

Blurring Boundaries: The Women of American Abstract Artists, 1936 — Present

Coordinated by The Ewing Gallery at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville
with support from Clara M. Eagle Gallery at Murray State University, Kentucky

Number of Objects: 62

Number of Artists: 49

Curator: Rebecca DiGiovanna

Lorenza Sannai



Ordine Sparso
2017
Acrylic on board
12" x 12" x 3/4"



Certe Volte
2017
Acrylic on board
16" x 16" x 2"



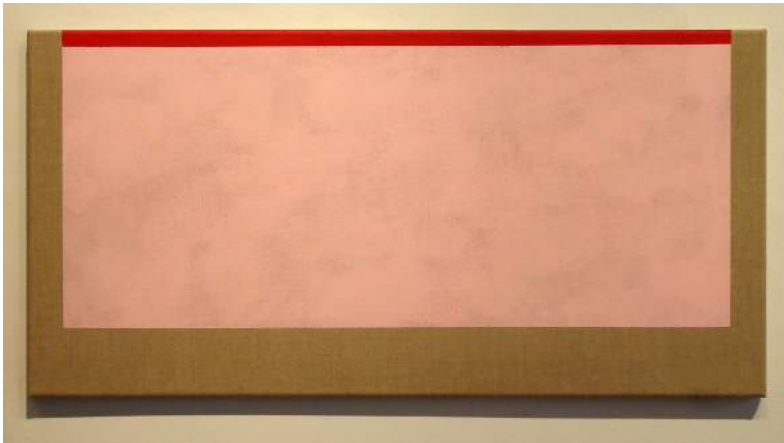
Preparatory drawings for *Ordine Sparso* and *Certe Volte*
2017
Digital Enlargement
Variable

Emily Berger



Breathe In
2017
Oil on wood
36" x 28"

Sharon Brant



Pink and Red #2
2017
Acrylic on linen
15" x 30"

Marthe Keller



Pre-Op
1994
Oil, alkyd, zinc and graphite on linen
38.5" x 39.5"

Anne Russinof



Inside Out
2017
Oil on canvas
20" x 24"

Alice Trumbull Mason

*Founder



Magnitude of Memory
1962
Oil on canvas
36" x 26"

Clover Vail



#14
2015
Ballpoint on wood panel
10" x 8"

Kim Uchiyama



Archaeo
2010
Oil on canvas
20" x 16" x 1.5"

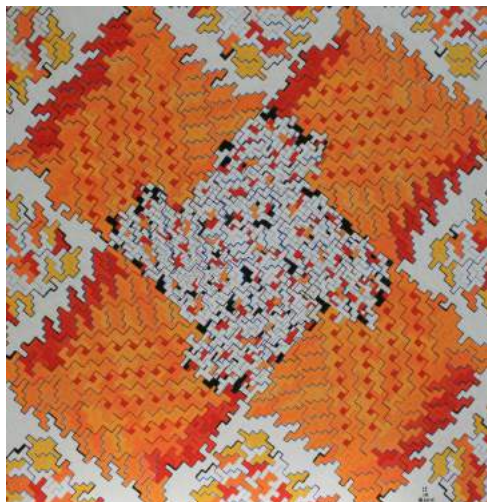
Susan Bonfils



Opening #1
2017
Mixed media
36" x 36" x 3 3/4"

Irene Rousseau

*President Emeritus



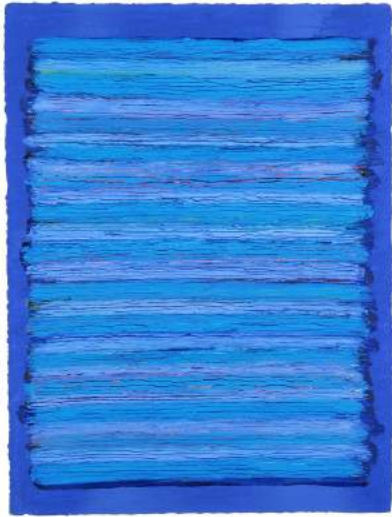
Stretching the Space
2015
Oil paint, pen, and ink on canvas
36" x 36" x 2" //
framed 37" x 37" x 2"

