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http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sheldonpubs/86

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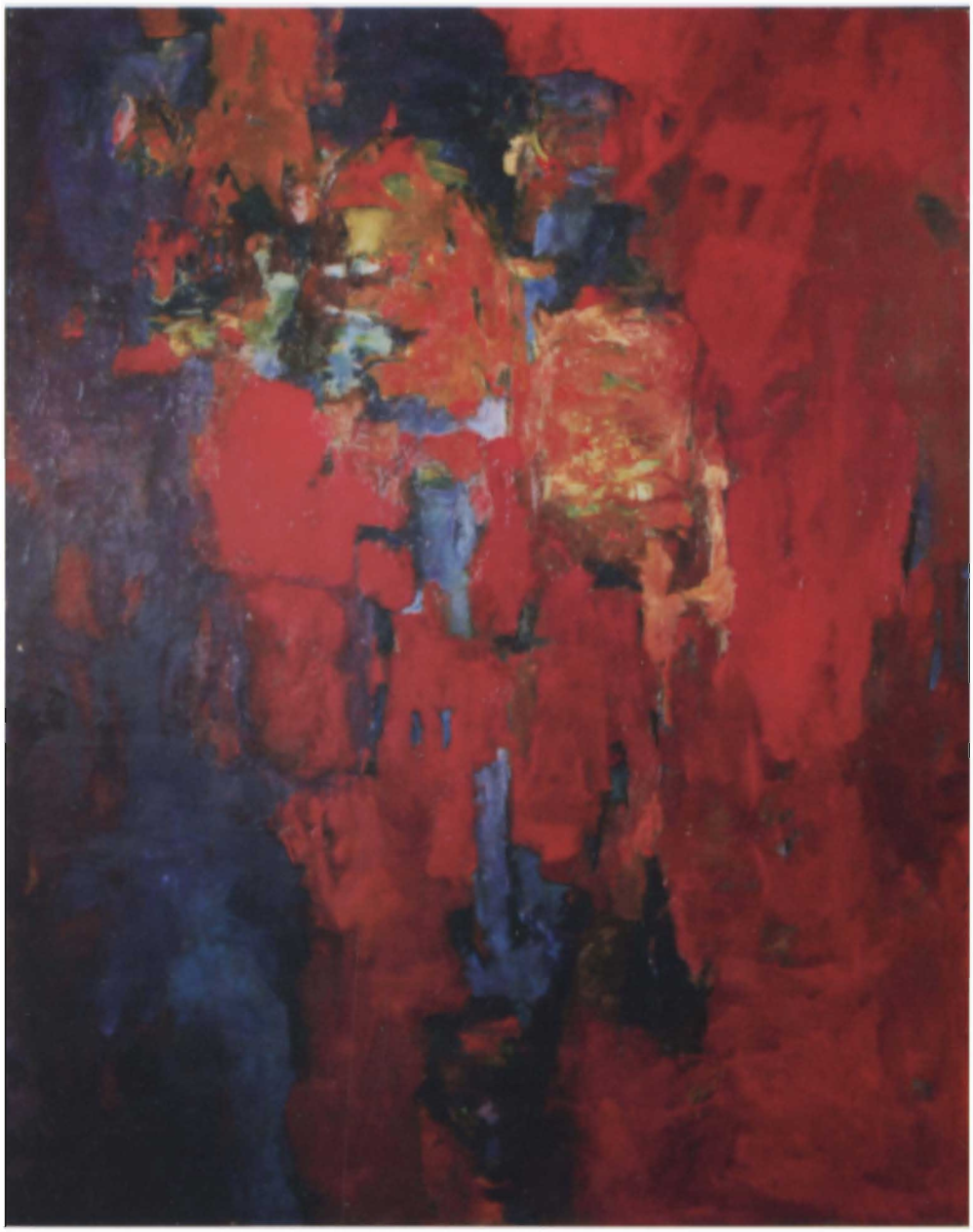
BETTER HALF, BETTER TWELFTH

