

**Rehistoricizing** the Time Around  
**Abstract Expressionism** in the  
**San Francisco Bay Area**  
1950S–1970S

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Rehistoricizing the Time Around Abstract Expressionism in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1950s–1970s looks at this period in art history from the perspective of those who experienced it, through a series of interviews and a roundtable discussion conducted by Carlos Villa in 2005. We are documenting and archiving these conversations and making them, and the important issues that emerge, accessible for all.

The material in this brochure serves as an introduction to a forthcoming printed publication. Electronic editions will be available for download through the Worlds in Collision web site <http://www.usfca.edu/classes/worldsincollision/> and printed editions will be accessible from the Anne Bremer Memorial Library of the San Francisco Art Institute.

Our purpose is to ask what artists, issues, and historic exhibitions and publications surface when reviewing this period from a feminist and multicultural perspective.

# INTRODUCTION

**C**anonized art history identifies a set of “blue ribbon” artists that have been the most studied, collected, and appreciated; these artists are, almost without exception, white and male. However, in recent decades, feminist and multicultural scholarship has identified thousands of women and persons of color that have contributed in equal measure as artists. Certainly, their work expands the notion of American art history—yet the full integration of their contribution into the canons remains to be completed.

**A**bstract Expressionism is recognized as an ascendant moment in American art history, when the center of the visual art world moved from Paris to the United States. Inspired in part by existentialism, surrealism, and the destruction of World War II, American Abstract Expressionism became the dominant model for modernist art making, internationally, for more than a decade.

**T**his movement in the visual arts paralleled the development, in the music world, of jazz, a new style of free improvisation. Parallels to other cultural expressions can also be drawn: In Asian art, personal integrity is embodied in the stroke and the form of the painting. In African art, spirit can be embodied in the object itself. However, these cultural connections have not been commonly recognized in historical accounts. ▶

**A**nd, while Abstract Expressionism implied a new type of artistic freedom, not everyone shared in the triumph. Most of the art histories that have been written codify only a few artists and a few ideas. Women artists and artists of color played key roles but were often not equally acknowledged.

**T**oday, the new art media associated with postmodernism, and related ideas of appropriation and irony, have supplanted the ideals and the unique, handcrafted qualities of the work of the abstract expressionist period. This historical shift has made the act of art *making* seem almost backward.

**P**erhaps through this inclusive rehistoricization, we will re-envision and deepen our value systems. By expanding our view of history, we can discover and identify new dialogs and aesthetic concerns that might expand perspectives for the present and future—to ensure that the historical erasure is not repeated. ◉

## ROUNDTABLE/2005

On November 5, 2005, Carlos Villa hosted a roundtable discussion at the Anne Bremer Memorial Library of the San Francisco Art Institute. The topics discussed pointed to important artists, issues, and vocabularies that relate to an expanded notion of the development of art in and around San Francisco during the 1950s and 1960s.

The following pages offer an overview of the issues that were raised by our contributing speakers. ►

## ROUNDTABLE/Speakers

Whitney Chadwick

Dewey Crumpler

Jeff Gunderson

Mark Johnson

Lizzetta LeFalle–Collins

Jose Lerma

Arthur Monroe

Mary Lovelace O’Neal

Cornelia Schulz

Carlos Villa



“It was probably the first cohesive effort at ushering in and embracing the pluralistic, multicultural view of contemporary art.”

I am the librarian and archivist at the *Anne Bremer Memorial Library* of the *San Francisco Art Institute*, which has a long history of roundtables, symposiums, and colloquia. As early as 1916, there was a lecture series sponsored by the school called, “The Symposium on Modern Art.” It included faculty from *Stanford University*, *UC Berkeley*, art critics, and the first Director of the *San Francisco Museum of Art*—then located at the *Palace of Fine Arts*.