Liz Ainslie



Way You Could Tell
2017
Oil on canvas
48" x 36"

Joanne Mattera



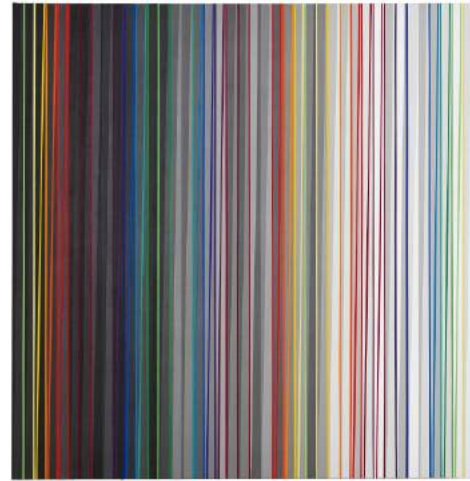
Swipe 11
2016
Oil and wax on 300-lb. Fabriano
Hot Press
30" x 22" // framed 34" x 26"

Judith Murray



Tribe
2012
Oil on linen
50" x 54"

Gabriele Evertz



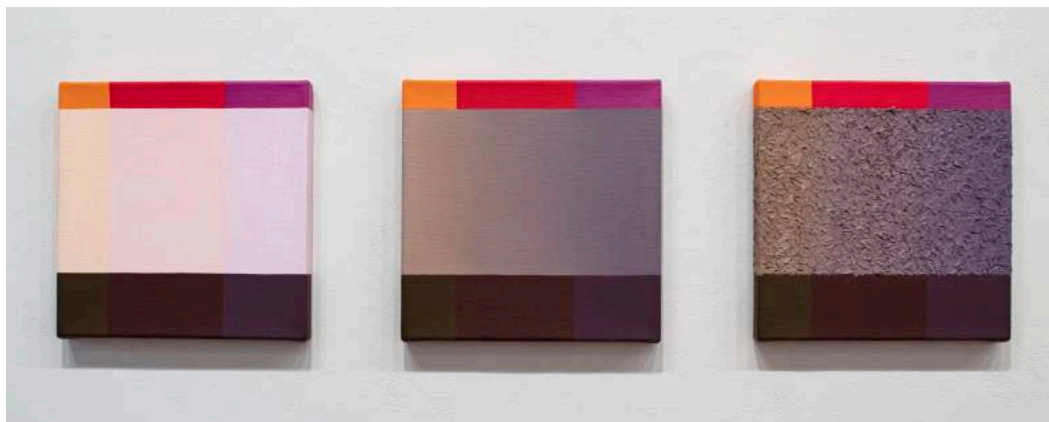
Toward Light
2018
Acrylic on canvas
42" x 42"

Melissa Staiger



Connection 2 Ways
2017
Assemblage on panel made of marble,
subway tiles, acrylic paint
24" x 12"

Siri Berg



Bars (triptych)
1999
Oil on linen
12" x 12" x 1.25" (45" wide accounting for 3" in-between)

Karen Schifano



It's Curtains for You, Kid
2017
Flashe on canvas
22" x 28"

Perle Fine



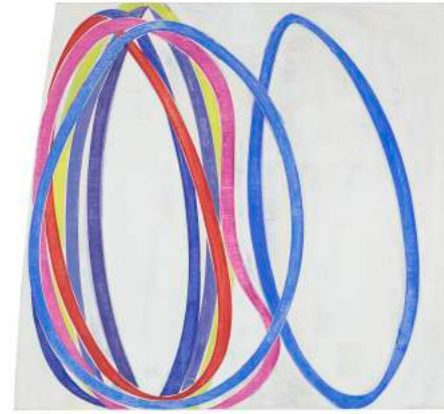
Arriving
1952
Oil on canvas
50" x 49 1/2"

