

ESPHYR SLOBODKINA



THE MANY
WORLDS OF
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LewAllen
Galleries



Looking Backwards (In a Classical Tradition), 1982, oil on gessoed board, 47" x 48"

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April 2–May 1, 2021

Esphyr Slobodkina (1908–2002) played a central role in the early development of abstract art in America. Her elegant abstractions, influenced by Cubism, incorporate subtle—and clever—nods to architecture and the modern technology around her. As abstract art first began to gain acceptance, Slobodkina's art was championed by Peggy Guggenheim, Alfred Barr, Clement Greenberg, and other institutional icons of American art.

Still, Slobodkina's freewheeling artistic energy covered much more ground than her reputation as a trailblazer of American abstract art. In the New York art world, she was known as an unrelenting interdisciplinary, for channeling her creativity in a wide



range of materials and means. She was altogether untethered by the expectations put on her as an innovator of American art.

Over the course of her seven-decade career, Slobodkina crafted works that called upon traditional modes of painting as well as those of modernism and the art of the 'new.' *The Many Worlds of Esphyr Slobodkina* includes examples of Slobodkina's work in painting, collage, textile, and sculptural assemblage from 1928 through her final years in the early 2000s.

Early in her career, Slobodkina was an important advocate for the burgeoning abstract movement.

She was a founding member of the seminal American Abstract Artists, a group that exhibited together to promote abstract art when it was still viewed unfavorably in the United States. Founded in 1936, the American Abstract Artists was active for decades, counting among its members Piet Mondrian, Fernand Leger, Josef Albers, Alice Trumbull Mason, and many others. Slobodkina was the group's first Secretary, later served as its President, and was an exhibiting member of the group throughout her career.

In the New York art world, Slobodkina was known as an unrelenting interdisciplinary, for channeling her creativity in a wide range of materials and means. She was altogether untethered by the expectations put on her as an innovator of American art.

Like many of the others who were part of the American Abstract Artists group, Slobodkina had fled a regime that was institutionally oppressive to modernist artwork (she had immigrated to New York City as a twenty year-old in 1928, uprooted with her family during the Russian Revolution). For these artists, the freedom to experiment and pursue their personal visions was of utmost importance—not only for their artistic pursuits, but also for their livelihoods. In the case of Slobodkina, who viewed the entire world through the prism of art, this was especially true.

This LewAllen exhibition includes a selection of this artist's pivotal early abstract works, such as *Untitled* (1940) and *Purple Abstraction* (1939), as well as concurrent early landscapes and still lifes that demonstrate still other stimulating permutations of Slobodkina's spatial and formal experiments. Of particular note is *Noank Harbor* (1933), an attractive watercolor landscape built from a network of diagonal lines and inflected with Cubism. Throughout her career, Slobodkina channeled scenes and elements of the physical world, but reinterpreted with an engaging, unusual, and playful approach.



Blue and White Hungarian Pitcher, 1963, oil on board, 24" x 18"



Composition in Violets, c. 1940s, oil on board, 9 1/4" x 7 3/4"

By the 1940s, Slobodkina had developed a fully realized abstract style that involved poetic arrangements of flat, curvilinear forms and toned, lyrical shapes—but which still hinted at imagery from the physical world. Often she came across photographs or diagrams of machine or architectural subjects, which she would trace, overlay with other sketches, or otherwise alter their compositions. Channeling her architectural training, Slobodkina planned her art out meticulously, often creating multiple preparatory drawings and studies in pursuit of a carefully ordered harmony.

Her works were the subject of a 1942 one-person exhibition at America's first modern art museum, A.E. Gallatin's Museum of Living Art in New York. The following year, at the recommendation of Alfred Barr, the first Director of the Museum of Modern Art, Peggy Guggenheim included Slobodkina's work at her legendary gallery, Art of this Century, in her landmark *Exhibition by 31 Women*. (Though the exhibition was praised by critics, the art critic for *Time* magazine refused to review the show, saying that there were no first-rate female artists and that women should focus on having babies.)

While she often implemented a subtle, warm palette, her compositions are far from passive, mute, or rigid. Somehow both organic and mechanical, physical and immaterial, Slobodkina's abstract forms all relate and affect each other, perhaps as a metaphor for the integrative qualities of any artwork. In her paintings, nonobjective forms pierce and fold around each other, some grasping with finger-like appendages, others swinging outward on what appear to be door hinges. Some of the shapes in *Monochrome in Yellow* (1950) are fastened together with two discs that resemble screws. Other images are tied together in pulleys, suspensions, or other ambiguously mechanical, Rube Goldbergian arrangements. A 1954 review in *Art Digest* described each of Slobodkina's abstract works as forming 'self-contained cosmos.'

