

CHARLES RIVA COLLECTION

Sun Women

24.04 - 29.06 2019

Curated by Jérôme Neutres

Louise Bourgeois

Helen Frankenthaler

Eva Hesse

Jacqueline Humphries

Lee Krasner

Joan Mitchell

Louise Nevelson

They didn't want to look like men

Warning: female artists should not be categorized because of their gender.

Patti Smith once said: "As an artist, I never wanted to be fettered by gender nor recognized or defined as a female poet, musician or singer. They don't do that with men – nobody says Picasso, the male artist." We shall thus not seek to essentialize their work here, but rather show creations and artists who have long been neglected by a scene that has privileged male creators. In the same way as expression necessarily hails "from somewhere," creation arises out of a given personal, sociocultural and historical context. However, not discriminating against the production of female artists does not mean one should not appreciate, in terms of aesthetics and anthropology, the artistic particularities engendered by the Western women's liberation movement in the 20th century.

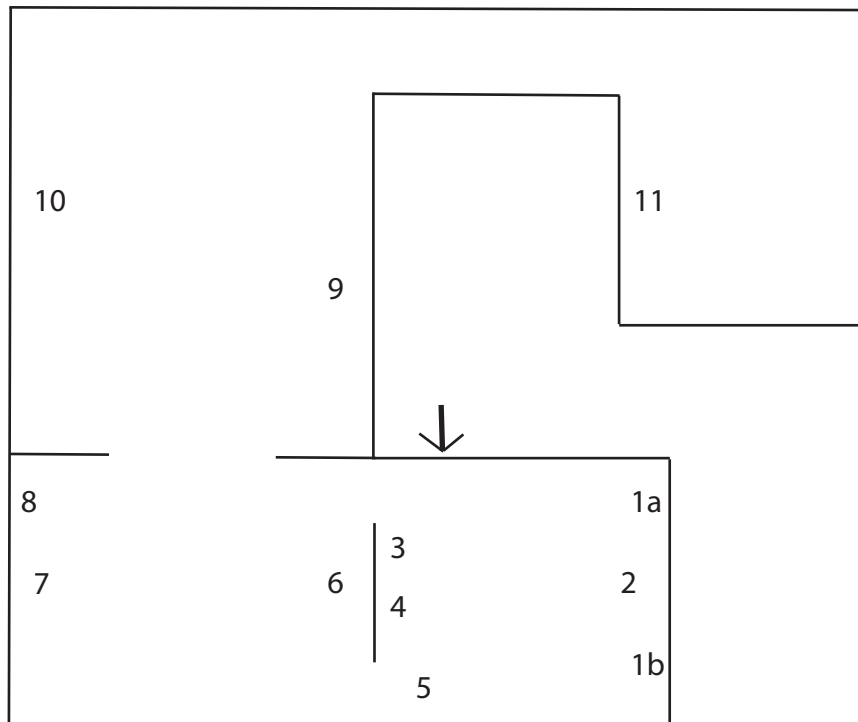
By definition, to create is to emancipate oneself; conversely, the emancipation of women in the 20th century was a tremendous lever for creativity. It is no coincidence that many female artists have turned to abstract or conceptual art. Abstract-art exegete Eric de Chassey reminds us that abstraction is "a liberation, the triumph of artistic freedom as a possibility, unhindered by external references" (*in L'abstraction avec ou sans raisons*). In the words of Lee Krasner, "As I say, I as an abstract artist was active politically." The title of this exhibition is based on Lee Krasner's series, *The Sun Woman*. To the modern women of the 20th century engaged in conquering their freedom in a male-dominated society – including, and especially, in the art field – abstraction appeared as the perfect medium. The women artists presented here are thus not associated through a hypothetical form of feminine sensitivity or some other cliché related to their gender. The reason for bringing them together here is, to quote Laure Adler, that they "dared to defy social, political, sexual, and psychological norms to fulfil their vocation." (*in Les femmes artistes sont dangereuses*, Flammarion, 2018). In addition, the work of these great artists is de facto a powerful statement of feminism in the abstract American art scene of the XXth century. Indeed, as Louise Bourgeois said, "I am a woman, hence I don't need to be a feminist" (Interview with Jacqueline Caux). "Women at that time were supposed to look pretty and throw little handkerchiefs around... well, I couldn't play that role," said Louise Nevelson. To these women, being an artist was in itself an act of rebellion. Their art was a means to oppose the concept of womanhood imposed by a traditional society that insisted on excluding them from the field of artistic creation.

