

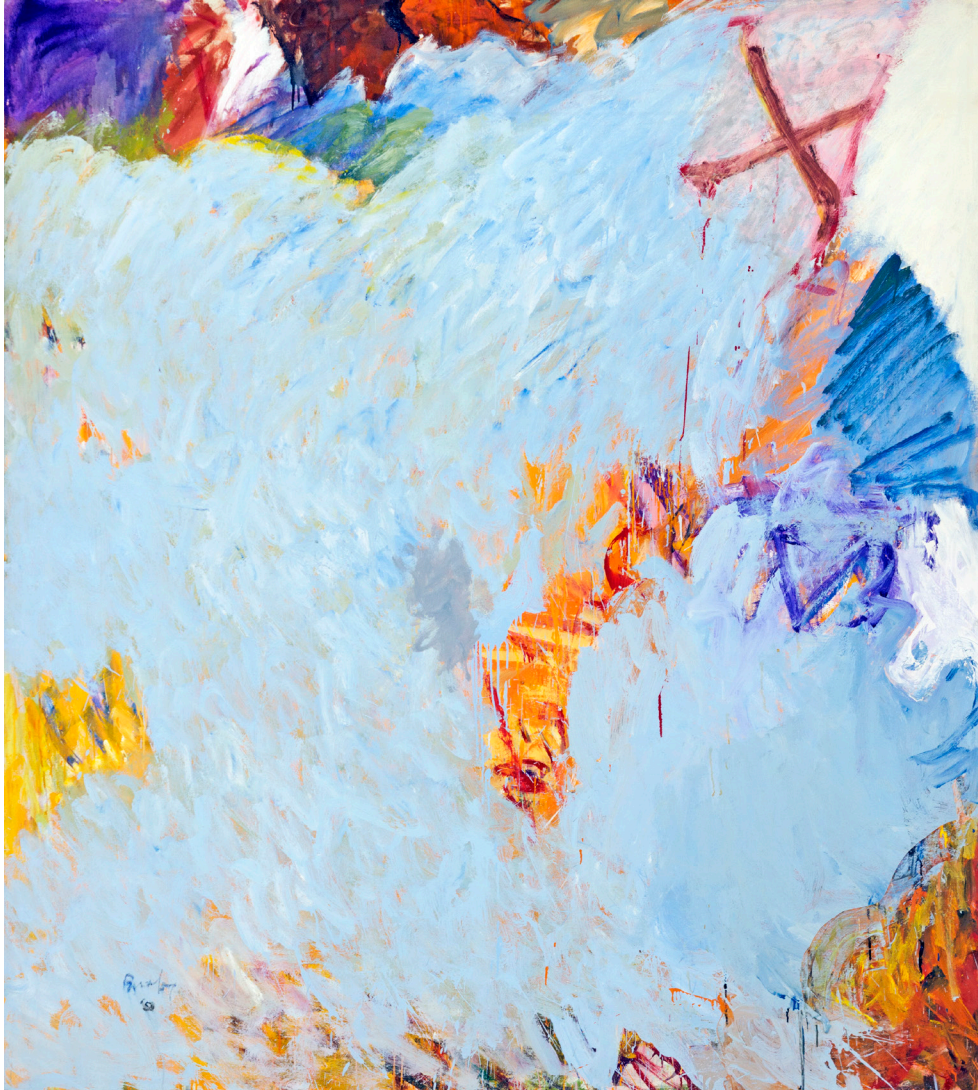
# eric firestone gallery

## The Guardian

### 'A punch in the face' - Action, Gesture, Paint: Women Artists and Global Abstraction 1940-70 review

Adrian Searle

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Pat Passlof's Stove, 1959. On view in Action, Gesture, Paint at the Whitechapel Gallery, London. Courtesy of the Levett Collection

#### **Whitechapel Gallery, London**

Female abstract expressionists - many overlooked or 'borrowed' from - finally get their day in this jolting exhibition whose works seem to yell at each other from wall to wall

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The idea is great: an exhibition of female abstract painters from the 1940s to the early 70s. Subtitled *Women Artists and Global Abstraction*, this show is intended, if not to overthrow the canon, then to revise the story: much of it is derived from abstract expressionism, in which the role of female artists has been consistently downplayed.

This exhibition aims to stand as a corrective, not only by focusing on the few better-known women associated with the New York school during the 1940s and 50s, but also on artists from Europe, Latin America, China, Japan, Iran and elsewhere. Most were formed during the period between the suffragettes and second-wave feminism in the 1960s. To make art at all and to have a career was an uphill struggle.

Attempting to draw together several strands of improvisatory abstract art, the exhibition takes us from New York to European *art informel*, from etiolated postwar École de Paris abstraction to pasty, austerity-era *tachisme*, and from noodling introspection, zen-like calligraphy and quietism to paint-heavy lyricism and corporate-lobby colourfields. At the show's core is the idea of painting as an arena, an existential act as much as an object. With this idea comes a belief in authenticity and self-expression, in painting as a performance of the self and the unconscious, and as an index of embodiment.

