

ART REVIEW

Primer and Show on Women Who Loved and Created Art

By Benjamin Genocchio

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Founded in New York in 1889 as the Woman's Art Club, the National Association of Women Artists was one of several organizations initiated in the late 19th century to advance the cause and careers of women. Today it is the country's oldest continuing women's art organization.

In 1992, the association decided to donate its collection of around 200 works by its artist members, spanning the late 19th century to today, to the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum. Many of the best pieces have been on display in the museum's permanent collection rooms over the past two decades, as regular visitors know, but until now there's never been a concentrated showing of works from the association's gift.



“Woman Holding Flowers” (1893 by Louise Cox.

“A Parallel Presence: National Association of Women Artists, 1889-2009” comprises work by about 60 artists; much of it is drawn from the collection, with the rest, mostly historical material, on loan from public and private lenders. It is a handsome and thoughtful show that will travel to the UBS Art Gallery in New York later this year.

Arranged chronologically, with works grouped more or less by decade, the exhibition illustrates an engagement by members of the National Association of Women Artists with broader currents in American art, beginning with academic realism in the late 19th century. Louise Cox, Edith Prellwitz, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney and Bessie Vonnoh are among the major artists represented in these early exhibition sections.

This was the heyday of N.A.W.A., when it could boast among its members nearly all the most important female artists in America. It had an urgency and relevance, actively helping women counter the many obstacles they faced in gaining professional training, exhibition opportunities, serious critical analysis and a market for their artworks.



“Untitled” (1945-50) by Claire Shainess.

Ms. Vonnoh, in particular, is worth lingering over, for having recently seen a national touring show devoted to her work, I am convinced that she was one of the most talented academic sculptors of her time. She is known for small table sculpture and garden statuary cast in bronze, most of which portrays women and children, or sometimes both together. Either way, her work is lovely.

In contrast to the stylized academic naturalism that characterizes the first section of the exhibition, subsequent rooms contain works in Impressionist, abstract and Abstract Expressionist styles. Some of these artists are fairly well known, like Cecilia Beaux, but others,

like Margery Ryerson, are less familiar. Ms. Ryerson's "Misty New York Scene" (circa 1915) is a charming Impressionist landscape that could be hung with pride alongside works by Childe Hassam and others.

There are several highlights in the area of abstraction, including Agnes Pelton's "Ascent (a k a Liberation)" (1946), a picture that was inspired by an interest in transcendental spiritualism; Sylvia Wald's "Untitled" (circa 1959), which is vaguely reminiscent of a Philip Guston painting, especially the scribbled blocks of color bouncing against one another; and Sumiye Okoshi's "Ruins at Sunset" (1960), a murky expressionistic abstract painting filled with movement.

Sylvia Wald's "Untitled" (circa 1959).

Visitors should take the time, too, to get acquainted with several little-known, talented midcentury sculptors, like Helen Beling, Anita Weschler and especially Augusta Savage, an African-American woman who was widely admired for her realistic portrait busts. Showing here is "Gamin," a bronze modeled in 1929 but cast in 1940, showing a smiling African-American boy in a cap. It is a really fine work.

Because this is a historical show, the curators have included cases in sections containing documents connecting N.A.W.A. and artworks with the times. In the 1960s section, the case contains brochures for traveling exhibitions and interesting letters that relate to the 1964 New York World's Fair and the role of the association in exhibitions coinciding with that event.

The quality of work in the contemporary period varies tremendously, but does include some pleasant pieces. Among them are a figurative sculpture made of old cloth scraps by Faith Ringgold, experimental works on paper by June Wayne, the doyenne of American printmaking, and a pair of dramatic and fun photorealist paintings by Joan Hierholzer and Linda Lippa.

But the reality is that by the 1980s and '90s the idea of an organization devoted to women was starting to seem passé, as women became a larger presence in art schools, commercial galleries and museums. The National Association of Women Artists played a role in this process, for which female artists and the rest of us should be grateful.