

# VAN DOREN WAXTER

## VOGUE

A Radical Female Artist (and an Unsung Hero of the Avant-Garde) Gets Another Look in “Hedda Sterne: Structures and Landscapes”

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Portrait of Hedda Sterne, circa 1959  
Photo: Inge Morath

This November, the Van Doren Waxter gallery in Manhattan presents “Hedda Sterne: Structures and Landscapes, 1950–1968,” a selection of works by the Bucharest-born Surrealist and Abstract Expressionist painter Hedda Sterne. It will be Van Doren Waxter’s second exhibition of Sterne’s work, following 2016’s “Hedda Sterne: Machines, 1947–1951.”

An unsung hero of the American avant-garde—the collector Peggy Guggenheim was a friend and fan—Sterne (née Lindenberg), who died in 2011 at the age of 100, was inspired in part by the thrilling pace of postwar American life. On canvases dense with color, her bold, gestural strokes could just as easily impose structure as create chaos—fitting, for an artist based in New York. The city, she wrote, was like “a gigantic carousel in continuous motion . . . [forming] an intricate ballet of reflections and sounds.” Her art thrived on that energy.

Sterne found various muses: “Structures and Landscapes” follows the transition of her creative focus from buildings and cityscapes to softer, more organic forms. Including works in oil, acrylic, watercolor, and several fascinating pictures in Rapidograph pen—an instrument favored by engineers and architects for the consistent width of its lines—the exhibition confirms the surprising mutability of her artistic practice.



Hedda Sterne, *Untitled* (Lunar Halo), c. 1950  
Photo: Courtesy of Van Doren Waxter

“All of [the works] are going to look pretty novel to people,” says Dorsey Waxter, principal of Van Doren Waxter. Not only did Sterne’s style vary widely, but she also kept her color palette uncommonly limited—composed mainly in grays, blacks, and browns, “these pictures have a very distinct kind of gravity to them,” Waxter says—and she liked to work her surfaces with a range of different materials. The stretched canvas, once reserved for the application of oil paints, Sterne took to drawing on with graphite, pastels, and charcoal. “She broke the walls of tradition,” Waxter says.

Although Sterne’s formal education ended in 1932 (she was enrolled at the University of Bucharest, studying art history and philosophy, when she married her first husband, Fritz, and withdrew), she kept singularly stimulating company throughout her early years. In Bucharest, she befriended painters, sculptors, and poets, conversant in Dada, Surrealism, and Constructivism; and in Paris, she worked for a time in the ateliers of Fernand Léger and André Lhote.



Hedda Sterne, *Untitled*, c. 1965–1968  
Photo: Courtesy of Van Doren Waxter

Sterne remained in Europe until 1941, when she joined Fritz (who had fled the year before) in midtown Manhattan. Acquainting herself with fellow émigrés André Breton and Marcel Duchamp, in 1942 she was included in the seminal “First Papers of Surrealism” exhibition, and from 1943 onward, Sterne was regularly featured at Guggenheim’s Art of This Century gallery. In 1950, she was one of 28 visual artists—Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman among them—to sign an open letter to Roland L. Redmond, then the president of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, protesting the institution’s “contempt for modern painting.” When *Life* did a story on the “Irascibles,” as they came to be known, the following January, 15 artists showed up for the photograph, and Sterne—standing at the rear of the group, in a dark, belted overcoat—was the only woman.



Hedda Sterne, *Untitled*, c. 1959  
Photo: Courtesy of Van Doren Waxter

Alternately interrogating her childhood memories, the built environment, movement (which she ingeniously rendered with commercial spray paints), and nature, Sterne’s work wasn’t quite like anything else. “Hedda was always searching, never satisfied,” the gallerist Betty Parsons once said. Sterne and Parsons worked together for almost 40 years. “She had many ways; most artists just have one way to go.” As Sterne noted herself in 2007, “I took it for granted that art is essentially an act of freedom. You react to the world totally freely.” The works on display in “Structures and Landscapes” are proof of that freedom, both in their assorted subject matter and in the fluidity of Sterne’s hand as an artist. While *Untitled* (1959) could be mistaken for a detail from a swirling Turner seascape, *Yellow Structure* has the off-kilter internal geometry of a Braque.

“She didn’t identify artistically with so many of her contemporaries,” Waxter says. “Artists like Rothko, for example, [were] trying to tap into a kind of subconscious, and were pursuing a way of art-making that had to do with the psyche. Hedda wasn’t so involved in that.” Her second marriage, to the renowned illustrator (and fellow Romanian immigrant) Saul Steinberg in 1944, gave Sterne a level of financial security that made it possible for her to create art on her own terms. “[She] cared about exhibitions, but she didn’t have to use the money from whatever works were sold to support herself,” Waxter says. “That makes a big difference. That [gave] her artistic freedom, and license.” It’s also perhaps why she isn’t more widely recognized. “Hedda was a very private person,” Shaina Larrivee, director of the Hedda Sterne Foundation, says, “and she wasn’t competitive.”



Hedda Sterne, *Yellow Structure*, c. 1952  
Photo: Courtesy of Van Doren Waxter

Still, since 2015, she has had a bit of a renaissance, appearing at MoMA, the Whitney, the Met (redemption, at last), and in the permanent collection of the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh. At a moment of intense reckoning for creatives of all kinds, Sterne, a pioneering female artist very nearly lost to history, is getting the attention she's due. "Could we have timed this?" Waxter asks. "No, but here we are. [Now] there's this incredible confluence of what we're trying to do, and the world around us being hungry for that kind of information."

*"Hedda Sterne: Structures and Landscapes, 1950–1968" will be on view November 1–December 22 at Van Doren Waxter, 23 East 73rd Street, New York City.*