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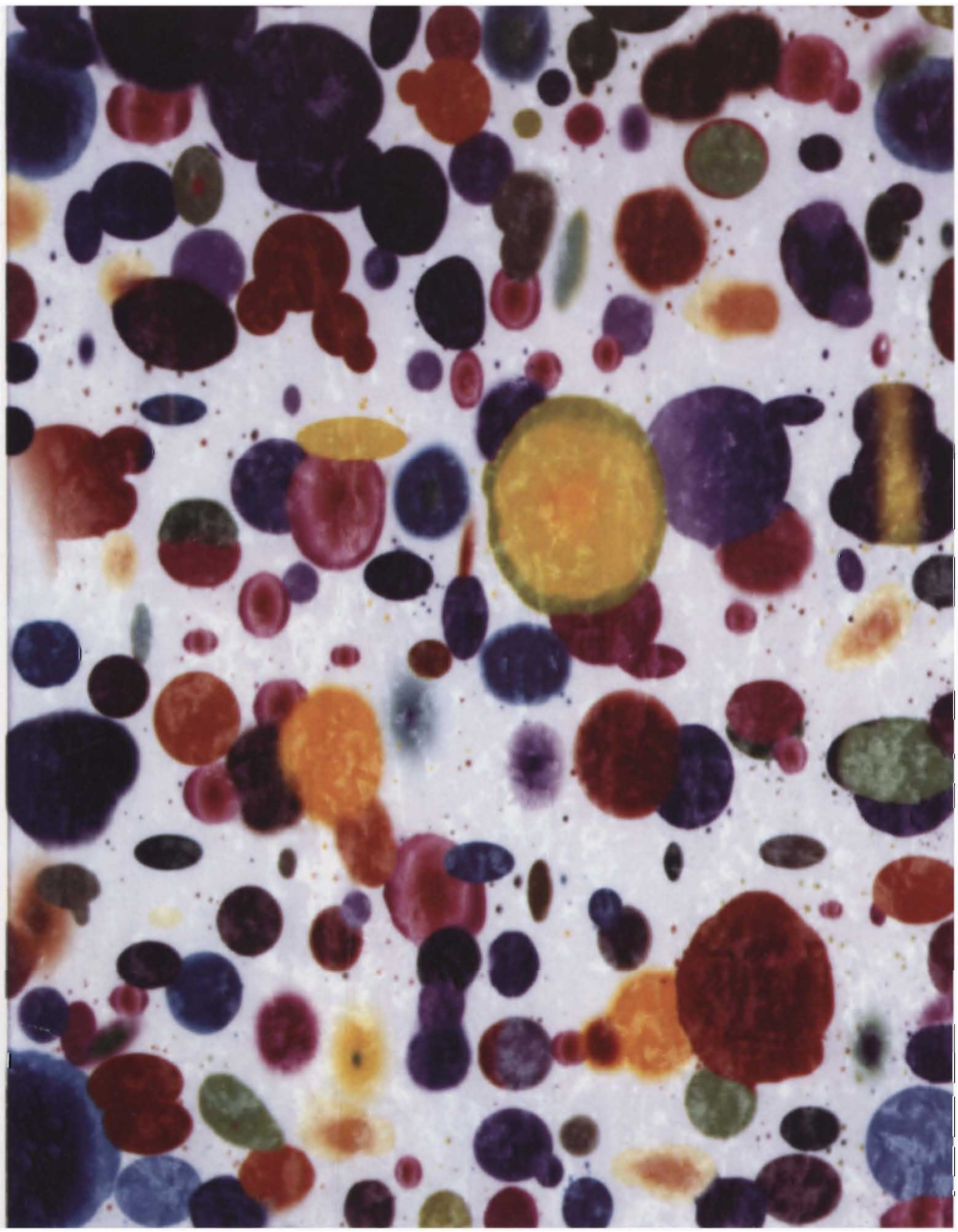
BETTER HALF, BETTER TWELFTH

Women Artists in the Collection



POLLY APFELBAUM, *SEEING SPOTS*, 1999, IRIS PRINT ON SYNTHETIC VELVET, UNL-ROBERT E. SCHWESER AND FERN BEARDSLEY SCHWESER ACQUISITION FUND, THROUGH THE UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA FOUNDATION

This special exhibition of the permanent collection focuses exclusively on the contributions of American women artists. The fact of women's historical exclusion from the art world is part of the exploration. "Why have there been no great women artists?"—art historian Linda Nochlin famously asked in a 1971 essay. Her findings pointed to the past exclusion of women from working with male nude models, hence apprenticeships, then professions and academies, to which we add commercial gallery exhibitions, art criticism, and art history. Over the centuries this vicious cycle has shaped the current phenomenon: the predominance of male artists in museum collections.