Li Trincere



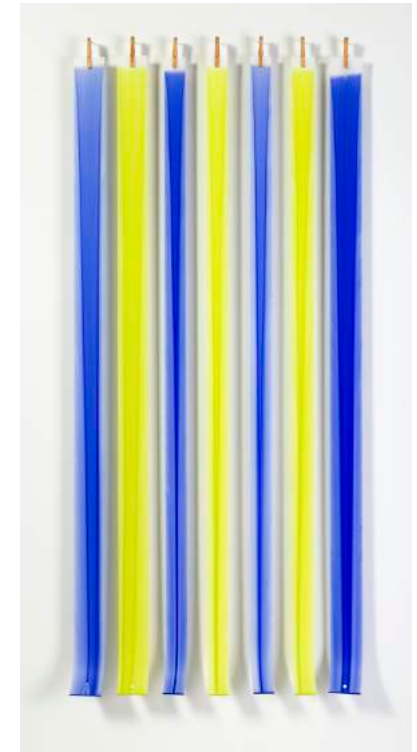
Green1
2017
Acrylic on canvas
24" x 34" x 1 1/2"

Joanne Freeman



Sweet Spot
2012
Oil on shaped canvas
30" x 33"

Mary Schiliro



Drip-dry
1995
Acrylic paint, mylar, clothespins
60" x 36"

Esphyr Slobodkina

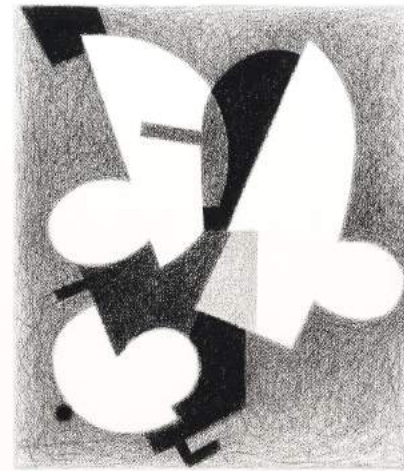


The Red L Abstraction
c. 1940
Gouache on paperboard
7 11/16" x 9 1/8"

Laurie Fendrich



#18 2016
2016
Conté on Arches
24" x 18"



#8 2015
2015
Conté on Arches
24" x 18"

Jane Logemann



Plum-Korean
2008-9
Ink, oil, varnish on muslin
36" x 26 1/2" // framed 39" x 30"

Beatrice Riese
*Past President



Kufa
2003
Ink on paper
31" x 22 1/4"

Cecily Kahn



Laughter and Forgetting
2017
Oil on canvas
24" x 20" x 1"

Patricia Zarate



Sweet Spot
2014
Acrylic on wood
48" x 2 1/2" x 1/2"

Gail Gregg



Scored
2012
Encaustic on cardboard
15" x 12"

Gertrude Greene
*Founder



Related Forms
1947
Oil on canvas
32" x 24"

Lynne Harlow



Sweetheart of the Rodeo
2016
Vinyl curtain, acrylic paint
6 x 8 x 18'
Site-specific vinyl curtain

Nancy Manter



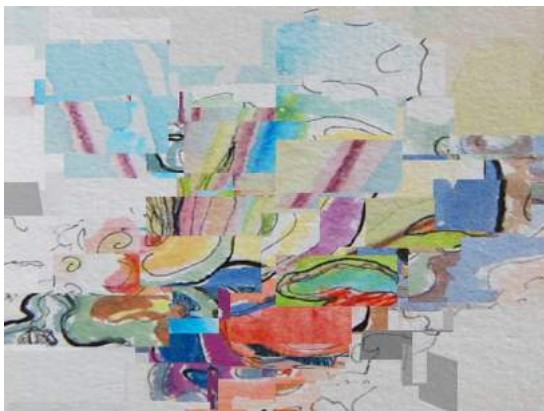
Remember to Turn...
2017
Flashe paint and charcoal collage
on Yupo paper
40" x 26"

Ce Roser



Fanfare
1986
Oil on linen
23 3/3" x 36 1/2"

