

Unearthing a Treasure Trove of Bay Area Women Abstract Painters

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SONOMA, California — If you were to ask an art lover to name a famous female Abstract Expressionist who lived and worked in the San Francisco Bay Area, there is really only one likely answer: Jay DeFeo. Her 12-foot-tall, two-ton painting/sculpture “The Rose,” which can be seen at the Whitney Museum, has affirmed De Feo’s status as an icon on both coasts. The other widely recognized postwar woman artist from the Bay Area — DeFeo’s great friend Joan Brown — is generally associated with figurative art as an early member of the Bay Area Figurative group.

For this reason, *The Long View: California Women of Abstract Expressionism 1945–1965* at Modern Art West in Sonoma greets visitors with something unfamiliar: a Joan Brown abstraction. Toward the end of her student days at the California School of Fine Arts, Brown

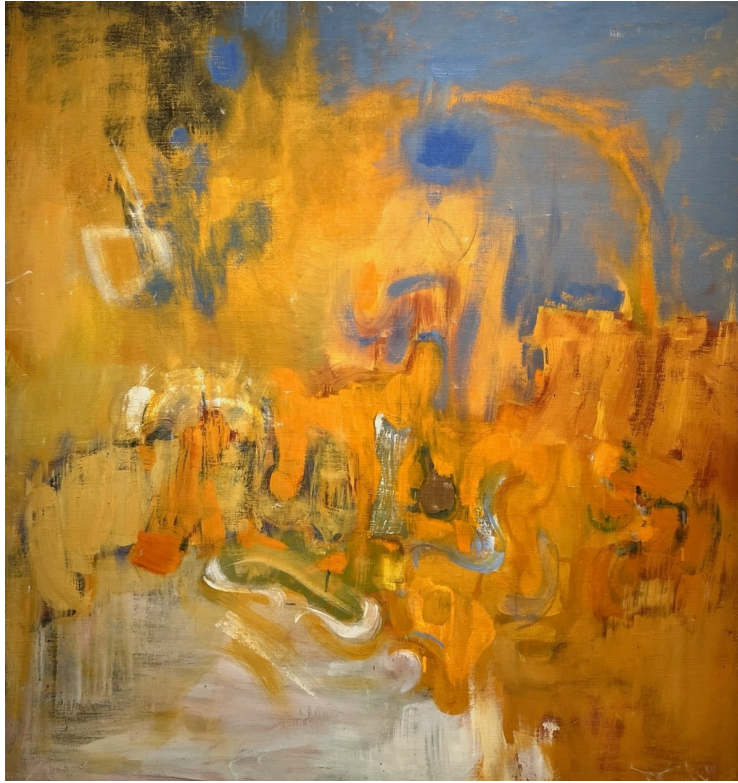
was working the territory between abstraction and representation. According to SFMOMA curator Janet Bishop, Brown's upcoming retrospective (opening November 19) will feature "several of her mostly abstract canvases that incorporate what she called 'things.'"



Nell Sinton, "Dark Landscape" (1958), oil on board, 36 x 51 inches

As *The Long View* amply demonstrates, DeFeo and Brown may be the best known Bay Area women artists who worked in abstraction, but they were far from alone. The exhibition includes sophisticated abstractions by many of their peers, including Zoe Longfield, Nell Sinton, Ruth Wall, Marie Johnson, Adelle Landis, and 19 others. If any of these names rings a bell, it might be Adelle Landis, who became Adelle Landis Bischoff when she married artist Elmer Bischoff in 1962. His status as one of Bay Area Figurative's Three Musketeers (David Park, Richard Diebenkorn, and Bischoff) obscured Adelle's reputation for decades. It's an all too common story for postwar women artists.

Of course, there are other reasons that women abstractionists in the Bay Area have been overlooked and their work undervalued. In the opinion of the late art historian Susan Landauer, who contributed a chapter titled "The Advantages of Obscurity" to the catalogue for the 2016-17 exhibition *Women of Abstract Expressionism*, they faced discrimination generated by both gender and geography: the Bay Area was seen as a backwater compared to New York. In addition, Bay Area artists who painted abstractly in the 1940s and '50s didn't call their work Abstract Expressionism. The terms they most often used for their ambiguous and dynamic abstractions, "Open Form" and "Long Form," were also used to describe Beat poetry.



