

WASHBURN

HYPERALLERGIC

Reading Anne Ryan's Poetic Collages

By Tim Keane, March 9, 2020



Anne Ryan, "Untitled (No. 562)" (c. 1948-54), collage, 7 1/16 x 6 3/4 inches
(courtesy the Estate of Anne Ryan and Washburn Gallery, New York)

In the annals of postwar New York art, collage artist Anne Ryan is inaccurately described as the prolific poet of the 1920s who gave up verse to make visual art in the 1940s and '50s. It's undeniable that Ryan's visual art — especially her collages — established her prominence in the final two decades of her life, a legacy honored on the 20th anniversary of her death, in 1974, with a solo exhibition at leading American museums.

In these subsequent decades, Ryan's art has been presented in one-person and group shows to laudatory and frequently rave reviews. But in critical terms, her importance as a poet has been decoupled from discussions about her paintings and collages, reinforcing the fallacy that once she took to the studio, she relinquished the imperatives of poetry.

The exhibition *Anne Ryan Collages* at Washburn Gallery has deservedly generated renewed praise for this groundbreaking American abstract artist. But viewed from the vantage point of her vocation as a poet, *Collages* serves an added purpose, undoing the misleading premise that her creative career ought to be bifurcated. As if to emphasize this correction, it includes a never-before-seen poem/artwork by Ryan doubling as an autobiographical commentary that proves — as does this entire enthralling show — that she harnessed visual art as a means for creating poetry through the relatively new, nonverbal idioms of American abstract art.

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Anne Ryan in 1953 (photograph by Wilbur Pippin, courtesy Washburn Gallery, New York)

Of course, the biographical record always reflected Ryan's interest in collage as an extension of that poetic vocation, not a break with it. And as Joan Washburn herself reminded me during my recent visit, Ryan, after publishing a widely reviewed book of poetry called *Lost Hills* (1925), never ceased writing poetry throughout her life.

Born in Newark in 1889, she began writing poetry and fiction after she emerged from an unhappy marriage and found herself living in Greenwich Village alongside actors, fellow writers, and visual artists. Following a short lived Depression-era move to Majorca, Spain, Ryan, who was tasked with raising and supporting three young children, opened a restaurant on 8th Street and in the war years began associations with influential peers in the visual arts. These included the artist Hans Hoffmann, a neighbor and early supporter, and the British printmaker Stanley William Hayer, who invited her to join the community in his exiled European Atelier 17, where she began to make woodcuts and engravings.

As she worked on poetry and painting, her road-to-Damascus moment is purported to have occurred at a 1948 exhibition of Kurt Schwitters collages at New York's Fried Gallery; instantaneously, she took to that art form.

The 25 collages at Washburn invite the visitor to see them — and *read* them. Their equidistant positioning on the gallery walls creates the illusion of reading and then turning consecutive pages in a poetry collection. Many are framed by Ryan within wide margins consisting of variable beiges and whites. The collages also immediately call attention to their essence as gracefully manipulated and transposed papers of various types — colored, painted, creased, beveled, frayed, deckle-edged — fusing abstract art to writing's etymological roots in text, textile, and *textura* — “that which is woven.”

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Anne Ryan, "Untitled (no. 179)" (c. 1948-54), collage, 8 7/8 x 7 3/8 inches
(courtesy the Estate of Anne Ryan and Washburn Gallery, New York)

Just as Ryan's lyrics in *Lost Hills* track self-possessed insights and emotional nuance through a sensitized and sharp deployment of early 20th-century American vernaculars, these collages forge nonfigurative alphabets and plaited calligraphy to comparably expressive and restrained ends. This poetic vocabulary is augmented by cast-off and repurposed midcentury American signifiers like candy wrappers, string and embroidery, ticket stubs, newsprint, and fabric swatches. Ryan's Modernist hieroglyphics and chromatic phonemes are arranged horizontally, vertically, elliptically, often layered upon or juxtaposed one to the other. There is an internal pictographic grammar with geometric clauses and appositional shapes that relate syntactically, much like descriptors, modifiers, indirect metaphors, and synecdoche in the spare economy of a poem's discourse.

The collages' understated alterations in color, tone, and granularity produce visible correspondences to subliminal and melancholic states, approximating psychological epiphanies through that refined, calibrated imagery. In this regard, these rigorously compressed collages call to mind the attenuated, philosophically charged verse of American poets like Emily Dickinson and H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) as much as they do the energies of Cubists and Abstract Expressionists.

In contrast to the often explosive and colossally scaled canvases of her era, Ryan's small collages present meaning patiently and discreetly, drawing on crisp, semi-overlapping cut-outs; they seduce or hypnotize the gaze through careful metrical arrangements, accentuated and complemented by patterned gaps that show the underlying paint and the warp-and-weave of their textile supports. These darker toned negative spaces serve as the graphic equivalencies to the caesurae and enjambments that orchestrate pauses, intervals, line breaks, and verse continuations within a printed poem.

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Anne Ryan, "Untitled (no. 544)" (1951), collage, 13 x 16 1/4 inches
(courtesy the Estate of Anne Ryan and Washburn Gallery, New York)

Recurring motifs appear and morph into new configurations from picture to picture, an incremental sway that parallels how lyrical poetry trails imagery and metaphors and how a line of verse builds its evolving force by unlocking the sonic plasticity that inhabits vowels, consonants, and syllables. If there's a visual corollary to literary alliteration and assonance, it lurks in these collages' jagged curves, tapered points, pitched borders, and semi-rounded declensions.

Ryan was far from the only figure in the postwar New York arts scene to infuse into visual art the strategies of writing poetry, and vice versa. But she may well have been the first American pioneer to do it this seamlessly and unselfconsciously. That preeminence still needs to be foregrounded in the art historical record, the better to appreciate how Ryan's body of work helped to usher in a New York-based era of experimentation characterized by cross-pollination between painting and poetry, a current that runs through the careers of painters Cy Twombly, Joan Mitchell, and George Schneeman, poets Barbara Guest, Frank O'Hara, and Ed Sanders, and poet and collage artist Joe Brainard, among many others. The world-renowned New York poet John Ashbery was a collector and enthusiast of Ryan's art and, like her, he too later took to making collage art.

Anne Ryan Collages spotlights this subversive cultural forerunner, an artist who sanctioned a new mysterious marriage between American poetry and abstraction. Ryan's inconspicuous audacity proves that the quietly and intensely personal is always avant-garde.

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