

← ON ART

HELEN A. HARRISON

Women of the 9th St. Show

In the November 24, 1975, issue of *New York* magazine, the art critic Thomas B. Hess reviewed an exhibition of portraits by Elaine de Kooning. Hess, who was himself among her subjects, described her as “one of the sparkling ‘Amazons’ who emerged in the flowering of American painting after World War II and into the 1950s.” He also mentioned several female artists of the early 20th century Russian avant-garde to whom that “equivocal nickname” had been applied.

I’m grateful to my friend, the artist and composer Edvard Lieber, for sending me the complete text of Hess’s article, since I was having trouble understanding why on earth the phrase “Sparkling Amazons” was used as the title of the current exhibition at the [Katonah Museum of Art](#). Having read what Hess wrote, I’m now even more perplexed.

The Katonah exhibition, on view through January 26, features the 11 female artists included in the landmark 1951 exhibition of abstract art known as the 9th St. Show. Hess named four of them in his article, but not in reference to that show, which isn’t mentioned. He may have meant the term, which he acknowledged was ambiguous, as a tribute to the artists’ fortitude, since they’d been fighting for recognition for decades.

But taken out of context and stripped of the internal quotation marks denoting its patronizing implication, “Sparkling Amazons” is a title that the artists would surely resent. Since they’re not around to complain — the last survivor, Jean Steubing, died in May — I’m doing it on their behalf.

The point, which several of them made repeatedly throughout their careers, is that they should not be categorized or pigeonholed as a female subset. They argued that their work should be judged by its quality alone, on the same basis as their male peers.

In one sense, segregating the women, as the Katonah show does, perpetuates the inequity. On the other hand, you can’t judge what you don’t see, so this exposure helps redress the imbalance.

And, to be fair to the men, some of

those in the 9th St. Show are now just as unheralded as some, though not all, of the women, a number of whom are enjoying overdue but significant exposure these days.

Among the 11 artists spotlighted at Katonah, the five painters singled out in Mary Gabriel’s book “Ninth Street Women” — Lee Krasner, Helen Frankenthaler, Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell and de Kooning — are represented by outstanding examples. None of the canvases on view was actually in the 9th St. Show, but they are roughly of the period.

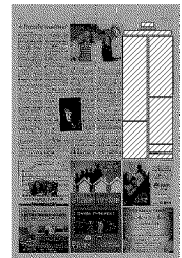
In addition to big, bold works that can hold their own in any company, smaller pieces illustrate the artists’ range and contradict the notion that all powerful abstract expressionist paintings are large. And the collages by Anne Ryan transform little scraps of paper and cloth into complex, multilayered compositions that are just as compelling on an intimate scale.

Perle Fine, who also excelled at collage, though in a larger format, is not represented by her strongest work. The exception is “Fragment,” a vertical canvas in which the structure is crumpled like checkered cloth, for an almost trompe-l’oeil effect.

Fine’s work has become better known in recent years, but the four remaining artists in the Katonah show, Guitou Knoop, Day Schnabel, Sonja Sekula and Steubing — who actually paid the rent for the vacant store in which the 9th St. Show was held — are virtually unknown today.

Knoop and Schnabel, both sculptors, were born and trained in Europe, as was Sekula, whose works on paper recall Paul Klee’s brand of cubist-derived whimsy. Her one canvas, “7 am,” is a response to her experience of the Lower East Side, where she lived in the same building as John Cage and Merce Cunningham, with whose artistic concepts she clearly felt in tune. Imposing sculptures by Knoop and Schnabel, and a lively gestural abstraction by Steubing, round out the selection.

Notwithstanding the exhibition’s un-



fortunate title, I'm grateful for this rare opportunity to see their work alongside that of their more celebrated colleagues and to judge it on its own merits.

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Perle Fine's "Fragment."