

Friday, March 11th, 2016

“I Was Free To Do As I Pleased”: Regina Bogat on her Life as an Artist

by David Rhodes

On the eve of her joint exhibition with sculptor Wang Keping at Zürcher Gallery, David Rhodes went to visit the legendary Regina Bogat in her New Jersey studio home.



Works by Regina Bogat and Wang Keping in their joint exhibition at Zürcher Gallery, 2016

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The unique work of Regina Bogat came to my attention at Zürcher Gallery's Frieze New York booth presentation in 2015, and later, through a solo exhibition at Zürcher Gallery in autumn of that year. I was already impressed by what I saw before seeing the dates of the works. It is one thing to innovate retrospectively, but quite another to do it contemporaneously in response to the moment. The works seemed, so much, both of their time and of the present. They not only resonate with young artists now; they represent, given their quality and originality, what arguably should have been an acknowledged achievement in the 1960s and '70s. [DR]

DAVID RHODES: You are a New York artist, how did you come to live in New Jersey?

REGINA BOGAT: I moved here from Manhattan in 1972 with my husband, Alfred Jensen, and our two young children. Our Division Street loft was slated for demolition to make way for Confucius Plaza. We found this artist's house; it was purpose-built in 1906 by a German artist and his French wife. The top floor is a studio with large north-facing skylights. It was with reluctance that I left New York. Even though it is only twenty-five minutes away from the city by train, at the time I felt isolated and cut-off from my prior life.

Today artists and galleries are dispersed across the boroughs in a way that is totally other to the concentrated, intimate associations of the New York art scene in previous decades, especially the 1940s, when you began participating in this world. When you arrived, what were your impressions of the New York art world?

As a young student, the New York art world was exciting. Many galleries were opening showing avant-garde art, artists were opening coops and collectors were buying contemporary American art. American art came to the forefront of the art scene, which had previously been led by Europe. America was shaking-up the art world and New York was playing a central role.

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You are fortunate to have experienced such an exciting time in American art history and I am fortunate to be speaking with you, a primary source! Did the New York art world seem diverse or was it established entirely around the Abstract Expressionists? I imagine there were different camps.



Regina Bogat, *Andromeda*, 1965. Acrylic on canvas, 44 x 38 inches. Courtesy of Zürcher Gallery, New York/Paris

There was diversity even though the Abstract Expressionists were receiving the most attention. I went to many openings for second generation Abstract Expressionists like Al Leslie, Nicholas Krushenick and Grace Hartigan. The first generation Abstract Expressionists, such as Jackson Pollack, Bill de Kooning and Arshile Gorky, were selling well and entering major collections. Articles about Abstract Expressionism dominated magazines, journals and the art sections of newspapers. I was most aware of the second-generation Abstract Expressionists' competition with the first generation who already had fame and money from their work.

Some artists resisted action and gestural painting sticking to representational painting with regional themes and there were also those who continued emulating French Fauvism and Cubism. There were midtown galleries devoted to regional art like that of Rockwell Kent and Edward Hopper. At the Art Students League, Will Barnet was still doing derivations of Picasso. Some artists dismissed the abstractionists. I overheard Wolf Kahn refer to Abstract Expressionism as “spaghetti painting.”

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The idea of various “groups” seemed to exist via the influential art writers of the period rather than being formed by the artists themselves. People were either for Clement Greenberg, who was doctrinaire, or for Tom Hess (of Art News) and Harold Rosenberg who were both more open to differing views about art.

The influx of European artists escaping WWII added to the diversity in New York. Did they influence your work?

Surrealists made a brief impact on my earliest work. I learned the technique of collage from studying Max Ernst. Although not an émigré, Giorgio de Chirico’s juxtaposition of unusual objects and concrete forms influenced me.

Neo-Plasticism was in the mix, led by Mondrian. He had his studio in Manhattan but passed away before I left College. At Brooklyn College, I heard a lot about him because the art department there was influenced by Bauhaus principles and its head, Harry Holtzman, was the executor of Mondrian’s estate. Perhaps I was unconsciously impacted by Mondrian. Bernard Zürcher, who is an art historian, has pointed out similarities in my geometric abstractions.

Duchamp, who later played an important role in New York, was playing chess on Fourteenth Street. I found his art amusing. This might have contributed to the playful dialogue I have with my work as it is made.

Did galleries have a strong role in differentiating various aesthetic tendencies?

