

Whitechapel Gallery offers thrilling landmark show of female abstract artists — review

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Visual Arts

Pioneering non-figurative work by women from all over the world gets its due in an exuberant London exhibition



Helen Frankenthaler, 'April Mood' (1974) © Helen Frankenthaler Foundation/DACS

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A call to spring and nature rising in the heart of the gritty wintry city, Helen Frankenthaler's "April Mood", a luscious, watery extravaganza of stain-soaked pink, orange and blues, floats across the opening wall of the Whitechapel Gallery's exuberant new exhibition *Action, Gesture, Paint: Women Artists and Global Abstraction 1940-1970*. The show closes as grandiloquently, with Joan Mitchell's operatic colour tangles and brilliant dispersed light in "Rufus' Rock" and "Untitled", richly allusive yet taut compositions playing wild and free with landscape elements as evocations of emotion and memory.

Between these masterpieces, 80 artists fill out the picture of how women across the world from the 1940s to the 1970s embraced non-figurative painting as gestures of liberation and self-expression.

A mere seven years, but a sea-change in cultural sensibility, separates this ambitious exhibition from the Royal Academy's colossal 2016 show *Abstract Expressionism*, which focused almost entirely on big boys Pollock, de Kooning, Rothko and co, and consecrated the movement as built on explosive American macho energy. Part of current impulses to rewrite established art-historical narratives, the Whitechapel show unpicks and expands this reading in terms of gender and, impressively, geography.

The range is thrilling. In South Korea, Wook-kyung Choi saturated her canvases with swooping, ragged oranges, scarlets and ochres, a razzle-dazzle of green and blue stripes interspersed with scintillating white impasto — abstract marks at their most vibrant and apparently improvisatory, held within a just-ordered framework.



Wook-kyung Choi, 'Untitled' (1960s) © Wook-kyung Choi Estate

Training in Rome, Behjat Sadr absorbed influences of European *art informel* alongside the imprint of Persian tapestries and Islamic architecture, returning to Tehran to paint elegant constructions dominated by vast curves, usually black, sometimes lit with glittery primary hues, suggesting natural elements — tree trunks, forests, comets — and always, in the oozing liquid paint, referencing the black gold of oil.

Argentine Noemí Di Benedetto's stretched, rough-textured canvases are stitched like wounds. Shadowy figures, recollections of exile, emerge in Palestinian Maliheh Afnan's dark landscapes "Mindscape" and "Concours". In "Open Game" and "Promenade", Ida Barbarigo translates Venice's winding canals and reflections into opalescent curlicues, fluttering white strokes against airy backgrounds.

Apparent throughout is a sense of the fragility, urgency and excitement during sociopolitical upheaval, in different global contexts. Barbarigo remembered an exhilaration wandering across deserted Venice in 1945: “I felt this openness and was nourished by it . . . seeing light on things, tones, grey details . . . ecstatic vagabonding.”



Behjat Sadr, 'Untitled' (1956) © Behjat Sadr Estate/DACS

At the same time, when war ended catastrophically in Japan, Toko Shinoda added thick bold black strokes, gestural splashes and blurry passages to her refined ink paintings, fusing Asian calligraphy with modern abstraction. “The air of freedom after the war suddenly nurtured the seeds of a desire within me to express the shape of my heart visually. I was suddenly emancipated . . . my brush moved like an outpour,” she wrote.

On the other side of the world Michael West (née Corinne Michelle West) also recorded the end of the war: “A great parade of tanks and guns roar under my 5th Avenue window — the noise is deafening, hysterical . . . this glorious roar — this beautiful abstract scene of people lined all along the curb . . . is the new poetry, the new art.” A luminous blot seeps across dense enamel and sand layers in her “Nihilism”, alluding to nuclear holocaust but also creation arising from destruction. The rhythmic marks record the reach of West’s body as she painted; the whole surface is animated in a way embodying Harold Rosenberg’s definition of American abstraction: “an arena in which to act”.

