

HIDDEN HISTORY OF ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM AND ASIAN-AMERICAN ARTISTS ADDRESSED IN NEW SHOW AT HONOLULU MUSEUM OF ART

First exhibition to explore artistic and personal relationships between artists of the New York School and artists of East Asian descent, especially those based in Hawai‘i

HONOLULU, HAWAI‘I—May 18, 2017—This September, the Honolulu Museum of Art presents the first exhibition to consider mid-twentieth-century abstraction through its Asian-American practitioners, with a special focus on artists active in Hawai‘i. *Abstract Expressionism: Looking East from the Far West* addresses a gap in the history of Abstract Expressionism, bringing artists of the New York School together with Asian-American artists who studied and worked in New York in the 1940s and 1950s, examining the influence of Asian intellectual and artistic traditions on artists long revered as uniquely American. Conceptualized and curated by Deputy Director of Art and Programs and Curator of European and American Art Theresa Papanikolas and organized by the museum, the exhibition opens September 7, 2017 and runs through January 21, 2018.

The exhibition presents major works by American masters such as Philip Guston, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, and Mark Rothko, alongside those by Asian-American artists such as Ruth Asawa, Saburo Hasegawa, Isamu Noguchi, Isami Doi, Tadashi Sato, and Tetsuo Ochikubo, among others. With more than 45 paintings, drawings, and sculptures, the exhibition will examine the ways in which Eastern traditions from Chinese and Japanese calligraphy to Zen Buddhism helped advance Abstract Expressionism’s aesthetic agenda—its understated lyricism, its compositional balance, its subtle awareness of place—regardless of the artist.

“Art history tends to celebrate the Abstract Expressionists as extreme individualists, reflecting American intellectual and artistic independence after World War II,” said Papanikolas.

“However, this narrative is applicable to only a handful of artists, and it leaves out artists such as these Asian-Americans who either developed or contributed to significant modes of abstraction that go beyond the New York School’s Eurocentric nationalism. This exhibition highlights their histories, while also clearly showing the influences in both directions.”

While an artist like Isamu Noguchi is now considered an established figure of American Modern art, for much of his working life he was not considered part of that pantheon as a result of his heritage. Noguchi—who was born in Los Angeles, worked with Constantin Brancusi, had his

studio in New York City, and was friends with artists such as Willem de Kooning and Arshile Gorky—was considered too Japanese by Western standards.

Many other Asian-American artists had relationships with, learned from, and in turn influenced the direction of Abstract Expressionism, but remain un- or under-recognized as part of this movement. Included in the exhibition are:

- Ruth Asawa: born in Norwalk, California in 1926, Asawa studied at Black Mountain College with Joseph Albers before returning to the Bay Area to develop the hanging wire constructions for which she is best known. Her graceful, unbroken forms—transparent, undulating, and designed to cast shadows—connects to installation art and roots in the Bauhaus, while her focus on the immediate creative impulse aligns her with Abstract Expressionism. Asawa also drew on her Japanese American background and her study of calligraphy with her emphasis on the interplay between line and the interstices around it.
- Satoru Abe: a native of Honolulu, Abe moved to New York in 1948 and studied with George Grosz and others at the Art Students League. Originally a painter, Abe evolved to focus on sculpture, and his works draw on a vocabulary of forms that echo the Abstract Expressionist interest in locating equivalents for universal ideas, while also evoking the cosmic cycles articulated and explored in Asian philosophy.
- Tadashi Sato: the grandson of a noted Japanese sumi-e painter, Sato was born on the Hawaiian island of Maui in 1923, and in his youth trained in Japanese calligraphy. Following his studies at the Brooklyn Museum School and with Stuart Davis at the Pratt Institute, Sato immersed himself in the New York art scene. Drawing on his early training in Japanese calligraphy, his paintings focus on delicate brushwork, subtle tonalities, and polished symbolism, in which forms float and oscillate in understated evocation of water, sky, and the processes of nature.
- Isami Doi: born on O‘ahu in 1903 and raised on Kaua‘i, Doi studied at Columbia University as well as in Paris, and is one of the elder statesmen of Japanese-American artists from Hawai‘i. In the 1940s and 1950s, he split his time between Hawai‘i and New York, becoming part of New York’s art scene and often exhibiting at Edith Halpert’s famed Downtown Gallery. During this period, Doi’s paintings evolved, producing gently stippled surfaces that reflect his effort to transcend the egoism he perceived in gestural abstraction.