Jeanne Wilkinson



Animated Abstraction 4
2016
Video
Series of stills from video animation



Raquel Rabinovich



River Library 421 with Rivermaps
2013
Nile river mud, pencil and glue on Essindia paper
12 3/4" x 23 1/4" // framed 25" x 33"

Vera Vasek



August 24, 2007
Tidal Relief Series
2007
Plaster, acrylic, sand, glass fiber, aluminum
67" x 62" x 4"

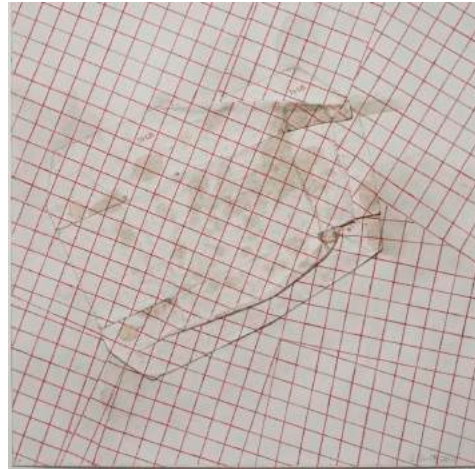


Tidal Relief Series
2007
Video

Susan Smith



SCT 200 Irregular Grid
2012
Collage - found French fry container,
watercolor, pencil
11" x 11" (framed 14"x14")



2 1/2 lb. Irregular Grid
2012
Collage - found French fry container,
watercolor, pencil
9 1/8" x 9 1/4"

Phillis Ideal



Blue Borrowed
2016
Acrylic, collage, resin, spray paint on canvas
40" x 30" x 1 5/8" framed

Katinka Mann



Red Yellow Polaroid
1982
Polaroid Print
21 5/8 x 24 6/8"

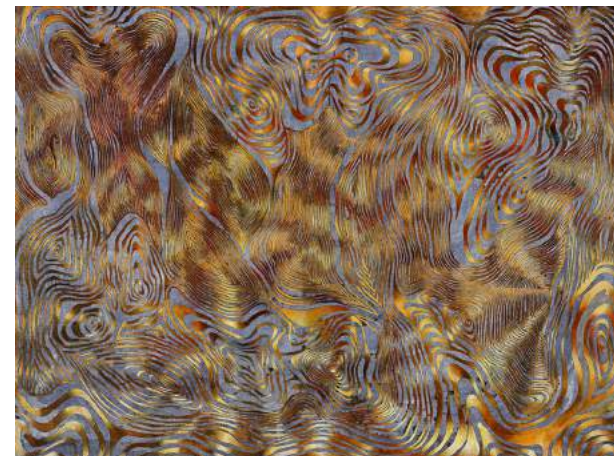
Charmion von Wiegand

*Past President



Luminous Lattice
1956
Collage on paper
16" x 16"

Mara Held



Ostinato
2007
Egg tempera on linen over panel
32" x 48"

Lisa Nanni



Opposing Forest Green and Blaze Orange Waves
2016
Chromate aluminum, art glass, acrylic
13 1/2" x 12" x 4"

Rhia Hurt



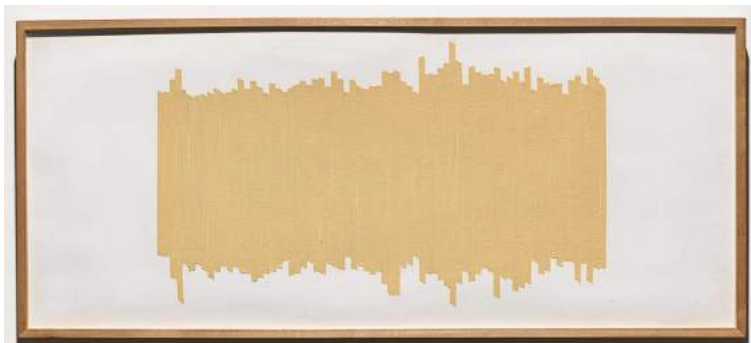
Pretty in Peach
Reflecting Pool Series
2018
Acrylic and watercolor on paper
15" x 12"

