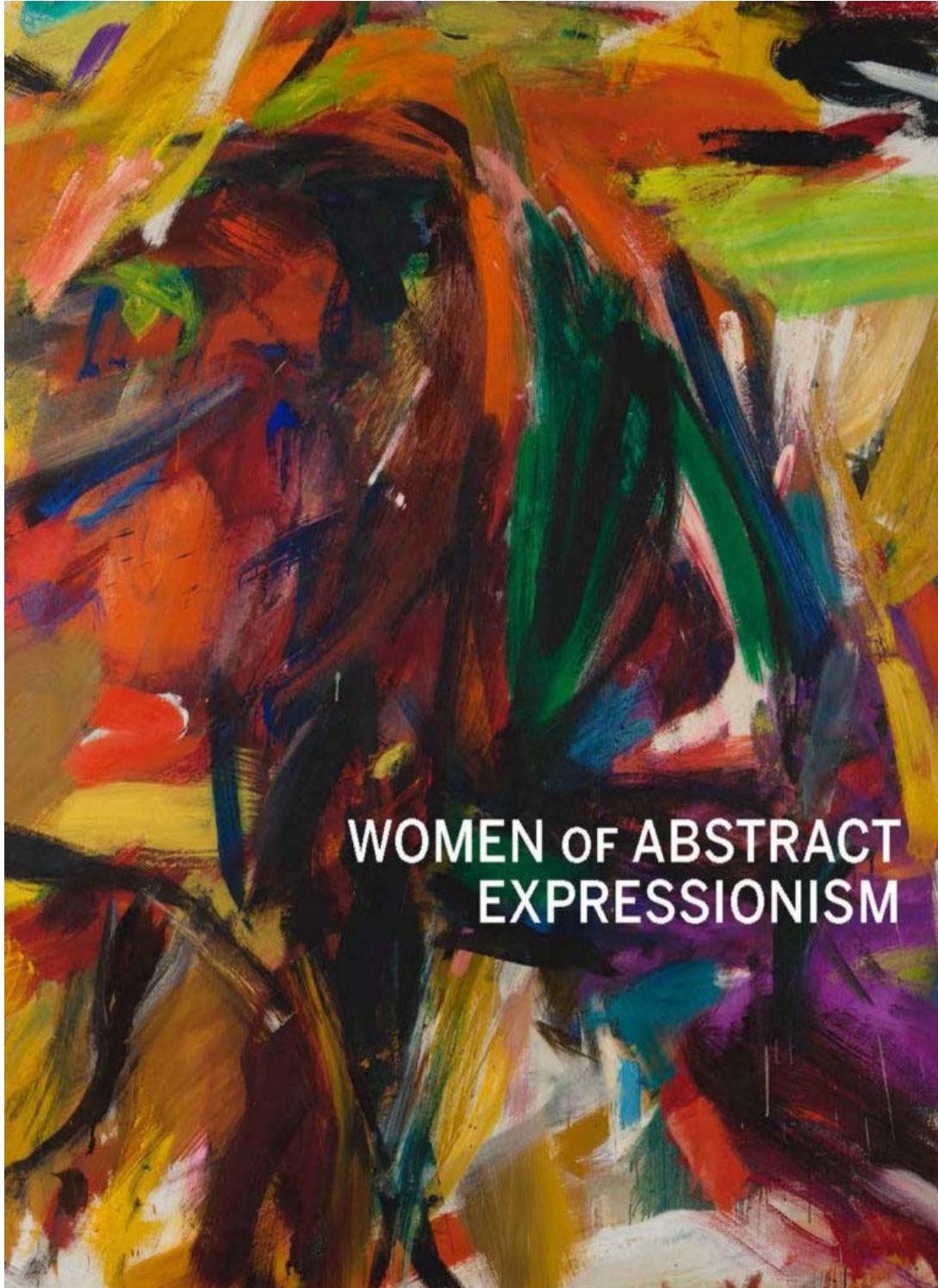


Reader's Diary: 'Women of Abstract Expressionism'

by [Barry Schwabsky](#) on [May 29, 2016](#)



I won't be getting to Denver to see the exhibition [Women of Abstract Expressionism](#), curated by Gwen F. Chanzit, and chances are I won't be getting to Charlotte or Palm Springs to see its subsequent

iterations; with luck, I just might make it to London where the show will end its tour in the summer of 2017. So I'm glad I've got the [catalogue](#) at least. This is a necessary show and publication — though also just a stopgap until something more comprehensive comes along. We think the canon of American art of the 1940s and '50s is set in stone, but we've got a lot of looking still to do. The exhibition itself includes works by a dozen East and West Coast artists whose work I know well (Lee Krasner, Joan Mitchell), ones whose names I've come across periodically over the years without ever learning much about them (Sonia Gechtoff, Ethel Schwabacher), and a few who are completely new to me (Mary Abbott, Judith Godwin). The catalogue includes essays (by Joan Marter, Ellen G. Landau, Susan Landauer, and Robert Hobbs, as well as an interview with Irving Sandler and an introduction by the curator) that are in themselves excellent but only begin to cover the territory. Better still, there are images and a bit of biographical information about many more artists than those in the show, and these include some of the ones I'd be most curious about. Of course, reproductions can be misleading, but the works of Michael West (born Corinne Michelle West, 1908-1991) in particular look terrific — gutsy, physical, and yet hauntingly self-erasing. The single reproduced painting by Vivian Springford (1914-2003) makes me want to see more, too. There's a 1941 canvas by California sculptor Claire Falkenstein that could easily have been captioned as having been painted this year by Amy Sillman — how fresh is that? And what about West Coast Asian-Americans Bernice Bing (1936-1998) and Emiko Nakano (1925-1990)? This book left me hungry for more illustrations and much more biographical data about these artists, who accomplished what they could against great odds. It left me a bit melancholy, too. Without some concerted effort today, these artists are still all too likely, for the most part, to sink back into the obscurity they fought against as hard as they could. By chance, just after reading this catalogue, I came across a letter to the editor in the London Review of Books responding to a review of a book on Grace Hartigan, one of the anointed "Women of Abstract Expressionism." The letter writer, one David Hass of northwest London, notes that the reviewer's rundown of women painters in New York in the 1950s omits a certain Dorothy Heller, who, according to Hass (I wonder what his source is), was once named by Clement Greenberg as "the finest woman painter in America," adding that she exhibited with the Tibor de Nagy, Poindexter, and Betty Parsons Galleries. Heller goes unmentioned in *Women of Abstract Expressionism*. It seems there's more research to be done.

[Women of Abstract Expressionism](#), ed. by Joan Marter (2016) is published by the Denver Art Museum in association with Yale University Press and is available from [Amazon](#) and other online booksellers.

[Bernice Bing](#)[Claire Falkenstein](#)[Denver Art Museum](#)[Dorothy Heller](#)[Ellen G. Landau](#)[Emiko Nakano](#)[Featured](#)[Gwen F. Chanzit](#)[Irving Sandler](#)[Joan Marter](#)[Reader's Diary](#)[Robert Hobbs](#)[Susan Landauer](#)[Vivian Springford](#)[Yale University Press](#)