American Abstract Artists: Tribute to Esphyr Slobodkina

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Ce Roser
Irene Rousseau
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Edward Shalala
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Esphyr Slobodkina
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Stephen Westfall
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Opening Reception
Saturday, September 6th, 6-9pm
Ilya Bolotowsky, whom she married in 1933. (Ever resourceful, at the conservative National Academy of Design. There she met Bolotowsky urged Esphyr to become involved in this nascent AAA, and within a few years she was working alongside Alice Trumbull Mason to increase the group's profile among New York society.

Esphyr's mature style was forged by the late 1930's, a few years following her initial contact with the "Park Avenue Cubists" and A. E. Gallatin's Museum of Living Art. Gallatin mounted her first solo show, in 1940. Though Esphyr prided herself on her stylistic and material flexibility, in her serious painting she embraced a nature-derived, cubist-influenced approach which, in the dialectic of the day, squared off against Neo-Plasticism. In "Copy of Swan Lake," for example, interlocking shapes in flat colors slither and resist; edges glide against edges with the controlled deliberation of a meat cleaver on a sharpening steel. The collage aesthetic that propels this painting was a constant in Esphyr's work, extending even to illustrations for her well-known children's books, such as Caps for Sale, 1940, oil and collage on canvas, 29 x 25.5 inches

The Slobodkina Foundation was established in Glen Head, Hollywood, Florida, she belittles the efforts of Byron Browne and Lee Krasner; the reader senses a score being settled. Back in the early 1960's, it fell to newly elected president Leo Rabkin to mend relations with the Riverside Museum, the now-defunct upper West Side venue for many AAA exhibitions, after Esphyr alienated the Museum's administration. "They couldn't stand her," recalls Rabkin, "but we could spit at each other and remain good friends."

American Abstract Artists (AAA) is a democratic, artist-run organization, which exists to expand ideas and promote the exposure and understanding of abstract and non-objective art. Founded in 1936, AAA is committed to organizing and circulating abstract art in the following ways: organizing member exhibitions, producing member print portfolios and catalogues, distributing published materials internationally to cultural organizations, documenting member history in the Archives of American Art, publishing a journal every three years, and hosting critical panels and symposia.

Numerous exhibitions and honors accrued over the years, and in 1984 Esphyr was included in "Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America, 1927-1944," seen in New York at the Whitney Museum. The following year, the Metropolitan Museum acquired a 1935 canvas, "The Pot-Bellied Stove." A decades-long project, the five-volume memoir entitled Notes for a Biographer, details Esphyr's youth in multicultural Asiatic Russia and in the vibrant milieu of mid-century Manhattan. Her version of those formative meetings in the 1930's forms the preamble to her 1979 bibliography, American Abstract Artists: Its Publications, Catalogs and Membership, and is so vivid the reader might forget that Esphyr wasn't there.

The Slobodkina Foundation was established in Glen Head, New York, not far from the artist's Great Neck home and studio, in 2000. That year, Esphyr took part once again in an AAA exhibition, at the Hillwood Art Museum at Long Island University, Brookville. She is fondly remembered at the opening reception, holding court from her wheelchair with a glass of wine in her hand. Esphyr's focus, her vitality, and most of all her astounding tenacity continue to inspire admiration in her fellow American Abstract Artists.

Stephen Maine

Front: Slobodkina standing in front of Composition in an Oval at her Great Neck home, ca. 1950.

Many thanks to AAA members Leo Rabkin, Ruth Eckstein, James Gross, and Irene Rousseau.

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