Irene Rice Pereira



Untitled
c. 1955
Gouache on paper
9 1/8" x 5 3/8", 16" x 12" framed

Merrill Wagner
*President Emeritus



Untitled
1976
Masking tape on Paper
12.5 x 29"

Lynn Umlauf



3.6.14
2014
Pastel, acrylic, canvas, frame
20.25" x 18" x 2.5"

Claire Seidl



Neither Here Nor There
2016
Oil on linen
30" x 39"

Iona Kleinhaut



Mare Nostrum: Casalabate
2017
Oil on linen
30" x 32"

Nola Zirin



Hide and Seek
2017
Oil and glitter on wood panel
24" x 36"

Alice Adams



White Corner Cast
1969
Silastic resin
8' x 4" extended, 10" x 4" coiled

Blurring Boundaries: The Women of American Abstract Artists, 1936 – Present

“The stamp of modern art is clarity: clarity of color, clarity of forms and of composition, clarity of determined dynamic rhythm, in a determined space. Since figuration often veils, obscures or entirely negates purity of plastic expression, the destruction of the particular form for the universal one becomes a prime prerequisite.”¹

- Perle Fine (1905-1988)

Perle Fine’s declaration for the hierarchy of distilled form, immaculate line, and pure color came close to being the mantra of the 1930s and of American Abstract Artists (AAA). Founded during the disorder of Great Depression America, AAA was established at a time when museums and galleries were still conservative in their exhibition offerings. With its challenging imagery and elusive meaning, abstraction was often presented as “not American” because of its derivation from the European avant-garde. Consequently, American abstract artists received little interest from museum and gallery owners. Even the Museum of Modern Art, which mounted its first major exhibition of abstract art in 1936, hesitated to recognize American artists working within the vein of abstraction. MoMA’s exhibition, *Cubism and Abstract Art*, at the time groundbreaking for its non-representational content, filled four floors with artwork, largely by Europeans.² This lack of recognition from MoMA angered abstract artists working in New York and was the impetus behind the founding of American Abstract Artists later that year.

In the early 1930s, abstract artists flocked to a new school founded by the German artist Hans Hofmann. For young artists, Hofmann’s class nourished a pioneering interest to learn the techniques of the European modernists. Included in his eager group of ready-admirers were artists Nell Blaine, Lenore [Lee] Krasner, Ray Kaiser [Eames], Perle Fine, and Mercedes Carles [Matter]. Although Hofmann was more welcoming to women than his contemporaries, he was still partial to male artists, once telling Lee Krasner that her work was “so good you would not believe it was done by a woman.”³ Perle Fine recalled a day when Hofmann, bitter and frustrated as more of his male students left to enter military service, pointed to each woman in his class and declared “You’ll amount to nothing. You’ll amount to nothing. You’ll never get anywhere. You’ll never get anywhere.”⁴ Despite Hofmann’s criticisms, the women who attended his school during the late 1930s and early 1940s considered the experience a formative one, as it gave them an opportunity to gather and discuss their ideas and work. Hofmann’s school provided a place to establish friendships and community, spawning a new generation of like-minded artists who eventually transitioned from student peers to AAA members.

In 1943, several of AAA’s female members participated in an all-women’s show, entitled *31 Women*, at Peggy Guggenheim’s Art of This Century gallery. Critical reception of *31 Women* echoed the patriarchal sentiments expressed by Hofmann and common at the time. *New York Times* reviewer and senior art critic Edward Alden Jewell declared that, “the work might just as well have been produced by ‘The Men’”⁵, while an anonymous reviewer in *ArtNews* asserted, “the works...[promote a] new conception of

¹ Kathleen Housley, *Tranquil Power: The Art and Life of Perle Fine*, (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 2005), 100.

² Museum of Modern Art. *Cubism and Abstract Art*. The Museum of Modern Art, 1936, https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_catalogue_2748_300086869.pdf.