Women Artists in the Collection – Part II



CAROL HAERER, *FIRE FLOWERS*, 1956, OIL ON CANVAS, NAA – GIFT OF MR. AND MRS. THOMAS C. WOODS

This reinstallation of the permanent collection galleries continues Sheldon's focus on American women artists. The fact of women's historical exclusion from the art world provides a basis for our exploration. In a 1971 essay, art historian Linda Nochlin famously asked, "Why have there been no great women artists?" She detailed various exclusions women suffered—from working with male nude models, hence from apprenticeships, then art 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 an unnamed woman by a man. "Better twelfth" refers to the approximate fraction of works in the collection by female artists. The exhibition celebrates the productivity of women artists—primarily 20th-century artists—by offering a selection of them in our galleries, allowing us to consider who is still missing from the collection. The installation is organized into six sections: work by pioneering artists, ceramics, printmaking, photography, and paintings both representational and abstract.

SHELDON MUSEUM OF ART NOVEMBER 2010–JULY 2011

In the nineteenth century, pioneering women both withstood and rejected societal views that only men could become professional artists. Mary Cassatt and Helen Hyde, for instance, each acquired artistic training and, through the support of their families, traveled abroad to expand their careers. Both were influenced by traditional Japanese wood-block prints, or ukiyo-e, which were popular in Europe and the United States in the latter half of the 19th century. Cassatt, who enjoyed an expatriate existence in Europe, often employed contrasting patterns, a tilted perspective, and cropped subjects borrowed from this Eastern aesthetic. Hyde moved to Japan to study and later became an early proponent of wood-block printmaking in the United States. Both artists gained notoriety in their lifetime.

As the 20th century progressed, women artists assumed greater roles in art education, contributing to the cultural development of the communities they served. These positions of influence resulted in a greater expression of women's experience in art. While the muted still-life paintings of Nebraska artists Anna Reed Hall and Louise Mundy capture the everyday feel of domestic life, the impressionistic works of Lillian Westcott Hale, Cora Parker, and Sara Shewell Hayden include female sitters situated in soft surroundings that evoke a mood of tranquility. Westcott Hale found recognition as a significant American Impressionist, and Parker and Hayden established themselves as professors at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln.

Increasing prominence also provided artists with opportunities to expand beyond specifically feminine themes. In Marguerite Zorach's imaginative *Provincetown, Sunrise and Moonset*, bold, dark pigments accentuate the cubist style and convey her interest in color. Equally dramatic are the modernist landscapes *New York, Night* by Georgia O'Keeffe and *Inflation* by Gladys Lux, an art educator at Nebraska Wesleyan University.

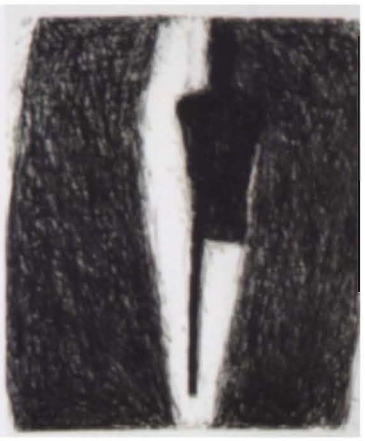
Although representational of the real world, the works in this gallery are also products of human emotion and imagination. Here artists explore a broad array of styles and subjects including landscape, memory, and contemporary gender issues.

Sylvia Plimack Mangold, April Gornik, and Robyn O'Neil approach the traditional genre of landscape in varied ways. In her lithograph *View of Schunnemunk Mountain*, Mangold establishes a dialogue between image and edge. Starting with a lyrical landscape composed of dark blues, blacks, and hand-colored dots, she adds a trompe-l'oeil depiction of masking tape, incorporating a common artist's tool into the composition itself. In contrast, Gornik's approach to *Late Palatine Light* involves eliminating the human element and heightening the dramatic collision of land and sky with a use of dark against light. In her detailed graphite drawing *The Last Man on Earth*, O'Neil places a figure within the drama of nature, creating a work that conveys both a sense of banality and a fear of extinction.

In her work, Stella Waitzkin drew inspiration from her own landscape of flea market books and found objects. The artist began her career as an Abstract Expressionist painter and started to sculpt in the early 1970s, using books as her primary subject and polyester resin as her medium of choice. Pieces like *Box with Books* embody a striking physicality while evoking memories of the distant past.

