

Surface Work

Private View 6 – 8pm, Wednesday 11 April 2018

11 April – 19 May 2018 **Victoria Miro**, Wharf Road, London N1 7RW

11 April – 16 June 2018 **Victoria Miro Mayfair**, 14 St George Street, London W1S 1FE



Image: **Adriana Varejão**, *Azulejão (Moon)*, 2018
Oil and plaster on canvas, 180 x 180cm.
Photograph: Jaime Acioli
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Taking place across Victoria Miro’s London galleries, this international, cross-generational exhibition is a celebration of women artists who have shaped and transformed, and continue to influence and expand, the language and definition of abstract painting.

More than 50 artists from North and South America, Europe, the Middle East and Asia are represented. The earliest work, an ink on paper work by the Russian Constructivist **Liubov Popova**, was completed in 1918. The most recent, by contemporary artists including **Adriana Varejão**, **Svenja Deininger** and **Elizabeth Neel**, have been made especially for the exhibition. A number of the artists in the exhibition were born in the final decades of the nineteenth century, while the youngest, Beirut-based **Dala Nasser**, was born in 1990. Work from every decade between 1918 and 2018 is featured.

Surface Work takes its title from a quote by the Abstract Expressionist painter **Joan Mitchell**, who said: ‘Abstract is not a style. I simply want to make a surface work.’ The exhibition reflects the ways in which women have been at the heart of abstract art’s development over the past century, from those who propelled the language of abstraction forward, often with little recognition, to those who have built upon the legacy of earlier generations, using abstraction to open new paths to optical, emotional, cultural, and even political expression. Historical and contemporary works shown in dialogue will create a series of conversations across the decades, touching on themes such as the monochrome, process, geometric abstraction, seriality and gesture.

On display will be an example of **Yayoi Kusama**’s iconic *Infinity Net* paintings – seriality as a form of self-obliteration and self-definition – and a painting by the late US artist **Mildred Thompson**, who often found inspiration in scientific theories and universal systems, and whose buzzing palette of yellows and reds and calligraphic brushstrokes evoke the invisible forces of magnetic energy. These are complemented by a

painting from the 1970s by **Alma Thomas** who in 1972, at the age of eighty, was the first African-American woman to receive a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. For Thomas, colour was a way ‘to concentrate on beauty and happiness, rather than on man’s inhumanity to man.’

Contemporary artists such as **Adriana Varejão, Bharti Kher** and **Howardena Pindell** employ complex surfaces to engage with equally complex narratives and histories. A new ‘cracked tile’ work by Brazilian artist Adriana Varejão evokes the traditions of Minimalism and monochrome painting while its ruptured surface speaks of a disquieting colonial legacy. A work by Bharti Kher comprises a richly-painted board on which intricate patterns of bindis have been applied. Howardena Pindell, whose first major survey is currently on view at MCA Chicago, explores texture, colour, structure and process to address intersecting issues such as racism, feminism, violence and exploitation. Works on display from the 1970s by the artist have the appearance of vast, pointillist fields that, in part, recall African cloth made from pounded fibres and natural dyes.

Works from the era of Abstract Expressionism counter the idea of gesturalism as being an innately masculine language to reveal how, equally, it has been employed to engage with female sensibility and experience – in, for example, the work of **Joan Mitchell, Lee Krasner** and **Helen Frankenthaler**. These celebrated artists will be shown alongside under-recognised figures of their time, such as **Hedda Sterne**. An active member of the New York School of painters, Sterne was also one of the artists known as the ‘Inscibles’, who protested against the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s policy on American painting of the 1940s and who was included in a now iconic photograph for *Life* magazine in 1951; Sterne, notably, is the only woman in the image. Better known as one of the leading gallerists of the twentieth century, showing artists such as Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman, **Betty Parsons** (who showed Sterne at her gallery in 1943) was also an abstract painter and sculptor who maintained a rigorous artistic practice. Now finding a receptive new audience, Parsons’ work reveals a mastery of spontaneity and improvisation, along with a profound interest in ancient and ethnographic arts.

The natural successors to these pioneering figures are international contemporary practitioners who embrace abstraction in their continuing quest to engage with history and articulate experience. The idea of gesture – both virtuosic and intimate, suggestive of landscape, the body, or more internalised visions – unites richly allusive works by artists such as **Fiona Rae, Ilse D’Hollander, Rita Ackermann, Jackie Saccoccio, Louise Fishman, Varda Caivano** and **Martha Jungwirth**.

These allusions grow further still in work that expands upon the traditional definition of painting by engaging with walls, floors and architecture. Works by **Lynda Benglis, Angela de la Cruz** and **Annie Morris**, among others, occupy a productive, liminal space between painting and sculpture. Other artists embrace ideas of chance, indeterminacy and temporality. Drawing upon the language of abstract expressionism as well as pagan history and folklore, British artist **Jessica Warboys** makes use of the sea and its actions upon mineral pigments in the creation of her large-scale work. Lebanese artist **Dala Nasser** employs unconventional materials such as liquid latex, brick pigment and dirt collected off the floor, on ‘grounds’ including tarpaulin and trauma blankets to create a body of work that, possessing an intricate physicality, speaks to the contemporary moment. Reframed and reinvigorated in new contexts, abstraction reveals itself to be as vital a force today as it was a century ago.

The exhibition includes: Rita Ackermann, Etel Adnan, Gillian Ayres, Sara Barker, Lynda Benglis, Suzanne Blank Redstone, Betty Blayton, Sandra Blow, Sarah Cain, Varda Caivano, Lygia Clark, Prunella Clough, Angela de la Cruz, Jay DeFeo, Ilse D’Hollander, Svenja Deininger, Lucy Dodd, Louise Fishman, Helen Frankenthaler, Mary Heilmann, Loie Hollowell, Tess Jaray, Martha Jungwirth, Bharti Kher, Lee Krasner, Yayoi Kusama, Joan Mitchell, Katy Moran, Annie Morris, Rebecca Morris, Victoria Morton, Elizabeth Murray, Dala Nasser, Elizabeth Neel, Tomie Ohtake, Betty Parsons, Howardena Pindell, Liubov Popova, Fiona Rae, Mary Ramsden, Dorothea Rockburne, Jackie Saccoccio, Mira Schendel, Yuko Shiraishi, Raphaela Simon, Pat Steir, Hedda Sterne, Alma Thomas, Mildred Thompson, Adriana Varejão, Paule Vézelay, Jessica Warboys and Mary Weatherford.

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