³ Randy Rosen and Catherine C. Brawer, *Making their Mark: Women Artists Move Into the Mainstream, 1970-85* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1991), 30.

⁴ Miriam Schapiro, *Art: A Woman’s Sensibility* (California: California Institute of the Arts, 1975), 20.

⁵ Edward Alden Jewell, *31 Women Artists Show Their Work*, *The New York Times*, 6 Jan. 1943, <https://www.nytimes.com/1943/01/06/archives/31-women-artists-show-their-work-peggy-guggenheim-museum-offers.html>.

the weaker sex. Other all-female organizations should have a look-in at a show which is so refreshingly un-ladylike.”⁶ *Time* magazine critic James Stern refused to write about the show altogether, proclaiming that women should simply stick to creating with their bodies.⁷ Peggy Guggenheim, herself indifferent to women artists, scheduled the show’s opening the month before the gallery closed for the summer; a date she considered inconsequential as the potential audience flocked elsewhere to escape the summer heat.⁸ The art world had room for models and mistresses, but not for women artists in their own right. Women who were married to successful artists, critics, or collectors were slightly more visible, but in general, women artists stood a strong chance of being undervalued or ignored. To avoid dismissal simply on the basis of gender, many female artists used only surnames or initialed their canvases. Lenore Krasner changed her name to the androgynous Lee, while Irene Rice Pereira simply used the initial I. Whereas subject matter could be problematic for women painters—conjuring images of pastel flowers or beatific children—in abstraction, the gender of the painter made little difference. Absent gender specific signifiers, pure abstraction gave women a freedom they did not have when painting representationally. By the time of Guggenheim’s second women’s show, a 1945 exhibition entitled *The Women*, perceptions regarding women within abstract art were shifting, but critical review was still tinged with surprise at their ability to create strong abstract work.

If the reception of women in Guggenheim’s shows could be described as dismissive at best, the opposite was true of their participation within American Abstract Artists. From the outset, both as women and as abstract artists, women of AAA were working on the periphery of the art world. Perhaps as a result of their mutual status as internal exiles of the art world, both male and female members of AAA established goals which included advocating for abstract art and the inclusion of *all* abstract artists in museums and galleries. In comparison to the other abstract artist collectives of the period, where equal footing for women was unusual, AAA provided a place of refuge for female artists. Women within AAA have enjoyed a remarkably active history and generative role since the group’s founding and have been instrumental in articulating its mission within the arts community. Founding member Gertrude Greene coordinated the group’s first exhibitions, including the opening group show at Squibb Gallery in 1937.⁹ Esphyr Slobodkina, another of the group’s founding members, was also the organization’s first secretary, later serving as president, treasurer, and bibliographer. Among the thirty-nine founding members of AAA, nine were women. Of the group’s fifteen presidents, six have been female. This gender mix was highly unusual at the time. Still today, the group’s membership, a nearly even divide between men and women, remains remarkable within the broader art world.

More than 80 years after its founding, AAA continues to nurture and support a vibrant community of artists with diverse identities and approaches to abstraction. In celebration of this tradition, *Blurring Boundaries: The Women of American Abstract Artists* traces the work of the female artists within AAA from the founders to contemporary, practicing members. Included are works by historic members Perle Fine, Esphyr Slobodkina, Charmion von Wiegand, Irene Rice Pereira, Alice Trumbull Mason, and Gertrude Greene, as well as works by current members, such as Ce Roser, Irene Rousseau, Judith Murray, Alice Adams, Merrill Wagner and Katinka Mann. Through fifty-four works, the exhibition explores the stylistic variations and individual approaches to guiding principles of abstraction: color, space, light, material and process. In Lorenza Sannai’s geometric, hard-edged painting, *Ordine Sparso*, interest resides in the rigor of straight line, shape, and formal composition. Both Gertrude Greene and Laurie Fendrich imbue geometric shape with biomorphic qualities: Greene’s *Related Forms* suggests interaction between two totem-like bodies; Fendrich’s anthropomorphic, angular figures are rooted in familiar forms of popu-

⁶ Helen Langa and Paula Wisotzki. *American Women Artists, 1935-1970: Gender, Culture, and Politics* (England: Ashgate Publishing, 2016), 36.