Kay Sage and Ruth Ray, meanwhile, take inspiration from the subconscious mind. Haunting and oddly familiar, Sage's surreal dreamscape *This is Another Day* conjures a sense of infinity, setting a peculiar geometric structure against an endless sea and luminous skies. Ray's painting *Vera's Window* recalls the memory of a friend's encounter with a voyeur. The artist's use of an old window frame and a tattered shade seems to focus and amplify the eye's eerie gaze.

L to R: **Marguerite Zorach**, *Provincetown, Sunrise and Moonset*, 1916, oil on canvas, NAA – Nelle Cochrane Woods Memorial / **Georgia O'Keeffe**, *New York, Night*, 1929, oil on canvas, NAA – Thomas C. Woods Memorial / **Katy Faulkner**, *Untitled (Cityscape)*, undated, double-sided oil on canvas mounted on Masonite, NAA – Gift of LeRoy Ihrie



Since photography's early decades in the 19th century, women artists have recognized the medium's potential to express a personal vision and sense of physical reality. In the 1960s and 1970s, as the women's rights movement gained momentum, a new generation of female photographers turned to the medium, using it to explore a wide range of issues that include the social construction of gender and its critique.

In Delilah Montoya's *Jackie Chavez* and *Doreen Hilton*, for example, the subjects are considered *malcriada* (illbred)—in this context, women who flout social convention. These boxers fight not only one another but also the cultural imperative that it is unseemly for a woman to be athletic, aggressive, and confident in a sport dominated by men. Ana Mendieta's ritualistic performances, documented in photography, also raise questions about the representation of the female form.

Linda Connor, a photographer with a spiritual sensibility, suggests the female body in the gentle contours of hills and grass that make up her landscape on view. Marsha Burns's image from the *Dreamers Portfolio* implies a life story rather than existing as an anthropological document. She insists, "My work is not fully grounded in portraiture. These are not pictures of a person, but about a person." Susan Horn, an instructor at Nebraska Wesleyan University, employs unusual perspectives and altered physicality to communicate her observations about place and intimacy.

Renowned for her photographs of outcasts and the socially marginalized, Diane Arbus became one of the leading American photographers of the 20th century. In *Child with a Toy Hand Grenade in Central Park, NYC, 1962*, she contrasts the innocence of childhood with the destructive weapons devised by adults.

The magic realist works of Kathy Vargas question life's mysteries. In her images, she layers hand-colored photographs to create complex, surreal portals into time and space.

Relatively democratic, printmaking permits multiplicity and greater affordability than other traditional media. This accessibility has long attracted women artists, allowing them to create and experiment with a freedom not always available in other media.

Helen Loggie, for instance, created etchings that explored the landscape of her native Pacific Northwest. In *From Goat Mountain*, the artist sketched outdoors before transferring her drawings to a printed image. She created variations in tone by submerging some areas of the printing plate in acid longer than others: objects in the foreground appear darker while the background remains light, providing a sense of depth.

Language is essential to Lesley Dill's work. *Poem Dress, "The Soul Selects Her Own Society"* draws its title from a poem by Emily Dickinson. Dill, who visited New Delhi in the early 1990s, printed the work on an Indian newspaper. She was attracted to the visual appeal of the Hindi language and what she describes as its devotional quality. *Poem Dress* combines fragments of poetry, creating a work that is fragile in nature yet powerful in content.

Another artist who expands printmaking beyond the two-dimensional is Lynne Allen. The artist can trace the matriarchs of her family back six generations on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in South Dakota. *Pouch* combines numerous techniques including hand painting, intaglio, sewing, and woodcut to evoke ideas of cultural displacement and remembrance.

The works of Liliane Lijn and Sylvia Wald contain bold colors and shapes that represent the artists' interests in organic forms. For Lijn the abstracted cone represents cosmic shapes such as Earth and the moon. Wald is considered to be one of the pioneers of color screenprinting in the 1950s. Labeled an Abstract Expressionist due to her experimental techniques and innovative compositions, she created prints that feature floating, layered, brightly colored forms such as those in *Farmer's Antic*.