In 1949, the “Western Roundtable on Modern Art” was organized by the school’s Director, *Douglas MacAgy*, and included *Marcel Duchamp*, *Frank Lloyd Wright*, *Gregory Bateson*, *Kenneth Burke*, and *Mark Tobey*. They had four different sessions discussing the role of the critic, the role of the museum, the role of the collector, and the role of the artist, in modern art. This roundtable was in response to the 1948 *Life Magazine* symposium, which had upset advocates of contemporary art. MacAgy and the rest were doing their best to defend modern art.

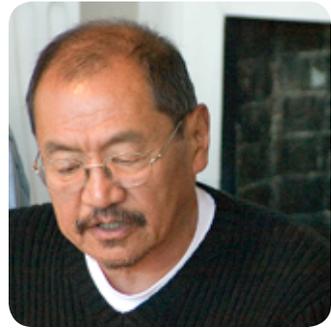
In 1966, the school held a symposium called, “The Current Moment in Art,” which included *Wayne Thiebaud*, *Claes Oldenburg*, *Larry Rivers*, *Peter Selz*, *Walter Hopps*, and *Frank Stella*, among others.

In 1976, painting faculty member, *Carlos Villa* organized *Other Sources: An American Essay*, which was a series of exhibitions and performances accompanied by a catalog that would have been the printed equivalent of a symposium. It was probably the first cohesive effort at ushering in and embracing the pluralistic, multicultural view of contemporary art. Following this, Villa worked on a series of projects under the guise of the theme *Sources of a Distinct Majority* including *Worlds in Collision: Dialogues on Multicultural Art Issues* in 1989.

This long history has led us to where we are today—ready to discuss “Rehistoricizing the Time Around Abstract Expressionism in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1950s–1970.”

—Jeff Gunderson

“Somebody told me there was no such thing as Filipino art. If it did not exist, I am trying to—at least—find a reason why.”



Somebody told me there was no such thing as Filipino art. If it did not exist, I am trying to—at least—find a reason why. Here I am teaching *Filipino American Art History*, but there was a period from the mid-1940s to the early 1970s that does not have a lot of people in it, particularly that are Filipino, who have been making *abstract art*. I would like to shed light on a *condition* and create a *linkage* to artists of color and women artists who were working in the Bay Area during that time.

When artists came to the *California School of Fine Arts*, it was like entering a seminary. Your identity from your former life was inconsequential as an artist. This was a world of people and activity that I wanted to be a part of. It was a world where the *color* of my skin did not seem to matter. It was a world where artists of all colors would come together as *individuals*, immersed in their thoughts and activities, and were willing to share the excitement. I was always aware of the world outside of the art world and the former was a place that I could never fit into.

—Carlos Villa



“There was a pejorative sense that very sophisticated cultures were backward due to Euro-centrism.”

In colonial studies, they say that the **conqueror** writes the history books. Euro-America-New York was the conqueror since certain dialogs of formalism were seen as the most important issues to explore. In *Art in the Encounter of Nations*, Bert Winther-Tamaki talks about how **Franz Kline** was such an advocate of Asian calligraphy, and of its influence on his work, until **Clement Greenberg** said that Asian art was **effeminate**. We soon see Kline distance himself from the whole conversation. There was a pejorative sense that very sophisticated cultures were backward due to **Euro-centrism**.

**Ruth Asawa** had a difficult time because her work was soft and suspended. It was not considered sculpture in its day because it did not stand up by itself. It was not big, massive, metal. If we **recognize** artists because of their social engagement, instead of the bravado in their work, I think **Ruth Asawa** would be our **Jackson Pollock**.

Suddenly, **Asian American** artists rise to the top of a different view of artists' engagement with their community—artists as activists and artists as guardians of their community.

—**Mark Johnson**

“As a young person, I wanted to learn to make a good, tough painting—to make art that had balls.”



I was nurtured by a number of people at Howard University: **Lois Mailou Jones**, **David Driskell**, **James Porter**. The ones I remember most from the Art Institute are **Ray Saunders**, **Mildred Howard**, **Sylvia Lark**, **Oliver Jackson**, **Carlos Villa**, and **Dewey Crumpler**. Many of us were fired up, coming from the civil rights movement, living the life of the **artist** plus the **activist**.

