

HYPERALLERGIC

Sonia Gechtoff Finally Gets Her Due

Gechtoff's work did not fit into any of the New York art world's narratives of progressive art. It is time we look closer at what this marvelous artist achieved.



Sonia Gechtoff, "Celestial Red" (1994), acrylic on canvas, 77 3/4 x 78 inches (photo by Guang Xu, image courtesy the artist and 55 Walker, New York)

Sonia Gechtoff was part of the Abstract Expressionist flowering that took place in the Bay Area between the late 1940s and late '50s, along with Jay DeFeo and Deborah Remington. One of the centers of this convulsive outburst was Clyfford Still, who taught at the California School of the Arts (1946–50). Gechtoff, who moved to San Francisco from Philadelphia in 1951, was inspired by Still's work to begin painting with a palette knife. Still's solemn, moody abstractions enabled Gechtoff to shed her previous indebtedness to Ben Shahn's socialist realist style and concerns.

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I first became aware of Gechtoff when I saw the exhibition *Sonia Gechtoff: The Ferus Years* at the now-defunct gallery NyeHaus (October 29–December 17, 2011), which was accompanied by a catalogue with an informative interview conducted by Marshall N. Price. Although Gechtoff was in important shows of her era, including *Younger American Painters* at the Guggenheim Museum (May 12–July 25, 1954), curated by James Johnson Sweeney, she was overlooked for years in historical surveys of Abstract Expressionism and 1950s Bay Area art, even though her credentials are impeccable. In 1957, she was the opening show at the legendary Ferus Gallery. According to Price, “Sonia’s primary innovation was her work with the palette knife — making sharp, slashing strokes of paint. [...] This was later adopted by Jay DeFeo.” Gechtoff and her husband, painter Jim Kelly, lived next door to DeFeo at 2322 Fillmore, where the latter began “the Rose” in 1958.

All of this began to change when Gechtoff was included in the landmark exhibition *Women of Abstract Expressionism* at the Denver Art Museum (June 12–September 25, 2016), curated by Gwen Chanzit. This helped put her on the map. (DeFeo and Remington were also in the show.) What did not happen, and still needs to, is a close examination of the arc of Gechtoff's career.



Installation view of *Sonia Gechtoff* at 55 Walker, New York, 2022 (image courtesy the artist and 55 Walker, New York, photography by Kunning Huang)



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In 1959, three years after the death of Jackson Pollock, and as the New York art world was swiftly shifting its attention to Pop art, Minimalism, and Color Field painting, Gechtoff and Kelly moved to New York. While her work would never again generate the excitement it did when she was living in California, this lack of a response did not deter her — as convincingly demonstrated by the survey exhibition *Sonia Gechtoff* at 55 Walker (Bortolami Gallery, kaufmann repetto, and Andrew Kreps Gallery).

Consisting of 21 paintings and works on paper made between 1958 and 2017, a span of nearly half a century, the exhibition marks an important step in the art world's consideration of Gechtoff. From relying on a palette knife to using acrylic and graphite in the same painting, as well as incorporating diverse sources within a collage-like single painting (architecture, landscape, and flames and wave-like forms), Gechtoff confidently pushed her art into new realms, inspired by collages she made in 1962 and '63, none of which are in the exhibition. At the same time, working in New York under the sign of pure painting and later the “death of painting,” it is easy to understand why she was marginalized. Her work did not fit into any of the New York art world's narratives of progressive art. The fact that drawing was a serious part of her practice and that she did not work on a monumental scale probably did not help her either. Nor did it help that she and her husband had two children.

Of the 21 works in the exhibition, 19 were made between 1984 and 2017, the year before she died. Eight of these works, done in acrylic and graphite on paper, are no bigger than 16 1/2 x 15 3/4 inches. Made when the art world was enthralled with Neo-expressionism, these and other late works make it clear that Gechtoff had no down periods. From the 1980s on, she combined figural allusions to landscape and architecture with abstract passages that evoke convulsive change, such as crashing waves and roiling skies. She seems preoccupied with time passing in both the daily sense and the larger, cosmic sense.



Sonia Gechtoff, "Hiroshige Revisited" (1988), acrylic and graphite on canvas, 58 1/4 x 40 1/2 inches
(photo by Guang Xu, image courtesy the artist and 55 Walker, New York)

In the collage-like acrylic and graphite painting "Hiroshige Revisited" (1988), Gechtoff divides the vertical picture plane horizontally. In the upper area on the horizon line, which is framed on both sides by flat column-like forms, she uses blue and violet to depict Mount Fuji's famous symmetrical cone, against a dark red sky with red storm clouds. Below the horizon line is a red tongue-like shape. Is this meant to be read as lava? Is it a reference to the dormant volcano's early history? What are we to make of the blue columns on each side of the mountains, partially overlapping Mount Fuji on the left side? How are we to read the green punctuated by vertical bands drawn in pencil?



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In “Celestial Red” (1994), Gechtoff has depicted a molten red and pink arc in the painting’s upper quarter, rising above a large, fiery, dark red rectangle. A large black circle is inset into the rectangle, surrounded by a band whose colors echo the arc, inflected with blues and violets. Within the circle are eight orbs in orange, violet, or blue. The black circle becomes a portal, an opening that evokes another dimension or world that we cannot glimpse.

What do the eight orbs signify? What does the partially obscured red geometric form within the black circle mean? The different reds convey molten heat, which seems to be one of Gechtoff’s preoccupations. Without resorting to arbitrary juxtapositions, her paintings resist reductive readings. That resistance can be read as a metaphor. Like DeFeo and Remington, Gechtoff attained a resonant, independent vision that, in her case, spans seven decades. It is time we look closer at what this marvelous artist achieved.