, New York.

Perle Fine (1908–1988)

Though never producing representational art, Fine experimented with many styles—from abstract cubist compositions to semi-circular, biomorphic forms. Most of her paintings demonstrate her skill in balancing color and design. By 1952 Fine's paintings featured tangles of black lines. In other examples, fields of color, such as pink, peach, violet, or green, float above the surface.

In 1954 Fine and her husband, Maurice Benami, left New York City for The Springs in East Hampton, New York, where she built a studio near many artists of the New York School. Fine was a leading member of the New York School and continued to exhibit in New York City. In the early 1960s, her canvases became more concerned with geometric forms, rather than the painterly compositions of the previous decade. Active until her death, Perle Fine had more than thirty solo exhibitions during her lifetime. Her paintings can be found in the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Museum of Modern Art.
Lee Krasner (1908–1984)

Lee Krasner is recognized as a pioneer Abstract Expressionist; her intellectual investment in the early stages of the movement before and during her marriage to Jackson Pollock is well documented. Raised in a Russian, Orthodox Jewish family in Brooklyn, Krasner asserted her independence at a young age and began classes in 1926 at the Art Students League and the National Academy of Design in New York City. From the mid-1930s until 1943, she worked in the mural division of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) meeting future Abstract Expressionists as well as influential critics. At this time, she studied with Hans Hofmann who exposed her to the styles of the School of Paris and the strong influences of Mondrian, Picasso, and Matisse.

In 1941 she came face to face with another great influence, John Graham, author of System and Dialectics of Art (1937). A year later Graham invited her to participate in French and American Painting at McMillin Inc. (Graham also invited Pollock to participate through this show. Krasner and Pollock developed a friendship that would lead to their marriage three years later.) In 1944 Krasner exhibited at Sidney Janis’s Abstract and Surrealist Art in America, where she showed heavily delineated abstractions indebted to Picasso. Her work began garnering much praise: influential art critic Clement Greenberg stated that Krasner had the “best eye in the country for the art of painting.” Pollock and Krasner were married in 1945. Soon after, in November of that year, they moved to The Springs in East Hampton, where Krasner would maintain a permanent residence for the rest of her life.

While Pollock perfected his innovative drip-canvas technique in the 1940s, Krasner began her first important series, the Little Image paintings, which followed a three-year period of producing Canvases of acculated grayness—what she called her “gray slabs.” With the Little Image series, Krasner addressed the importance of the “continuum,” creating labyrinthine webs and hieroglyphic configurations that referenced the metaphorical processes of writing and calligraphy. Krasner compared these paintings to a much earlier enigmatic art form the illuminated manuscript, about which she stated “it’s no beginning and there’s no end.”

Working in cycles, much like Pollock, Krasner created her next series of large collages, which incorporated organic metaphors, urban allusions, and human personages. Shown at the Stable Gallery in New York, in 1955, these collages were executed by tearing and rusting old canvases and drawings, her own and even those of Pollock. After Pollock’s death in an automobile accident in 1956, she began her large sized Earth Green series, whose expansive, high-angled palette of ochre, pink, red, green and blue is combined into sexual, anthropomorphizing, and violent features. Individual titles in the series—Prophesy, Birth, and April—reflect her inner struggles and preoccupations. While dealing with her loss and pain in the early 1960s, her own work continued to grow larger and monochromatic. Because of their somber palette and references to Pollock’s drip process, Krasner’s paintings in the Umbra and White series were not on the whole favorably received when exhibited at the Howard Wise Gallery in 1960 and 1962. Making matters more difficult were the criticisms of Krasner’s management of Pollock’s estate, especially the slow and controlled dissemination of his works.

In the 1970s and 1980s, numerous articles and a museum exhibition at Guild Hall considered Krasner and Pollock’s “working” relationship, an emotional and psychologically intense one, which had ramifications for her creative efforts as well as his. While Krasner’s post-1956 paintings show some indebtedness to Pollock, her primary relation to the sources and themes of Abstract Expressionism has been reconsidered and advanced.

It was during these years, as her work was re-evaluated, that her reputation as an important Abstract Expressionist was further established. She was the only woman exhibited in the Whitney Museum of American Art’s 1975 exhibition Abstract Expressionism: The Formative Years. In the later years of her career, Krasner exhibited regularly at major galleries in New York City. Including a show of her later large-collage series, Eleven Ways to Use the Word to See and Matisse, hard edge paintings. In 1981, shortly before her death, a traveling retrospective exhibition was shown at the Houston Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York—it was among the only retrospectives granted to a woman artist by an American museum at the time. (An earlier retrospective of her paintings, drawings, and collages was held at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London in the mid-1960s.) Krasner’s work is represented in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, Guild Hall Museum East Hampton, and many other major museums and private collections in the United States. The Pollock-Krasner Foundation was established upon her death to provide grants to needy artists. The Pollock-Krasner House in East Hampton has become a study center for art produced on the east end of Long Island.
Joan Mitchell (1926–1992)

Joan Mitchell is currently recognized as one of the greatest women artists of the twentieth century. Her vibrant palette and bold brush strokes combine to create aggressively powerful canvases. Her popularity with audiences and critics began in the early 1950s during the height of the Abstract Expressionist movement, continued through the 1960s and 1970s as increased attention was paid to female artists, and again flourished in the 1980s with her large and brightly colored canvases.