In New York, I was part of a group of black artists—**Joe Overstreet**, **Al Loving**, and **Amiri Baraka**, who was **LeRoi Jones** at that time. A number of the poets were upset with me because my art was not as **literal** as they thought it should be—not showing African women jumping out of the bush with spears and guns. I started making huge, black paintings by rubbing **lamp black**, a powdered pigment, into the canvas so that the canvas and the pigment are the same. My response to the black arts folk was to say that, if you look at these big, black paintings, you will realize that this is as black as it can be. So, in terms of being a black artist, is this black enough for you? I told them that this is an **abstract concept** that could not be closer to **African art**, which was always abstract. The idea of the object always had to do with some intangible force being a part of this concrete thing.

What I have always been interested in is how to live and how to make art. As a young person, I wanted to learn to make a good, tough painting—to make art that had balls. If getting in a gallery mattered, I would have been out of luck. Being an **African American** artist had many drawbacks and gallery **representation** was not the least of it. It has been very difficult for African American artists—male or female—to get consistent, excellent representation. The gallery system is geared towards newness because their job is to be fashionable. When the **civil rights movement** was making demands galleries were changing, but somehow that was not sustainable. A great fault is to be found with many gallery owners and dealers, because for them, it was much more about their social climbing than it was about the artist.

—**Mary Lovelace O’Neal**



“The gestural aspect of Abstract Expressionism was liberating, intuitive, and life affirming—not male or female, white, black, or brown, but human.”

That period was extremely **macho, male, and egocentric**. Nonetheless, the energy of this grand **gesture** of Abstract Expressionism was a powerful force. In itself, the movement was attractive, not so much for the macho manner of the guys that became the standard bearers or signifiers of it, but because it provided a vehicle for the release of a basic, or primal, human experience. The gestural aspect of Abstract Expressionism was liberating, intuitive, and life affirming—not male or female, white, black, or brown, but **human**.

On an energetic level, **Abstract Expressionism** was and is a marvelous configuration, and on the social level became attributed to and appropriated by those who were recognized as important “**geniuses**”—in other words, white men. Women were peripheral and only recognized when their work had the power associated with the men. Artists of color, for the most part, were not recognized.

Essentially, at the very core of the problem is a deeply insidious white and male **supremacy** that is still in operation throughout the world. For women in the West, there have been some significant **advances**. As we look at the world, there is obviously a long way to go because the problem of male **chauvinism** and white supremacy resides so deeply within the collective unconscious.

—Cornelia Schulz

“That was the first time I had heard the word ‘communist’—being a farm boy from the valley.”



When I first arrived at the California School of Fine Arts I was in my Mexican period as a painter, and somebody told me there was a mural here by Diego Rivera. But, it was covered and I found out that it was because he was a commie. That was the first time I had heard the word “communist”—being a farm boy from the valley.

I was one of the few kids of Mexican background here at that time, but everybody was seen as a group of artists treated equal. Racism did appear a little later, but at that time Rivera and Frida Kahlo had just left, and apparently, they really left a mark. A number of my classmates including Dean Fleming, and the teacher Edward Corbett, had studied in Mexico. Because of the West side connection with Mexico—not only from here but also through Jackson Pollock, who had seen Mexican painting in Los Angeles—there was a great influence on American painting. For example, the way the Mexicans Siqueiros and Orozco used thick paint and pushed it around.

The best teacher I had was Dorr Bothwell, and she has been overlooked as an artist. I immediately went into shock when I saw my first Hassel Smith, which was a non-objective painting. That was the end of my Mexican period. I knew something was going on but it was not until I came back from the Korean War that I was able to move into it. In some way that was a revolution for me, as was being in the military. After I returned from Korea, my painting really changed and it took me years to understand that. In war, you see the big picture and you see who we are as human beings.

I felt that the group of artists here were very exciting and one thing was common: you never sold out. You made art for its pure form and the galleries were not included. That is why we, as artists, started galleries. Most of the avant-garde galleries were started by painters, and they were good. A lot of them were talented, but talent alone does not make a good artist.

