

KMA exhibit highlights the women of iconic '9th St. show'

By MARY LEGRAND

In 1951, a group of artists in New York City organized an exhibition simply titled "the 9th St. show" in what would be a pivotal moment for the emergence of abstract expressionism. Of the more than 60 artists who participated in the show, only 11 were women. Later referred to as "Sparkling Amazons," these female artists were ambitious, tough and adventurous. They were also widely regarded as renegades, pioneers and bold innovators.

This fall, for the first time since "the 9th St. show" took place 68 years ago, the Katonah Museum of Art is bringing works by these extraordinary women together. The exhibition, titled, "Sparkling Amazons: Abstract Expressionist Women of the 9th St. Show," opens this Sunday, Oct. 6, and runs through Jan. 26.

The exhibition opens with a preview for KMA members on Sunday from noon to 2 p.m., and those who attend without membership can become members on the spot. The public opening follows, from 2 to 5 p.m.

KMA Executive Director Michael Gitlitz, who oversees all aspects of museum operations, staff and programming, said the exhibition opening on Sunday is not the one organizers first had in mind.

"The museum and people in the community had been thinking for a number of years about a possible Lee Krasner show," said Gitlitz, who joined KMA 14 months ago. "But there was a major Lee Krasner exhibition already in the offing that subsequently opened in May at the Barbican in London and is traveling around Europe at four different venues this year, but not coming to any institutions in the United States. When I came to the KMA I quickly realized that doing a Lee Krasner retrospective was not a viable option."

Shortly after KMA hired associate curator Michele Wije, she approached Gitlitz with what he described as "an idea how we could play in this sandbox and make it much more interesting. She suggested we concentrate an exhibition on the women of 'the 9th St. show.' There have been exhibitions over the centuries that have changed the course of the art world, and 'the 9th St. show' is

one such example. It really launched into the public consciousness the arrival (and) the importance of abstract expressionism, which later came to be called the New York School."

Included in "Sparkling Amazons" are masterpieces from the Whitney Museum of American Art

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and the Metropolitan Museum alongside works that previously were completely unknown, Gitlitz said, adding, "It's very exciting to bring the artists back to their contemporary relationships."

Represented in "Sparkling Amazons" exhibition is work by the 11 women who were among the 9th St. artists: Elaine de Kooning, Perle Fine, Helen Frankenthaler, Joan Mitchell, Grace Hartigan, Marguerite Guitou Knoop, Krasner, Anne Ryan, Day Schnabel, Sonja Sekula and Jean Steubing.

Wije, in an introduction to the "Sparkling Amazons" catalog, said the purpose of the exhibition is not to isolate the women because of their gender in order to artificially give them their due. "It is instead to demonstrate that they were an essential source of the intellectual and artistic currents of the downtown art scene in the 1950s and were active participants in the social ebb and flow that made up the New York School," she said.

Their artistic talent "and an unflagging commitment to their profession underscore that the women in this exhibition were innovators, and not interpreters, of Abstract Expressionism," according to the catalog.

"These were artists who happened to be women, not 'lady painters,'" Wije said. "When Thomas Hess, renowned art critic, referred to them in retrospect as 'Sparkling Amazons,' it was not a pejorative observation, but a tribute to the indefatigable spirit and strength of these women artists whose dynamism and resilience made a crucial contribution to the first, totally original avant-garde artistic movement in the United States..."

"Bringing their work together in this exhibition allows for a broader and more inclusive understanding of American art in the 1950s."

There is no definitive list of works included in the 1951 show.

"The paintings and sculptures in the Katonah Museum of Art exhibition were chosen to indicate the style that each artist was pursuing by 1951 and to convey



their artistic evolution over time,” Wije said. “For this reason, the exhibition is comprised of works that span the entire decade of the 1950s.”

Gitlitz said it takes a “tremendous amount” of research, legwork and strategic thinking to persuade major institutions to loan important works of art such as those included in “Sparkling Amazons.” “One of the questions you always get asked is, ‘Who else is lending to the exhibition?’” he said. “It’s a bit of a game of chicken as to who’s going to lend first. You have to pull threads out, keep following them doggedly, and essentially create enough momentum that people start taking it seriously.”

An exhibition important enough to be ranked alongside “Sparkling Amazons” would typically take three to four years to put together, according to Gitlitz. In the case of KMA and “Sparkling Amazons,” the exhibition has taken just 10 months from conception to opening.

In a foreword to the exhibition catalog, Gitlitz credited the passion and ambition of the staff and supporters of the KMA, which “allowed the museum to organize this important and innovative show, one with original scholarship, masterpieces by the most important female Abstract Expressionists, as well as works by other heretofore marginalized artists.”

Even the list of participants in “the 9th St. show” remains “a subject of continuing debate,” Wije wrote in the catalog introduction. “Franz Kline designed the original invitation for the show and included the 11 women artists who are featured in the current exhibition. Later, the art dealer Leo Castelli, who by some accounts hung the show and helped finance it, modified Kline’s list by handwriting several other artists’ names on the poster. The additional women Castelli recorded were Sara Dienes, Adaline Kent and Florence Grippe, who all likely submitted work to the show. According to a statement by the sculptor Peter Grippe, his wife, Florence, was in-

strumental in helping to organize 9th St. We chose not to include these additional artists since there is as yet no definitive agreement and the line between apocryphal accounts and authentic reminiscence remains indistinct.”

By focusing on just the 11 women who participated in “the 9th St. show,” KMA is not suggesting that the many other female artists of the 1950s were not important to abstract expressionism, according to Wije. “Instead,” she said, “our objective is to capture a significant moment in the history of art and to share some of the vibrant, visual art that defined the downtown scene in the 1950s.”

Complementing the “Sparkling Amazons” exhibition will be an author talk by Ruth Appelhof, former executive director of Guild Hall in East Hampton, Thursday, Oct. 24, from 6 to 8 p.m. She will talk about her relationship with Lenore “Lee” Krasner, the subject of Appelhof’s personal memoir, “Lee and Me.”

For more information, call 232-9555 or visit katonahmuseum.org. Katonah Museum of Art is located at 134 Jay St., Katonah.



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Sonja Sekula’s “Pour l’Animal Noir,” 1945, ink and gouache on paper. Courtesy Peter Blum Gallery, New York.