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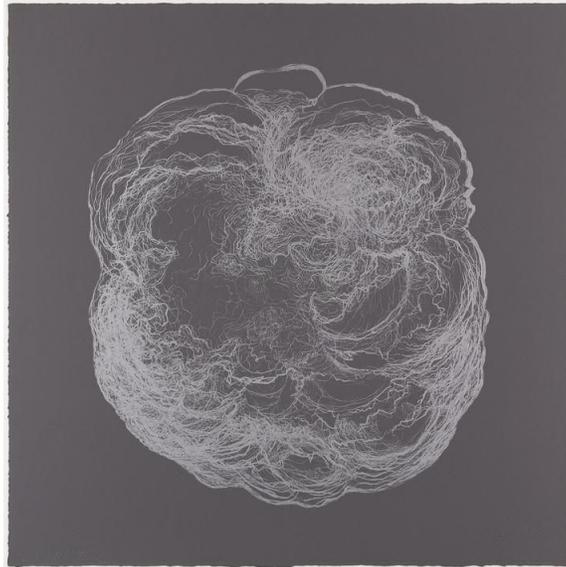


Hedda Sterne, 'Untitled (Metaphores and Metamorphoses VIII),' 1967 ©THE HEDDA STERNE FOUNDATION/ARS, NY

By *Judith H. Dobrzynski*  
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On first impression, visitors to “Hedda Sterne : Printed Variations” might be tempted to think of Cézanne’s fixation on the apple: The Sterne lithographs that occupy a long wall here at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art were inspired by a head of crinkly lettuce. And both artists were exploring form and color. But it does no disservice to Sterne to state that her experiments were more limited and her aspirations more narrow. She had no pretense of situating lettuce among other objects, hinting at relationships, or using it as a metaphor, as Cézanne did. Unlike Cézanne, who wanted to “astonish Paris with an apple,” as he reportedly once said, Sterne doesn’t dazzle us with her plants. She’s intent on parsing that lettuce from various viewpoints and testing the properties of lithography.

Still, her lettuce series, called “Metaphores and Metamorphoses,” at times does turn the prosaic into the poetic—particularly in “Untitled (Metaphores and Metamorphoses VIII),” from 1967, a bird’s-eye view of the lettuce set against a deep-blue background. It conjures a flower or a radiant heavenly body as much as it does the leafy vegetable.



Hedda Sterne , 'Untitled (Metaphores and Metamorphoses VII),' 1967 PHOTO: ©THE HEDDA STERNE FOUNDATION/ARS, NY

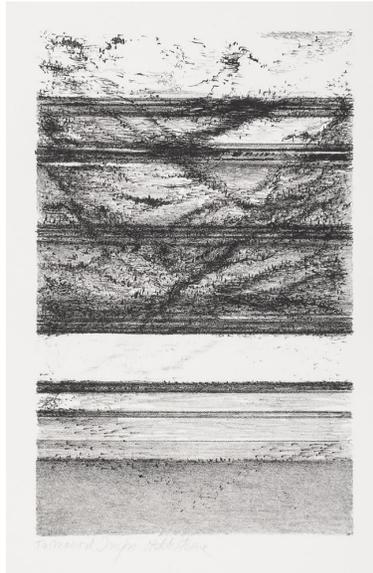
Sterne (1910-2011) is remembered now, if at all, mostly for her presence as the sole woman among the likes of Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still in a famous picture published by Life magazine. Labeled “The Irascibles,” they were part of a group of 18 painters and 10 sculptors who in May 1950 had written an open letter to the Metropolitan Museum of Art decrying plans for its juried “American Painting Today—1950” exhibition, complaining that the judging panels were too conservative, and calling on all “advanced artists” to boycott the contest.

Thus Sterne is often grouped with the Abstract Expressionists. But she really wasn't one. Her career—which began in her native Romania and then Paris before she emigrated to the U.S. in 1941—encompassed Surrealism; abstraction, both geometric and biomorphic; and figuration, including portraiture. Even her most abstract works lack the expansive gestural character of Abstract Expressionism and never completely disconnect from representation.

For a time—beyond the photo—Sterne was among the more visible female artists in the U.S. Soon after her arrival, she made friends among the New York School and married fellow artist Saul Steinberg. She exhibited at Peggy Guggenheim's famed Art of This Century gallery. When it closed, Sterne and Steinberg were among the artists who provided financing to gallerist Betty Parsons, who championed Abstract Expressionism and gave Sterne a show in 1947. In 1950—when Sterne was one of two women attending a painting symposium at Robert Motherwell's studio—Life magazine included her on a list of America's best young artists.

In 1967, Sterne spent time at the Tamarind Lithography Workshop in Los Angeles, which was dedicated to reviving lithography and stimulating the market for it, and most of the prints on view were acquired by the Amon Carter Museum as part of Tamarind's museum subscription program.

The 19 works from “Metaphores and Metamorphoses” show Sterne studying the formal qualities of the lettuce, which she depicts from many vantage points. She also tries out black and white, various colors and different kinds of paper. She crops the image, occasionally coming in tight. In one print, “Untitled (Metaphores and Metamorphoses IX),” the lettuce is—in the words of the exhibition curator, Michaela Haffner —“exploded” into a deep-green geometric form. Sterne is thinking, and viewers are watching. The lithographic process can be seen in three color separation prints that were used to create “Untitled (Metaphores and Metamorphoses VIII).”



Hedda Sterne, 'Untitled (The Vertical Horizontals II),' 1967 PHOTO: ©THE HEDDA STERNE FOUNDATION/ARS, NY

The other series on display, “The Vertical Horizontals,” also from 1967, comprises five prints. In these medleys of sea and sky, Sterne is concerned with the vanishing horizon. Although they are all black and white and show varying degrees of abstraction—with the lovely “Untitled (The Vertical Horizontals IV)” being the most representational—Sterne subtly suggests atmospheric conditions.

Four additional images in the show, all untitled and amorphous, though two seem to be crawling with insects, are outliers here—what Sterne was getting at is a mystery.

Perhaps that is fitting. Sterne was an experimenter, at one point even trying to convey highway motion in acrylic spray paint, but her large body of work presents a mixed picture of her talent. At a moment when female artists are being given second and third looks, she has already had four retrospectives (1977, 1985, 1997, 2006) at small museums. And she is occasionally included in larger group shows, such as the Museum of Modern Art’s 2017 “Making Space: Women Artists and Postwar Abstraction.”

“Hedda Sterne: Printed Variations” is a small, attractive show displaying themes that she also explored in painting. It leaves her where she will probably remain in art history, closer to the periphery than the center.

—Ms. Dobrzynski writes about the arts for many publications.