

WASHBURN



Anne Ryan at Washburn Gallery

By Jonathan Goodman, February 2022

Ryan's remarkable ability to generate genuine emotion from the abstract is made clear in this exhibition.



Untitled (no. 458), c. 1948-54, Collage, 5 x 3 7/8 in.

Born in 1887 in Hoboken, New Jersey, Anne Ryan took a strong interest in poetry for much of her life—in 1925, she published a book of lyrics: *Lost Hills*. In 1931, she moved to Majorica, but had to return to New York in the face of the Depression. Later, she began making paintings, studying printmaking with Stanley William Hayter and his printmaking atelier in New York. But perhaps the decisive moment of her artistic life occurred in 1948, when she saw a show of collages by Kurt Schwitters. Inspired by his efforts, Ryan at once began working on her own collages, and for the next six years, until her death, she produced a remarkable body of work: small assemblages, composed of bits and pieces of random materials, that are notable for their lyric beauty. Essentially a poet working in a visual medium, Ryan offers her audience an extended experience in a late modernist esthetic. Her entirely abstract work is personal even as it communicates a thoroughly nonobjective point of view. The outstanding show of her work at Washburn Gallery makes it clear that, from the start, Ryan was a master of the understated effect. Her collages, not exactly a series, are sequences aligned in their pursuit of a beauty free of rhetoric, usually dependent on the inherent lyricism of her materials.

In *Untitled No. 458*—all the works, done between 1948 and 1954, cannot be specifically dated—a black oval occurs against a rectangle of textured white paper. Within the black oval are found several abstract shapes: a rough white parallelogram whose right edge bulges outward, its straight lines coming to a point. Within the white form are three abstract shapes: on the left, two columns in dark red, next to which is a simple black rectangle. To the rectangle's right is a thin yellow sliver, much like a crescent moon. The gentle tension between organic and rectilinear shapes is deeply enjoyable, as are the variable textures of the work's components, always a strength of the artist. Another untitled work (no, 12087) consists of a crinkled white paper on top of which sits a smaller rectangular shape, made by squares, and on the right, rectangles, varying in color—red, yellow, mauve, tan, and dark green. Some slight wrinkling can be found in these shapes. Throughout Ryan's work, despite its resolute abstraction, there is the feeling of closeness and intimacy. Some of that has to do with the size of the artist's collages, which are small. But there is something else too: a bias in favor of subtlety and reticence, which amounts to a warm invitation to study the work.

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Untitled, c. 1948-54, Collage, 7 x 5 1/8 in.

In the collage numbered 416, the orientation is horizontal rather than vertical. Different pieces of paper, often wrinkled and muted in color (mostly gray, white, and tan), fit against each other and slightly overlap. In the upper right is a jaggedly edged piece of paper, covered with capital letters that are upside-down. Despite the humble materials used, the complexity of the surface generates a feeling much larger than the sum of its descriptions. As always, Ryan uses texture to great effect, with both rippling and dimples animating a quietly hued surface. In *Untitled (No. 643)*, the background is a slate blue, on top of which are a particularly successful arrangement of shapes: two very rough spherical forms with angled straight yellow lines; between the spheres are two thin, light-colored poles, with a white pole arising from a white square in the middle. On the top half of the composition are yellow and black curving elements. On the right side two verticals, one brownish and one whitish, rest on top of the curvilinear shapes. The composition, in its organic intricacies, communicates a balance and measure nearly monumental in feeling, despite its small size.



Untitled (no. 416), c. 1948-54, Collage, 4 1/2 x 6 5/8 in.

Ryan's remarkable ability to generate genuine emotion from the abstract is made clear in this exhibition. Her production seems to belong to a very different time, when it was possible for artists to concentrate on formal questions alone. Now that political awareness has become an important element of fine art, Ryan's lyric discoveries may seem off the point. But that is quite untrue. Her work occurs at a very high level, offering us the pure enjoyment of form. At the time she made these collages she was living in New York during the height of Abstract Expressionism. We duly note the connection, but there is something restrained in the collages not easily found in other work of the time. Her quiet, yet highly accomplished output makes it clear that there is always room for her understated, but inspired approach, which combines elements of abstract formalism with poetic play. Although generations have passed since the last of her work was made, the collages hold their own in lyric ambience.

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