

American Abstract Artists: Tribute to Esphyr Slobodkina

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Siri Berg	Stephen Maine
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Susan Bonfils	David Mackenzie
Power Boothe	Creighton Michael
Naomi Boretz	Manfred Mohr
Sharon Brant	Judith Murray
Michael Brennan	Mary Obering
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Kenneth Bushnell	Corey Postiglione
James O. Clark	Joan Webster Price
Mark Dagley	Richard Pugliese
Matthew Deleget	Leo Rabkin
Ruth Eckstein	Rodney Ripps
Tom Evans	Dorothea Rockburne
Gabriele Evertz	Ce Roser
Heidi Glück	Irene Rousseau
John Goodyear	David Row
Gail Gregg	Edwin Ruda
James Gross	James Seawright
Lynne Harlow	Edward Shalala
Mara Held	Babe Shapiro
Daniel Hill	Esphyr Slobodkina
Gilbert Hsiao	Richard Temperio
Phillis Ideal	Clover Vail
Julian Jackson	Vera Vasak
Roger Jorgensen	Don Voisine
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Steve Karlik	Stephen Westfall
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Victor Kord	Jeanne Wilkinson
Irene Lawrence	Thornton Willis
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THE PAINTING CENTER
52 Greene Street, 2nd Floor
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American Abstract Artists: Tribute to Esphyr Slobodkina

September 2 - September 27, 2008

Opening Reception
Saturday, September 6th, 6-9pm

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Copy of *Swan Lake*, 1996, oil on masonite, 29 x 25.5 inches (copy of previous painting, ca. 1940-50)

Shock Trooper of the New: Esphyr Slobodkina (1908-2002)

When American Abstract Artists was established, in the winter of 1936-37, its very name was a rallying cry. Stateside institutional endorsement of abstraction, when it existed at all during the heyday of Social Realism and the American Scene painters, was profoundly Eurocentric. MoMA's 1936 exhibition, "Cubism and Abstract Art," included just one American, Alexander Calder. Alfred H. Barr's curatorial snub of homegrown abstraction prompted New York artists to stage protests outside the Museum.

Among the picketers was Esphyr Slobodkina. Esphyr was the youngest of five children in a well-to-do Siberian family that fled the Russian Revolution and settled in Harbin, in Manchuria. In 1928 she immigrated to New York, and studied at the conservative National Academy of Design. There she met Ilya Bolotowsky, whom she married in 1933. (Ever resourceful,

Esphyr also spent mornings learning English at the Greater New York Academy, a missionary school in which her U.S. sponsors had mistakenly enrolled her.) Artists she knew through the WPA Federal Art Project gathered in Ibram Lassaw's studio and, later, in Harry Holtzman's loft to discuss a way forward for American abstraction. Even as their marriage was breaking up, 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 the 1940 *Caps for Sale*.

For the AAA she served as secretary from 1945 to 1960, taking breaks from her official duties in the late 1950's for residencies at Yaddo and the McDowell Colony. She was vice-president and treasurer from 1960 to 1962, and president from 1963 to 1965. In meetings she was reliably direct and assertive, with a lively wit. For a time, the group met in an apartment on East 57th Street that Esphyr had sublet to the classical harpsichordist Sylvia Marlowe after moving to Great Neck. With Abstract Expressionism dominant during those lean years, one spartan room sufficed for the few attendees.

While some found her outspokenness and candor refreshing, she could be pugnacious and undiplomatic. In her statement for the brochure accompanying her 1984 "Introspective" in

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

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

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

Photo credit: Ted Tessler

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