L to R: **Kathy Vargas**, *Sites and Accompanying Prayers #7*, 1992, toned gelatin silver print with hand coloring, UNL – Howard S. Wilson Memorial and the Mercedes A. Augustine Acquisition Trust / **Lesley Dill**, *Poem Dress, "The Soul Selectes Her Own Society,"* 1993, lithograph, thread, newspaper, UNL – F. M. Hall Collection / **Berenice Abbott**, *Waterfront, South Street*, about 1935, gelatin silver print, UNL – Allocation of the U.S. Government, Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration / **Susan Rothenberg**, *Hartford*, 1980, lithograph, UNL – F. M. Hall Collection

Women in many cultures have historically worked with clay to produce utilitarian objects. In the United States, the Art and Crafts movement of the late 19th century provided opportunities for women to be more involved in aesthetic concerns, albeit in secondary roles. In the production of art pottery, they were given the job of decorators and were typically expected to paint beautifully rendered surfaces while men created the ceramic forms. Nevertheless, these works brought credit to their female makers and laid the groundwork for a strong women's tradition of ceramics.

Regarded as the most influential contemporary artist in the field, Betty Woodman unites high art and craft in her nonfunctional objects. With their bold colors and fluid, curvilinear shapes, these painterly works reveal her affinity for classic pottery forms and modern, expressionist approaches. *Still Life Vase #8* is one of a numbered sequence of winged, two-sided vases splashed with vibrant hues.

Many ceramic artists have responded to the traditions of the past by immersing themselves in ancient designs and techniques of construction. In the early 20th century, for instance, Maria Martinez of the San Ildefonso Pueblo in New Mexico became world renowned for black ceramics inspired by prehistoric clay work. She reintroduced pottery making to her community, prompting a revival of traditional art forms.

Other ceramists influenced by Native American pottery include Lillyan Rhodes, who adopted Colorado Pueblo designs, and Gene Suzanne Weppner, who gives her works a glossy sheen by employing an ancient technique practiced by the Peruvian Nazca and other cultures. At the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, professor Gail Kendall is inspired by both courtly and humble pots from 13th- through 18th-century Europe and the Middle East. Mid-20th-century British artist Lucie Rie, however, resisted the early Asian styles that many of her colleagues adopted, instead developing a European modernist approach all her own.

L to R: **Hedda Sterne**, *New York, #5*, 1955, oil on canvas, UNL – F. M. Hall Collection / **Betty Woodman**, *Still Life Vase #8*, 1990, ceramic, UNL – Olga N. Sheldon Acquisition Trust / **Alice Trumbull Mason**, *The Barberry Hedge*, 1955, oil on canvas, NAA – Nebraska Art Association Collection / **Marjorie Mikasen**, *Action Potential*, 2005, acrylic on canvas, UNL – H. Y. Thomson Fund

Nonrepresentational artists of the 20th century have been associated with a variety of artistic movements including Geometric Abstraction and Abstract Expressionism. While it is easy to conceive of their works as containing exclusively abstract subject matter, many of them retain themes and imagery inspired by the natural world.

Thelma Christensen, for example, practiced abstraction by simplifying forms into geometric shapes and patterns. The artist populated her painting *Landscape* with large, rectangular areas of color. Although the canvas is far from representational, its readable horizon line, organic color palette, and title reveal that it is by no means purely abstract.

Similarly, Hedda Sterne and Helen Frankenthaler often hint at representation through the titles they choose for their works. Sterne's *New York, #5* contains an easily identifiable window in the upper-right-hand corner and branchlike forms in the foreground, both of which indicate an outdoor setting. Frankenthaler is best known for her paintings, but she is also a prolific printmaker. In the woodcut *Vineyard Storm*, she mimics the stained look of her canvases in a radically different medium.

Contemporary artists Marjorie Mikasen and Lisa Sanditz follow in the footsteps of these artists by continuing to incorporate both representation and abstraction in their works, which are characterized by geometric shapes and bold colors. Like their predecessors, they exemplify the multifaceted nature of representation in art and reveal how artists frequently work in the middle ground between abstraction and naturalism.

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 James B. Milliken and Nana G. H. Smith, Victoria L. and Robert B. Northrup, and Carl and Jane Rohman.

Exhibition support provided by the Sheldon Art Association, the Nebraska Arts Council and the Nebraska Cultural Endowment

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