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The Female Cool School

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Usually, art movements or “schools,” acquire names for reasons of expedience. Critic Irving Sandler named Color Field Painting, because he needed a title for the chapter on Clyfford Still, Barnett Newman, and Mark Rothko in his book *The Triumph of American Painting*. Critic Jules Langser and his friend Peter Selz coined Hard-Edge Abstraction because they needed a name for a show linking Lorser Feitelson, John McClaughlin, and Karl Benjamin—all California artists with a preference for sharpness and clarity. The term Light and Space emerged similarly from a group exhibition’s title. Many of these schools consisted mostly of men (Selz and Langser notably left female hard-edger Helen Lundeborg out of

their exhibition); the catch-all Feminist Art Movement being the exception.

Just this summer, Yale University Press published what they called “a long-awaited survey,” *Women of Abstract Expressionism*—every time I see the title, I think of a scene in Ann Rower’s book about Lee Krasner and Elaine De Kooning, *Lee & Elaine* (1988). Rower closes her eyes and tries to imagine that Lee and Elaine did it first, that their husbands copied them, and then lied about it. But even with eyes closed, she feels the overshadowing force of Jackson and Willem. Books like Yale’s new survey, and shows like Hauser, Wirth & Schimmel’s recent *Revolution in the Making: Abstract Sculpture by Women* function almost as correctives, acknowledging female-identified artists as important and influential too. Maybe that ongoing preoccupation with correcting makes us less primed to notice when the women are dominating in the present.

It was an L.A. gallerist who first pointed out to me the “badass lady painters” working in Los Angeles. right now. “Something’s going on with that,” he said, adding that he was giving me a scoop, which he was. As soon as their badassery had been singled out, I couldn’t help seeing Sarah Cain, Allison Miller, Laura Owens, Rebecca Morris, and Dianna Molzan as a cohesive group, female artists whose coexistence in the same region is consequential rather than coincidental. Because they’re based in Los Angeles, and tied together by an aesthetic attitude, they remind me of The Cool School posse from Los Angeles’ midcentury heyday—Irwin, Moses, Bell, Altoon, et al.—studio rats united by a moment and a certain spirit. The Cool School, though, is an all-male frame of reference, so maybe it’s better to adhere to no frame.

Born between 1969 and 1979, all of these female L.A. painters have self-possessed, un-heroic approaches to mark making, mixed with quiet rebelliousness and full-on dedication. The work reads as easygoing, but that’s deceptive. Leaving things unfinished or loosely formed on purpose often seems easy or nonchalant even if it’s really something else, such as deep aversion to hierarchy (aka patriarchy). And being routinely, methodologically breezy undermines stereotypes of feminine flightiness so effectively, it’s hard in the moment to remember they exist.

These painters have crossed paths and exhibited together in piecemeal—Cain and Morris in a two-person Chinatown show in 2009, Owens and Morris appearing in the 2014 Whitney Biennial, Cain and Miller in a show in a former bank in 2013, Molzan, Cain and Owens all curated into *Variations: Conversations in Abstraction* at LACMA in 2014, and so on—but no curator has ever invited them all to show together at once.

When I imagine them shown together, I see the exhibition clearly: Sarah Cain’s *Supreme Being*, massive and bordered in gold leaf, hangs on a wall that thankfully isn’t white. It’s cracked, stained concrete, not at all pristine. In Cain’s painting, loose pink and gray graffiti-like marks appear above the gold leaf and then, suspended on top of the graffiti, is a frame of painted stripes lined with cut-out fringes along the bottom. Cain made this in 2009, and it hangs a few generous feet away from Allison Miller’s *Hour*(2015), in which blue and red half-moons appear on a light pink surface that has been punctured with holes. The half-moons, which look like watermelon slices or disoriented rainbows, line up at regular intervals until, abruptly, the pattern stops and fades into an expanse of white interrupted only by a very light pink circle. Miller’s painting, while significantly smaller than Cain’s, holds its own. On the opposite wall is a new untitled painting by Laura Owens, impasto swooshes of teal, green, blue, purple and red overlaying a cartoon image that includes a sheep. Next comes *Untitled (#04-13)* (2013) by Rebecca Morris, an army green circle broken by geometric incisions, hovering casually above lots of black specks. Then there’s *Untitled* (2009) by Dianna Molzan, a hazy wash and splotches of color on linen that doesn’t stretch all the way to the bottom of the frame. Painterliness in all the work is intermittent, a choice rather than a methodology. Abstraction too is a functional preference rather than a rule; recognizable imagery does appear occasionally.