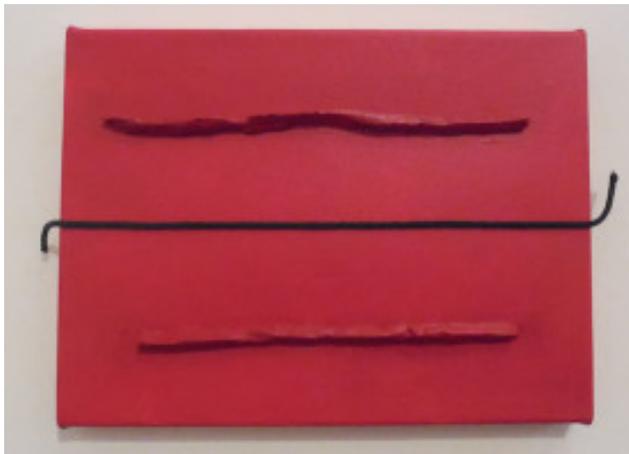
Galleries that encouraged avant-garde art promulgated that aesthetic (at that time Abstract Expressionism). The traditional galleries showed conservative art espousing the representational aesthetics. Other galleries specializing in modern art represented aesthetics that were recently avant-garde.

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There were two different art worlds *vis-à-vis* the galleries in New York. The galleries on 57th Street were commercial, while the galleries on 10th Street and the East Village coops were mostly artist-run. Neither world was exclusive to an aesthetic.

The art world became very complicated as more and more money was involved: the galleries looked towards the museums for advice on what artists to show; the museums looked to the galleries to see the latest developments; the collectors looked to both galleries and museums to determine the best work for investments. The critics stepped in to name the art movement of the day. The auction houses were there but they didn't have the power that they have today.



Regina Bogat, Material Exchange Transformation, 2014.

Acrylic, cord, clay on canvas, 9 x 12 inches.

Courtesy of Zürcher Gallery, New York/Paris

Were the well-known artists accessible to you and supportive?

I had several wonderful friends in the art world. Some of them were well known. I went to openings, introduced myself to people and wrote for a journal called "East". At first, I was in awe of the success of well-known artists. In time, I became friends with several who were accessible and supportive. Many of the well-known artists were erudite but never stodgy.

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Was Elaine de Kooning one of these?

Elaine de Kooning welcomed me as part of her family as well as a fellow artist. She invited me to go along with her to visit artists' studios and compare notes on the visits. She was free with her ideas about painting. She permitted me to stay in her studio while she was painting, something most artists forbid. She was communicative and supportive. She threw wonderful parties to which I was invited. This was invaluable because it was a place to network. Networking was very important as it still is today.

How about Ad Reinhardt and Mark Rothko?

I met Reinhardt at openings. He was friendly and attentive. I learned a lot about how to construct a painting from Ad. He was learned but not pedantic. Ad was using oil paint but wanted the paint to be completely matte; he drained all the oil from the paint. This made his work hard to conserve later. He revealed a lot about his painting techniques.

Rothko had his studio across the hall from mine at 222 Bowery and we became close friends. Mark taught me a lot about the art world: he taught me about galleries; he told me how to avoid shady dealers; he taught me how to prepare for a show; and, he showed me ways to care for and store art. I assisted him in his studio by repairing the edges of his paintings for his show at the Modern. He told off-color jokes which kept us laughing. Mark is often presented as off-putting; however, he really was quite warm, nurturing and could be very funny.

My husband, Al Jensen, was supportive and showed me the world of antiquities. For a young New Yorker, who had not traveled much, a six-month trip to Paris, Switzerland, Italy, Greece and Egypt was mind-boggling. He showed me that what we see as ornament was based on ancient symbolism. He shared his fascination with numbers, science and ancient cultures. My work was deeply influenced by these new experiences.

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You mentioned you were writing about art for the journal “East” at one point. Elaine de Kooning was also writing. Were artists’ opinions the benchmark for each other over what critics were saying? Did artists’ writings contribute to the contemporary art dialogue by championing the less known, or by arguing for what was most important? These days, it seems the market bypasses the opinions of artists and critics while the collectors hold sway.

I have always admired John Ruskin, the result of whose brilliant support of Turner continues to amaze me. It’s hard to go from Ruskin to Saatchi; but, today’s art market was developed by collectors like Saatchi in his championing of Damien Hirst and the YBAs (Young British Artists). Nerve and money overtook quality and connoisseurship.

Even so, some gallerists do a great job of supporting less well-known artists; Zürcher Gallery, Paris/New York, is one of them.

I was in London during the 1980s and 1990s when the YBA phenomena and Saatchi’s collecting was taking place; it’s only part of the story as you can imagine. What about New York artists’ writings of the 1940s and 1950s?