The expression "better half" historically referred to a wife or lover, acknowledging the significance of the unnamed woman by a man. "Better Twelfth," in the title, refers to the approximate ratio of female to male artists currently represented in the collection. The exhibition demonstrates the productivity of women artists—primarily twentieth-century artists—by naming a selection of them in the galleries, allowing us to consider who is still missing in the collection. The galleries are organized according to six groups: work by pioneering artists, sculpture, printmaking, photography, representational and abstract paintings.

SHELDON MUSEUM OF ART PART I: APRIL – OCTOBER 2010

Pioneer women artists defied social customs and family prohibitions to pursue art careers. In the nineteenth century, they were denied access to art schools and galleries. For example, to avoid compromising her career, Elizabeth Nourse—an artist who was acclaimed in Paris for her technical skill and unique personal vision—signed her paintings "E. Nourse" for much of her career in order to disguise her gender. Nourse's canvases portraying intimate scenes of rural women, often with children, are similar to those of another American, Mary Stevenson Cassatt, who also spent her adult life in Paris. Cassatt was the only American invited by Edgar Degas to exhibit with the Impressionists in Paris. Her style later evolved, becoming simpler, and her subjects more straightforwardly rendered than before. She portrayed women unsentimentally and with an aura of dignity and purpose—some appear as Madonna-like images of mother and child.

Artists Elizabeth Paxton, Lilian Westcott Hale, and Marguerite Stuber Pearson found recognition in the American Impressionist group called the Boston School, known for its emphasis on academic technique and traditional subjects: figures in interiors, portraiture, and still life.

Cosmopolitan themes and the American west inspired Georgia O'Keeffe. While living in a New York City hotel with her husband Alfred Stieglitz, she painted *New York, Night.* Perhaps in reference to such a spectacular view as this one, she exclaimed, "One can't paint New York as it is, but rather as it is felt." Her fascination with the City's geometry and verticality well reflects the American aesthetic shift toward modernism.

Olive Rush, a pioneer of the "Santa Fe style," portrays the traditions of native women from New Mexico through the use of bold colors and depictions of utilitarian and decorative objects in *Food Bearers.* She and the other artists represented in this gallery are among the tenacious and courageous few who sought careers in art and struggled to become recognized and successful artists.

Representational art has long been accessible to the masses by virtue of its sense of immediacy in depicting nature, people, and objects. Artists in this gallery represent a broad array of styles and subject matter, ranging from traditional aesthetic concerns in depicting still life to photo-realism and to the psychological complexities of grappling with contemporary issues such as violence. These works capture the social dimension of personal experience.

Urban Realists Isabel Bishop and Katherine Schmidt both attended the Art Students League in New York during the Great Depression. Bishop's talent for painting can be seen in her work, *Union Square,* which depicts the crowded streets of New York City and captures the ambience of time and place. Through her use of light and form in rendering objects of commercial desire, Schmidt creates an atmosphere of pleasure hinting at indulgence in her still-life painting *New Shoes.*

Audrey Flack's *Banana Split* depicts objects of a different kind of desire and by a different method. By assembling objects and photographing them for this work, Flack translates them into a deliciously realistic yet complex silk-screen image. Her image of delectable desserts evokes a culture of over-indulgence. The painting *Meal II,* by contemporary artist Hung Liu, on the other hand, portrays a moment of sharing a basic meal of rice among women. Appropriating photographs from historical archives and reworking them in celebratory palettes, Liu re-inscribes and recovers a visual history of women's culture in pre- and post-Revolutionary China.