The artists have no qualms about taking up space, though doing so does not read as an aim in itself. Their lack of ambivalence and disinterest in outright expressionism means they’re not really aligned with the Provisional Painting Raphael Rubinstein outlined in 2009, (1) and only peripherally with gestures of refusal and Ab-Ex reliant “fakery” Mark Godfrey described in a 2014 essay (in which he actually did discuss Owens). (2)

Other female L.A. painters are clear kindred spirits, though they aren't in my imagined exhibition for reasons related to imagery and painterly mannerisms: Alex Olson, Mari Eastman, Monique Van Gendersen, Caitlin Lonegan, and Mary Weatherford. Fewer men working right now would fit as easily in. Bart Exposito might be a vague kindred, as might New York-based Zak Prekop, or Matt Connors. This gender divide is likely circumstantial, the result of historically different relationships to power. Curator Helen Molesworth tried to locate such a different relationship in an essay on New York painter Amy Sillman in which she discussed unknowability as a feminist virtue, a reaction against authority and mastery. (3) Abstraction has been described as "unknowable" before (in terms of all-black canvases, or seeking out the unperceivable), but here, in the context of feminist mark-making, "unknowable" has a more pragmatic use. A gesture that isn't predetermined is less likely to adhere to already established patterns and expectations.

In a 2013 *Artforum* interview, Laura Owens pondered what it meant to inhabit her gesture completely. "Isn't it interesting that a male orgasm has a DNA imprint that will replicate itself over and over again, reinforcing itself the way language or naming might," she mused, "but the female orgasm has no use, no mark, no locatability? It can't even be located in time. [...] I want to think about how that can be the model for a new gesture." She added, "That sounds really gendered, but it's not—" (4) This new gesture, she tried to explain, would be distanced from the signature and narrative of the artist, more about the experience of the process and object, for artist and viewer. Her version of process art sounded less like Robert Morris' "means over ends" approach, more like Eva Hesse's desire to push against "singleness of purpose" in favor of something less goal-oriented, "to achieve by not achieving." (5)

Sarah Cain also talked about avoiding goals in a 2013 interview with MOCAtv, in which she grappled with gender. "I've been owning up to the super femme idea recently and going really big with femininity," Cain said, "which is about a lot of things, but I think it's also a way of processing what it means to be a woman, what power means." She explained that she would enter a zone, processing femininity via her manipulation of materials and generating an instinctive sort of language for the work that might seem "really dumb" at first, to viewers and even to her. The work behind her in the studio as she spoke included a large amount of pink and purple, strips of canvas bunched up like ribbon and applied like a frame to the edges of a finished painting. These girly markers were messy, divorced from "prettiness," and they took on an intuitive fierceness that only seemed intentional because it was so consistent. "If I know what I'm doing, or if I know what the painting's going to look like," she continued, "there's really no point in doing it." (6) Molzan, Miller and Morris agree that predetermination can be a hindrance.

"[T]here has to be a degree of the unknown for me to proceed with a painting or body of work, or else it is just execution without discovery," said Molzan in 2011. (7) Space for discovery means unexpected results, Miller said in 2011: "Since there is no real planning involved in the making of the paintings, they are as much a surprise to me as to anybody looking at them." (8) Morris spoke in 2013 about how the process of painting involves translating what one wants internally into an external form, and how sometimes, when they emerge, her wants aren't what she expected. "I don't like planning too much in advance," she said, "because I want to be fully open to that moment—to that transition from the inside to its manifestation in the outside world." (9)

The results of this unplanned-ness, unsurprisingly, differ across all five artists' work. The quietness of Miller's intuitive language can't be mistaken for Owens' assertiveness, or for Cain's femme-informed graffiti. But still, choices appear contingent, made in relation to each other (i.e., unplanned). Artist Penny Slinger, a radical to the core, has talked about how frustrating she found 1970s feminism—her peers trying to take for themselves the recognition they hadn't had, rather than rethinking success and power altogether. Not planning on purpose is a way to be uncertain without being insecure. It's thus not surprising that female artists, expected to be less confident and thus better situated to rearrange what confidence looks like, would front this particular approach. And in Los Angeles, where there's historically less pressure to conform to historical and academic models, they perhaps have the physical and psychological room they need.

In the exhibition I've imagined, the artists' work together communicates a pulse and sense of place, one that's influenced by sprawl, empty lots, and imperfections. It evokes an intensity that isn't territorial, a West Coast punkishness. But it seems annoyingly linear to call these artists a school and give it a name. The work resists that way of thinking and categorizing and thrives on its own disinterest in formal pronouncements. At the same time, recognizing the overlaps gives the work a collective force, mapping the way that key facets of its sensibility have dispersed across a region. Dispersal means greater influence; you can't deflate a canon singlehandedly.

- (1) Rubinstein, Raphael, "Provisional Painting," *Art in America*, May 2009.
- (2) Godfrey, Mark, "Statements of Intent," *Artforum*, May 2014.
- (3) Molesworth, Helen, *Amy Sillman: One Lump or Two*. New York: Pressel, 2013.
- (4) Lehrer-Graiwer, Sarah, "Optical Drive: Sarah Lehrer- Graiwer Talks to Laura Owens," *Artforum*, February 2013.
- (5) Hesse, Eva, "untitled statement," *Art in Process IV*. Finch College, 1969.
- (6) "Sarah Cain: The Artist's Studio," MOCAtv, October 18, 2013.
- (7) Hainley, Bruce, "Dianna Molzan," *Kaleidoscope*, Winter 2011.
- (8) Lupo, Nancy, "Interview with Allison Miller," *Artslant.com*, 2011.
- (9) Cahill, Zachary, "Rebecca Morris: 500 Words," *Artforum.com*, September 6, 2013.