

eric firestone gallery

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Pat Passlof

ERIC FIRESTONE GALLERY | NEW YORK

Pat Passlof (1928–2011) was an important figure in the development of the New York School of Abstract Expressionism. She was there from the beginning and, indeed, one of its incubators. In 1948, she studied with Willem de Kooning at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, the place to be if one wanted to become an avant-garde artist. That was also the year Arshile Gorky committed suicide; his Surrealized take on abstraction, along with that of his friend de Kooning, remained an influence on Passlof. But as “Memories of Tenth Street: Paintings by Pat Passlof, 1948–63”—a presentation at Eric Firestone Gallery that featured a thoughtful selection of works the artist created in Manhattan’s East Village at the titular address—made abidingly clear, Passlof’s painterly innovations eschewed the aggressive grandiosity of her mentors for something more lyrical, intimate, and inviting. Even though *Untitled*, 1950, with its thin black lines and planar, smeary sections of pale gold and white, seems indebted to Gorky’s paintings, and *Theater*, 1957, with its turbulent facture and thick encrustations of dirty violet, red, and fawn, carry a generous dose of de Kooning’s method, Passlof truly astonishes in such delicate, subtle works as *Miss Julia*, 1961, with its quivering, luminescent surface awash in sundry pinks, yellows, browns, and blues radiating from a loosened grid. In this “pure” abstraction, Passlof achieves aesthetic independence. “The being of the work of art yields itself only through its sensuous presence,” French phenomenologist Mikel Dufrenne wrote, “which allows [us] to apprehend it as an aesthetic object.” Outgrowing the lessons of her confreres, Passlof comes into her own with extraordinary sensuousness. It seems safe to say that without Black Mountain College there would have been little or no future for avant-garde art. (And Europe, where it had developed, had become a war-torn ruin by 1948.) It is important to emphasize the year Passlof began studying with de Kooning: The New World was the place to revivify the sensation of the new, which had become timeworn and stale in the Old World. It also seems safe to say that Passlof’s transcendental aesthetic, and its subliminal affinity with American Luminism, surpasses the more earthbound—dare one say heavy-handed?—work of de Kooning and Gorky.



Pat Passlof, *Miss Julia*, 1961, oil on linen, 80 × 69".

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Passlof was instrumental in the restoration of vanguard culture in more ways than one. As the gallery's press release tells us: "In 1949, Passlof helped renovate the Eighth Street loft, which was the first location of 'The (Artists') Club,' attending every talk and panel. Noticing that many of her peers rarely spoke when they came to the Club, she decided to organize an alternative 'Wednesday Night Club,' envisioning it as a kind of 'junior club.' The Wednesday evening sessions quickly became popular, leading the old guard to squelch it for fear of competition." Clearly, Passlof was in the thick of it, fearlessly holding her own despite the condescending dismissal of her paintings as retardataire—"more 'impressionistic' than 'abstract,'" as Donald Judd once wrote, along with his trivialization of her color as "somewhat sweet," another coyly misogynist characterization. Certainly Passlof's paintings don't climb the wall like desperate, erect penises the way Judd's sculptures do, the boxes that constitute them a record of so many feckless orgasms. If the Abstract Expressionists were masturbators of gesture, then Judd was a masturbator of geometry. These were so-called big men: They always seemed to live in fear of the "junior club," i.e., smart, pioneering women.

—Donald Kuspit

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