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## Surface Work review – women abstract artists dazzle in historic show

### Victoria Miro Mayfair and Wharf Road, London

This magnificent, century-spanning survey of abstract painting, all of it by women, many of whom are unknown, is as poignant as it is momentous

By Laura Cumming | 15 Apr 2018



'Never-ending mirage': Hedda Sterne's Vertical Horizontal #7 1/2, 1963. Photograph: © ARS, NY and DACS, London 2018 Courtesy Van Doren Waxter, New York

There are certain shows that change one's sense of art. Surface Work is one of them. Spread across two sites, it is nothing less than an anthology of abstract painting spanning an entire century, from early constructivism to post-digital sampling, in which every work holds its own and every work is by a woman. This is a rare and historic event.

It is also clear proof, if more were needed, of the institutional bias of the art world. So many of these women's names are unfamiliar, so many have been stunted, forgotten or ignored, that it is quite possible to walk through rooms full of magnificent works without having heard of their makers. Abstract painting, roughly as represented in British museums, tends to run from Kandinsky, Malevich and Mondrian to Pollock, Rothko and Barnett Newman, through to Richard Diebenkorn, Cy Twombly and – if you're very lucky – [Joan Mitchell](#), an artist easily as great as Twombly yet appallingly neglected in this country. Bridget Riley and the ever-visible [Yayoi Kusama](#) are eminent exceptions too, and last year's [Russian Revolution shows](#) brought us the amazons of the avant garde as never before. But still this show is guaranteed to surprise with its surge of artistic revelations.



Hedda Sterne. Photograph: Gjon Mili/The Life Picture Collection/Getty Images

Hedda Sterne (1910-2011), for instance, a Romanian-born painter associated with the abstract expressionists in New York. Too associated, perhaps: she was the only woman in an iconic photograph of the so-called irascibles, including Pollock, Reinhardt, Motherwell and de Kooning, co-signatories of a momentous letter objecting to the aesthetic conservatism of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1950. This singularity proved fateful. “I am known more for that darn photo,” she once remarked, “than for 80 years of work.”

At Victoria Miro you can see one of Sterne’s most sublime works, in which several horizontal bars, lavishly painted in glowing hues against a variety of opalescent whites, creams and greys, rise in a storeyed format above one another. Together they conjure repeating seashores stretching away into the distance. Horizontals invoke horizons, almost invariably, in abstract painting, and Sterne plays upon this romantic tendency in the mind’s eye to imagine the beautiful impossibility of a never-ending mirage.

Sterne showed at New York’s famous Betty Parsons Gallery, alongside her fellow irascibles and many other American stars, from Joseph Cornell to Jasper Johns. But Parsons (1900-82) was a considerable artist in her own right. Anyone who associates her mainly with an unfailing eye for new gifts might look at her own, in the lush and gorgeous *End of Winter*, where soil-brown and deep green curves press against each other with energetic force. As in life so in art: the world’s surface stirs with new life.

I have never seen the art of Paule Vézelay, one of Britain’s first abstract painters, who was born Marjorie Watson-Williams in Bristol in 1892 but shed her humdrum English name on an early trip to Paris. *Silhouettes*, painted there in 1938, is a zany array of biomorphic forms, somewhere between planets, fruit and exclamation marks, ultramarine and black against a pale ground so that they dance abruptly on the eye. Vézelay was forced to leave the painting behind at the outbreak of war; it was saved, but many others were lost.



Silhouettes, 1938 by Paule Vézelay. Photograph: The Estate of Paule Vézelay

Vézelay had to wait until the age of 90 for her first public survey, at the Tate Gallery in 1983. She died the following year. The American artist Helen Frankenthaler (1928-2011), who effectively invented colour field painting, wasn't honoured at the Museum of Modern Art until after her death though she was acknowledged as a towering figure of postwar abstraction. She is represented here with a wildly gestural work, more calligraphic than the diaphanous "soak stain" canvases for which she is known, and perhaps more explosive.

Until I saw this show, I had no idea that Nicolas de Staël had a subtle follower in the Belgian painter Ilse D'Hollander (1968-97), whose gravely beautiful canvases hold rectilinear forms and monochrome colours in quizzically balanced variations. D'Hollander killed herself aged 29. Nor had I come across Howardena Pindell (born 1943), who decoupled pointillism from image so that her millions of coloured points float free, creating an atmosphere of their own, in this case the drift of flickering light through a glade. Or Jay DeFeo (1929-89), whose *White Water*, from the last year of her life, sets the liquid paint scudding and frothing over the canvas. DeFeo once showed with her compatriots Frank Stella and Ellsworth Kelly, but over here her name has slipped between the slats. To see all these works in London, for the first time, is both momentous and poignant.



Red Tree, 1976 by Joan Mitchell. Photograph: © Estate of Joan Mitchell Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York

Of course there are well-known artists here too. A wonderful late ab-ex [Lee Krasner](#) (1908-84), involving skeins of delicate ochre and sepia, is perfectly calculated in scale and movement to give an effect of hazy distance brought into momentary focus. The venerable British painters [Prunella Clough](#), [Sandra Blow](#) and [Gillian Ayres](#), who alas died last week, are all here, along with a fine white-net Kusama and a non-objective composition by [Liubov Popova](#), Russian constructivist, from 1918. Joan Mitchell's *Red Tree* is tremendously arboreal, a blaze of sudden glory conveying all the excitement of looking deep into mysterious thicket.

Anyone at all interested in painting might want to start with the early 20th century in Mayfair and move to Wharf Road for more recent work, witnessing the abundantly various approaches to abstraction over time – conceptual, geometric, gestural, hard-edged, romantic, numinous, optical, comic. *Neurons and Noise*, by [Bharti Kher](#) (born 1969), in which a million bindis scintillate across a sizzling plane of circles, sets off vibrations for both eye and mind. Mary Weatherford (born 1963) has a burst of green light on Coney Island flaring up in vinyl and neon paint.

*Moon*, by the Brazilian artist [Adriana Varejão](#) (born 1964), doesn't appear abstract – a great disc, its surface cracked, revealing a secret dust beneath – until you stand back and witness its eerie geometry. [Dala Nasser](#) (born 1990) paints with latex on used trauma blankets, turning refuse into glittering abstract banners.

All anthologies are inevitably partial, and perhaps some of the wittiest imaginations here – [Mira Schendel](#) (1919-88) and [Mary Heilmann](#) (born 1940) – aren't perfectly represented. One tiny [Agnes Martin](#) grid, attempting quietude in the throng, will hardly convince. But the immense range is a blessing, not least because it scotches any notion that women could ever think or paint alike; though they might easily share the same obstacles. Some of these painters were once known as the wives of more famous artists. I won't repeat the diminution by mentioning those men's names.

Most astonishing, for me, is the American artist [Pat Steir](#)'s fiercely beautiful *September North China Sea* (1994-95), a cascade of dark marks on an umber ground, made with the sheer forces of gravity and liquid. Calligraphy, rain, watercolour art, a twist of Chinese scarlet at its centre: the painting carries a vast culture, geography and climate in its delicate torrents. Steir is 78, and still her marvellous work comes as a surprise. If only more shows were like this one – bringing forward the new, while bringing back the absent legends.



September North China Sea, 1994-95 by Pat Steir. Photograph: © Pat Steir; courtesy Cheim & Read, New YorkCheim & Read