In French, the word “Artiste” ends with an “e” as if it belonged to the feminine gender. And yet there are so few women artists in museums and exhibitions... just a little over twenty among the thousands of artists were exhibited at the Louvre until recently. And although the Musée d’Orsay covers a more recent period, it only counted for a long time less than 300 female creators in a total of 4,4more than 4000 artists, i.e. less than 7%. “For a long time, women were excluded from art schools and academies. They were not allowed to paint nude models.

Their artistic contributions (in the so-called minor fields of portraiture, floral compositions, and domestic scenes) have been underestimated; they have often been relegated to the reassuring and ‘minor’ sphere of applied arts,” recalls the art historian Simona Bartolena in her book *Femmes artistes. De la Renaissance au XXIe siècle* (Gallimard). The École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts de Paris finally opened its doors to women in 1897.

Already present among the Impressionists, they actively participated in the Avant-Garde movement. Despite this, less than 20% of the modern and contemporary artists exhibited at the Centre Pompidou are women. In the 1980s, the Guerilla Girls denounced this imbalance in their slogan: “Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?” In a 19th-century issue of the Gazette des beaux-arts, Paul Mantz ranked Berthe Morisot in the “household painter” category – as one might say a “housekeeper.” Speaking of Marie Bashkirtseff, Gustave Moreau said: “The large-scale intrusion of women in the realm of art would be a disaster beyond remedy. What will become of us, when creatures whose minds are as down-to-earth and practical as women’s minds are, when creatures so lacking in the true gifts of the imagination, proffer their horrible artistic common sense, supported by claims?” (Gustave Moreau, *L’Assemblée de rêves*). Studying the works of these female artists raises another paradox, for the latter are first and foremost considered as artists and not merely as women. As it turns out, the ghettoization of great 20th-century creators because they were women and the guilty indifference of the art world shielded them from the dangers of fame and too much visibility. “Because they had to defend themselves more than their male counterparts, Paula Modersohn-Becker and Sonia Delaunay – to name but a few – were more radical in their choices and less affected by their success. Their work was more personal as a result, for it was not influenced by the admiration of their contemporaries!” said Fabrice Hergott, the director of the Musée d’art moderne de la Ville de Paris where a large number of women artists are featured for the high quality of their work.

“I feel totally female. I didn’t compete with men and I don’t want to look like a man!” said Louise Nevelson. The struggle for emancipation led by women artists does not mean they sought to be the same as men. Let us listen to Louise Nevelson, and revel in the creations of great artists who also happened to be extraordinary women.



1a. Eva Hesse
No Title, 1965
 Ink on paper
 21 x 29,7 cm
 The Estate of Eva Hesse, Courtesy Hauser & Wirth

1b. Eva Hesse
No Title, 1965
 Ink on paper
 21 x 29,7 cm
 The Estate of Eva Hesse, Courtesy Hauser & Wirth

2. Louise Nevelson
Day/Night XVI, 1973
 Painted wood
 76,5 x 51 x 8cm
 Private Collection

3. Joan Mitchell
Sans titre, 1978-1979
 Pastel sur papier,
 90x68,5, cm
 Private Collection

4. Joan Mitchell
Sans titre, 1978-1979
 Pastel sur papier,
 90x68,5 cm
 Private Collection

5. Joan Mitchell
Tilleuls, 1978
 Pastel sur papier
 93x71,5 cm
 Gift from the artist to Mr. Guy Bloch-Champfort

6. Helen Frankenthaler
Eight in a Square, 1961
 Oil on sized, primed canvas
 101.3 x 105.4 cm
 Courtesy Gagosian

7. Louise Bourgeois
 Untitled, 1954 (Cast in 2005)
 Bronze, painted white, and stainless steel
 137,8 x 30,5 x 30,5 cm
 Collection Louise Bourgeois Trust, Courtesy Xavier Hufkens

8. Jacqueline Humphries
Untitled, 2018
 Oil on linen
 96,6 x 101,6 cm
 Courtesy Per & Inga-Lill Ovin

9. Lee Krasner
Comet, 1970
 Oil on canvas
 177.8 x 218.4 cm
 Courtesy Kasmin Gallery

10. Louise Nevelson
Untitled, 1984
 Wood painted black
 221 x 68 x 20 cm
 Courtesy Galerie Gmurzynska

11. Helen Frankenthaler
Caffeine, 1975
 Acrylic on canvas
 152,4 x 131,4 cm
 Private Collection