Two artists whose works explore the vulnerabilities of childhood are Amy Cutler and Claudia Alvarez. Cutler's figures and objects in *Astrid* suggest an iconography that parallels the tradition of children's cautionary tales. This delicately painted work illustrates a flat, folkloric style that conjures an ominous narrative. More ominous still is the silent intensity observed in the gaze of the child figure in Alvarez's *Boygun.* Alvarez's subtle use of line and color against a soft white background ironically emphasizes the transitory state between innocence and violence.

L to R: **Jane Peterson**, *The Red Cross Center*, about 1917, gouache and charcoal on paper, NAA – Gift of Beatrice Rohman / **Hung Liu**, *Meal II*, 2006, oil on canvas, UNL – Gift of Marjorie J. Woods in memory of Thomas C. Woods, Jr. / **Diane Arbus**, *Lady at a Masked Ball with Two Roses on Her Dress*, 1967, gelatin silver print, UNL – F.M. Hall Collection

The photography gallery includes work from the collection spanning four decades of creativity. This gallery features artists who carved out a place for women in the field of photography while breaking away from some of its male-oriented traditions and biases. The generations of women artists represented here traversed a difficult terrain, moving away from purism and realism in representation to employ photography as a mode of interrogation into matters of gender and social concern.

Diane Arbus's 1960s portraits often focused on outcasts and the socially marginalized. *Lady at a Masked Ball with Two Roses on Her Dress* reveals something of the strangeness within society, a kind of magical fringe within the mainstream. Cindy Sherman uses her own body to do something similar. Rendering her body as medium of expression she becomes the subject of psychological, sometimes pathological, strangeness in questioning social obsessions and the modes of representations that idealize or objectify the female body.

The title of Joan Lyons's twelve-piece portfolio, *A Family Album,* along with the album's images of mother and child might seem at first to be gender specific or traditional. However, Lyons's graphic strategies and montaging of images, produced through a complex manipulation of photography and screenprinting, expand the terms of art's discourse to include the world of the home, not simply as the subject of portrayal but as a stage conducive to the making of art.

Barbara Kruger draws on her former career in advertising and graphic design as central components in her artwork. Combining imagery from popular sources and campaign-style texts, Kruger provocatively exposes the negative implications of rampant consumerism, the entrenchment of patriarchal power in society, and the exploitive nature of stereotypes of women. Many of the artists in this gallery utilize the presumed candor of the photograph and combine it with their distinctive artistic and graphic strategies to address contemporary concerns.

Printmaking in the United States has a rich and varied history and includes many prominent women artists. Sheldon has a strong collection of printmaking, representing its greatest number of women artists by medium.

Blanche Grambs worked as part of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project (WPA-FAP) in the 1930s. In her work *Mining Town,* Grambs conveys the hardship of rural America through the depiction of workers' dilapidated houses. As a female artist, Grambs was excluded from the social circles of her male peers. Her choice of depicting workers' homes rather than the men themselves reflects a limitation imposed on female artists.

The art community of the WPA is not the only example of a printmaking group. In 1910 Bertha Jaques was a founding member of the Chicago Society of Etchers, and in the 1960s June Wayne helped begin the Tamarind Institute in Los Angeles. Wayne stressed the collaborative aspects of printmaking. Artists such as Squeak Carnwath, Juane Quick-To-See Smith, and Polly Apfelbaum all produced works with Tamarind.

Experimentation in many of the print workshops allowed artists who were not primarily printmakers to take up the medium. Nancy Graves, known primarily as a sculptor, also worked in etching. Also, the prints of Jane Freilicher often reflect her painterly aesthetic.

Thematically, prints range from abstract representations, such as *Long Veritcal Falls #1* by Pat Steir, to the deceptively simple animal portraits of Beth Van Hoesen. Alison Saar's bold, color woodcut *Ulysses* draws on ancient Greek mythology to tell us something about African-American experiences.

The medium of printmaking has been characterized by its democratic nature. Its role outside traditional fine arts allowed women to create and experiment with a freedom not always found in other mediums. Works in this gallery represent the diversity, both in style and content, that developed over the past 100 years.

