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Arresting Abstractions:

Kemper Museum's "Magnetic Fields" show rewrites art history

KEMPER MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART
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21 Artists You Should Know

KEMPER MUSEUM'S "MAGNETIC FIELDS" EXHIBITION HIGHLIGHTS ABSTRACTIONS BY WOMEN ARTISTS OF COLOR

BY ELISABETH KIRSCH

Paintings, sculpture and installations by some of the greatest artists you've never heard of are now on view at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art. "Magnetic Fields: Expanding American Abstraction, 1960s to Today" is the first exhibit in the U.S. to show abstract artwork made exclusively by women artists of color.

It's sensational, showcasing a wild range of experimentation, unabashed color, and buoyant, confident rhythms in artworks by 21 women from three generations.

Clearly, every artist here deserves their own show. Most importantly, this exhibition introduces viewers to artists whose oeuvre has too often been overlooked and is therefore unfamiliar. That's changing.

Young curators, such as the Kemper's Erin Dziedzic and independent curator Melissa Messina, who co-curated "Magnetic Fields," are working overtime to fill in art historical gaps too long neglected by an elitist art world dominated by museums and galleries blind to artists of color, especially if they were female. And even more if these artists dealt in abstraction.

When abstract art reached its peak in America in the 1950s, Clement Greenberg, the most influential critic of the day, insisted that this was a movement strictly about form and color on a flat canvas. The personal and the symbolic were eschewed.

FROM THE ARTIST © CANDIDA ALVAREZ PHOTO BY TOM VAN EYNDE

Above: The 7- by 6-foot canvas, "black cherry pit" (2009), by Candida Alvarez, exemplifies the large scale and vibrant palette of many of the works in "Magnetic Fields."

Opposite: "El Gato" (2001), by Chakaia Booker, one of the artist's signature works made from rubber tires, has been part of the Kemper Museum's collection since 2004. In 2008, the museum presented a major one-person show of Booker's work.

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND SEARS PEYTON GALLERY, NEW YORK, NEW YORKY AND LOS ANGELES, CALIF. © DEBORAH DANCY PHOTO BY E.G. SCHEMPF

"Winter Into Spring 2" (2015), a work in charcoal, gesso and acrylic on paper by Deborah Dancy, represents what the artist calls "tangential entanglements" and "accidents."

These absolutes do not apply to the artists here.

"Feelings are more important to me than anything else," Sylvia Snowden once said in an interview about her art, and this sentiment pertains to most of the artists in "Magnetic Fields," who seem more willing than male artists to align their aesthetic inspirations with the complexities of their everyday lives.

Alma Thomas said that her vibrant canvases of ribbon-like stripes or dots were inspired by her garden in the backyard, and by the wind at her windowpanes. Candida Alvarez, who creates puzzle-like fields of painted color, wrote that: "Having run away from seemingly inadequate definitions for abstract painting, I find myself immersed in a relationship that tracks, exchanges and shreds the world of news, front-page photography, design, and pictorial memory into a subject-less pictorial mash-up."

Many of the artists in "Magnetic Fields" work in a variety of media. Brenna Youngblood creates photo collages and paintings, such as the large, dreamy canvases in this show. Betty Blayton, a multimedia artist who died in 2016, is represented here by two of her joyful monoprints. Blayton, who cared greatly for

her community, founded The Children's Art Carnival in Harlem and was co-founder of The Studio Museum in Harlem. She wrote of her art and her life that: "I am deeply interested in metaphysical principles, all aspects of religion, mythology and the science of mind."

Several artists in "Magnetic Fields" are deceased; others are young. Thomas was born in 1891, 90 years before the birth of Abigail DeVille, the youngest exhibitor. A goal of "Magnetic Fields" is to demonstrate the aesthetic dialogues that have occurred and are occurring among members of the different generations.

Yet the underlying drama of this exhibit is what these artists managed to achieve against great odds. Historically, women artists have had to rely on ties to male family members or benefactors, e. g., Berthe Morisot and brother-in-law Edouard Manet, and Anni Albers and husband Josef Albers. Every woman here received a college degree, and 20 have MFAs. Most have taught, many have been community activists, and have or had families. Statistically, 80% of those with MFA degrees in America quit making art. The extraordinary art in this exhibit is as much a tribute to the drive and spirit of the makers as it is to their actual creations.

Alma Thomas died in 1978 in the same Washington, D.C. house where she and her family had relocated in 1907 after race riots forced them out of Georgia. Thomas got a B.A. in 1924 and later a master's degree from Columbia University. Seen as a real force in the Washington Color School — a movement in Color Field painting that included Kenneth Noland, Morris Louis and Gene Davis — she was the first African-American female to have a one-person show at the Whitney Museum, in 1972. Her work was all but forgotten, however, until a spate of recent retrospectives, including one at the Studio Museum in Harlem, which received rave reviews. (Both she and Barbara Chase-Riboud now have work in the Museum of Modern Art exhibit "Making Space: Women Artists and Postwar Abstraction" through August 13.)

