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Retelling the Story of Abstract Expressionism Through Women Artists

In London, a new exhibition highlights how the movement emerged across the world during the mid-twentieth century.



The Colombian artist Fanny Sanín in front of her painting “Oil No. 4” (1968), one of dozens of Abstract Expressionist works on display at the “Action, Gesture, Paint” exhibition at London’s Whitechapel Gallery. Credit...Ellie Smith for The New York Times

By Charlotte Jansen
Reporting from London
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When the landmark Abstract Expressionism show “The New American Painting” arrived at London’s Tate gallery in 1959, it featured work by 17 artists: all of them American, and 16 of them men. Financed in part by the C.I.A. to promote liberty and independence as American ideals, the show toured throughout Europe.

In London, the audience was receptive. The show drew record visitors to the museum, and while not everyone appreciated the radical new works with aggressively applied paint, everyone was talking about them: British critics responded in more than 30 reviews. Had the Americans finally hit upon an autonomous artistic language that wasn't derivative of European styles? Critics seemed to agree that they had, and that New York, for the first time, had superseded Paris as avant-garde art's new frontier.

Sixty-four years later, a very different version of the Abstract Expressionist story is being told in London. The Whitechapel Gallery show "Action, Gesture, Paint" unravels the American myth of "AbEx" in 150 gestural paintings by 81 women artists from all over the world. The exhibition, which runs through May 7, then travels to the Fondation Vincent Van Gogh in Arles, France, and the Kunsthalle Bielefeld, in Bielefeld, Germany.



Laura Smith, the exhibition's lead curator, said in an interview that she had spent more than a year researching women painters working in gestural abstraction between 1940 and 1970, and was surprised at how many she discovered, from all over the world.

She realized that "if we were going to retell the story of Abstract Expressionism as not entirely masculine, we also had responsibility to retell it as not entirely American," she said.

In the show and its accompanying catalog, Smith proposes that independent Abstract Expressionist styles emerged during that period in Latin America, Asia, Africa and Europe, and that these are equally important parts of the movement's story.

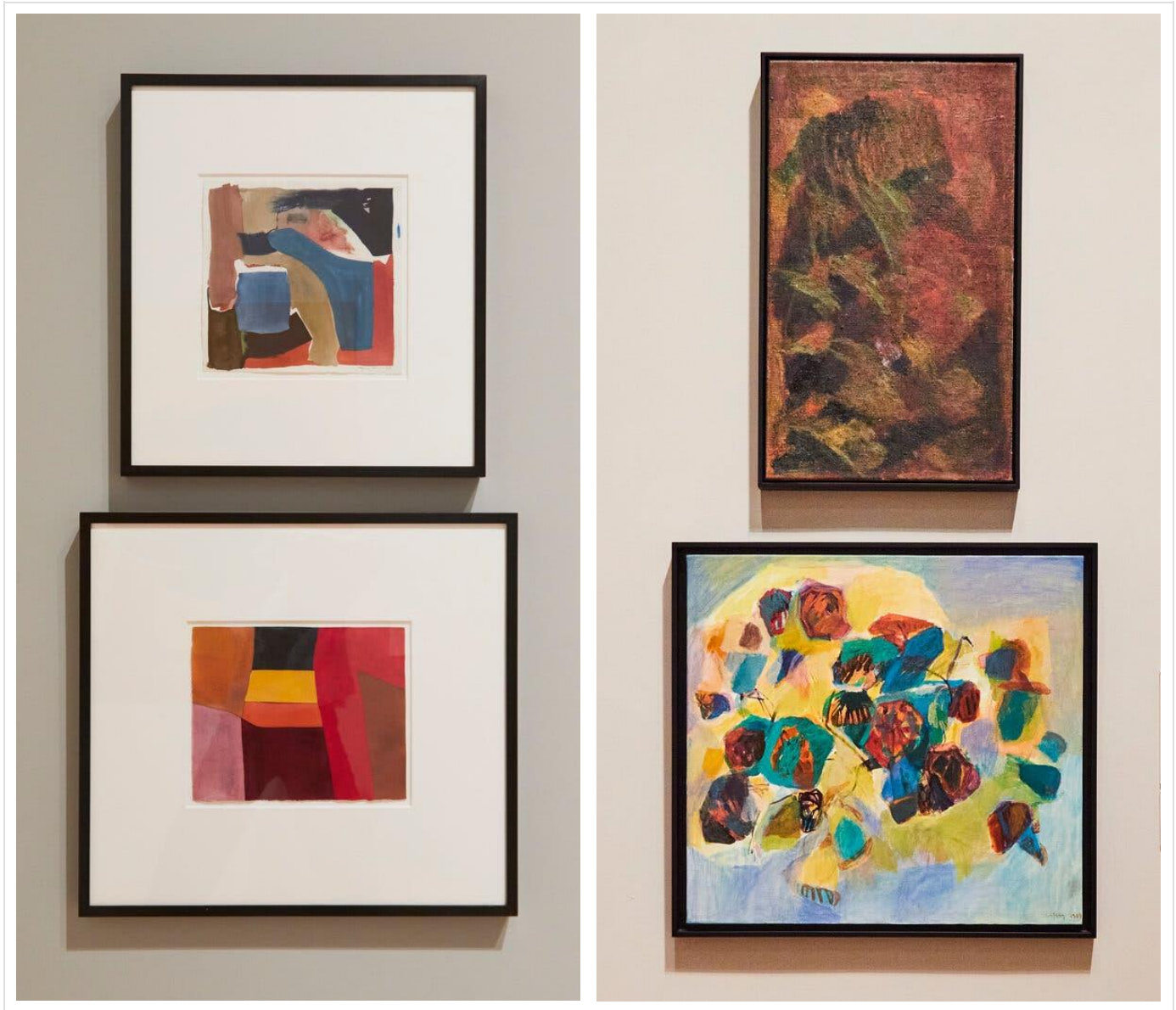
"So many artists were making the same type of work around the world at the same time," Smith said. "It wasn't something America sold to the world: It was already happening, and it was being shared by artists who were traveling, teaching and exchanging ideas."

