

RICHARD SALTOUN

PRESS RELEASE

Outside, looking in
Richard Saltoun Gallery London
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Richard Saltoun Gallery is pleased to present *Outside, looking in*, a group exhibition celebrating the fundamental role women have played in the evolution of abstract art. The title references how female abstractionists have historically been eclipsed by their male counterparts and left out of dominant discourse. Including photography, painting, textile, and ceramics from 1960 to the present day, *Outside, looking in* offers a foray into the practice of twelve international female artists – some working exclusively with abstraction – and the circumstances that too often hindered their recognition.

An entire room is dedicated to the paintings and gilded fabric works of gallery artist **Shelagh Wakely** (1932–2011), a pioneer of installation art and an integral member of the New British Sculpture movement of the 1980s. Wakely's work is imbued with a romantic sensibility towards our surroundings. Nature, fragility, decay, and the transient nature of time are some of the themes that inspire her delicate works. Using atypical, organic materials inclined to weathering and deterioration – like shells, petals, fruit, spices, and silk – and a breadth of artistic mediums, Wakely created magical works that explored the notion of boundaries, edges and divisions and captured the traces of natural processes. Despite a lack of recognition in her own country, Wakely received critical and popular acclaim in Brazil, where she spent a long time working with artist Tunga in the 1990s.

British artist **Romany Eveleigh** (1934–2020) approached abstraction as a contemplative form of mark-making. Borrowing techniques and materials from the world of writing and printing, she developed a practice that stands out for a distinctly minimalist aesthetic. Her painting *Ravenna* (1960–63) was made when the artist had just moved to Rome with her partner, the Italian photographer Anna Baldazzi. Richard

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Saltoun Gallery's solo presentation at Frieze Masters 2022 marked the first exhibition of Eveleigh's work in the UK. On the occasion, Tate acquired one of the artist's works for their collection.

Mozambican artist and political activist **Bertina Lopes** (1924–2012), was one of the first artists to bridge the gap between African and European art. Lopes worked as cultural attaché of the Mozambican Embassy in Rome and worked all her life to bring peace and independence to her home country. Her artistic work is highly political, and it was only after Mozambique was declared independent from the Portuguese colonial rule in 1975 that she turned to abstraction. Her painting *Respiro [Breath]* (1985) is a beautiful example of how she moved away from politically charged figurative paintings to create lively, abstract compositions. Her work is currently on show in Whitechapel's *Action / Gesture / Paint*.

The early practice of **Barbara Levittoux-Świdorska** (1933–2019), one of the most important yet overlooked pioneers of fibre art, focused mostly on paintings. Her *Space III [Przestrzeń III]* (1998) shows how she concentrated on depictions of simple forms with clean, minimalist lines, elements that will characterise also her textile practice.

African-Canadian artist **Jan Wade** (b. 1952) draws on her mixed heritage, African diasporic spiritual practices and Slave Cultures to explore Black postcolonial identity, ethnicity, and spirituality. Using found or readymade objects and recycled materials, Wade creates paintings, textiles, and assemblages that incorporate slogans, religious icons, and pop-culture symbols. On view at the gallery is part of her decade-long abstract embroidery project *Breathe* (2004–2020), which draws on Black Southern quilting and textiles traditions. This haunting piece took on newfound urgency following the words of Eric Garner, "I can't breathe", who was killed by a police officer in New York City in 2014.

Běla Kolářová (1923–2010) and Annegret Soltau were experimental pioneers with abstraction in photography. Kolářová was an influential figure of the Czech avant-garde whose practice focused on the small details and everyday objects often overlooked by others. Between the 1950s and 60s, she began to experiment with camera-less photography, using direct light to capture the images of objects glued onto the sensitive surface of photographic paper, as in *Dripping III* (1961) and *Object of Pressed Glass* (1963).

In the 1970s, German artist **Annegret Soltau** (b.1946) was one of the few women artists to directly manipulate photography negatives to obtain abstract images. She used needles to scratch the negatives and repeated the process until the complete obliteration of the images, taking photographs of the different stages of the process, as in *Sich verlieren (to get lost) I + II* (1986). This technique allowed her a visual representation of themes of personal loss, identity, and transformation, which recur in her practice.

Magda Cordell (1921–2008) was the only female member of the Independent Group (or IG), a post-war British movement out of which originated Pop Art. Cordell, a Hungarian Jew, fled to the UK with her sister to escape the Holocaust, had connections to the world of Continental painting and the community of émigrés artists who gravitated in the orbit of the Hanover Gallery in London. A rare female voice at this time, Cordell's expressive painting explored the female form and was heavily influenced by the Art Brut of continental painters.

Among the artists on view, Joan Snyder, Vivian Suter, and Lynda Benglis are the most widely acknowledged. American sculptor **Lynda Benglis** (b. 1941) was first recognised in the late sixties with her poured latex and foam works. On view is one of her *Bird's Nests*, a monumental ceramic form, painted in bright colours. Benglis' work offered a female counterpart to the male-dominated Process Art and Minimalism movements, one that was concerned with the exploration of physicality and metaphorical and biomorphic shapes.

Fellow American artist **Joan Snyder** (b. 1940) came to prominence in the early 1970s with her gestural and elegant "stroke paintings", which brought elements of chaos and irregularity in the forms of drips, smears, and stains to the grid-like clusters of colours.

After a successful but brief career as a young painter in Basel, Swiss artist **Vivian Suter** (b. 1949) disappeared from the art world. She escaped Switzerland and embarked on a long journey through

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California and Central America, before settling in Panajachel, Guatemala. In her new environment, she continued to paint, and her abstract forms began to engage in a deep and lengthy dialogue with nature. Since 2014 her work has been widely exhibited.

Concluding the display are two works by British artist **Rosa Lee** (1957–2009), richly layered with skeins of paints in wave-like forms that create optical illusions. Part of the Hong Kong diaspora, Lee's sources were both Western, with Bridget Riley and the writings of Jacques Derrida being hugely influential, and Asian, with calligraphic abstraction underpinning her entire practice. Inspired by the American Pattern & Decoration movement, in the 1980s & 90s Lee created a new type of abstraction that used traditionally feminine decorative elements to dismantle the hierarchy of fine art over craft. In doing so, she raised questions about the validity of the modernist conventions and reclaimed the position of women within the history of painting. Sadly, Lee passed away at barely 52 years old, so her burgeoning career was cut short, and her massive influence on the UK's abstract and feminist art isn't as celebrated as it should.

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Image: Romany Eveleigh,
Ravenna, 1960-63 © the Estate
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