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The Cool Revival: Sonia Gechtoff in San Francisco

by Faye Hirsch

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Tough, straight-talking abstract painter Sonia Gechtoff is currently being rescued from ill-deserved obscurity, swept up in a wave of fervor for Abstract Expressionism sparked by MoMA's more narrowly selected show (up through Apr. 25). Gechtoff, though, got her start on the West Coast. She had the first solo show at Ferus Gallery in L.A. in 1957, was photographed by Hans Namuth, married the brilliant, under-known artist James Kelly and was once so angry she threw her inebriated lover, the Bay Area abstractionist Ernest Briggs, down a flight of stairs.



Gechtoff is one of just two surviving members of the 18 Bay Area artists, angelheaded hipsters all, featured in the splendid exhibition "Bella Pacifica: Bay Area Abstraction 1946–1963, A Symphony in Four Acts," mounted at four venues around the city: Leslie Feely Fine Art, Nyehaus, Franklin Parrasch Gallery (all through Mar. 5) and David Nolan Gallery (through Feb. 5).

Born in 1926 in Philadelphia, Gechtoff arrived in San Francisco in 1951 and found a heady mix of artists, poets and jazz musicians feeding off each others' energy in a scene as lively as anything back East.

Her large oil *Angel* (1960) is featured on flyers and in ads for "Bella Pacifica," and it has pride of place at David Nolan Gallery, which focuses on the 6 Gallery. An artists' cooperative that flourished between 1954 and '57 at 3119 Fillmore Street, the gallery is best known as the place where Allen Ginsberg first read "Howl," on Oct. 7, 1955, initiating a national controversy.

Paintings, collages and assemblages by Gechtoff's contemporaries Hassel Smith, Deborah Remington, Jess, Bruce Conner, Wally Hedrick and Kelly, all of whom showed at 6 Gallery, are on also view at Nolan.

Gechtoff, a terrific raconteur, talked to me about the Bay Area scene, which she remembers in sharp detail.

SLIDESHOW



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Sonia Gechtoff, 1957 / unidentified photographer. Sonia Gechtoff papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.



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Sonia Gechtoff, *The Angel*, 1960.

GECHTOFF: I was just trying to do a painting that was basically abstract, with some figurative suggestion to it. And I had done a couple of paintings like that a little bit earlier. One of them was a kind of self-portrait. I was deliberately introducing the female figure to a lot of things that I was doing at that time.

HIRSCH: And why was that? It was certainly before feminist art.

GECHTOFF: I wasn't the least bit interested in feminist art and I still am not. We were feminist before the feminists came along. I think I was really trying to do forms of self-portraits. The first one that really worked, which was 1955, I called self-portrait. Even when was I was sixteen I had big boobs so I put that in. That's all it was really about, and then I just took off from there.



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Gechtloff in front of *The Angel*, 2011.

HIRSCH: What about that pink? I don't think of pink as a particularly Abstract Expressionist color.

GECHTOFF: It's not as unusual as that. You don't find it in the majority of them, but you find it in a lot of De Kooning, and you find it in those Guston middle period paintings, the abstract ones.



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Ernest Briggs, *Untitled*, Dec. 1958

GECHTOFF: Ernie Briggs turned me on to Clyfford Still. He had been one of Still's students and kept up a correspondence right up to the end of Still's life. I went with him, before Jim. Ernie unfortunately was a big boozier. I was drinking, but not like Ernie. I actually threw him down the steps at my place in San Francisco. He would stay over for a long weekend and Jim, who hardly said a word, and knew I was going with Ernie, would turn up in the morning, while Ernie was still there. We'd be eating breakfast, and Jim would sit there at the table, not saying anything. He made Ernie so uncomfortable. After about two or three visits like that Ernie said, "What the hell does that guy want, coming around?" And I said, "I think he wants me." And I was right; he was just biding his time.



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Hassel Smith, *The Houston Scene*, 1959

Hassel used to host these soirees, I don't know what else to call them, about every other week up in his Potrero Hill house. This was a way of making some extra money that he needed. But he also enjoyed it. Hassel was a big yakker. And would invite any artist who could to come over and spend an evening, and they'd throw out a lot of ideas about painting in general. He would start it and pontificate, and that's what he did beautifully, about all this. And then we would all chime in. And the only two people who absolutely refused to go to any of those were Ernie and Jim. My ex-, and my husband.

Courtesy of David Nolan Gallery, New York.



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Bruce Conner, *Chou Rat*, 1959

My mother [Ethel "Etya" Gechtloff] had East and West Gallery. She came out in 1955, stayed with us briefly, then split and found her own place, down the street, at Union and Fillmore, an empty flower store, cheap rent. And she told me, "I'm going to live in the back, and I'm going to open a gallery." And I said, "You're not going to make any money at that." "I don't care. It looks like a lively scene. Tell me about some of the people." She was more traditional, so I said, "Ma, I don't think you're going to understand this stuff." "Give me a chance," she said. She gave Bruce Conner and Roy de Forest their first solo shows. She gave Hassel Smith a big solo show. She didn't make a lot of money, cause nobody was buying those things, but she got a lot of attention.

Courtesy of David Nolan Gallery, New York.



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James Kelly, *Embarcadero II*, 1956

Jim was older than the others-born one year later than Jackson Pollock, in 1913. He was in the Air Force during the war. Arriving in San Francisco in '50, he went to the California School of Fine Arts on the GI Bill. That school was not like any other. The GIs were more mature guys. They were given space, and they just painted. Once in a while they'd go to a critique, but they didn't have to. Jim got four years of unfettered painting time, which made up for the time he lost in the service.

There was this wonderful atmosphere, and lots of time. He changed his style almost immediately. He was looking for something to free him from his geometric painting, more like Mondrian. He started with the gesture, then he just took off. By the time I met him, he was doing some terrific stuff.



Deborah Remington, *Untitled*, 1953

Deborah was one of the youngest of everybody involved here. She said she was born in 1935 but she was fibbing; she was actually born in 1930. Deborah was a wonderful painter, there's no question about that. Some of the later ones are a little slick. She was a student of Still, and Hassel Smith. The young artists like her were intimidated with Still; they were in awe of him. Hassel Smith was probably one of the most important influences on her. She really tells it like it is in Mary Kerr's new documentary *San Francisco's Wild History Groove* (2010). Wally [Kendrick, married to Jay de Feo] is on there, he's making all kinds of things up, but Deborah is really telling it the way it was. She would have enjoyed all this attention so much. That's the way it goes—she died in April.

Courtesy of David Nolan Gallery, New York.