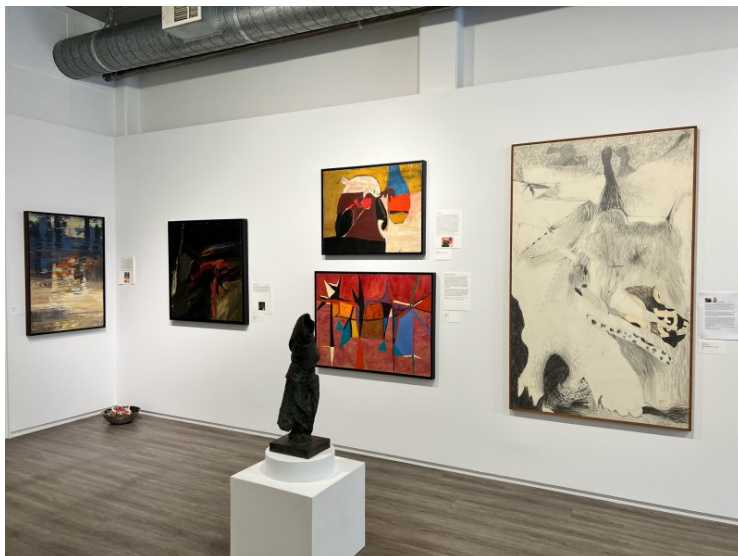
Zoe Longfield, "Untitled" (1949), oil on canvas, 46 x 43 inches

Because of Susan Landauer's research — and the exhibitions presented at Berkeley's now-closed Mythos Fine Art and Artifacts — the work of numerous women artists has been brought forward for our re-assessment. Sadly, because of Landauer's death in 2020, an exhibition she had been developing on abstraction by women artists of the Bay Area did not come to fruition. *The Long View*, which comprises Bay Area works that owner/director David Keaton has spent nearly 20 years locating and acquiring, is filled with museum-quality abstractions that offer tantalizing glimpses of what Landauer's proposed exhibition might have revealed.

One especially striking work is "Untitled," a 1948 oil on canvas by Zoe Longfield (1924-2013). Seething with ribbon-like brushstrokes that coalesce into fields of amber, orange, gold, white, and blue, it is mesmerizing and intense. Longfield — one of three women abstractionists who was admitted to Clyfford Still's inner circle of "Cognoscenti" — received a solo show at Chinatown's cooperative Metart Gallery, which she helped found. Reviewing Longfield's 1949 exhibition, *San Francisco Chronicle* art critic Alfred Frankenstein wrote that "of all the numerous artists who have taken up the new credo of arbitrary (or spontaneous) expression in unrestrained colors and unrestrained shapes, Miss Longfield impresses me as one of the most successful." After seeing her "Untitled" more than seven decades later, I have to agree.



Ruth Wall, "Untitled" (1950), oil on canvas, 40 x 26 inches



Installation view of *The Long View: California Women of Abstract Expressionism 1945-1965* at Modern Art West, Sonoma, California

Nell Sinton (1910–1997), whose art evolved from family scenes and cityscapes to abstractions, is represented by a 1958 oil titled “Dark Landscape.” Characterized by critic Bill Berkson as a “sensibility painter,” meaning that “her feelings about a specific motif are peculiar to the way she shows what she sees of it,” Sinton’s work has not been shown in depth since a 1981 retrospective at Mills College. If “Dark Landscape” is any indication, she was a skilled and interesting colorist and capable of compelling painterly improvisation.

Wyoming-born Ruth Wall (1917–2009) served as a pilot during World War II and then studied at the California School of Fine Arts with Hassel Smith, Edward Corbett, and David Park. Also a printmaker who exhibited a suite of abstract lithographs at the CSFA in 1952, she later lived and exhibited in Paris before returning to San Francisco. Her 1957 “Untitled” oil has a ragged, blocky sense of irregularity that bears comparison to Philip Guston’s works from the same era.

Marie Johnson (Calloway) (1920–2018) was a schoolteacher in Baltimore before moving to the Bay Area, where she taught at two art schools and later became president of the San Jose chapter of the NAACP. A square untitled painting from the 1950s reads as an abstract landscape, activated by a core of broad black strokes framed by boulder-like gray forms. It’s a painting that made me wonder what her other work looks like. Perhaps there is someone, somewhere who is planning a show that might help satisfy that curiosity.



Adelle Landis (Bischoff), “Untitled” (1953-54), oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches

The Long View: California Women of Abstract Expressionism 1945–1965 continues at Modern Art West (521 Broadway, Sonoma, California) through September 12. The exhibition was curated by David Keaton, the owner/director of Modern Art West.