

55 Walker

Sonia Gechtoff

24 June – 26 August, 2022

55 Walker (Bortolami, kaufmann repetto, and Andrew Kreps Gallery) is pleased to announce a retrospective of the late Ukrainian-American artist Sonia Gechtoff (b.1926, d. 2018). Gechtoff was an acclaimed painter who began her career in Beat-era San Francisco but lived most of her life in New York City. Gechtoff was overlooked for much of her career but has received renewed interest in her early career palette knife paintings and later career works which synthesized painting and drawing. This exhibition, organized in partnership with David Richard Gallery and the Sonia Gechtoff Estate, includes paintings on canvas and paper made between 1958-2017.

Gechtoff is best known for her atmospheric abstractions of swirling colors redolent of seas, skies or smoke. Inspired by the work of Clyfford Still, Gechtoff developed a distinct technique of palette knife painting. Her drawings were executed similarly, with long deliberate strokes of graphite that evoke windswept grasses and vegetation.

By the 1970s, Gechtoff had fully transitioned from oil paints to acrylic. Until this point, she had considered painting and drawing to be wholly separate, if equally important, aspects of her art practice. However, the flat, matte, and fast drying surfaces of acrylic provided new opportunities to combine painting and drawing media. Working on both paper and canvas, Gechtoff applied silvery graphite over most of her paintings for the last few decades of her life, contrasting flat planes of color with textural and compositional effects only possible through drawing.

Gechtoff was inextricably attached to the art world from birth. Her husband, James Kelly, was a notable abstract painter himself. She was raised in Philadelphia by her father Leonid, a realist painter from Odessa, and her mother Ethel, an early dealer of Bruce Conner and Roy De Forest who founded East & West Gallery in San Francisco. After her father's passing in 1951, Gechtoff and her mother moved to San Francisco. Gechtoff had extraordinary success at a young age, with solo exhibitions at the San Francisco Museum of Art (now SFMoMA) and the De Young Museum. She was also featured in the debut group show and was afforded the first solo show at the influential Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles, notable for launching the careers of many post-war artists.

The attention in California led to Gechtoff's inclusion in the *Younger American Painters* group show at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, alongside such luminaries as Jackson Pollock, Philip Guston and William de Kooning. However, Gechtoff was one of just 4 women to be included in a show of 57 artists. After permanently relocating to New York in 1958, Gechtoff exhibited with the venerable Poindexter Gallery and Gruenebaum Gallery and taught at the National Academy of Design. She continued to make work until her death in 2018.

However, the gender disparities in the Guggenheim show foreshadowed a lack of commercial and critical appreciation given to Gechtoff and generations of women artists. This bias has been noted by art historians such as John Yau, who has written extensively on Gechtoff's life and work, and Gwen Chanzit, who chose to highlight Gechtoff's work in *Women of Abstract Expressionism*, a much-lauded 2016 exhibition which traveled from the Denver Art Museum to other institutions. Although there has been renewed attention to Gechtoff's early works, much of her output from the 1960s-onward remains unseen.

Works by Sonia Gechtoff (b. 1926, d. 2018) are in the permanent collections of the Baltimore Museum of Art, Maryland; Legion of Honor, San Francisco; Denver Art Museum, Colorado; The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Modern Art, New York; National Academy of Design, New York; Oakland Museum of Art, California; San Francisco; Museum of Modern Art, California; Museum of Art, Stanford University, Palo Alto, California; Worcester Museum of Art, Massachusetts; San Jose Museum of Art, California; and The Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., among others.