Mitchell was born in Chicago, the eldest of two children. In her early years, she trained to be a professional skater; but a knee injury sidelined her athletic career. Mitchell attended Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, for two years. Unhappy at Smith, she left to study at the Art Institute of Chicago, where her talent was recognized and she was awarded a scholarship to study in Europe. Mitchell deferred her trip for a year to go to New York City to paint. She registered for a class taught by Hans Hofmann, but his aggressive style intimidated her and she dropped out after only one visit. In spite of this experience, Mitchell was greatly affected by the New York scene, becoming acquainted with the works of Arthur Glimcher and Jackson Pollock. Her arrival in France following her year in New York signaled the beginning of a lifelong love affair with the country that she would later call home. She also traveled to Central and South America before returning, in 1951, to an apartment on 156th Street in New York City.

That same year Mitchell participated in the Ninth Street Show. Although it was not her first exhibition, this show was extraordinarily important to Mitchell in particular as it was the art world in general—considered one of the landmark exhibitions of the Abstract Expressionist movement. Mitchell had her first solo show in 1952, and her work met with glowing reviews. Mitchell’s art from this period utilizes all-over brushwork that combines a sometimes violent stroke with vibrant colors. Her work was continuously praised by critics.

In 1959 Mitchell moved from New York to Paris to be with the Canadian artist Jean-Paul Riopelle, with whom she had met four years earlier. She continued to paint and exhibit in New York throughout the 1960s and 1970s. With her inspiration stemming from the landscapes and gardens that surrounded her in France, Mitchell produced work that was increasingly natural and landscape oriented. Her loose, painterly, expressionistic style remained consistent. Much of the press concerning Mitchell during this time concentrated on her efforts and struggles as a female artist. Although Mitchell would reject the term “feminist” as it applied to her art, her work was exhibited in several shows dedicated to women artists.

Mitchell’s career surged again in the 1980s, beginning with her solo show at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. She was the first American woman to receive such an honor. Mitchell also had several large gallery shows in the United States. Her art from this period is often compared to that of Claude Monet, particularly his late paintings. Mitchell’s work had become extremely large, and her expressionistic brush stroke was sometimes combined with a palette that included pastel colors. Though it would seem that Mitchell was bowing to the impressionists, these new elements were simply continuing the project she began during her years as an active participant of the New York School: the all-over, erratic brush stroke and the use of large canvases are extensions of the work she produced in the mid-1950s.

A B

Betty Parsons (1900–1982)

Best known for her gallery, which showcased the emerging Abstract Expressionists, Betty Parsons was also a prolific and respected artist. She founded the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1946 and continued to serve as its director until her death in 1982. In addition to the Instrumental part she played in promoting some of the major figures of the postwar period, Parsons is noted for her openness to a variety of individual styles and for her unwavering support of several non-conformist artists during the years their work was overlooked by the critics. Ethel Schwebachs, Fritz Bultman, and many other women artists were represented by the Betty Parsons Gallery at a time when commercial opportunities for women were relatively limited.

Born in New York City, Parsons studied sculpture briefly before leaving New York to spend ten years in France, where she studied with Alexander Archipenko, Antoine Bourdelle, and Ossip Zadkine at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. During these years she spent several summers in Brittany, studying with Arthur Lindsay, an English painter who led summer workshops in landscape painting. Parsons responded to the immediacy and expressive potential of the watercolor medium and, encouraged by Lindsay, began to carry her sketchbook with her at all times, creating a prodigious number of sketches—landscapes, still lifes, and portraits—throughout her career.

Returning to the United States in 1953, Parsons continued to paint landscapes and still lifes. Three years later she had her first solo exhibition of watercolors in New York City at Midtown Galleries. In the late forties, stimulated in part by the work of the Abstract Expressionists she represented in her gallery, Parsons began to produce abstract paintings, which she discovered more accurately expressed what she wanted to convey—her own sense of color and movement of her subjects. Gradually her style shifted toward expressive, geometric signs and away from literal representation. Parsons worked in oil and acrylic as well as watercolor, varying her format and her media to accommodate her mood and her subject, whatever the media, she rendered his works quickly, capturing a place or a moment with an economy of gestural images. Derived from specific landscapes encountered on her many travels, much of her abstract imagery evokes a particular season, quality of light, or local mood.

From 1936 to 1957, Parsons had ten solo exhibitions in New York City, and she continued to exhibit her paintings in solo and group shows around the country and internationally through the 1970s. In 1974 the Montclair Art Museum in Montclair, New Jersey mounted "a retrospective of Parsons's work. She is represented in the collections of the National Museum of American Art, the Montclair Art Museum, and Guild Hall Museum.