⁷ Alexander Russo, *Profiles of Women Artists* (Frederick, MD: University Press of America, 1985), 133.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁹ Joan Marter, *Women of Abstract Expression* (England: Yale University Press, 2016), 179.

lar comic characters, like Charles Schulz's *Peanuts* series. In Esphyr Slobodkina's reductive gouache, *The Red L Abstraction*, intersecting shapes take on the mechanical structuring of a Constructivist blue-print. Patricia Zarate's *Sweet Spot* and Siri Berg's *Bars* are characterized by pattern, precise and controlled application of pigment, and unmodulated color.

Several artists explore seriality, combining and re-combining vertical or horizontal bands of color as they work out formal problems of space and light. In Gabriele Evertz's *Toward Light*, Evertz subtly shifts from bars of achromatic grey to bands of bright white, visually coaxing viewer's gaze from edge to edge. Emily Berger's and Kim Uchiyama's works share an engagement with horizontal line, but with distinctly different outcomes. Uchiyama's *Archaeo* stacks pure colored bands in dense, stratigraphic layers, while Berger's *Breathe In* transforms airy, dry-brushed marks into mindful exercises, each band swelling across the canvas in a visual inhale. Careful compositions and geometric arrangements are juxtaposed with works which employ more immediate, intuitive forms of expression. Here, much of the emphasis is on the material nature of painting, as artists like Claire Seidl and Iona Kleinhaut use broad, bodily strokes or repetitive, painterly marks to evoke internal emotion and thought. In *Laughter and Forgetting*, Cecily Kahn fragments color into a kaleidoscope of frenzied marks, compactly mapped in a boisterous landscape. Anne Russinof's *Inside Out* evokes pleasure in the recorded gestures of the body, as sweeping, arching movements spread with bright blooms of color across the canvas.

Many of the artists find inspiration for their work in a variety of materials and everyday objects. Gail Gregg's *Scored* uses scavenged cardboard, replete with corrugated lines and layered in encaustic; Phillis Ideal unites collaged elements with layers of spray paint, acrylic, and resin in *Borrowed Blue*; Susan Smith mingles watercolor and graphite with found French fry containers; and Melissa Staiger supplants canvas for subway tiles in *Connection 2 Ways*. Lynne Harlow situates the viewer among hanging strips of vinyl to create an intimate, light-filled space in *Sweetheart of the Rodeo*. Mary Schiliro suspends translucent strips of mylar from clothespins in an exploration of color and light in *Drip-dry*. Silastic resin, masking tape, and sand casts also make an appearance alongside painted shaped canvas and wood, works on paper and Yupo, and digital animation. Both Raquel Rabinovich and Vera Vasek engage bodies of water as co-creators. Vasek employs the ocean tide to cast large-scale movement drawings in *August 24, 2007*. In Rabinovich's *River Library* series, mud becomes metaphor for language as it traces the ancient story of the Nile river from which it is collected. Beatrice Riese and Jane Logemann use written language as medium in their work; in *Plum-Korean*, Logemann replicates the word for plum over and over, the painting becoming a concrete poem in the color plum; in Riese's *Kufa*, densely-gridded glyphs are stitched together to create a quasi-alphabetical design of pattern and text.

In an overdue celebration of this intergenerational group of artists, *Blurring Boundaries* highlights the ways in which the women of AAA have shifted and shaped the frontiers of American abstraction for more than eighty years. The exhibition emphasizes a variety of approaches, materials and processes within a shared visual and conceptual vocabulary; each work enters into a conversation with the others. What emerges from *Blurring Boundaries* is the organic, ever-evolving nature of abstraction as a language centered upon the dynamic synthesis of line and form, mark-making, color, space, and light—a language impossible to articulate through the boundaries and stereotypes of a gendered lens.