

Side-lined? Women Abstract Painters in the Mid to Late Twentieth Century

Background Notes

Barry Venning — 15 November 2023



Nina Leen: *'The Irascibles'*, Nov. 23rd 1950, (published *Life* magazine, January 1951)

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On November 24th, 1950, the photographer Nina Leen took a famous group photo in a studio on 44th Street, New York, now known as *The Irascibles*, which was published in *Life* magazine on January 15th, 1951 (**Cover image**). It depicted eighteen New York artists who have become famous as the Abstract Expressionists: the group included figures who would become the biggest names in mid to late twentieth century abstract art, such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, Ad Reinhardt and Clyfford Still. They had gathered to protest against the lack of support shown to them and American abstract art in general by the Metropolitan Museum.

Nina Leen's photograph has since become the touchstone for canonical lists of the Abstract Expressionists. Of the eighteen artists in that 44th Street studio, however, only one, the Romanian-American painter, Hedda Sterne (1910-2011), was a woman, and her presence was resented by the males. She later said in an interview in 1981 that "They all were very furious that I was in it because they all were sufficiently macho to think that the presence of a woman took away from the seriousness of it all." According to the painter, Lee Krasner (1908-1984), Sterne was only included in the photograph on the insistence of her friend, the influential art dealer, Betty Parsons (1900-1982), who represented many of the male Abstract Expressionists at that time, and therefore had considerable leverage. Parsons maintained a 40 year professional connection with Sterne; such female friendships were vital for women in the American avant-garde. Apart from her friendship with Parsons, Sterne had a close relationship with her Manhattan neighbour, the gallerist and tastemaker, Peggy Guggenheim (1898-1979), who regularly showed Sterne's works in the 1940s. Guggenheim also introduced Sterne to pillars of the European avant-garde such as Marcel Duchamp, Andre Breton and Max Ernst, who were notably more supportive of her work than the *Irascibles* crowd.

In a career that lasted eighty years, Sterne produced a range of work that defied easy categorisation and segued between abstraction and figuration, such as her 1948 painting, *NY, NY No. X (1)*, which presents simultaneously as a semi-abstract mass of lines and planes and a cityscape with rooftops, walls, fences, ladders, fire escapes, towers and wood panels. Sterne has only recently begun to receive her due as an

artist: she is still conspicuously less well-known than her husband, the artist, cartoonist and designer, Saul Steinberg (1914-99), and her first exhibition in the UK was as recent as 2020. And yet, artistically and intellectually, she was more than the equal of most of those in the *Irascibles* photo: she was widely travelled, spoke five languages and read abstruse German philosophy in the original.



Figure 1: Hedda Sterne (1910-2011): *NY, NY No.X*. 1948. Oil on canvas, 83.5 x 118.5 cm. Tate

Hedda Sterne's career is, in many ways, exemplary of female American avant-garde artists. Both Elaine de Kooning (1918-89) and Lee Krasner were overshadowed by their husbands (Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock, respectively) and even managed their husbands' careers, to the detriment of their own success.

Lee Krasner's reputation has risen very considerably since the mid-1960s, particularly due to the work of feminist art historians who have pointed out that the relationship between her and Pollock was mutually productive, and that she not only influenced him, but also the thinking of the influential critic, Clement Greenberg. The gallerist, Sidney Janis, said of her that Krasner "knew more about painting than anyone in the United States, except [the artist, writer and collector] John Graham". The pioneer of European abstract art, Piet Mondrian, with whom Krasner regularly danced in New York jazz clubs, told her in 1942, "You have a very strong

inner rhythm. You must never lose it". That inner rhythm is apparent in her painting *The Seasons* of 1957 **(2)**, the largest of a series of paintings referencing the natural world, that Krasner produced in the year after Pollock's death in a drunken car crash. Up until then, Krasner's studio was a smallish upstairs room in their farmhouse in Springs, East Hampton, which meant that her works were generally modest in scale. After Pollock's death, she moved her equipment into Pollock's painting barn and was free to work on whatsoever scale she chose.



Figure 2: Lee Krasner (1908-84): *The Seasons*, 1957. Oil and house paint on canvas. (235.6 X 517.8 cm). On display at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, October 2015 (Photograph — Barry Venning).