—Jose Lerma



“They were colorful, kind of funny, and everyone thought they would go away.”

Scattered among the vast literature that now exists in the field of California studies are few references to **black artists**. Rather, when depicted in newspaper accounts with appropriate photographs, they were shown as a general part of the broad color of **counterculture** found in **North Beach** during the 1950s and 1960s. The few black artists who worked during San Francisco’s most vital era of art, associated with abstract expressionist painting from 1946 to 1960, can be split into two groups. Some received acclaim during their lifetimes while others went unnoticed—except among fellow artists. Almost all were **forgotten** in the years to come.

They were colorful, kind of funny, and everyone thought they would go away. When blacks first hit the scene in the mid-1950s, they wore afros and berets, drank bad wine, and listened to poetry by candlelight. Black artists used anything and everything to make a **connection** to the art world. By the mid-1960s, they had metamorphosed out of their North Beach cocoon out into the world of radical **politics**—their efforts having gone unnoticed by the majority of the histories of American post-modernity.

Only in recent years has there been an interest in post–World War II art from California and in the work of black artists in **San Francisco**. This is surprising since they played a remarkable role in its development—both at the **California School of Fine Arts** and in the North Beach area. These artists include Sargent Johnson, Charles Dawkins, Hayward King, Jimmy Carter, Larry Compton, Harlen Jackson, Arthur Carraway, and Aaron Miller, among others.

—Arthur Monroe

“You were looking for art to do something specific but the relationship to art is experience—not entertainment.”



My interest was in artists in modern times and of people like **Charles White**, who was the only African American I saw regularly in black magazines. That aspect of my development and my observation of what was going on was very much connected because most of the teachers I had—including some black teachers—did not have a clue about the participation of African American artists in the period. In fact, several teachers said that there is no such thing as an **African American** artist.

The history of art is written to satisfy the interests of the **power** structure within the society that it is being taught in—and we came up in a racist cultural aesthetic in the United States. America is very much connected to Europe and anything outside of Europe was associated with the other.

There is a whole generation of young people, African Americans among them, who are **reshaping** and **reinvestigating** the notion of this magnificent and most powerful period in American history. They are stripping the biased way that art historians have dealt with this period to open up a dialog, which is much larger than the narrow cast that was taking place in the 20th century by the unfortunate 19th century notion that art **history** was plagued with.

I heard this curator say that the **purpose** of art is to challenge me, to make me think differently about something that I experience, and therefore any great art is always challenging. Right there you have stopped art from functioning. You were looking for art to do something specific but the relationship to art is **experience**—not entertainment.

—**Dewey Crumpler**



“Black American artists in California have certainly embraced expressive forms of abstraction in their work.”

Black American artists in California have certainly embraced expressive forms of abstraction in their work. **Sargent Claude Johnson**, **Richard Mayhew**, and **Norman Lewis** were inspired by their knowledge of Abstract Expressionism and open to intuitive spiritual inspiration. The black imagery explored by these artists in the early years of their artistic careers became less **representational** as they became dazzled by the shear properties of the paint, making those properties and compositional issues fundamental to their works. By pursuing the tenets of Abstract Expressionism, Black painters sacrificed appreciation of their work by large Black audiences and they also remained under appreciated and even **unknown** by much of the larger art world.

**Sargent Claude Johnson** was an active artist in the Bay Area and I am convinced that he treated his sculpture and ceramic surfaces—in terms of the way he applied the glazes—like paint with very abstract expressionistic markings. **Richard Mayhew** has been investigating the spiritual aspects of nature and the act of painting itself, since the beginning of his career. He does not view himself as a landscape painter, rather as a painter constantly investigating the shapes, colors, and tonalities that he experiences daily. Also, **Norman Lewis** chose to devote his artistic life to **Abstract Expressionism**, even when challenged by **Romare Bearden** in the mid-1960s to create works that were relevant to the **civil rights** movement. While Bearden chose to reconfirm his position with the figure, Lewis and Mayhew chose to remain firmly in their **experimentation** with abstract markings.

