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Lara Cox

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# The Year of Shirley Jaffe

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- 1 Over the past eighteen months or so, American painter Shirley Jaffe (1923-2016) has been a notable feature of the French museum circuit. Her paintings were shown in *United States of Abstraction : artistes américains en France, 1946-1964* which ran in the Musée d'art de Nantes and the Musée Fabre in Montpellier between May and October 2021; they were the subject of *Shirley Jaffe : une Américaine à Paris* at the Centre Georges Pompidou between April and August 2022. I also happened upon her *Sans titre (C2)* (2003) discretely nestled in the entrance of *Motifs, raisons d'agir* (June-October 2022) in Guingamp, part of *Le Frac en résidence* organised every two years across Brittany.
- 2 Indeed, this fact of the artist's work being quietly "nestled" in the Frac Brittany collections can be applied to the Nantes/Montpellier group shows, and to the Pompidou retrospective. Her canvases were exhibited in the back galleries in Montpellier's Musée Fabre as a marker of transition from abstract expressionism to a more orderly geometric expressionism found upstairs in the work of Alexander Calder among others. *Une Américaine à Paris* took place in one of the smaller, peripheral galleries on the floors dedicated to the Pompidou's permanent collections.
- 3 The artist's unassuming presence in each of these locations by no means reduces her work to the realm of the incidental. All three shows rightly built up an impression of an artist's work constantly in flux, and as inspiring others to (re-)invent, albeit while betraying the sidelined status to which Jaffe, who spent over six decades of her life in France, has been consigned in both the history of Abstract Expressionism, and in contemporary art. These shows may be symptom, but they are also a corrective.

## Constant (Re)invention

- 4 While "abstraction" is undoubtedly the trait that defines all Jaffe's œuvre, she did not stick to doing the same thing throughout her long career—exemplifying in fact the irreducibility of this word to any one style.

- 5 Visitors to the Musée Fabre were given an insight into the artist's early work, beset by blurring and blending. The fuzzy forms made out in *Crazy Jane* at Appomattox (1956-1957), *The Red Diamond* (1964), and *Pale Triangle* (1964) approximate a kaleidoscopic vision and they bear the heavy (but no less virtuoso) signature of the artist's brushstroke. While the display of these three paintings do show a progressive transition towards the geometric, it was only in the Pompidou retrospective that we were given full illustration of the artist's brisk switch in 1968 from an expressive to a more measured and meditated gesture, where the brushstroke evaporates into evenly posed, Matisse-inspired matt colouring.
- 6 The sign of the artist's hand and painterly tools would eventually make a return as the Pompidou retrospective demonstrated. *Cobra* (1996) combines, for instance, Jaffe's vibrantly coloured frank geometry with two formless masses in light red and blue where gesture is once again communicated as the white of the canvas seeps through to show the stroke. Standing alone in the Guingamp show, this hybridisation of Jaffe's earlier styles was framed as an impetus to contemporary creation. Hanging alongside the coastal scenes of Jean-Michel Sanejouand and opposite a multi-coloured, windsail-like sculpture created by the local community in response to Jaffe, the nautical themes and the artist's *Sans Titre (C2)* emerged—a site-specific transformation that exemplified Jaffe's work not simply as “motif” but also a “raison d’agir” as the show title suggested.
- 7 If the latter show encases Jaffe's work in the hyper-contemporary drive to collective creation in the artworld (as illustrated by the group praxis that defined this year's *Documenta*), this idea of the artist constantly on the move, in search of new styles, and in dialogue with others, relates as much to the artist's dissatisfaction with artistic stasis as it does to her gender.

## Jaffe, The Feminist (?)

- 8 As sculptor and painter Polly Apfelbaum states in the publication accompanying the Pompidou show, Jaffe, as a woman artist in an artworld dominated by men, “didn't have the luxury of just doing one thing” (60).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Jaffe was initially represented by Jean Fournier and, while a loyal friendship developed between the two, she was aware that she did not receive as much attention and acclaim as other artists of her generation.
- 9 Inhabiting a gallery next to the Pompidou Centre in the rue Quincampoix, Jaffe very quickly had to contend with rival male artists of Abstract Expressionism (such as Simon Hantaï and Sam Francis) and the artists connected with the Supports/Surfaces (such as Claude Viallat) for representational space (Paul 151). This precipitated not only her constant exploration of new aesthetics but also her decision to cut loose from the Galerie Jean-Fournier for the nearby Galerie Nathalie Obadia in search of “a different perspective—a feminine one to accompany and disseminate her work” (Piffaretti 35).
- 10 Friends with Linda Nochlin, Jaffe should not, however, be considered *in stricto sensu* a “feminist”, a label she never officially embraced. Even less so should she be regarded as mistress of a “feminine” art. She abandoned the sweeping and expressive gestures of her earlier paintings, finding them too “emotive” (Kaneda 45). Her turn, as abrupt as it was sure, to Matissean-like shapes and colours might be considered a kind of anti-Cixousian, *un-writing* of the body. In fact, as the documentary on Jaffe in the Pompidou

confirmed, Jaffe was sceptical about the differences in perception of men and women artists. This returns us to the male Abstract Expressionists who may have been her competitors, but were nonetheless her compatriots in the French capital.