Also included in the exhibition are works by Saburo Hasegawa, a Japanese artist associated with *Bokujin-kai* or Ink Society, an avant-garde group of calligraphy masters who wished to release that ancient practice by opening it up to Western abstraction. Hasegawa lectured extensively in the United States in the 1950s, and through his teachings exposed artists such as de Kooning,

Pollock, Rothko, Ad Reinhardt, and Adolph Gottlieb to Asian art and philosophy. His presence in the New York School has gone largely unrecognized in mainstream histories of Abstract Expressionism.

“With this exhibition, Hawai‘i’s Abstract Expressionists will take their place alongside exponents of the movement nationally, building on the museum’s record of actively transforming understanding of the art of Hawai‘i through exhibitions and publications that situate it within its broader context,” said Sean O’Harrow, director of the Honolulu Museum of Art. “At the same time, by presenting works by these acknowledged American masters, we are providing our audiences with an exceptional experience of 20th-century modernism.”

Abstract Expressionism: Looking East from the Far West will occupy the entirety of the museum’s 4,000-square-foot temporary exhibition gallery and be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue with essays by Dr. Papanikolas and Stephen Salel, the museum’s Robert F. Lange Curator of Japanese Art.

A number of programs are also being planned as part of the exhibition, including a gallery discussion with Papanikolas, art historian Marcia Morse, and collector Nancy Conley. Also planned are a Butoh performance, lectures by curator Theresa Papanikolas and director Sean O’Harrow, and a Japanese film festival.

About the Honolulu Museum of Art

One of the world’s premier art museums, the Honolulu Museum of Art presents international caliber special exhibitions and features a collection that includes Hokusai, van Gogh, Gauguin, Monet, Picasso and Warhol, as well as traditional Asian and Hawaiian art.

Located in two of Honolulu’s most beautiful buildings, visitors enjoy two cafés, gardens, and films and concerts at the theater. The museum is dedicated to bringing together great art and people to create a more harmonious, adaptable, and enjoyable society in Hawai‘i.

Locations:

Honolulu Museum of Art: 900 S. Beretania Street

Honolulu Museum of Art Spalding House: 2411 Makiki Heights Drive

Honolulu Museum of Art School: 1111 Victoria Street

Honolulu Museum of Art at First Hawaiian Center: 999 Bishop Street

Honolulu Museum of Art Doris Duke Theatre: 901 Kinau Street (at rear of museum)

Website: www.honolulumuseum.org

Phone: 808-532-8700

Hours:

Honolulu Museum of Art: Tues.-Sat. 10 a.m.-4:30 p.m.; Sun. 1-5 p.m.; closed Monday.
The Honolulu Museum of Art Café: lunch only, Tues.-Sat., 11:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m.

Honolulu Museum of Art Spalding House: Tues.-Sat. 10 a.m.-4 p.m.; Sun. noon-4 p.m.
Spalding House Café: lunch only, Tues.-Sat. 11 a.m.-2 p.m.

General admission (permits entry to both museums on the same day):

\$20 general admission; \$10 Hawai'i residents and active-duty military living in Hawai'i; youth 18 and under are free.

Separate tickets are required to view the special exhibition *Abstract Expressionism: Looking East from the Far West*. Adults, resident and out-of-state: \$10. Youth 18 and under: Free

Admission is free to: shop, cafés, Robert Allerton Art Library, and the art school

Free days: First Wednesday of every month

Bank of Hawaii Family Sunday: The museum is free to the public on the third Sunday of the month, 11 a.m.-5 p.m., courtesy Bank of Hawaii.

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