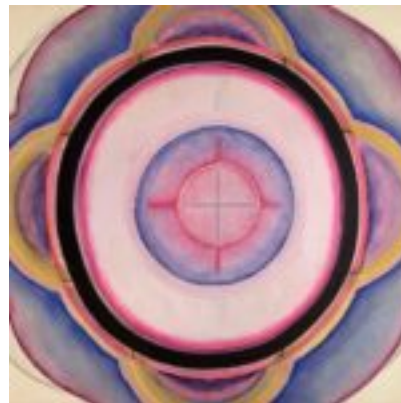
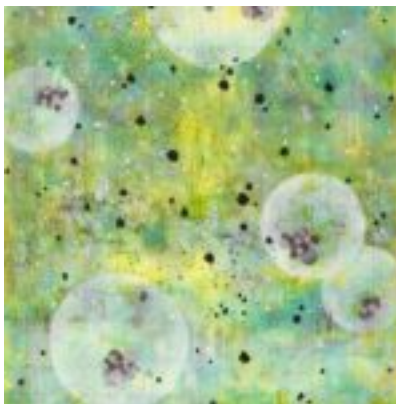


Deeper into the South

By Sarah E. Fensom

A current exhibition celebrates the vibrant women artists of America's South.



"I've been working with this collection for over 11 years, and I know it well," says Bradley Sumrall, Curator of the Collection at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art. "And just by getting to know it, I noticed it had a really strong collection of female artists." The Ogden Museum's founding donor, Roger Ogden, had an affinity for women artists, Sumrall explains, and he was aware that Southern art in particular has a lot of strong female voices. The New Orleans-based museum is currently staging "The Whole Drum Will Sound: Women in Southern Abstraction" (through July 22), a show that draws primarily from these rich holdings.

Several iterations of female-centric museum shows have popped up around the country as of late. Some more recent ones have been spurred on by the MeToo movement, others by the notion that many works by female hands in museum collections have been under-seen by the public. That women artists have been marginalized and underserved in art history and the art world at large is resoundingly and shamefully true, and thus seemingly any reason to promote these artists is a good one. But nevertheless it's important that these exhibitions not feel like gimmicks, or worse, cheap gestures meant to fix inequality in one fell swoop.

Sumrall is fully aware of the delicacies of staging such a show, and has developed the exhibition with them in mind. "Initially I said 'I hate to do a women's art show—these aren't women artists, these are artists,'" says the curator. "I didn't want this to be seen as me defining a 'feminine aesthetic'—I'm not sure there is one and I'm certainly not the one to define it, but I was reading the French author Amin Maalouf's *In the Name of Identity*, from which we take the show's title, and I wanted to put a quote from it out in front of the exhibition to show that we're just celebrating strong voices—these aren't 'women artists,' they're not purely 'abstract,' they're not just regional artists, they're strong, important voices."

The quote from Maalouf that Sumrall refers to reads: "A person's identity is not an assemblage of separate affiliations, nor a kind of loose patchwork; it is like a pattern drawn on a tightly stretched parchment. Touch just one part of it, just one allegiance, and the whole person will react, the whole drum will sound."

One of the pillars of the exhibition—and of abstraction in the South—is Dusti Bongé, a Biloxi, Miss.-based artist. The show features the force-field-like geometric abstraction *Circles Penetrated* (1942, oil on canvas) and the sultry, totemic *Swamp at Midnight* (n.d., oil on canvas), which lives on the abstract side of the street but saunters towards landscape. Both were gifted to the Ogden by the Dusti Bongé foundation. Bongé is an interesting example of the South's interaction with Abstract Expressionism, a primarily Northern

phenomenon that shifted the art world's center to New York from Paris in the middle of the 20th century. She moved fully into the style in the 1950s, after flirting with Surrealism throughout the '40s. During this period, Bongé, who remained in Biloxi raising a son alone after her husband, Arch Bongé, a Nebraska "cowboy artist," died of Lou Gehrig's disease in the mid-1930s, began showing at the famed Betty Parsons Gallery in New York. She had her first solo show at the gallery in 1956 and was represented by the dealer for some 20 years.

