

The Women Who Made Modern Art Modern

INTRODUCTION

“One can not become an art dealer as one would become a member of most any other professions. It is not a profession in the sense that bourgeois society is familiar with, but a way of life. There are no opening or closing hours. No holidays, even though some friends believe we never do any work at all. “

Walter Feilchenfeldt, By Appointment Only: Cezanne, Van Gogh and Some Secrets of Art Dealing

Curator, Michael Klein

I.

The Women Who Made Modern Art Modern features the careers and programs of some twelve art dealers, all of whom are women and all of whom were great innovators in their day, supporting and championing the “new” in American art. The artists they promoted, supported, and exhibited now represent the pantheon of American art and artists. This might be an untold story or even an uncharted history of the many small entrepreneurial businesses and personalities that helped develop and promote American visual culture, both here and abroad.

This exhibition is a sampler of some of the women and some of the artists they supported. The story here is larger and needs much more research, but it is a long-needed beginning. The connections and associations of the post-War art scene are numerous and fascinating because the stories are less about competition than about the sharing of artists, ideas, and efforts. Though each of the dealers presented here had her own viewpoint, they all shared some common characteristics.

Through interviews, statements, and discussions with artists and friends of these dealers, one gets a sense of the business climate and work ethic of these women. Fearless might be one word to describe them, but impassioned also expresses their belief in the artists they promoted. For these women, the gallery was not just a means of business but a way to introduce themselves, demonstrate their expertise, and legitimize their position as the influencers of the development and directions of the artists shaping American art.

It is fitting to cite this example of what these dealers did, and how they worked. In Grace Borgenicht's catalogue statement for a 1982 exhibition, in collaboration with her colleague Terry Dintenfass, she wrote: "It is with great pride that we present this exhibition celebrating the unusual phenomenon of artists and dealers who have stayed together for twenty years....For the dealer, it is always a pleasure to communicate one's enthusiasm to others and see one's taste and judgment recognized. But the real excitement of being a dealer comes from the meaningful relationship with the artists one represents." Some twenty galleries were represented in that exhibition. In addition to the two aforementioned dealers, the exhibition included works represented by gallerists Marian Willard, Betty Parsons and Virginia Zabriskie, among others. Borgenicht

ended catalogue essay with these remarks by the late New York Times art critic Hilton Kramer: "I think we tend at times, because dealers are, after all, in the business of making money, to understate the very sizable contribution they make, not only to the artist's life, but to the cultural life of people who are not artists. In New York, certainly, they run the highest level of free cultural entertainment to be had."

II.

In late fall of 1965, New York gallery owner Martha Jackson published a small catalogue. In it was a selection of works by up and coming artists. Looking back from 2016, we can see a brilliant eye at work. Not only was she a champion of such contemporary American artists as Larry Rivers, Sam Francis, and Grace Hartigan, but she also presented to her New York clients artists from other parts of the globe: Great Britain's Alan Davie and William Scott, for example, and Italy's Alberto Burri. In Jackson's own words, she sought to explore "the international nature of the search for the forms of today."

That search led to presenting very different approaches in painting. On one hand, Burri, whose heavily textured and somber paintings brought him to prominence in New York in the mid 50s, was first included in shows at the Stable Gallery and then in a Young Artists show at the Martha Jackson Gallery. Scott, on the other hand, also a talent from abroad, had a sparer style, more reductive and joyful. Scott had a total of seven solo shows over the years with the gallery. Both Burri and Scott later had additional shows at the gallery, along with dozens of other artists: i.e., the Gutai Group from Japan; John Chamberlains' rugged three dimensional constructions of car parts; the growing junk aesthetic of Richard Stankewicz, Robert Mallery and others; the Dutch-born Karel Appel, a founding member of the COBRA

movement; and the Spanish painter and sculptor Antoni Tàpies.

If some galleries were afraid to show or support women artists, Jackson exhibited their work not for political reasons but because she believed in the artists and their respective work. She did play a crucial role in bringing artists like Barbara Hepworth, Louise Nevelson, Claire Falkenstein, or Grace Hartigan into the spotlight despite, as she explained, “there was little market for women’s artwork and when it was difficult for women to find representation.”

New York artist Ed McGowin worked with Martha Jackson in the mid 60s. He remembers, “She saw my work in the Whitney Annual in 1966 and came to my studio in 1967, and included me in a group show of younger artists. In 1968, she gave me a solo show. I was again in a Whitney Annual that year, and I was busy making art using plastic materials. I was living in Virginia in a garden apartment at the time, and she came to visit and was shocked that I could live and work in a place like that with my wife and two kids around.” McGowin added, “She was both delightful and charming, and I would visit her in her home above the gallery. We would flip through art magazines and she would comment on works: yes on that no to that and so on. I was very impressed her and some of the artists she showed like Chamberlain, Paul Jenkins, who she adored, and Louise Nevelson before she was invited to join Pace, which at the time was the new hot gallery on the block.

of his career. "Terry saw my early cast bronze works in a group show entitled Humanism in New England Art in 1970, and then contacted me. She was very interested in what I was making, and I had my first one man show in 1971. She was terrific, supportive in every way, including a stipend. I did several shows with her over the next few years, even though ideally my work didn't fit precisely with the painters and sculptors she represented, who were all mostly figurative. But she supported my ideas and we developed a great friendship. In fact I would spend a week every summer with her at her place on Martha's Vineyard."

Fleischner continued, "One day Mr. Joseph Hirshhorn, who was visiting the gallery to look at my works on paper, became insulted when I suggested to him that the way he handled the works was perhaps a bit rough. Terry agreed with me, always siding with her artists." She is quoted as saying "This gallery was run from the beginning as a two way street; we've helped each other. Furthermore," she added, "the big earners were very generous; they let the money stay to help those who weren't selling as well." Her advisors and friends were not only artists but other dealers such as Edith Halbert, a pioneer in her own right, and the museum directors Jack Baur and Lloyd Goodrich at the Whitney Museum of American Art.