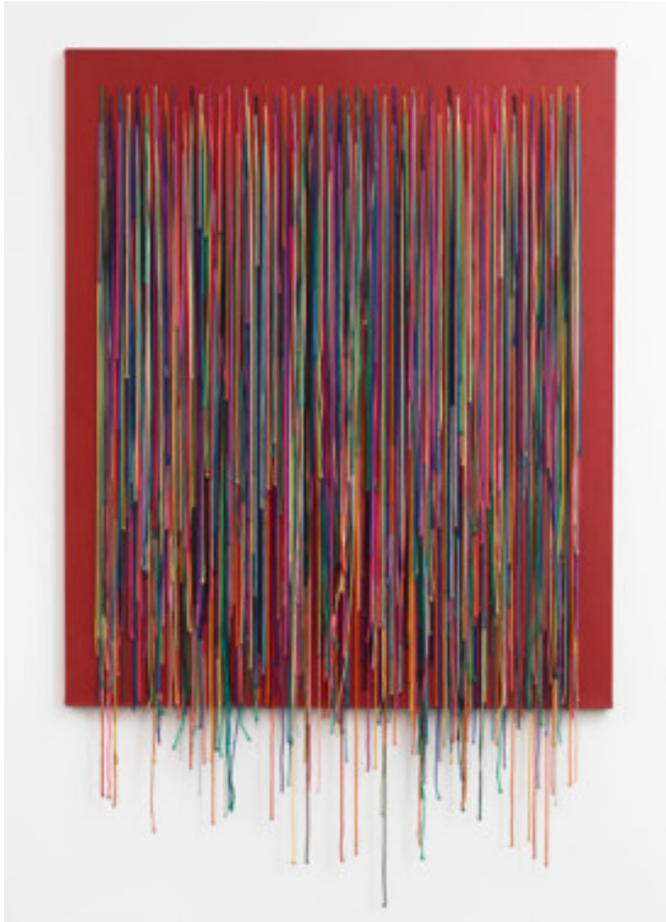
In the 1950s, Elaine de Kooning’s art writings were deep, expansive and important. She wrote for “Art News” extensively. Her observations were sharp. She went into detail about an artist’s life and contribution whereas most reviews were overviews of exhibitions.

In the 1970s, when feminism really started, more women wrote. Feminist writers were celebrated. “The Second Sex” by Simone de Beauvoir and “The Feminine Mystique” by Betty Friedan were musts. These feminist writers stirred and empowered women artists. Artists are eager for attention and especially want to hear what people think of their work. Artists value studio visits: when Swiss painter Max Bill saw one of my geometric abstractions from the 1960s, he said that he “always tried to put red and blue together but here you have achieved it in your painting;” when, in 1982, curator and critic John Caldwell wrote

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in *The New York Times* about my show at Douglas College, I was tickled pink by “quirky” and “I’ve never seen anything like it.”



Regina Bogat, Cord Painting 14, 1977. Acrylic, cord on canvas, 72 x 60 inches. Blanton Museum, Austin, Texas

Throughout your oeuvre, your work reflects the time in which it was made and has connections to other artists' work of that time; yet, it is different. Since the 1960s, your use of materials other than paint, thread for example, extends the painting from its pictorial function; as in Eva Hesse's work, these unorthodox materials breach the painting sculpture divide. Since my student days, I've been very interested in Hesse. Your use of strong color together with this three dimensional aspect is an approach that young artists are engaging now. The difference is you didn't know where it might lead. How did other artists react to your use of materials at the time these works were actually made?

The best thing about being largely ignored in the 1960s and '70s, was that I was free to do as I pleased. There was no pressure to comply with particular expectations or “isms.” My use of unusual materials was mostly intuitive and unconscious. I can't explain it without returning to childhood recollections of household trimmings and the needlework children were taught. Justification came later when I read Huizinga's “Homo Ludens” (play is culture). Some of my contemporaries were also expanding into mixed media, painting with

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sculptural projection. My friend, Eva Hesse, pursued this extensively. Around the same time, Lucas Samaras also used unorthodox materials such as rainbow-colored wool.

In the early 1970s, I was chosen by a panel of women artists to participate in “Women Choose Women” with a painting, constructed in 1971, of dowels and rope. This was an affirmative reaction in action as a limited number of participants were chosen from many applicants.

