

ART REVIEW

Nevertheless, they persisted: standout New England women painters



DECORDOVA SCULPTURE PARK AND MUSEUM

"Queen Of The Night," 1981, acrylic on canvas, 60" x 85", by Sandi Slone

By Cate McQuaid | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT APRIL 13, 2017

“Expanding Abstraction: New England Women Painters, 1950 to Now,” at the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, reminded me of Maud Morgan’s thwarted career.

Morgan was a painter with promise in New York in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Betty Parsons, Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko’s dealer, represented her. Major museums bought her work. Then her husband got a job at Phillips Academy Andover, and the couple moved to Massachusetts. That put the brakes on her rise in the art world.

“I was in just the right hot spot. I think I could have made it into — I’m not saying the top echelon — but I could have made . . . a certain kind of fame,” she told the Globe in 1996.

Morgan kept working. If her career didn’t boom, she garnered attention in New England. She died in her 90s in 1999. The Maud Morgan Prize at the Museum of Fine Arts, awarded to Massachusetts women artists, honors her.

New attention is being paid to women artists of Morgan's era. Last year, the Denver Art Museum organized a show celebrating women Abstract Expressionists, and on April 15, New York's Museum of Modern Art opens "Making Space: Women Artists and Postwar Abstraction."

While "Expanding Abstraction" organizers Jennifer Gross, the deCordova's former chief curator and deputy director of curatorial affairs, and associate curator Sarah Montross have borrowed some of the more notable early paintings on view, including a Helen Frankenthaler, most of the works are from the collection.

The deCordova has always championed New England art. Many big names have New England ties, so the pool is deep enough. But the museum has on occasion been cash-strapped and risk-averse, and the narrow range of this show reflects its earlier conservatism and its lot as a small, regional institution.

Abstract Expressionists dominate "Expanding Abstraction," which traces their experiments with material and theme. There are nods to Color Field painting and geometric abstraction. Minimalists barely make a peep. Op Art is but a blip. Nor is there any of the muscular, cartoony abstraction of, say, an Elizabeth Murray.

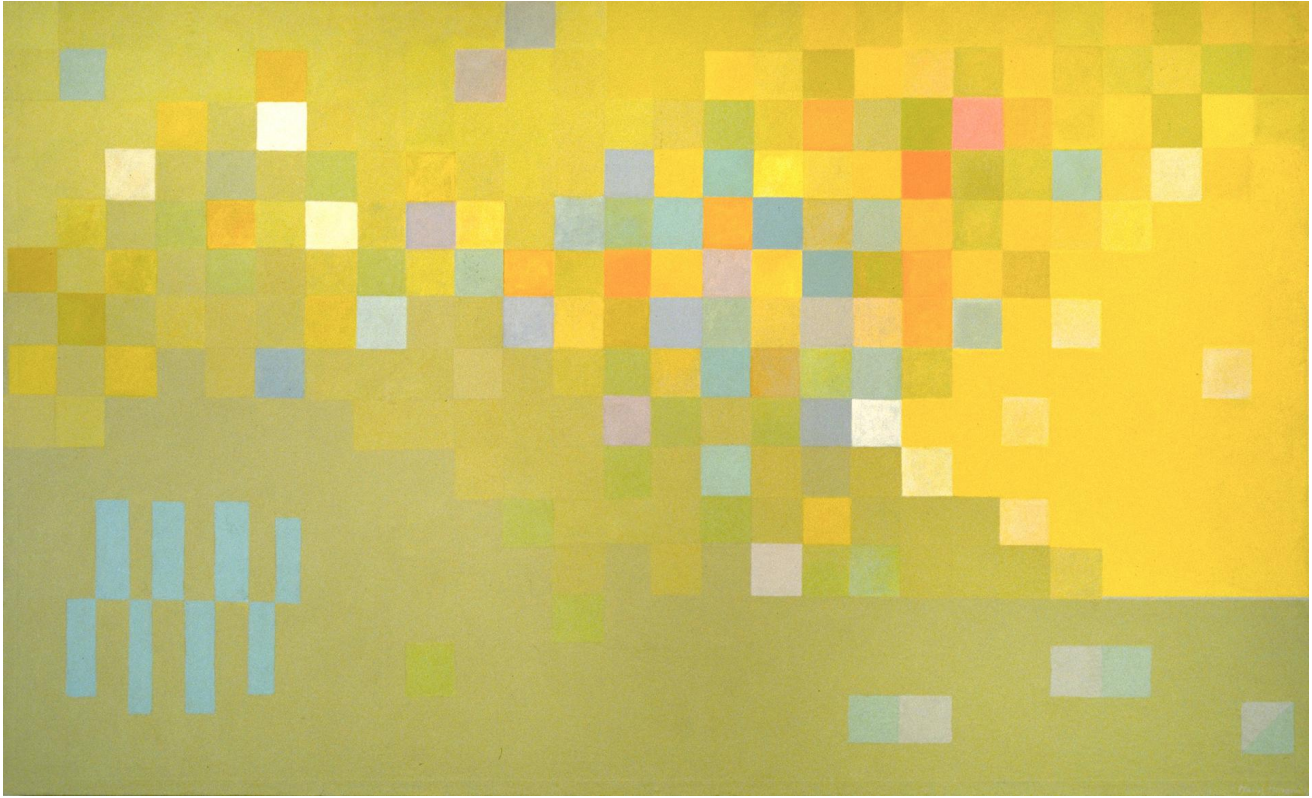
Like almost all museums in the 20th century, the deCordova didn't collect works by many women. Wall text breaks the museum's exhibition habits down by numbers. In the 1950s, 31 percent of the deCordova's one- or two-person shows featured women. Sound low? It was actually wildly high.

