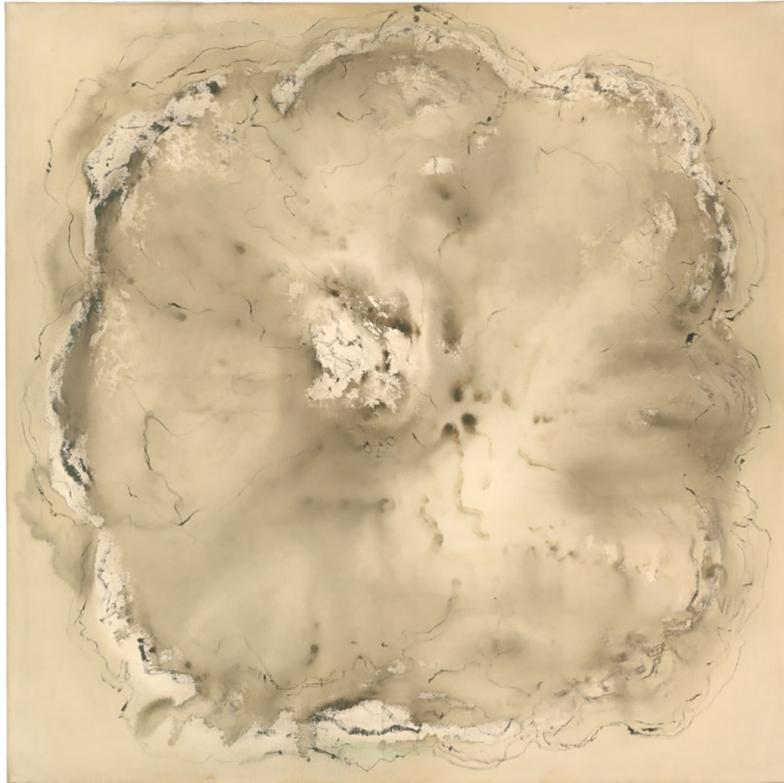


VAN DOREN
WAXTER

ARTFORUM

February 2019 Issue



Hedda Sterne, *Untitled*, 1967, acrylic on canvas, 64 × 64".

Hedda Sterne

VAN DOREN WAXTER | 23 EAST 73RD STREET

In Nina Leen's iconic photograph *The Irascibles*, painter Hedda Sterne stands on a table behind a group of fourteen abstract painters, all men, who confront the camera with somber expressions. In her coat and hat, with a shiny purse dangling from folded arms, she towers over Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Ad Reinhardt, and the rest. When it was published in the January 1951 issue of *Life* magazine, the picture bestowed upon the enigmatic Sterne a mythic status. She was posed at a slight remove from the group, her role unclear: Was she a fellow artist or a muse? Despite her extraordinary life and achievements—she studied at the Fernand Léger Studio in Paris, exhibited at the legendary Salon des Surindépendants of 1938, narrowly escaped German-occupied Romania before settling in the US in 1941, showed in New York at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century Gallery and the Betty Parsons Gallery, married Saul Steinberg, and died in 2011 at the age of one hundred—Sterne saw her work relegated, for the most part, to the darker corners of history.

Yet over the past fifteen years, interest in her art has returned. A traveling retrospective of her work was organized by the Krannert Art Museum at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2006. Some of her most important paintings from the mid-'50s were included in "America Is Hard to See," a 2015 collection-based survey at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art, and in "Making Space: Women Artists and Postwar Abstraction" at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 2017. The launch of the Hedda Sterne Foundation has laid the groundwork for a critical reappraisal of her practice. In 2016 Van Doren Waxter presented "Machines, 1947–1951," an engrossing show of seven paintings and seven drawings featuring anthropomorphized airplanes, lampposts, and farm equipment, both menacing and exuberant. The most recent exhibition, "Structures and Landscapes, 1950–1968," was less focused—the nonchronological hang encouraged viewers to make connections between the formally disparate works. One could take note of the skillful ways in which Sterne used black, for example (in her hands, the color hovered at the threshold between sumptuousness and horror), or the vertical scaffolds around which many of the pieces were organized. But it was difficult to grasp how and why she moved from the jubilant goldenrod, canary, and mustard strokes of *Yellow Structure*, 1952, to the scratched-and-scuffed swaths of black in *#1-1959* to the thick bands of tan and gray in *Vertical Horizontal*, 1963–64. Overall, the paintings were pleasing but hardly revelatory, nothing like the pieces presented in recent museum exhibitions—until I encountered *Untitled*, 1967. This stunning canvas, sixty-four by sixty-four inches square, was hung in a second room with another painting and a suite of ink drawings. Thinned acrylic had been poured onto the canvas when it was laid flat, so that pale-brown paint radiated out from the center, creating an irregular circle with scalloped edges. Blurry, sooty dots seemed burned into the surface, while florid black lines adorned the stain's perimeter. *Untitled's* curved forms and square boundaries interrupted the insistent verticality of the other paintings. Its pale colors stood in stark contrast to the overall dominance of dark tones, and its seemingly porous surface appeared to quiver gently, like a dispersing cloud of smoke.

The catalogue explained that *Untitled* is from a series of paintings, drawings, and prints that Sterne made after heads of lettuce in the late '60s, although a subtle smear of bright green along the bottom edge is the only clear nod to her source material. The nine leafy drawings nearby more closely resembled the vegetable, with their nervous, undulating lines and suggestively labial forms. But this work transcended its mundane subject, giving it the air of a celestial orb. The year she painted it, Sterne proposed to Betty Parsons that for her upcoming show, she hang some of the work from the ceiling. One can easily imagine this light, otherworldly piece floating overhead. Set apart from the rest in style and substance—not unlike Sterne in Leen's photo—*Untitled* beckoned us to go further into an underestimated artist's work and legacy.

— *Rachel Churner*