

Louise Bourgeois, Joan Mitchell and Lynda Benglis at The Museum of Modern Art

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HOLLAND COTTER | ART REVIEW



Above left, Joan Mitchell's "Ladybug" (1957), part of "Making Space: Women Artists and Postwar Abstraction," at the Museum of Modern Art. Above right, clockwise from left, two works by Vera Neumann, both titled "Stone on Stone" (circa 1950, and 1950-55); Lucienne Day's "Causeway," from 1967; Lina Bo Bardi's "Poltrona Bowl chair" (1951); and two works by Anni Albers, both titled "Free-Hanging Room Divider" (circa 1948, and 1949).

Women at Play in the Fields of Abstraction

Works from the end of World War II to the beginning of second-wave feminism offer a more inclusive history.

FUNNILY ENOUGH, the Museum of Modern Art has never named the long-running blockbuster show that fills its permanent-collection galleries. So I'll name it: "Modern White Guys: The Greatest Art Story Ever Invented." What the museum does name are the occasional temporary exhibitions that offer an alternative to that story. "Making Space: Women Artists and Postwar Abstraction" is the latest, and a stimulating alternative it is.

Abstraction is a foundational subject for MoMA. The institution was basically conceived on the premise that this is the mode to which all advanced art aspires. But the work in "Making Space," dating from the end of World War II to the beginning of second-wave feminism, is not really representative of the museum historically. For one thing, of course, it's all by women. And it's by artists of diverse geographic and ethnic backgrounds. Unsurprisingly, much of what's here is late in arriving at MoMA. Several pieces from Latin America, given by the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection, came just last year.

In its diversity and in other ways, "Making Space" escapes the old MoMA formula, though in certain other ways it adheres to it. We begin on what looks like familiar ground. The show's first section, "Gestural Abstraction," is dominated by two brushy, wall-filling paintings — one by Lee Krasner, the other by Joan Mitchell — of a kind that has been a staple at the museum since the 1940s. Both artists are big names but, you note, they are not quite big enough to rate fixed placement beside Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline in the permanent Abstract Expressionist galleries.

So the show starts in what feels like honorable-mention mode. But it doesn't stay



ALMA WOODSEY THOMAS, MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Making Space: Women Artists and Postwar Abstraction
Through Aug. 13 at the Museum of Modern Art; 212-708-9400, moma.org.

lages of the New York artist Anne Ryan (1889-1954) were inspired as much by life as by other art. Each of these sparkling visual salads of fabric, paper and thread reflects the artist's work as a seamstress (she made all her clothes) and a cook (she opened a Greenwich Village restaurant) as much as her interest in Pollock and Kurt Schwitters. (Ryan fans will not want to miss a splendid gallery show dedicated to her at Davis and Langdale Company through April 22.)

In a section called "Geometric Abstraction" are several 1950s works from Latin America, though whether they embody Modernist order and balance is a question.



ANNE RYAN, MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

shakes out, historically and atmospherically. Introduce a body-adjusting chair by the great Italian-Brazilian artist-designer Lina Bo Bardi to the body-obsessed sculpture of Constantin Brancusi. Put Ruth Asawa's porous, basket-like wire sculptures up against Richard Serra's fortresslike walls. Let Alma Woodsey Thomas and Mondrian meet and talk about masking tape and useful beauty.

Naturally, some people will have a problem with all this. A politically minded eroticist like the Italian artist Carol Rama (1918-2015), who has a fantastic piece called "Spurling Out" in the current MoMA show (and a retrospective at the New Museum coming at the end of the month), scares the pants off traditionalists, because what do you do with her? Where does she fit in? How can you make her make White Guy sense? You can't.



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Clockwise from above left: "Untitled," by Alma Woodsey Thomas, circa 1968; Lenore Tawney's "Little River Wall Hanging," from 1968; and Anne Ryan's "Collage, 353," 1949.