T.L.
Ethel Schwabacher (1903–1984)

Ethel Schwabacher was not a part of Abstract Expressionism's "official" circle. She did, however, associate personally with Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, as well as with the less-recognized Abstract Expressionists Jack Tworkov, Richard Pousette-Dart, and Kenzo Okada. She was given five solo shows at the Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, in the years between 1953 and 1962.

Schwabacher's artistic education and career were spent almost exclusively in her native New York City. Her formal artistic education began with the study of sculpture, which she pursued when she enrolled at the Art Students League at the age of 15. Later, from 1920 to 1921, she studied at the National Academy of Design. In 1923 she learned stone carving methods and apprenticed with the sculptor Anna Hyatt Huntington. But Schwabacher would abandon sculpture for painting in 1927, enrolling in classes with Max Weber at the Art Students League. This shift to painting coincided with a period of family troubles for which she sought professional help, an experience that resulted in her lifelong treatments through psychoanalysis.

After studying painting and undergoing psychoanalysis in France and Austria from 1928 to 1934, Schwabacher returned to New York. For the next two years, she took independent instruction with Arshile Gorky, with whom she had developed a friendship before leaving for Europe. Gorky's psychologically charged creations—surrealist-inspired, biomorphic abstractions that sprang from his unconscious and his use of personal memory—and the natural and erotically suggestive forms in his imagery were influential for Schwabacher throughout the 1940s. Her attraction to Gorky's imagery reflected her increased interest in probing her own psyche. Schwabacher's paintings from this time combine forms derived from automatism with abstract but recognizable references to nature. This imagery, with its frequent resonances of eroticism and fecundity, became integrated with the theme of childbirth beginning around 1951.

In the painful years following the untimely death of her husband, Wolf Schwabacher, in 1951 and her subsequent lapse into severe depression, Schwabacher's painting entered a forest period of abstraction, which lasted until the early 1960s, after which her art turned increasingly figural. During these years, her creative endeavors were rooted in relentless psychological searching through lived and remembered experience. Its joys and traumas, treating interrelated themes of nature, childbirth, death, loss, and fear of isolation—which she at times interpreted through Greek myths—Schwabacher expressed her dual, and sometimes conflicting, identifications as an artist and woman. Using a wide range of techniques, from diffuse and incisive lashes of vibrant color-shapes to brush strokes creating calm, diaphanous, geometric, and reductive effects, Schwabacher sought the most cogent formal resolution of her content, which, when achieved, offered personal solace. She treated the canvas not only as a place to explore personal struggle but, ultimately, as a place to capture the beautiful and transcendent, beyond the private to the universal.

Schwabacher's work was represented at a number of annual exhibitions sponsored by the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and was included in the large exhibition Sixty American Painters 1966. Abstract Expressionist Paintings of the Fifites at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Her paintings are currently to be found in many major museum collections, including those of the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City; the Whitney Museum; the National Museum of American Art; the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo; New York; and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.
Catalog of the Exhibition

Dorothy Dehner
Report of the City, 1916
Broughton: 11 x 21 in. 6
Collection of the Dorothy Dehner Foundation for the Visual Arts
Joseph Sparrow #1, (New York) 1939
Reisort: 15½ x 42½ x 4
Collection of the Dorothy Dehner Foundation for the Visual Arts
Jung, Landscape, 1952
Reisort: 42 x 19 x 9
Collection of the Dorothy Dehner Foundation for the Visual Arts
(Jr., 1914)

J. M. Mitchell
On canvas, 36 x 24
Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art
Gift of Mrs. Donald 1. Buehold, 1986

Betty Parsons
Oil on canvas, 60 x 48
Collection of the Betty Parsons Foundation
Untitled, c. 1957
Gouache on paper, 32½ x 30½
Collection of the Betty Parsons Foundation
Untitled, c. 1957
Gouache on paper, 30 x 30½
Collection of the Betty Parsons Foundation
Untitled, 1959
Gouache on paper, 21 x 16
Collection of the Betty Parsons Foundation
The Whale, 1959
Oil on canvas, 47½ x 47¼
Collection of the Betty Parsons Foundation

Ethel Schwartzbauer
Antigone I, 1958
Oil on canvas, 51 x 41¼
Estate of the artist
Ode IX, 1995
Oil on canvas, 35 x 40
Private collection
Rembrandt and the Camera, 1935
Oil on canvas, 50 x 50
Estate of the artist
Sandwich, 1956
Oil on canvas, 50 x 72
Estate of the artist
Temper, 1951
Oil on canvas, 30 x 36
Private collection
Wabi, I, 1951
Oil on canvas, 30 x 36
Private collection

Dimensions are in inches, in order of height, width, and depth.

Selected Bibliography


Dorothy Dehner
Dorothy Dehner, David, Dorothy Dehner: In Retrospect: The Sculptures and Drawings, American Sculptural Destiny, from the 1940s and 1950s. Tampa, FL: Tampa Museum of Art, 1994.