The Summit Group—the trio of Bess Phipps Dawson, Halcyone Barnes, and Ruth Atkinson Holmes—were exposed to Ab Ex at the Southwest Texas Junior College in Summit, Miss., in the early 1950s. Their instructor, Roy Shultz, brought the tenets of the movement to their classroom in rural Mississippi, sparking a new sense of freedom in the practices of the three artists. About this time, Dawson is quoted as saying, "Roy Shultz absolutely captured us. His enthusiasm for abstract expressionism spilled over on all of those who came in contact with him...Roy encouraged us to experiment. It wasn't long before we had abandoned magnolias and shacks. We were doing daring new pieces and expressing ourselves for the first time in our lives." Roger Ogden collected works by the three artists, and they are prominently featured in the museum's exhibition. Standouts include Dawson's *Red Glow* (1959, oil on Masonite), an energetic study in color, Holmes' intricate and textural *Dégagé* (1950, mixed media on board), and Barnes's minimal *Variation #1* (1955, oil on canvas), an incredibly bold and arresting canvas that would be at home in a collection of Rothkos.

Mark Rothko, as it turns out, plays an interesting role in the exhibition. Ida Kohlmeyer, whom Sumrall calls "the queen of New Orleans art," let Rothko use her garage as a studio while he was staying in the Louisiana city in the 1950s. The two were close, and his influence, as well as Hans Hofmann's, helped shape what would become a dreamy, almost spiritual, style of abstraction. *Rondo #2* (1968, oil on canvas) is a highlight of the Ogden's show. The mandala-like work

blends Rothko's color fields with the mystic, visionary style of the early abstractionist Hilma af Klint.

The Dallas-based contemporary artist Sherry Owens, who has worked with many materials but is widely known for her sculptures with crape myrtle wood, has a special place in the exhibition. Heavily influenced by the self-taught Abstract Expressionist sculptor Clyde Connell, Owens made several pilgrimages to visit the late Louisiana artist—a relationship that plays out in the Ogden's show. "Owens went and sat at the feet of her master Clyde Connell," says Sumrall, "but she'd never shared a wall with her." Setting out to change that, Sumrall encouraged one of the museum's patrons to purchase a specific piece of Owens' work, *Mother Nature Throwing Up Her Hands* (2017, crape myrtle, baling wire, paint, dye, and wax), for the Ogden's collection. "'This is our role,' I told the patron," he says. Owens' piece joins *Dancer* and *Dancer No. 4* (both 1985, cedar, hydrostone, wax and ink) by Connell.

The South's strong tradition of self-taught art is highlighted in the exhibition not just by Connell, but also by Minnie Evans. The South Carolina artist used pencil and crayon to draw visions she believed came from God and the lush foliage she saw while working as the gatekeeper of the Airlie Estate, a public garden. Work by Evans is juxtaposed with that of Shawne Major, a formally trained Louisiana artist who uses found objects and references quilt-making to create a unique vernacular style. Major's *Eating Cake* (2998, mixed media), a dense patchwork of glittering trinkets, melds the energetic cacophony of a Pollock canvas with the materials of a crafter's supply closet.

Lynda Benglis's *Minerva* (1986), a bronze, nickel, and chrome sculpture that manages to seem heavy and extraordinarily delicate at the same time, take pride of place in the show, as does MaPo Kinnard's metallic, biomorphic ceramic *Stormy* (circa 2015, oil on bisque fired ceramic). Dorothy Hood's *Florence in the Morning* (circa 1976, oil on canvas), a moody work with fields of poured color that seem to sink into the canvas, is joined by Marie Hull's *Pink Morning* (circa 1960, oil on canvas), which features thick swaths of dripping paint.

The exhibition also includes work by Vincencia Blount, Lin Emery, Margaret Evangeline, Cynthia Brants, Shawn Hall, Jacqueline Humphreys, Valerie Jaudon, Bonnie Maygarden, Anastasia Pelias, Betsy Stewart, Ashley Teamer, and Millie Wohl. It certainly weaves together a patchwork of artists, their stories, and their communities.