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CRITIC'S PICKS

Alice Trumbull Mason, Alone and With Friends

A poignant gallery show of the artist's "Shutter Paintings" is paired with an exceptional Whitney exhibition of the forward-looking prints that she and her contemporaries made in days gone by.

By **Roberta Smith**
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The Saffron Pitch, 1963, oil on canvas, 36 x 30 in.

One of the many new frontiers in art history today is abstract art by women. It's not possible to say for sure, but I suspect we barely know what we don't know. This thought has hit me often in the last few years, usually in big, jolting museum exhibitions.

But right now, that jolt reverberates in two small overlapping shows. The Whitney Museum's "Labyrinth of Forms: Women and Abstraction, 1930-1950" is shining light on prints and drawings in a little seen but carefully tended corner of the permanent collection. Prominent among them are three outstanding prints by the American abstractionist Alice Trumbull Mason (1904-1971). Her presence is underscored by six prints by Mason's contemporaries given in 1977 to the museum in her honor by her daughter and son-in-law, the painters Emily Mason and Wolf Kahn.

Meanwhile, in nearby Chelsea, Washburn Gallery has mounted "Alice Trumbull Mason: Shutter Paintings," a series of 15 vertically divided canvases that Mason painted from 1960 to 1966, after the death of her beloved son sent her into a spiral of grief and intermittent drinking that shortened her life. Each show has an intensity and emotional resonance that invites close, careful looking.

There are no slackers among the 33 works at the Whitney. They have been carefully selected and installed by Sarah Humphreville, a senior curatorial assistant who has written an interesting online essay. Her thesis is that American abstraction had some of its roots in Surrealist-inclined graphic works made by women during the 1930s and '40s who were mostly overshadowed by the critical and market triumph of Abstract Expressionism starting around 1950, and consequently often forgotten. You'll find the unfamiliar names to prove it: Dorr Bothwell ("Corsica," a dark, brooding silk screen from 1950), Agnes Lyall (an untitled 1937 lithograph of a nearly single line that quietly morphs into a tilted fusion of chair, table, doorway and

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scraggly plant) and Sue Fuller (“Lancelot and Guinevere,” a dense, suggestive soft-ground etching with stencil and embossing in red, black and white from 1944).

But whether you know the artist or not, nearly everything comes as a refreshing surprise: be it a prescient 1938 oil-on-paper of scattered shards of color by Lee Krasner; an untitled fusion of flesh and machine as voluptuous abstraction in an exquisite graphite drawing by Elaine de Kooning from around 1947; and from around 1942 a fabulous collage of bright colors and patterns centering, possibly, on a red demon by Charmion von Wiegand, who usually favored grids. Some of these women stopped working or slowed down because of needy or unhelpful artist-mates, but here their confidence, optimism and talent are electric.

At Washburn, Mason’s Shutter Paintings reflect her love of geometry, surface and color, treated as usual with an affecting tenderness. The configurations here are even more emotional: thin, greatly elongated and irregular vertical stripes of color — in an array of sharp yellows, soft grays and sudden brown and blacks. Rarely at rest, the stripes taper and expand, intruding upon and changing their neighbors, setting off rhythmic pressures horizontally.



Magnitude of Memory, 1962, oil on canvas, 36 x 26 in.

It takes a minute to see that the most active stripes are actually attenuated diamonds and triangles, whose sharp, sometimes vanishing tips ignite seeming flashes of light or dark. There’s a kind of pain underlying some of these pictures. They differ from the carefree geometries of much 1960s abstraction the same way the emotionally charged clumsiness of the Early Renaissance contrasted with the perspectival ebullience of the High.

Extended over greater distances than usual, Mason’s edges all wobble noticeably, which adds to the air of instability and fragility, intimating the effects of aging and drinking perhaps but also grief about the tenuous miracle of life. It was something of which she was by then painfully aware. The Shutter Paintings may also be Mason’s reaction to the 1960s — at once for and against — and one more aspect of her greatness.

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