Abstract Expressionism "wasn't something America sold to the world: It was already happening," said Laura Smith, the exhibition's lead curator. Credit...Ellie Smith for The New York Times

The exhibition begins with "April Mood," a 14-foot canvas with swathes of magnificent color by the New York-born painter Helen Frankenthaler; in the same room are three pieces created six years earlier by a lesser-known Colombian contemporary, Fanny Sanín, who also experimented with flat planes of vibrant color



The Whitechapel show opens with "April Mood" (1974) by Helen Frankenthaler. Credit...Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Ellie Smith for The New York Times.



Fanny Sanín's pictures "Watercolor No. 4 (2)" (1968), top, and "Watercolor No. 8" (1968), bottom. Credit...Ellie Smith for The New York Times

The Lifang paintings "Autumn" (1968), top, and "Untitled" (1969), bottom, hang in the exhibition. Credit...Ellie Smith for The New York Times

Sanín, 85, said in a phone interview that she developed her Abstract Expressionist style while studying at the University of the Andes, in Bogotá, Colombia, in the 1950s. She added that she was heavily influenced by her teachers there, the Colombian painters David Manzur Londoño and Armando Villegas; at that stage, the American AbEx painters had no impact on her work, she said.

In 1966, Sanín came to London for a two-year stint to study printmaking — already “solidly expressing myself within Abstract Expressionism,” she said — and produced the three works now exhibited at the Whitechapel Gallery. It was only when she visited MoMA’s touring “Art of the Real” exhibition in Paris two years later that she saw works by Frankenthaler for the first time, she said. Helen A. Harrison, the director of the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center, said that Abstract Expressionism’s origins can be pinpointed to Germany in 1919, and that the movement began to resonate around the world, becoming a “global phenomenon” after World War II.

The show explores this international resonance beyond the West, presenting affinities between gestural painting styles emerging in the postwar period, including in Japan, with Gutai; Korean Art Informel, in South Korea; and Informalismo Latin America, which all employ expressive brushwork and improvised techniques. Many of these places, Smith said,

were facing a shared context of postwar trauma and instability, which could have resulted in similar ideas of what art should be, and how it looked.

Several artists in the exhibition demonstrate AbEx developing outside of U.S. influence, Smith said. Lifang, one of the artists included in the exhibition, was a co-founder of the Fifth Moon Group in Taiwan in 1956.

“The group’s iconic style can be seen as a hybridization of Eastern-Asian calligraphic traditions and the tendencies toward gestural abstraction that were evolving across international modern painting,” Smith said. The Fifth Moon Group’s style “represented an innovative move toward freedom of expression embracing an international outlook,” she added, “and as the only woman founder of the group we thought it vital that she be included.”

Also included in the exhibition is Marta Minujín, who Smith called one of the most important Argentine artists working in an informalist, or Informalismo, style, which is characterized by the gestural application of paint and by adding everyday materials such as sand and earth to a work. Minujín’s specific process — involving scratching and tearing — pushed AbEx techniques even further, Smith said.

The American artists who do appear in the show counter the stereotype of the American AbEx painter as white, straight, male and living in Manhattan: The earliest works are two drip paintings from Janet Sobel, a mother of five who worked on her canvases in her kitchen in Brooklyn. Dated 1945 and 1948, the paintings contest the idea that Jackson Pollock was the only one to employ the technique in the same period.



The American artist Sylvia Snowden in front of her “Untitled” (1966), hanging in the Whitechapel exhibition. Credit...Ellie Smith for The New York Times

Also in the show is Sylvia Snowden, 81, who studied at Howard University in the 1960s and who, Smith says, offers “a different window to American Abstract Expressionism,” with her raw, visceral abstract social history painting about civil rights and inequality. Even in the U.S., it seems, many important contributors to the development of Abstract Expressionism have been overlooked.

“This form of painting gave these women the freedom to express themselves, personally and politically, but they also celebrated and explored what paint could do,” Smith said. “It is dismaying that so many of them have been forgotten.”

This Whitechapel show may offer a different lens on Abstract Expressionism, but it does not present the full view. “The only way to get a true picture of AbEx’s global resonance is to survey the movement in its totality, regardless of the artists’ nationality, race, or sex,” Harrison said. “Even generational distinctions aren’t all that useful — some artists are keeping the flame alive today.”