Artwork by **Black Americans**, like their creators, has often been classified under one sweeping view. In America, some artists and their audiences contend that the work must somehow “look Black” and be created from the specific experience of “being Black.” Yet it is critical to realize that artwork by Black Americans, like the artists themselves, does not fit within a **monolithic** definition, character, or identity. And, like Black Americans, the artwork is very **diverse** within the ethnically black population.

—Lizzetta LeFalle-Collins

“How do we rethink the canon from different perspectives and in different ways?”



Revisionist histories pose challenges to artistic and literary canons, often highlighting their exclusions. Yet problems remain. We can think about who is not there, but what questions do we pose? What kinds of research are needed in order to do more than merely find artists and try to fit them into existing canonical structures?

In art, canons reinforce sameness. Their underlying assumption is that a particular body of work is important enough that everyone should be familiar with it. But the “everyone” is already a self-selected group. In art history, it is senior professors, exhibition curators, publishers, and editors who make many of the decisions that determine what art is exhibited, valued, taught, circulated in books, and consumed.

During the late 1960s and 1970s, challenges to the canon came from different directions: from the women’s movement and the civil rights movement, and then from a growing interest in issues of cultural diversity and identity. All of these movements have resulted in challenges to the status quo and assumptions of sameness and universal acceptance.

These cultural struggles over meaning, representation, and inclusion have often led to charges that adding Virginia Woolf to a curriculum devalues Shakespeare, or that studying Romare Bearden’s work leads to ignoring Willem DeKooning’s. This kind of resistance to change works against what Griselda Pollock calls “differencing the canon.” How do we rethink the canon from different perspectives and in different ways? How do we admit difference into the sameness that produces canons in the first place? We can make the pie larger, and move around it in different ways, but it is difficult to effect lasting change without coalitions and institutional support.

—Whitney Chadwick

## ROUNDTABLE/Reflections

Speakers at our roundtable discussion alluded to personal concepts and experiences of freedom. For the artists who worked in the San Francisco Bay Area, being in an enclave like the California School of Fine Arts (CSFA) meant freedom. The making of an abstract painting also meant freedom. It was a conscious desire—and process—to achieve visual poetry at its highest level and to make art from personal need and perceptions. The artists of color and women artists who made abstract expressionist art, produced work from the standpoint of being free and individual. The forms in their work were found within the material used or invented through the working of that material. These artists were all generally happy to be in a place where they did not feel the full brunt of racial discrimination. The only thing that mattered to all of the artists who worked at CSFA was making the best art that they could make.

In the 1950s, artists did not come to CSFA for preparation of an art career—as we understand it today. Those who stayed for four years did not earn a diploma; instead, they received a certificate of completion—mostly to satisfy the requirements of the GI Bill. Artists who stayed at CSFA were serious and for many, their commitment was deep and terminal. ▶

**C**alifornia School of Fine Arts was a place where artists went if they wanted their work to advance within the sanctuary of like-minded makers. Within this sanctuary artists did not use political, racial, or gender issues to empower or inspire creative production. The theater curtain covering Diego Rivera's mural was an obvious measure of discouraging these CSFA artists from over-intellectualizing their work. Instead, they were encouraged to find their path through their art, as individuals, and to pursue art for its own sake.

**T**he 1950s was a time of de facto segregation in San Francisco, and people of color and women “all knew their place.” This was before the civil rights march in Washington, D.C. in 1963—a time that preceded the era of questioning, defiance, and the expansion of perceptions that developed during the 1960s and through to the pluralism of the 1970s. However, it was a period when committed artists and musicians chose their art and integrity over selling out—an aspect that they all stood on. ◉

# GOALS

Rehistoricizing the Time Around Abstract Expressionism in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1950s–1970s explores issues of inspiration and access. While historical in focus, this project also addresses the contemporary viability of abstract painting.

We plan to produce an expanded publication that will be accessible in the Anne Bremer Memorial Library of the San Francisco Art Institute and available for download later this year.

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