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Abstract Expressionists Showcased in MOCA's 'Confronting the Canvas'

By Charlie Patton

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In post-World War II New York, abstract expressionism, sometimes called the New York School, emerged, led by male artists like Jackson Pollock, who made the cover of Time magazine in 1956.

But "the male-centric definition of the movement" was a "myth," argues Jaime DeSimone, the Museum of Contemporary Art Jacksonville's assistant curator of exhibitions.

Pollock's wife, Lee Krasner, was a leading abstract expressionist, as were Helen Frankenthaler, Lee Bontecou, Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell and Anne Truitt, to name just a few.

Abstract expressionism is no longer the dominant American art movement as it was in the 1940s and 1950s. But there are still plenty of abstract expressionists and a lot of them are women.

"Interestingly, a survey of the state of contemporary abstraction that resulted in this exhibition revealed that the artists who appear explicitly engaged in a conversation with this historically male antecedent are primarily female," DeSimone writes in an essay for the catalog of "Confronting the Canvas: Women of Abstraction," a new exhibit at MOCA Jacksonville, which DeSimone curated.

The exhibit "explores the manner in which six contemporary painters appropriate both the physical, dramatic processes and the expressive freedom of direct gesture at the core of action painting, redeploying the now-historic style to boldly advance the abstract painting of our time," DeSimone writes in the catalog.

The six artists, all New York-based women, are Keltie Ferris, Maya Hayuk, Jill Nathanson, Fran O'Neill, Jackie Saccoccio and Anke Weyer. Saccoccio is the inaugural recipient of MOCA Jacksonville's Brooke and Hap Stein Emerging Artist Prize, awarded in March. As part of the prize, MOCA Jacksonville has purchased one of her large abstracts, "Time (Smelt)," for its permanent collection.

All of the six artists are well-known and highly regarded in the art world.

Martha Schwendener wrote last September in the New York Times: "This has been a summer of women warriors: Serena Williams, Angela Merkel, Charlize Theron's character in 'Max Max: Fury

Road,' and Shaye Haver and Kristen Griest, the first women to earn the United States Army's elite Ranger designation. Now, in the final days of summer, painting's warrior women are advancing, and Keltie Ferris is among them."

DeSimone said the women use varying approaches to create their art.

Saccoccio creates "improvisational portraits" which consist of countless layers of oil, mica and varnish. Fran O'Neill uses as many as 50 layers of paint in her work. Hayuk allows her paint to drip down the canvas. Nathanson uses an involved process involving polymers to create her color field paintings. Ferris uses a spray gun in her work. Weyer is the most traditional abstract expressionist in the exhibit.

In the catalog, DeSimone addresses the question of why she wanted to do an exhibit with only female artists.

"Recent discussions in the field question the agendas and value of all-women exhibitions, even though there are many influential precedents," she writes.

In 1945 socialite Peggy Guggenheim organized "The Women," an exhibit that included work by female artists like Janet Sobel, Lee Krasner and Louise Bourgeois, among others.

"Guggenheim provided an opportunity," DeSimone writes " ... 'Confronting the Canvas' strives to do the same for Ferris, Hayuk, Nathanson, O'Neill, Saccoccio and Weyer.