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TWO COATS OF PAINT

Award-winning NYC blogazine, primarily about painting

Anne Ryan's Small World

by Laurie Fendrich, February 24, 2022



Untitled (no. 643), c. 1948-54, collage, 7 x 6 5/8 in.

The poet and artist Anne Ryan (1889–1954) accomplished the rare feat of making precious art – art that’s small, perfectly executed, and pretty – that is not the least bit treacly or sentimental. Drawn to both abstraction and surrealism, Ryan was a quiet player in the avant-garde visual art circles of the 1940s, attracting less attention than women artists like Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning, and Grace Hartigan. Today she’s best known for her small collages, which she began after having a eureka moment at a Kurt Schwitters collage exhibition at the Rose Fried Gallery in New York in 1948. She immediately went home and started making her own collages out of her household debris – torn bits of paper, wrinkled candy wrappers, pieces of fabric, lace, and threads. Hers was a kind of feminine – “domestic” is a better adjective – version of Schwitters’ work.



Untitled (no. 184), c. 1948-54, collage, 5 x 3 3/4 in.



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

Ryan made over 400 collages during the last six years of her life, 29 of which are on view at Washburn Gallery through April 2. Honoring their abstract nature, the artist assigned them numbers rather than titles. They are always small, and some are downright tiny – refreshing in a time when Brobdingnagian art hogs so much attention. They would have seemed even smaller when she made them, for they were up against large-scale Abstract Expressionist paintings. The contest between small and large is perpetual, but as Tom Nozkowski once told me, a painter’s main task is to resolve complex problems of color and composition and working large only muddles things.

Ryan was born in Hoboken in 1889 to comfortable but hardly wealthy Irish-American parents. She was orphaned at 13 and attended a convent school in New Jersey through her junior year in college. In 1911, she married William McFadden, a lawyer; they had fraternal twins (a boy and a girl) in 1912 and a second son in 1919. Evidently unsatisfied with the life of a New Jersey housewife, in 1920 she began hanging out with edgy poets and artists in Greenwich Village. In the twenties, she published a book of poems and wrote a novel. Predictably, given the mores of the time, her marriage with McFadden ended.

In the thirties, Ryan ventured abroad, living in Majorca and then Paris, accompanied by at least one child for part of the time. After returning stateside, she again found a place in New York among writers and artists. She painted her first picture in 1938, when she was almost 50 years old, and began making drawings, etchings and woodblock prints as well. These were shown at several galleries, but her most important solo exhibition, at the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1950, consisted entirely of collages. In the now iconic Ninth Street

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Show in 1951, one of her larger collages was exhibited. Her daughter Elizabeth McFadden aptly cast her mother as “part Victorian” (she sewed all her clothes) and “part modern woman” (she lived much of her life as a single mother in Greenwich Village).



Untitled (no. 328), c. 1948-54, collage, 6 3/4 x 6 3/4 in.

Historically, collages have been small. In modern art, they began with Picasso and Braque’s cutting-and-pasting frenzy – an iconoclastic activity that incorporated the real stuff of quotidian Parisian life into art. (Even considered within the context of the Cubist revolution, the maneuver was shocking.) Making enormous collages would have been practically impossible, not to mention beside the point. A half-century later, Ryan’s doll-sized collages – the smallest, *Untitled No. 167*, is about 4 x 5 inches – made theirs seem gigantic. We have to look closely to appreciate the precision with which Ryan laid out every component and shape and color. There are long threads, stitches holding things together, threaded edges of frayed fabrics, wrinkled and flattened papers, and various painted hues. And there’s the constancy of the foundation onto which everything is glued – bumpy handmade paper, often with traces of color, made by Douglas Morse Howell, the favorite papermaker of many Abstract Expressionists including Ryan’s friend Jackson Pollock.



Untitled (no. 264), c. 1948-54, collage, 7 5/16 x 6 3/8 in.



Untitled (no. 562), c. 1948-54, collage, 7 1/16 x 6 3/4 in.

Ryan worked with inherently fragile materials that she ripped, cut, tore, or crinkled, but once glued down they became locked into place. I suspect that no matter how deft she was with her fingers, she used tweezers to cajole her tiny components into holding their positions in her small visual dramas. Her labor must have been like that of an eye surgeon manipulating thin, vulnerable retinas. Critics John Russell, John Ashbery, Hilton Kramer, Holland Cotter, Eric Gibson, Mark Stevens, Judd Tully, Deborah Solomon, Jonathan Goodman – the list goes on – have over the years marveled at Ryan’s collages. They describe the artist’s affectionate use of ordinary materials, her subtle painted colors and her attention to detail. Most important, they emphasize the strong link between her compact poetry and her compressed collages. At the risk of over-interpreting, I also sense a longing to reassemble pieces of fractured domesticity into something beautiful, on modernist terms. There’s a famous old German proverb that says God lurks in the details – or, alternatively, that the devil lurks there. In Anne Ryan’s collages, both are true.

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