## Adrift of America

- 11 Despite her frank and full rupture with expressive markers such as blurring, blending, gradation, translucent crisscrossing which guided fellow American painters in Paris in the post-war decades, Jaffe remained curiously attached to the label “Abstract Expressionism” throughout her career. Frédéric Paul, in the Pompidou exhibition catalogue, suggests that this was to do with staking out her Americanness in the French setting (151) to fulfill the ambitions of her parents (both Jewish, both immigrants) to integrate into American society.
- 12 Both the Pompidou show and *United States of Abstraction* in Montpellier deployed a curatorial technique of back-to-back wall display to demonstrate continuity all the while acknowledging the artist’s drive to rupture and reinvention. *Crazy Jane at Appomattox* (1956-1957) hung on one side of a wall of *United States of Abstraction* while on the other side *Pale Triangle* (1964) was displayed, inviting gallery-goers to explore Jaffe’s progression by way of Joan Mitchell, Shirley Goldfarb, Beauford Delaney, and others figuring in the pathway between Jaffe 1956 and Jaffe 1964.
- 13 If this carries the added benefit of resisting Jaffe’s reduction to an echo chamber of her own work, and contextualises her in the male and female artistic voices of her generation, the Pompidou managed to pull off a similar gesture without the need of calling in other artists. The geometric *Sans Titre* (C.3.2.10) from 1972 was positioned on the back of a wall where the expressive *Arcueil Yellow* from 1956 hung, the vivid yellow of both canvases evoking chromatic continuity between the earlier and later periods. Performativity also seems a mainstay that links Jaffe’s earlier and later work, the expressive brushstrokes ceding way, as the Pompidou show attests, to rough, penned sketches—resembling a theatre scenographer’s *croquis*—which were preludes to her painted geometrical forms on canvas.
- 14 As Molly Warnock proposed in the last edition of *Miranda*, the American painters in Paris during the post-war decades were “at a remove” from contemporaneous vanguards that were sweeping the USA (Pollockian “alovers”, Pop art, Minimalism), which would provide the creative freedom to take Abstract Expressionism in new directions. Jaffe’s hinge-like location between the lower and upper floors of the Fabre Museum in Montpellier fruitfully positions her in this liminal, experimental space. Yet, this remove from the artistic epicentre also has gendered consequences: Jaffe’s rightful place alongside the likes of Calder, Jack Youngerman, and Ellsworth Kelly in the history of Geometric Abstraction could not be appreciated in *United States of Abstraction* (albeit because Jaffe’s *volte-face* from the expressive to the geometric occurred in 1968, which post-dates this show’s time period of 1946-1964).
- 15 Relatedly, in Jaffe’s canvases, one gains the distinct impression of shapes adrift in the sea of white. This blanched ocean in fact pervades the artist’s later work. In paintings such as *Sailing* (1985) the shapes seem to float alongside each other, their paths sometimes crossing if a liquid background had caused a chance encounter Jaffe’s

geometric paintings bear a paradoxical quality of flatness and depth in the commingling of superimposed shapes.

- 16 Indeed, *United States of Abstraction* and *Une Américaine à Paris* play out the theme of an American cast adrift of her nation via curatorial technique. Paintings like *East Meets West* (c.1960)—with its loose evocations of buffalo—and *Crazy Jane at Appomattox* (recalling one of the last battles of the American Civil War) index the artist's home country. In both shows, however, visitors were promptly guided on a path to Jaffe's nationless shapes, for the most part designated by the word *Untitled*.
- 17 This kaleidoscopic evocation of origins and rootlessness is one of the many reasons Jaffe's works should endure today. It might even serve us in our own navigation of this complex era of rising Far Right nationalisms and migratory "crises", the topic discussed in Clara Bouveresse's article in this edition of *Miranda*.

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## NOTES

1. As a parallel example which proves Apfelbaum's point, visitors to *Anni et Josef Albers* show held at the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris running in late 2021 saw this gender imbalance played out with immediate starkness in the show's chronological retelling of the careers of the Bauhaus/Black Mountain College married couple. Anni Albers moved between tapestry and weaving, jewelry-marking, and screen printing while her husband concentrated on the exploration of colour modulation via contrast and juxtaposition in painting throughout his whole career.

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## ABSTRACTS

Review essay of a year of French exhibitions dedicated to Shirley Jaffe. Analyses the following exhibitions: the *United States of Abstraction : artistes américains en France, 1946-1964* at the Musée d'art de Nantes between the 19th May and 18th July 2021 and the Musée Fabre de Montpellier between the 6th August and 31st October 2021; *Shirley Jaffe : une Américaine à Paris* at the Centre Georges Pompidou between the 20th April and the 29th August; *Motifs, raisons d'agir* between the 25th June and 2nd October 2022 in Guingamp, for *Le Frac en résidence*.

Essai et compte-rendu d'une année d'expositions sur Shirley Jaffe en France. Analyse de expositions suivantes : *United States of Abstraction : artistes américains en France, 1946-1964* au Musée d'art de Nantes entre le 19 mai 2022 au 18 juillet 2021 et au Musée Fabre de Montpellier entre le 6 août et le 31 octobre 2021 ; *Shirley Jaffe : une Américaine à Paris* au Centre Georges Pompidou entre le 20 avril et le 29 août ; *Motifs, raisons d'agir* entre le 25 juin et le 2 octobre 2022 à Guingamp, pour *Le Frac en résidence*.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Shirley Jaffe, abstract expressionism, geometric abstraction, painting, curation, feminism, gender, migration, Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, Frac en résidence, Musée Fabre

**Subjects:** American art

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