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COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND TILTON GALLERY, NEW YORK, NEW YORK © BRENNA YOUNGBLOOD

The exhibit includes this large dreamy canvas by Brenna Youngblood titled "YARDGUARD" (2015).

A cool geometry presides in the art of Jennie C. Jones, Mavis Pusey and Lilian Thomas Burwell. Pusey was born in Jamaica in 1928, but at 18 she was in New York studying at the Art Students League, as well as with Robert Blackburn, the famed printmaker in Harlem. She also traveled to Europe. Pusey became a Precisionist painter par excellence, and like Rockwell Kent and Charles Sheeler was inspired by cityscapes and construction.

Nanette Carter coined the word "scapeologist" to describe her invented "scapes" that reference outer space and the environment. In her wall pieces, Lillian Thomas Burwell drapes canvases of solid colored canvas over carved wood and Plexiglas geometric shapes.

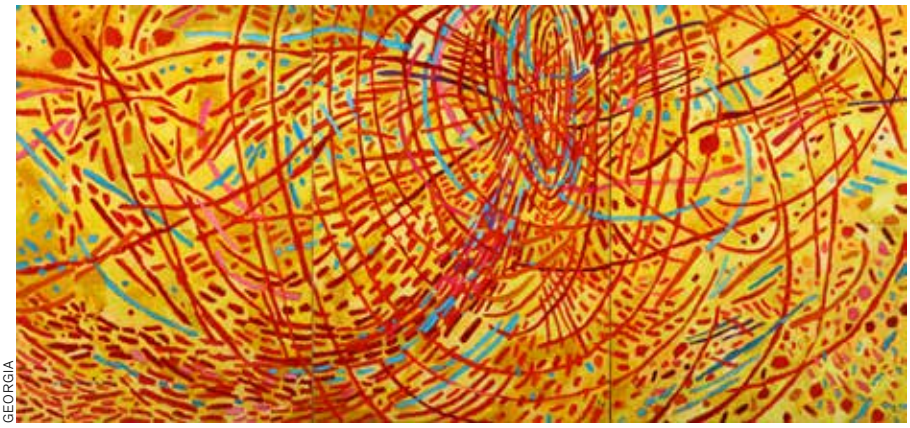
Jennie C. Jones combines the tenets of minimalism with sound systems of jazz recordings, many of which are historical. As critic Valerie Oliver wrote: "Jones' work challenges us to understand the frameworks of modernism, which embraced black musical forms but excluded black visual art for its canon."

The color black shows up frequently in "Magnetic Fields," both literally and symbolically.

Mary Lovelace O'Neal's works on paper are covered with charcoal and pastel that explore, she says, "esthetic qualities of black and political concerns of the dark medium." Deborah Dancy is a multimedia artist. In this exhibit, she shows paintings that connote dusky, post-apocalyptic scaffoldings, and represent what she calls "tangential entanglements" and "accidents." Barbara Chase-Riboud is an award-winning poet and best-selling novelist who also draws and sculpts. Both her pieces in this exhibit are from her "Malcolm X" series, and blend bronze, textiles and wood into totemic structures of mesmerizing, contradictory power.

For 20 years Chakaia Booker has used discarded, black rubber tires to make her sculpture. Her unique art is evocative of

COURTESY OF THE MILDRED THOMPSON ESTATE, ATLANTA, GEORGIA



The show takes its title from this enormous (70 x 150 inches) painting, "Magnetic Fields" (1991), by Mildred Thompson, who described her work as "a continuous search for understanding."

The underlying drama of this exhibit is what these artists managed to achieve against great odds.

everything from sci-fi creatures to demons of despair; her sculptures and installations also suggest how the discards of society can be re-formed into a powerful force.

Maren Hassinger, Kianja Strobert, Abigail DeVille, Shinique Smith and Howardena Pindell all employ a vast range of media to create art and installations that are as much about story-telling, albeit in the abstract, as they are about aesthetics.

Like a number of artists in "Magnetic Fields," Howardina Pindell has been overlooked, not only by traditional art institutions and galleries but by African-American ones as well. Pindell, who teaches at Stony Brook University, was a curator at MOMA and a professor at Yale. When she first wanted to exhibit her multi-textured, abstract art in African-American institutions, her work was rejected in favor of the kind of representational, socio-political art that is now more culturally sanctioned. Her response: "I think one can also use abstraction and have a black aesthetic because of the way abstraction has been handled in Africa through the use of geometry and patterns."

Pindell and others in "Magnetic Fields," like Mildred Thompson, who described her work as "a continuous search for understanding," show us that great abstract art can combine the formal, the political and the personal in as far-reaching a manner as any art that exists. □

"Magnetic Fields: Expanding American Abstraction, 1960s to Today" continues through Sept. 17 at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, 4420 Warwick Blvd. Hours are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday and 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Thursday and Friday. For more information, 816.753.5784 or www.kemperart.org