In recent decades, Slobodkina's legacy has continued to come into focus, revealing an extraordinarily creative spirit that fearlessly tested and broke through the boundaries around her. Even though she found great inspiration in Cubism, Futurism, and the collage technique, just as important was her early training as an architect, her teenage work as an assistant

to her seamstress mother, and her penchant for designing and fabricating her own clothing. Though seemingly unrelated, each of these threads disclose her attentiveness to the underlying materials and structures of the physical world and the aesthetic worlds of her own imaginative making.

Just as her abstractions hint at representational space and subject matter, Slobodkina's landscape paintings have a sense of flatness that counterposes their realism. Works like *Gasoline Station* (1933) and *Emily's House* (c. 1950s) instead act as lyrical arrangements of colors and shape, unpreoccupied with dimensional space or recording light and shade. This LewAllen exhibition also includes an early self-portrait, done in 1928, the year that Slobodkina first arrived in the United States. The painting portrays the young artist proudly displaying her colored polka dots with a stony facial expression that reads as confident and unyielding, qualities that were part of the artist's personality.

On view are some large-scale works that serve as culminations of Slobodkina's artistry. Exhibited here for the first time, *Dreams* (1992) is a poignant diptych that recounts a recurring dream, painted in a way that suggests collaged fabric cutouts. In the dream, Slobodkina would find herself walking down a hallway, candle in hand, and passing rooms with various scenes of people. Eventually, she would come to a door and unlock it with a key, but wake up just before she was able to pass through. With a highly

An advantage of Slobodkina's wide-ranging skills, training, and artistic pursuits is that she drew visual insights from aesthetic and conceptual connections across disciplines. Her work in abstraction, landscape, still-life painting, textile, collage, and assemblage sculpture allowed for an extraordinary amount of cross-germination in her images, simultaneously uniting her work and preventing it from getting lost in heady self-seriousness or mannerism. Even her work in children's book illustration—conveying complex ideas through engaging and approachable visuals—may be said to relate and inform the accessibility and depth of her art.

Worth remembering is that avant-garde art does not exist today as it existed in the early 20th century. Today, art making is seen as truly expansive, incorporating anything from the latest developments in digital technology to what may have been previously viewed as craft to more traditional modes of fine art. As Slobodkina refused to bow to these perceived (and sometimes gendered) boundaries, her oeuvre represents an approach to art practice that is truly contemporary.

For an exhibition catalog of a 1984 retrospective exhibition, she wrote, "Frankly, I never gave a damn what people thought.... I always painted, sculpted, constructed, made collages, wall hangings, Serendipographs, Glass Sandwiches, dolls, books, clothes, furniture, and all at the same or approximately the same time."



In a Classical Tradition, 1975, mixed media on fabric, 60" x 108"

engaging and inventive approach to composition, this remarkable work is particularly unusual for its narrative and figural qualities.

Included are also two sweeping textile collages, *Nails* (1978) and *In a Classical Tradition* (1975), which both further animate her geometric style through layers of patterned fabric and found materials. *Fairytale without Words* (c. 1960s) was a favorite of the artist, evoking a peaceful scene that moves between images of animals and trees to purely non-representational fields of warm tones, studded with faux-jewels.

Slobodkina approached all facets of life through the prism of art, drawing out the imaginative possibilities inherent in all things in her world. In particular, Slobodkina's still-lives exemplify her fundamental love for painting, of a humble desire to capture images of everyday objects that she chose to remember. Slobodkina depicts them with care and love for material and design and signifying the joy she found inherent in art making. In these works, Slobodkina reminds us what it means to view the world through the lens of art—it can transform a life.

— Alex Gill

ESPHYR SLOBODKINA (1908-2002)