L to R: **Hanh Thi Pham**, *Untitled* (from the California State - Fullerton Folio 83 portfolio), 1983, color print, UNL – F.M. Hall Collection / **Judy Pfaff**, *Year of the Dog #5*, 2008, woodblock, digital, collage with hand painting, UNL – Robert E. Schweser and Fern Beardsley Schweser Acquisition Fund, through the University of Nebraska Foundation

Women sculptors have participated in important art movements from neoclassicism to modernism, including realism, cubism, and abstraction. Early recognition of women sculptors coincided with the suffrage movement in the second decade of the twentieth century. As abstraction ascended at mid-century, recognition and representation of women in important exhibitions declined.

The works of Louise Nevelson and Louise Bourgeois, two leading American sculptors, depict totem-like figures. *Mountain Figure* by Nevelson and *Observer* by Bourgeois were completed in the mid-1940s. Each artist found inspiration in tribal carving, a technique the Cubists also found attractive. While Nevelson's intent was to tap into primal experience, Bourgeois's stark figure expresses the artist's feeling of alienation, which she experienced as a French-born female artist who was ignored after her arrival in the United States. Both artists are considered leaders in the development of "environments," a grouping of sculptures in one space.

Elizabeth Catlett utilizes representational styles of rendering, sometimes with degrees of abstraction or formalism, in her sculptural work. *Pensive Figure*, from 1968, is unusual in that it represents a woman as the subject of thought rather than the object of visual pleasure, as often appears in the work of so many male artists. It is also rich with allusions to all there is to think about in 1968—the many history-making events in the Women's Movement and the Civil Rights Movement might come to the mind of a pensive figure.

Contemporary American artists Jeanne Silverthorne and Minna Resnick also incorporate the human body within their sculpture. Silverthorne's *Phosphorescent Betty* is cast in rubber and modeled from actual DNA and hair samples of elderly people. Although miniature in size, the figure has carefully detailed features including wrinkles, a heavy carriage and slanted posture that give viewers hints about her life. The Betty figure sharply contrasts with that of Resnick's youthful *Big Butt Barbie on the Lam*, dressed in bright fashionable clothes. According to the artist, this Barbie represents many who are tormented by societal expectations of women's appearance.

Non-representational artists in the 1940s and 1950s emerged in New York City as a new generation of artists known as Abstract Expressionists. Lee Krasner, Grace Hartigan, Elaine de Kooning, Helen Frankenthaler and Sonja Sekula were all associated with the movement, which focused on an artist's ability to express internal thoughts and feelings through nonobjective brushstrokes.

Although equally talented, female Abstract Expressionists were overshadowed by male artists in the movement. In fact, Lee Krasner and Elaine de Kooning were better known as the wives of Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning than they were for their own work.

After her involvement with Abstract Expressionism, Helen Frankenthaler became associated with Color Field painting—a movement in which areas of flat, solid colors were spread across a canvas. As seen in *Red Frame* (1964), Frankenthaler worked from the floor to pour thinned paint onto unprimed canvas, essentially dying the canvas with the paint.

An abstract artist Carole Haerer was born in Salina, Kansas, but grew up in North Platte, Nebraska. Haerer's work is primarily nonobjective; she cites the elemental dynamic between light and perception as a dominant component in her work.

Influenced by women artists who came before them, contemporary artists Jennifer McLaughlin, Louise Fishman, and Martha Diamond have styles that draw on aspects of Abstract Expressionism, showing the lasting importance of abstraction and non-objectivity.

Although the majority of work in this exhibition is from the Sheldon's permanent collection, the Museum would like to acknowledge the generosity of lenders Carl and Jane Rohman, Bill McPherrin and Keith Robinson, Roger and Carole Sack, Susan S. and Scott J. Norby, and Wil J. and Sally Hergenrader.

L to R: **Louise Bourgeois**, *Observer*, about 1947-49, painted bronze, UNL – Olga N. Sheldon Acquisition Trust / **Elizabeth Catlett**, *Pensive Figure*, 1968, bronze, UNL – F.M. Hall Collection / **Judith Shea**, *Shield*, 1989, bronze with limestone base, UNL – Olga N. Sheldon Acquisition Trust and The National Endowment for the Arts / **Lee Krasner**, *Free Space*, 1975, screen print, UNL – F.M. Hall Collection

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