Although collectors purchased my pieces shortly after they were completed, I don’t recall any artists’ reactions to the materials I was using during the 1960s-1970s when I first began using mixed media. Interestingly, now, the younger artists appreciate my work from that period very much. They are surprised to learn that I did the work in the ‘60s and ‘70s because it resonates with their work today. They like the threads, cords, wooden sticks and dowels. They are enthusiastic.

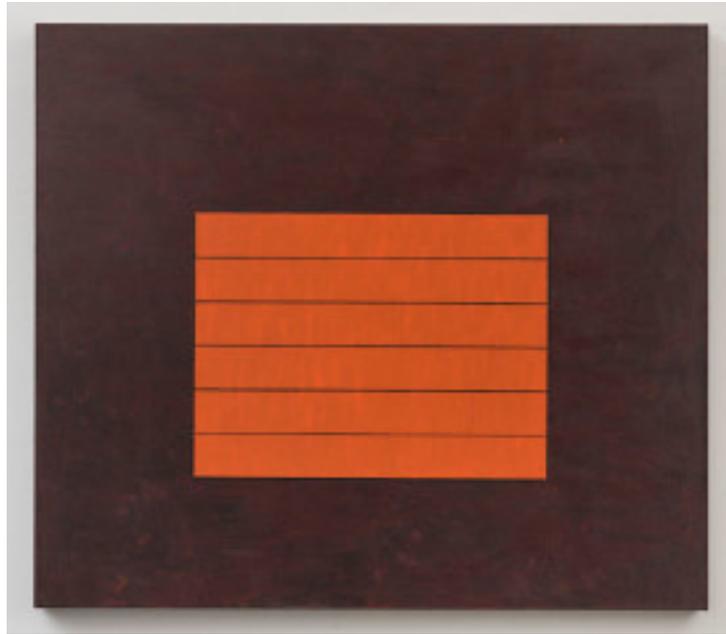
That doesn’t surprise me at all! Your works from the 1960s and 1970s are not only innovative and apposite to their time they are also prescient of some work being made today. This only happens with artists who have ability, vision, and of course it’s important to say, the courage, to do what they need to do, and remain undeterred if others don’t get it at the time. How did the various elements (dowels, sticks, threads, cord and so on) function for you?

The various unorthodox materials in my work function as the structure of the painting; they are never superficial ornaments. For example, in the untitled 1971 painting, shown at “Women Choose Women”, the dowels are my brushstrokes. In other paintings, the wooden sticks I have used function as lines. Artist and writer, Steven Westfall, pointed out that the sticks in my paintings create a chromatic haze. In my Cord Paintings, the cords are tactile, they add a sense of touch to the work. Although they shouldn’t be touched, people can’t keep their hands off them! All these materials are the structure of my paintings. They are not something I just attach to my work but rather they are the substance of my work.

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Al Jensen based a lot of his work on a grid structure. I learned that the grid was a great organizing element and employed it in many of my works. It serves as the underlying format beneath much of the materials I use.



Regina Bogat, Palmyra I, 2015. Acrylic, board on canvas, 40 x 46 inches. Courtesy of Zürcher Gallery, New York/Paris

Let's discuss your new work; what are you working on currently?

Beginning in 2013, I felt the state of the world was becoming so oppressive I could hardly breathe. My paintings took on a smoky, violent and sinister feel. I used a lot of red, black and black cord. Where my work of 2000-2010 was largely open and atmospheric, employing many colorful, transparent layers, in 2014 I began positioning an opaque board onto my work. The board was an emotional element, a closed door or the anxiety-provoking image of the little window to a solitary confinement cell. This work culminated in the Palmyra series of 2015, my response to the destruction of antiquities in Syria. I had never used painting to comment on a contemporary problem before, but the destruction of Palmyra and Aleppo alarmed me. The paintings suggest the vulnerability of the archeological site as they progress through stages of sadness and despair ending in final darkness.

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Invoking Zenobia, the third century warrior queen of Palmyra, who fought the Romans, is something else I had not done before in painting. The series will be on view at Zürcher Gallery along with the sculptures of Wang Keping through April 29, 2016.

My impression of the new works is that, on a metaphoric level, the qualities that you describe are certainly present, as we can now see in your Palmyra series with Wang Keping's sculptures at Zürcher Gallery. It has been a pleasure talking with you, Regina.

***Face to Face: Regina Bogat, Wang Keping* continues at Zürcher Gallery, 33 Bleecker Street, between Lafayette Street and Bowery, through April 29**

- See more at: <http://www.artcritical.com/2016/03/11/david-rhodes-with-regina-bogat/#sthash.y5MzVMQY.dpuf>