

To see work out of the context of its own making can be both fascinating and misleading but five independent and autonomous works by five thoroughly different artists, tell a number of stories. Each indicates a direct, palpable and distinct use of material. Yayoi Kusama's watercolour, 1952, whether complete or transitional, a working drawing, an indication of thought, or both, is distinct in itself. Obviously an element of her prolific practice as performer and sculptor in wood and fabric, it is a loose but lovely diagrammatic foreshortening of solid form, which can be seen to represent a particular and distinct moment in a long working life.

'Le cheval à six têtes, grand', a disturbing and complete figurehead, comes with a startling or startled shift. Introducing in a purely physical way the rhythmic stop and start of the photographic representation of movement, Germaine Richier's work is independent in spirit. Spanning, sharply mimicking, the 19th century animal bronze, it comes out of the artist's personal mythology to display a defiant contemporary stance and remind of Richier strength and role at a spirited avant-garde moment. Richier's work continues to confront the relationship between material history and associative understanding.

Nevelson's 'Night Sentinel Panel' 1973 is a hugely representative example of what has by now become unconsciously familiar sculpture. Collapsed, brought out from the linear, the very stuff of interior existence, shows life is rendered still in relief. Often misunderstood and even considered elaborate her sculptural work is a combination of formal virtuosity and internal recognition, sometimes quite pure and spare, especially in this case. Nevelson activates shallow shadow to draw a line across the surface, and uses material with the marks of construction and carpentry still evident to play with the actual fact of de-construction.

The diagrammatic extends again in the case of the piece by Carla Accardi's 'Argenta turchese', as well as in the very direct relation between material and fact. Part of a series it is exactly that material that combines with an apparent diaristic account of thoughts. Accardi, instrumental in bringing the principle of abstract painting to Italy, is responsible for work of expanded form, with light against dark, a range which shows belief in the warmth and value of material, and faith in the conflation of form and content rendered luxuriant and factual in its making. There is something of the thread of a relic about this though and also a sense of writing, drawing and colour as one. Framed by itself, the physical hold of silver on blue on tempera and casin is a detailed yet unconscious rendition of her genre.

The range of approach to making is evident, especially in the case of Milanese artist Dadamaino's 'Volume a moduli sfasati' 1960, which, represents very directly an early manifestation of the important artistic and conceptual associations within which she played a major part throughout her life. It is an excellent manifestation of a perpetual 20th century search for space as an extension of artistic possibility, the questioning of the nature of art. Beautiful, but functional, honey coloured, the grid is already there with plastic punched through and a perfectly judged scale of mark to all-over surface, which makes both ground and image. The fact of the material itself also an exact a continuity of questioning.

Bronze, watercolour, paint on tempera, collapsed construction, and gridded plastic all come with descriptive, associative and sometimes transformative qualities. But what about the artists? Where do they stand? Richier was centrally influential, Kusama is completely worshipped, Nevelson is an American idol, Accondi and Dadomainia respectively were at the centre of compelling artistic worlds in Rome and Milan respectively and beyond. Each artist has, continues to have, a great deal of influence on the art world, their work is formally expressive and divergent, yet their representation continues to be different to that of male artists of equivalent standing. Each is sought out, studied, influential, yet something remains hidden. Are they still in the process of being rendered a little less known than surrounding fellow male artists at an equivalent level?

It is important to look at the work, for its revelation, gravity, and expressive possibility but to state the wretchedly obvious, and undisputable fact that female artists over all tend to be less celebrated than their male counterparts can get in the way of the pleasure of appreciating their work. Is this because these artists thought, and think, of themselves first as artists rather than women or is it the other way round?

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