



Surface Work: the women who made abstract art

By Julia Weiner | April 12, 2018



Louise Fishman Bearer of the Rose, 2017 Oil on linen 177.8 x 228.6 cm 70 x 90 in © Louise Fishman Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York

"Abstract is not a style. I simply want to make a surface work." So said the artist Joan Mitchell in 1986, and from her words a new exhibiton takes its title. *Surface Work* at Victoria Miro's two London galleries celebrates the contribution that women have made to abstract painting, bringing together works by more than 50 artists of different generations from all over the world.

Jewish artists are well represented in the exhibition. Among them are Lee Krasner and Helen Frankenthaler, who were both part of the Abstract Expressionist movement that began in New York and became very influential all over the world.



Lee Krasner *The Farthest Point*, 1981 Oil and paper collage on canvas 144.1 x 94.6 cm 56 3/4 x 37 1/4 in © 2018 Pollock-Krasner Foundation / ARS, NY and DACS, London 2018 Courtesy Paul Kasmin Gallery

Jews were without doubt disproportionately represented in this movement, not only as artists but also as the intellectuals and critics who wrote about the work. The best known artists include Mark Rothko, born Markus Rothkonwiz in Dvinsk, Russia in 1903 and Barnett Newman, born in New York City in 1905 to recent immigrants from Poland. Their work was written about by two rival Jewish art critics and intellectuals, Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg.

Lee Krasner was born Lena Krassner into an Orthodox Jewish home, her parents recent immigrants from Russia. During the early years of her career, she was eclipsed by her rather more famous husband Jackson Pollock. After his death in a car crash in 1956, she became responsible for his estate and as a result of her insistence of remaining in control of his legacy, was regarded with hostility by some critics and curators. Indeed, she once said “The only thing I haven’t had against me was being black. I was a woman, Jewish, a widow, a damn good painter, thank you, and a little too independent.”



Helen Frankenthaler *Winter Figure with Black Overhead*, 1959 Oil on sized primed canvas 213.4 x 134.6 cm 84 x 53 in © Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc. / ARS, NY and DACS, London 2018. Photography by Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian

The work in the exhibition entitled *The Farthest Point* was made towards the end of her career in 1981. (She died in 1984.) It forms part of a series inspired by the seasons as when she was working on them, she had Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* running through her head. The work combines a lithograph from 1970 which she cut up and collaged onto a section of an earlier painting. For the painting she used a shade that she called Ahab-brown, the colour named after her poodle. She painted in umber tones in the 1960s whilst suffering insomnia following the death of first her husband and then her mother. Unable to sleep, she painted at night but found that when painting in artificial light, she changed from bright and vibrant hues to monochrome colours.

Helen Frankenthaler was also married to a fellow Abstract Expressionist Robert Motherwell. The daughter of a New York Supreme Court judge, she came from a more assimilated and cultured Jewish background than Krasner. She is represented in the exhibition by a large scale painting from 1959 which combines splashes of dense colour with lyrical paint strokes. The Abstract Expressionists often worked on a monumental scale, perhaps because many had spent the early years of their career working on the public art projects subsidised by Roosevelt’s New Deal.



Hedda Sterne Vertical Horizontal #7 1/2, 1963 Oil on canvas 182.9 x 137.2 cm 72 1/8 x 54 1/8 in © ARS, NY and DACS, London 2018 Courtesy Van Doren Waxter, New York

Less well-known than Krasner and Frankenthaler, Hedda Sterne was born Hedwig Lindenberg in Bucharest in 1910. The artist travelled regularly to Vienna and Paris where she became involved in the Surrealist movement. Married to Fritz Stern in 1932, she kept her new name when she fled to America in 1941, adding the extra 'e' to her surname when she started exhibiting in New York, soon becoming part of the Abstract Expressionist movement. She joined a number of other artists in protesting at the conservative nature of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's group juries and was the only woman in a photo of the protesting artists, shown alongside the most famous members of the movement including Pollock, Rothko and Newman — "I am known more for that darn photo than for 80 years of work" she commented at the end of her life. She is represented in the exhibition by one of her beautiful Vertical Horizontal paintings from the 1960s, another large canvas almost two metres high in which the artist suggests a vast landscape within a vertical format. This series was refined in Venice and indeed the work does suggest something of an expansive view over the lagoon.

Another Jewish artist represented is Louise Fishman, born in Philadelphia in 1939. Fishman has declared a strong commitment to her Jewish, feminist, lesbian identity and investigated her Jewish roots in 1988, when she accompanied a Holocaust survivor friend on a trip to Terezin and Auschwitz. She brought back some silt from the Pond of Ashes at Auschwitz which she mixed with beeswax to make paint to create a series entitled *Remembrance and Renewal*. She is represented in this exhibition by a recent painting from 2017 entitled *Bearer of the Rose*, another large scale work where the artist paints in bright colours on linen, improvising as in many of her works on a grid format.

A complete contrast to all the loose, spontaneous mark-making of the Abstract Expressionist artists is presented in the work of Tess Jaray. She was born in Vienna in 1937 into an artistic Jewish family. Her mother had studied at art school and her aunt ran a gallery. Her parents came to England with their baby daughter in 1938 and settled in rural Worcestershire. In 1960, she was awarded a travel scholarship which allowed her to visit Italy where she became influenced by Renaissance architecture. She is represented here by her 1962 painting *Castle Blue*, one of a pair of works in which she suggests through carefully painted geometric shapes the crenellations of a castle. Her work is very linear, the lines painstakingly painted and she arranges groups of shapes on flat grounds to investigate the effects that pattern, repetition and colour have on our visual perceptions.

Surface Work is on April 11 to May 19 at Victoria Miro, Wharf Road, N1, and April 11 to June 16 at Victoria Miro Mayfair, 14 St George Street, London