These are foundational myths in the story of abstract art, and take on a particular resonance when the artists in question are women. The show opens with *April Mood*, a suave, lush and overblown widescreen 1974 Helen Frankenthaler abstract landscape, and ends with a group of dyspeptic, argumentative paintings by Joan Mitchell. These two pioneers bookend a show in which works by Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning and Grace Hartigan stand as reminders of the eclipse suffered by female artists in the story of abstract expressionism.

But not everything is equally distinguished, powerful, or even individual. With its clamour of voices, approaches, touches, tempos, styles, its wild differences in scale, surface treatment, materiality and intention, there are surprises and discoveries here, great things and dismal things, anxious things and angry things. There is exuberance and rage. A lot of the energy in Mitchell's work feels ill-tempered, with its hurried fracturings and coalescences, the side-swipes and invocations of natural processes and of inner feelings. Her work is full of things coming together, things picked up then dropped or discarded. Mitchell's forms elbow their way across their canvases. Much of the drama is heightened by her use of blank space.

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The wrenching, spiky and jagged forms in **Martha Edelheit's** *Sacrificial Portrait*, and the frightening red and white gestures exploding against black in Sonia Gechtoff's work, have all the attack and suddenness of a punch in the face. Corinne West, meanwhile, resorted to painting under the name Michael West. George (Grace) Hartigan and Lee Krasner, whose name was originally Lena, also felt it necessary to disguise their gender. It is no wonder women get angry.



Martha Edelheit's *Sacrificial Portrait*, 1958. On View in Action, Gesture, Paint at the Whitechapel Gallery, London. Courtesy of the Levett Collection.

Even here, some stories are fitfully told or are only partially glimpsed. German artist Sarah Schumann, who spent her childhood in Nazi Germany, painted luminous egg-tempera fields that are full of delicate close-toned touches and variations. Then there's Alma Thomas, an African-American art teacher born in 1891, whose 1961 *Etude in Brown (Saint Cecilia at the Organ)* is a mysterious, almost architectural space flecked by light. This is a large painting in miniature, painted at her kitchen table.

Elna Fønnesbech-Sandberg, born in Denmark in 1892, began painting only in her 50s, at the suggestion of her psychoanalyst. Her paintings are filled with an almost frightening turmoil. Janet Sobel used glass pipettes to drip moiling tangles and skeins of enamel on to her canvases. These were seen by Jackson Pollock in 1945 and inspired, in part, his own drip painting (he even went on to use turkey basters to squirt the paint).

Yuki Katsura adapted Japanese techniques in her strange islands of wrinkled paper, collaged on to canvas. One is a deliciously eccentric yellow blob – almost filling the canvas – over a black background. Bifurcated sprouts reach towards the painting's edges. Odd and wonderful, it all makes you want to see more. Another of her paintings has a smaller dark blob – almost a head shape – set among ruffled golden folds. What's going on here? There is never enough of what one might want to see, and then we're off again.

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Some artists are just fleeting presences. In her short career, Peruvian painter Gloria Gómez-Sánchez produced dense, almost monochromatic works that often incorporated detritus. They look like a kind of residue, a painting degree zero. In about 1970 she stopped painting altogether, and little of her work survives. As much as the bigger names, and bigger works, it is tantalising moments such as these that keep the show alive, and keep us looking.

Jay DeFeo is represented by one vertical painting of something like a torso. It manages to be both commanding and vulnerable. Then we come across an earlier Frankenthaler from 1951 called Circus Landscape. It is almost a clownish take on Kandinsky, in which, among the improvised shapes and swipes and splurges, we find a cartoonish, wonky martini glass and an oversize shoe.

At other points, works seem to be yelling at each other across the gallery, from wall to wall. There are paintings that boil and paintings that seem to have lizard skin. There are lumpy paintings, childish paintings, paintings that are thoughtful and paintings that want to fight. There are more than 150 here, with 80 women artists clamouring over the walls of the Whitechapel, in a show co-produced with the Van Gogh Foundation in Arles and the Bielefeld Kunsthalle in Germany.

One asks why does so much (41 out of 150 is my estimate) come from a single private collection? And why does Gillian Ayres have so much space when other arguably more important artists are jammed up against their neighbours, or are reduced to being represented by single works? It is hard not to skid over the surface of things, and to be left with too many questions.

Action! Gesture! Paint! You can imagine a film director shouting the title through a megaphone. When different artists are using unmixed and mostly undiluted paint straight from the tube, everything gets a bit homogenised. This makes it all hard work for the viewer. Some of the standout pieces only tangentially meet the show's theme. Three small works by Bice Lazzari have little to do with action or gesture. With their discrete forms and symbols, they appear to be entirely deliberated records of her thoughts. Her fellow Italian artist Carol Rama shows an inky automatist figure incorporating a painted sac of real glass doll's eyes. Rama's title for this disturbing little work is great: We Moan, We Do the Bop. At its best, that is what this show does too.

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