

On View

12 Women of Abstract Expressionism to Know Now

Sarah Cascone, September 17, 2016



Lee Krasner, *The Seasons* (1957). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Photograph by Sheldon C. Collins. © 2015 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

The first names that come to mind in Abstract Expressionism—Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and the like—may all be men, but women artists also played a crucial role in the internationally-renown movement. It's time for some long-overdue recognition of other Ab Ex greats.

On view at the Denver Art Museum until September 25, curator Gwen Chanzit is spotlighting the achievements of such artists in the first museum exhibition to focus solely on female Abstract Expressionists painters, simply titled "Women of Abstract Expressionism". Featuring more than 50 major paintings, the show focuses on both East and West Coast artists, pairing familiar names, such as Helen Frankenthaler, with Perle Fine and Mary Abbott, among other less recognized figures.

"Except for a very small number of scholars who have spent their lives working in this field, there will be people you haven't heard of," Chanzit told artnet News. But, she points out, "ten years ago people didn't really know Jay DeFeo."

"This is not about pushing a feminist agenda, it's about taking another look," Chanzit added, pointing out that as recently as the 1980s, there wasn't a single female artist in *Janson's History of Art*, the standard college textbook. There

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

have been recent museum surveys of female surrealists, Pop artists and Impressionists, but she was breaking new ground with her Denver show.

“It was so clear to me that it needed to be done,” Chanzit said.

In preparation for the exhibition, Chanzit cast a wide net, taking a look at the work of over 100 women, about 40 of whom she says would have been a good fit for the final show and are featured in the catalogue. What she found was that artists were important practitioners of Abstract Expressionism—the first internationally-influential American art movement—on both coasts, but that the Bay Area’s female painters were more accepted and given more opportunities than their New York counterparts.

Regardless of where they were based, however, these artists haven’t been a major part of the art historical discourse. “A lot of these works have not been seen much,” said Chanzit, who hopes the exhibition will bring well-deserved attention to its participants. Moving forward, “we hope they will be woven into the fabric of the discussion.”



Jay DeFeo, *Untitled (Everest)*, from the Mountain series, (1955). Collection of the Oakland Museum of California. Gift of Jay DeFeo. © 2015 the Jay DeFeo Trust/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

2. Jay DeFeo (1929–1989)

Today, Jay DeFeo ranks among the better-known female artists of the era, but only after flying under the radar for many years. Best-known for her monumental painting *The Rose*, which is 10 feet tall, almost a foot thick, and weighs over a ton, DeFeo was the subject of a long-overdue retrospective organized by New York's Whitney Museum of American Art in 2012–13.