EDUCATION

1928 National Academy of Design, New York City, NY

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2019-20 *The Many Worlds of Esphyr Slobodkina*, LewAllen Galleries, Santa Fe, NM
- 2009 *Rediscovering Slobodkina: A Pioneer of Abstraction*, Heckscher Museum of Art, Huntington, NY (traveling exhibition)
- 2004 Kraushaar Galleries, New York, NY; also 2002
- 2003 *Esphyr Slobodkina: Abstractions*, Hillwood Art Museum, Long Island University, C.W. Post, Brookville, NY
- 1997 *Thinking in the Abstract: The Paintings and Sculpture of Esphyr Slobodkina*, Heckscher Museum of Art, Huntington, NY
- 1989 Sid Deutsch Gallery, New York, NY (also 1985, 1984, 1982, and 1980)
- 1984 *Esphyr Slobodkina: An Introspective*, Art and Cultural Center of Hollywood, Hollywood, FL
- 1978 *Paintings & Other Things by Esphyr Slobodkina*, Hollywood Art Museum, Hollywood, FL
- 1958 *Esphyr Slobodkina: Paintings and Collages*, New School for Social Research, New York, NY
- 1954 *Slobodkina*, John Heller Gallery, New York, NY
- 1951 *Paintings by Esphyr Slobodkina*, New School for Social Research, New York, NY
- 1948 *Tangents*, Norlyst Gallery, New York, NY
- 1947 *Esphyr Slobodkina*, Norlyst Gallery, New York, NY
- 1942 *Esphyr Slobodkina: Recent Painting and Sculpture*, Museum of Living Art, New York, NY
- 1938 *15 Abstractions by Esphyr Slobodkina*, New School for Social Research, New York, NY

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2018 *Intermission*, Naples Museum of Art, Naples, FL
- 2007 *Michael and Marilyn Gould Collection of American Modern Art (1918-1949)*, New Britain Museum of American Art, New Britain, CT
- 2002 *Modernism and Abstraction: Treasures from the Smithsonian American Art*, American Art Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC
- 2000 *Twentieth-Century American Art: The Ebsworth Collection*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; and Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA
- 1998 *Art of This Century: The Women*, Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center, East Hampton, NY; and Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice, Italy
- 1996 *American Abstract Artists*, (also 1983, Weatherspoon Art Gallery, University of North Carolina, Greensboro, NC; 1982, City Gallery, Department of Cultural Affairs, New York, NY; 1979, 1974 and 1959, Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, NY; 1977, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM; 1972, 1970, 1967 and 1964, Loeb Student Center, South Gallery, New York University, NY; 1969, North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, NC; 1968, 1966, 1965, 1960, 1958, 1956, 1954, 1951, 1949, 1947, 1945, 1943, 1941, and 1939, Riverside Museum of Art, New York, NY; 1962, IBM Gallery, New York, NY; 1961, Lever House, New York, NY; 1957, The Contemporaries Gallery, New York, NY; 1955 and 1950, New School for Social Research, New York, NY; 1953, Artists Equity Association, New York, NY; 1952, New Gallery, New York, NY; 1951, Galerie Karin Hielscher, Munich,

Germany; 1950, Galeria Nazionale D'Arte Moderna, Rome, Italy; 1948, Chinese Gallery, New York, NY; 1946, American British Art Center, New York, NY; 1944, Mortimer Brandt Gallery, New York, NY; 1942, Fine Arts Galleries, New York, NY; 1940 and 1938, American Fine Arts Galleries, New York, NY; 1937, Squibb Galleries, New York, NY)

- 1992 *Fables, Fantasies, and Everyday Things: Children's Books by Artists*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY
- 1989 *The Patricia and Phillip Frost Collection: American Abstraction 1935-1945*, National Museum of American Art, Washington, DC
- 1983-84 *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America, 1927-1944*, Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, PA (traveling exhibition)
- 1975 *Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors*, Union Carbide Exhibition Hall, New York, NY (also 1970, Loeb Student Center, South Gallery, New York University, NY; 1968 and 1966, Union Carbide Exhibition Hall, New York, NY; 1968, 1961, 1960, 1959, 1958, 1956, 1955, 1954, 1953 and 1941, Riverside Museum, New York, NY; 1965 and 1964, Lever House, New York, NY; 1957, Silvermine Guild of Artists, New Canaan, CT; 1950, New School for Social Research, New York, NY; 1952, 1951, 1949 and 1944, National Arts Club, New York, NY; 1948, 1946 and 1945, Wildenstein Galleries, New York, NY; 1943, Gallery of Modern Art, New York, NY; and 1942, Wildenstein & Co., Inc. Galleries, New York, NY)
- 1959 *Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY (also 1955, 1953, 1952, 1951, and 1950)
- 1953 *The Classic Tradition in Contemporary Art*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN
- 1945 *Eight by Eight: American Abstract Painting Since 1940*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA
- 1943 *Exhibition by 31 Women*, Art of this Century, New York, NY
- 1942 *25 Abstract Painters*, A.E. Gallatin's Museum of Living Art, New York, NY

SELECTED MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX
National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC
Saint Louis Art Museum, Saint Louis, MO
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA
Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY
The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, MN
The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY



Noank Harbor, 1933, watercolor on paper, 6" x 9"



LewAllenGalleries

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above: *Dreams* (diptych), 1992, oil on masonite, 37¼" x 96½" cover: *Monochrome in Yellow*, 1950, oil on masonite, 14½" x 8"