If recognition of Krasner's achievements was delayed by her connection to Pollock, those of Janet Sobel (1893-1968) were, until very recently, completely obscured. Sobel was a mother of five children, and a grandmother who didn't take up painting until she was in her mid-forties. A self-taught artist who, by her own admission, never went to museums and didn't understand art speak, Sobel nonetheless made an impression on the likes of Sidney Janis, Marc Chagall and Max Ernst, and her work was shown at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century Gallery in 1945. At that time, Sobel developed a technique of painting that involved dripping paint onto a board or canvas support, using oils and enamels **(3)**, the same process for which Pollock would become famous, although his earliest drip paintings postdate those of Sobel. Pollock and his friend, the critic Clement

Greenberg, saw Sobel's work at the Guggenheim show and, according to Greenberg "Pollock admitted that these pictures had made an impression on him." For his part, Greenberg said Sobel's works were the first 'all-over' paintings he had seen, meaning their surfaces were worked in a uniform way, decentred, without dominant points of interest. This became a characteristic feature of much Abstract Expressionist art but Sobel was never properly credited for originating it. Some years later, in 1961, Greenberg downplayed her significance when he condescendingly wrote that he and Pollock "noticed one or two curious paintings shown at Peggy Guggenheim's by a 'primitive' painter, Janet Sobel (who was, and still is, a housewife living in Brooklyn)". In fact, Sobel and her family moved from Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, to Plainfield, New Jersey, in 1947, which removed her from the centre of the art world and led to many years of neglect.



Figure 3: Janet Sobel (1893-1968): *Untitled*, 1946. Oil and enamel on board, 45.5 x 35.5 cm. MoMA

As suggested above, recent decades have seen a long overdue re-examination of the work of female avant-garde artists. A recent manifestation of this was the exhibition held at Tate Modern earlier this year, in which the works of Piet Mondrian (conventionally regarded as one of the founders of abstraction, along with Kazimir Malevich and Wassily Kandinsky) were shown alongside and in equal numbers with paintings by the Swedish artist, Hilma af Klint (1862-1964). Although their mature styles of abstraction were very different – Mondrian's art was based on linearity

and geometry, whereas af Klint employed organic forms **(4)** – it was nonetheless a sound curatorial decision, since the two had much in common. Both were classically trained artists, their practices rooted in the observation of nature and landscape painting. They also shared a fascination with mystical and esoteric belief systems, which were much in evidence in the years around 1900. They both became members of the occult movement called the Theosophical Society and they were ardent followers of the mystic, Rudolf Steiner, the founder of anthroposophy, which was based on a belief in the human ability to contact other spiritual realms, especially through the power of colour and visual art. Both artists died in 1944, but although Mondrian is firmly set in the modernist canon, af Klint was largely forgotten until the 1980s, in spite of the fact that her earliest abstract works preceded those of Mondrian by nearly a decade.



Figure 4: Hilma af Klint (1862 - 1944). Works on display at Tate Modern, May 2023. (Photograph — Barry Venning).

Women were prominent in occult and spiritualist movements, which offered opportunities for recognition that their gender denied them in daily life. It is not surprising, therefore, that Hilma af Klint's spiritualism was typical of many female avant-gardists, including the Swiss artist and healer, Emma Kunz (1892-1963), the American, Agnes Pelton (1881-1961), and the British mediumistic creators, Georgiana Houghton (1814-1884) and Madge Gill (1882-1961).

Agnes Martin (1912-2004) also believed fervently in the spiritual power and purpose of art, although she was drawn less to the occult than to the Zen Buddhist beliefs that were introduced into the USA by D.T. Suzuki after World War 2. Unlike Hedda Sterne, with whom this essay began, and in spite of the schizophrenia from which she is believed to have suffered, Martin became a respected associate of the Abstract Expressionists, a close friend of Ad Reinhardt and Barnett Newman, and an object of admiration for the generation that followed Pollock and Co. These younger artists, who, like Martin herself, were predominantly gay, included Robert Rauschenberg, Ellsworth Kelly and Robert Indiana. Her devotion to her work was total, for as she said in 1982, “art work is a representation of our devotion to life.” For more than forty years, she created rigorous paintings that were often comprised of meticulous, pencil drawn grids, overlain with a wash of pale colour or of gesso. These spare, restrained works are now seen as harbingers of Minimalism. She spent the last decades of her career in Taos, New Mexico, and continued to paint right up to her death in 2004 (5). Her friend, the gallerist Arne Glimcher, rightly observed that “Agnes Martin was one of the most influential painters of her generation and left an enduring mark on the history of modern and contemporary art.”



Figure 5: Michele Mattei: Agnes Martin in her studio in Taos, New Mexico, 2004

Reading List

Katy Hessel. 2022. *The Story of Art without Men*. Oxford. Hutchinson Heinemann.

Jennifer Higgie. 2023. *The Other Side – A Journey into Women, Art and the Spirit*. London. W & N.

Gail Levin. 2019. *Lee Krasner – A Biography*. London. Thames and Hudson.

Laura Smith (ed). 2023. *Action – Gesture – Paint. Women Artists and Global Abstraction*. Exhibition catalogue. London. Whitechapel Gallery

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