With scores of competing huge, noisy canvases, group abstract shows are hard to orchestrate, but this one is beautifully scaled, with a superb small room midway, slowing us down and allowing modest-sized paintings to breathe. Here Asma Fayoumi's "Requiem for a City", fragmented maroon and black architectonic forms interspersed with cobalt and silver shards, glimmers like a moonlit ruin; it was painted in Damascus following Israeli-Syrian clashes in 1967.



Janet Sobel, 'Untitled' (c1948)

Opposite are delicate canvases covered in splattered pigment and looping lines, such as the tremulous pink-turquoise “Illusion of Solidity” by Janet Sobel (née Jennie Olechovsky), a Brooklyn grandmother when she began to paint in the early 1940s. She anticipated Pollock’s

all-over drip effects by a few years, though the stronger comparison is with folk decorative styles from Sobel's native Ukraine. Critic Clement Greenberg called Sobel "primitive" and "a housewife".

There are, however, under-the-radar New Yorkers here as tough and full of bravado as the men. Lee Krasner's robust-voluptuous arcs and coils build wonderful compositions of controlled chaos — "Bald Eagle", "Feathering". Lesser known, the slashing dragged strokes in Judith Godwin's "Black Pagoda" and "Black Cross" have an architectural heft and depth recalling those of her friend Franz Kline, but a dynamic, lighter quality inspired by the physical movements of another friend, dancer Martha Graham. And Mary Abbott's undulating chords in hot colours in "Purple Crossover" and the rushing liquid flow of the towering vertical of "Mahogany Road" are as sensual-rowdy yet graceful as the paintings of her sometime lover de Kooning — and the influence was not all one way; they experimented with large abstracted landscapes around the same time.



Lee Krasner, 'Bald Eagle' (1955) © Pollock-Krasner Foundation/DACS

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Krasner has gradually won acclaim but the others, also belonging to Greenwich Village ab-ex circles in the 1940s-50s, became obscure several decades before their deaths — Abbott aged 98 in 2019; Godwin in 2021. A shift occurred just before they died when they were sought by interviewers as the last living links with the movement’s heyday; each spoke, with little bitterness, about the prejudice they faced as women painters in high-testosterone mid-century New York.



The market remains madly unbalanced: Abbott’s marvellous “Mahogany Road” sold in 2019 for just \$16,250. This is the more extraordinary because, of all genres, abstraction is gender-neutral. “I’m an artist, not a woman artist, not an American artist,” Krasner insisted.

Why then a women-only show? To redress inequality, fundamentally, and build a nuanced understanding. The selection could have been tighter: the artists included are of uneven stature — some will enter the canon, others are forgettable, few sustained the developing careers to justify retrospectives such as Krasner’s at the Barbican in 2019 and Mitchell’s currently at Paris’s Fondation Louis Vuitton. But most had the courage to make art from the maelstrom of their own experience: Krasner’s favourite line from Rimbaud, “I ended up finding sacred the disorder of my mind”, could speak for the majority.

Bursting with feeling, this exhibition is a landmark, celebrating so many women who found their own voices and swelled the global scene of abstract expressionism. As Frankenthaler wrote, “If it’s beautiful and it works, hooray!”

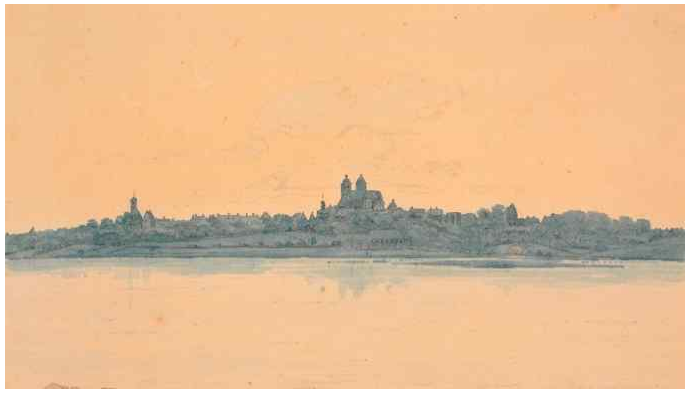
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