

University of Michigan Museum Showcases Two Generations of Women Minimalists

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Published 12:04 a.m. ET Jan. 4, 2015



(Photo: U-M Museum of Art)

"The only way for a woman, as for a man, to find herself, to know herself as a person, is by creative work of her own."

Betty Friedan wrote those words in "The Feminine Mystique" just over a half-century ago in 1963. Friedan wasn't an art critic, but it's revealing that at the very moment her landmark book was published, a number of gifted and original women painters were learning just how difficult it could be to do their own creative work in a male-dominated art world, where gender, politics and the critical tide were all stacked against them.

Those issues are front and center in "Reductive Minimalism: Women Artists in Dialogue, 1960-2014," a tightly focused, lucid and drop-dead gorgeous exhibition at the University of Michigan Museum of Art. Organized by guest curator Erica Barrish, the show connects the dots between nine often-neglected, pioneering women artists who came of age in the first flush of minimalism and nine contemporary painters who stand on the shoulders of their predecessors.

The result is an imaginative exhibition that opens a new window on an old subject. Barrish offers smart, close-readings of the paintings while placing them in a historical context that amplifies their meaning and shines a spotlight on some overlooked artists who deserve the push — and she does it without the fog of *au courant* theory or jargon.

All of the artists in the show work under the umbrella of minimalism: abstract art of simplified forms, pure geometry and restrained expression. Spaciously installed, the exhibition progresses two by two, as Barrish pairs works by older and younger artists who share common formal attributes: Agnes Martin and Tauba Auerbach each jump off from grid structures and patterns. Anne Truitt and Ann Pibal operate in a world of private symbols that imply narrative. Sally Hazelet Drummond and Shirazeh Houshiary create monochromatic fields of hypnotic, mystical power.

As Barrish argues in her catalog essay, the first generation of women minimalist artists — Martin, Truitt, Drummond, Jo Baer, Eleanore Mikus, Dorothea Rockburne, Mary Heilmann, Mary Corse, Suzan Frecon — was at a competitive disadvantage. On the one hand, the women's commitment to painting was seen as old-fashioned in relation to male sculptors like Carl Andre and Donald Judd, who defined the cutting edge. On the other, these women eschewed overt feminist ideology and themes that were markers of "seriousness" in the eyes of curators, critics and some artists.

Instead, they pursued an art of quiet, often intimate personal expression that lacked the aggressiveness of form and rhetoric associated with the art made by their male counterparts. The pointillist brush strokes in Drummond's shimmering "Presence of the Heart" (1962), the lush painterly quality of Rockburne's "Fire Engine Red" (1967) and the seductive shapes and pastels of Truitt's painted wood sculpture "Sandcastle" (1963) all reveal an

expressive lyricism dismissed at the time as self-indulgent and feminine.

Thankfully, times have changed. Artists today operate in a far more open, pluralist and egalitarian age in which prejudices against women, emotionalism and the very act of painting have all subsided (though still remain in pockets). The newer painters represented here — who also include Tomma Abts, Sam Moyer, Kate Shepherd, Alex Olson, Svenja Deininger and R.H. Quaytman — carry the torch forward with an exhilarating sense of freedom and confidence.

The surface of Olson's "Shell" (2011) is a subtle wash of grayish and white tones with tactile strokes and rhythms that create a kind of walking-on-eggshell balance of strength and fragility. It's paired with Heilmann's "Orbit" (1978), whose equally nuanced use of painterly imperfection suggests, like Olson's work, an enigmatic personal narrative.



Dorothea Rockburne's "Fire Engine Red" (1967, wrinkle finish oil paint on aluminum), on view at the U-M Museum of Art. (Photo: U-M Museum of Art)

Pibal's "FXMT" (2013), a meticulously painted small-scale abstraction, uses angled lines, bars, tiny rectangles and savvy color to create a painting in which the elements appear to interact and tell a story in a language beyond words. Pibal, like all of the women in "Reductive Minimalism," knows who she is in a way that Friedan would have recognized. The proof is right there on the canvas.