In the 1960s, that percentage plunged to 10 percent, and in the 1970s, 5 percent. It rebounded to 20 percent in the 1980s. After that, the door opened.

Women artists were dismissed and shrugged off. Nevertheless, they persisted, and “Expanding Abstraction” pays tribute to their tenacity and support for one another. Despite its holes, it has some knockout canvases.

Irene Rice Pereira signed her paintings “I. Rice Pereira” to avoid discrimination. Maybe it worked: In 1953, New York’s Whitney Museum of American Art gave her a retrospective.

Her luminous “Sunrise, Sunset,” made in 1951, intertwines her passion for the Bauhaus’s clean, lean, industrial-design aesthetic with a liquid spirituality. Now, there’s an intriguing and contradictory combination! Gridded networks layer in different scales, textures, and colors: spidery black, warm yellow and orange, sponged-on dappled blue. It’s radiance contained, a bottle of sunshine.



DECORDOVA SCULPTURE PARK AND MUSEUM

“Gold Coast II,” oil on canvas, by Maud Morgan.

Morgan’s first piece in the show, the large, yellow, pixelated “Gold Coast II,” dates to the early 1970s and demonstrates her incisive color sense. Slight variations in tone make greens and yellows recede or pop; space opens up in woozy brightness. Imagine coming to from a faint on a humid summer day.

In the 1970s, decades after Color Field painting first splashed into consciousness, the MFA devoted an exhibition to it. The show primed local painters, Natalie Alper and Sharon Friedman among them. Friedman’s “Tiger Lily” wafts over the canvas in dreamy, steamy, erotic breaths; it could swallow you.

Alper, whose Color Field works here are serene, aggressively blew her canvases up with pencil and paint in the 1980s. Meanwhile, Sandi Slone practiced fleet, flung calligraphy over deep, mottled space in the light-footed “Queen of the Night.”



DECORDOVA SCULPTURE PARK AND MUSEUM

“Prague Afternoon,” oil on linen, by Katherine Porter.

“Prague Afternoon,” a riveting canvas by the estimable Katherine Porter, anchors the final gallery, which covers the 1990s on. Colored concentric circles spin like a turntable within a red grid. In the middle, layered rectangles tilt. The piece feels at once symmetrical and cataclysmically off balance: The center cannot hold.

Kristin Baker’s “Diaphonous Leverage,” made in 2016, is the show’s newest work. Baker paints glazes over PVC in an iridescent swirl, like the inner curl of a cresting wave. Her painting ties the translucence and spaciousness of the exhibit’s Color Field works to the passionate gestures of the Expressionist paintings.

But it’s thoroughly 21st century. It took artists decades to slough off the self-seriousness of Abstract Expressionism, and Baker is gleeful with her paint. Even her blues are delirious.

Then again, so are Morgan’s. In her charged, mysterious 1986 canvas “Outremer,” fiery orange stutters like artillery fire against a blue that’s cobalt here, aqua or powder blue there. But while Baker’s blues shout and burble, Morgan’s brew.

If Morgan had never left New York, if she had achieved that certain kind of fame, we might not see her paintings in the deCordova’s collection. Call it a mixed blessing.

EXPANDING ABSTRACTION: New England Women Painters, 1950 to Now

At DeCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, Lincoln, through Sept. 17. 781-259-8355, www.decordova.org

Cate McQuaid can be reached at catemcquaid@gmail.com. Follow her on Twitter [@cmcq](https://twitter.com/cmcq).