

# CONTRADICTIONS IN PAINT

BY MEISHA ROSENBERG

## GRACE HARTIGAN: A SURVEY

OPALKA GALLERY, THROUGH OCT. 19

GRACE HARTIGAN BEGAN HER PAINTING career as a successful abstract expressionist in the 1940s, but has changed, chameleonlike, ever since. There are stages of her work, which has evolved over decades—she was born in 1922, and paintings on display date as recently as 2002—but it is impossible to pin the artist down to any one movement or 'ism.' Her sometimes intimidatingly large canvases of 6 or even 9 feet pose beneficial challenges in an age of thumbnail characterizations and postpop art, when everything is supposed to be fast, easy, and brandable. Hartigan reminds us that art doesn't have to be instantaneous: It can be difficult, ever-changing, and still meaningful.

This survey at the Opalka Gallery does justice to Hartigan's wide-ranging trajectory, although paintings from the late '50s and early '60s—an important phase—are not represented. Two medium-sized early abstract works (*Donna* and *White*, both from 1951), marked by a mastery of composition and a color scheme with lots of gray tones,

join a wonderful small yellow, white and black collaged painting (*Untitled*, 1949), to introduce her as an important abstract expressionist.

Hartigan rubbed elbows with Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock and was close with poet Frank O'Hara. In 1956, the Museum of Modern Art staged *Twelve Americans*, an exhibition that hailed the second generation of abstract expressionists; Hartigan was the only woman chosen for the show. Nelson Rockefeller bought one of her oils, *City Life* (1956). She was celebrated in the pages of *Life* magazine and in *Newsweek*.

Her fame ebbed quickly, but this exhibition demonstrates a restless imagination constantly reinventing itself. *Rockefeller Center* (1990), could be by an entirely different artist from the creator of the '50s paintings. Gone are the carefully networked abstract schemes of swooshes and crosses (gone, too, are the thick black outlines she favored in the '60s and '70s). Rockefeller Center instead creates open planes that clash with riotous splashes in bright red, blue, and white with rubbed-out areas, so that one gets the visceral sense of participating in a splashy (or bloody?) frenzy of public delight.

One theme uniting her work is its preoccupation with symbols of American

identity. An example here, *Hollywood Interior* (1993), poses vacuous women on the telephone, one of them a hot pink silhouette. Some of her early paintings delighted in American consumerism; this era of her work is not represented in this survey, which is unfortunate, because it is one of her best.

By the 1960s, she had moved to Baltimore, where she remains today. She has had fairly tumultuous relationships, marrying a few times and going through treatment for alcoholism, and her work's evolution reflects an up-and-down pattern. Paintings from the '70s such as *Have You Ever Seen Spain?* (1974) and *Bread Sculpture* (1977) vacillate between a manic energy with hot colors and an empty, depressed mood transmitted by the eyes of cartoonish characters. Her '70s work, read by some as aligned with pop art (although she rejects pop art's ideology), appears deliberately ugly. *Dolls* (1976) follows a trend in Hartigan's painting of ironically depicting femininity in naïf tableaux that can be aptly compared to street mural art. The darkly colored *Male Image* (1966) also has something to say about gender. It is a wall of paint, a labyrinth of phallic shapes with dead ends. Much of her work presents this kind of barrier to visual entry with a flattened, warped perspective and jarring colors.

Making yet another total turnaround, paintings in the '80s and beyond celebrate color and texture: *Gondolas* and *Towers, Venice* (both 1990) are in watercolors, while *Greuze's Woman in White* (2002) highlights simple, striking pinks and grays.

*Follies of 1934* (1989) summarizes for me Hartigan's many contradictions: It juxtaposes four large, cartoonish female figures on a beautiful splattered-pastel ground of light blue, darker purple, pink, and gold. The lovely splashes and gradations of color seem to contrast with the crudely drawn women, but their comical-sad figures give the painting form and life.

Hartigan's large-scale paintings must be seen from a distance, and the Opalka Gallery, which is one big airy room, makes an ideal space for viewing. There isn't much curatorial guidance—one short textual summary hangs on a wall, although a brief film clip and some books on display help.

At various times in her career, male mentors gave Hartigan advice: Isaac Lane Muse, also a painter and her partner in the late 1940s, told her not to paint abstractly, while the critic Clement Greenberg told her, when she had begun a series interpreting old master paintings, to return to pure abstraction. Yet she insisted on her diverse modes. Combining an abstract-expressionist style with a sometimes creepy primitivism, her crowded, boisterous canvases stubbornly and, sometimes delightfully, persist in being what they are. ■



Manic energy: Hartigan's *Bestiary* (1974).