NINE WOMEN PAINTERS

BENNINGTON COLLEGE GALLERY

MARCH TWENTIETH

TO

APRIL SECOND

1953

	Artist	Painting
1.	Fannie Hillsmith	Interior in Tan
2.	Alice Trumbull Mason	Slanted Weather
3.	Hedda Sterne	Bathroom Perspective
4.	Sonia Sekula	Another Mirror
5.	Pennerton West	Couple Waiting
6.	Helen Frankenthaler	Pillowcase No. 1
7.	Linda Lindeberg	No. 1,1953
8.	Joan Mitchell	Painting, 1952
9.	Perle Fine	Tyranny of Space, No. 4

Paintings loaned by courtesy of

1, Egan Gallery — 3, 4, 9, Parsons Gallery

5, 6, de Nagy Gallery — 7, B. Schaefer Gallery

2, 8, the artist

The struggle over whether or not a picture ought to contain identifiable objects, real or imaginary, has obscured a more radical cleavage of opinion. The case for or against "representational" painting folds up the moment somebody asks "representation of **what**?" You can label a **what** as an idea, an emotion, a fiction, a fact, a movement, etc. A tree is no more of a **what** on canvas than an expression of grief or the color green.

The radical cleavage, however, lies between two distinct notions: what a picture should **be**, and what it should **do**. The first, what a picture should **be**, is a classical notion. It involves stringent claims for beforehand judgment and carries with it a preconceived schema of elements which, once introduced in a certain fashion, should almost automatically produce the desired result. The difficulty and danger of the classical notion is that it is self-consciously **art**. All the elements may be present and yet the picture may **do** nothing.

The contrary notion . . . which is less a notion than an intense feeling . . . is, to be simple, romantic. In this view what the painting should **do** comes first. The artist seeks the shortest distance between two points, himself and the spectator. He is guided by intuition and works in a kind of uncalculated shorthand which may or may not involve the elements insisted upon in the classical notion. These elements mean nothing to him while he is working and appear only by accident. His picture will not **be** anything unless it **does** something and this something will be nothing preconceived but rather that which happens in the process of painting. The result is not desired in advance, it is **seen** when it happens and the painting is finished. The danger and difficulty here is that the subjectivity may become so personal as to be incommunicable.

Of course, the world is not neatly divided into classicists and romanticists. By nature or influence a painter may tend toward one or the other. At times the tension between the two views within the same individual may be so equalized he is frustrated entirely; at other times he may be so influenced by a current style that he is working at opposition to himself. A painter who should work intuitively will not be able to sustain his emotional interest in a lengthy, planned maneuver and his work will go dead. In the opposite situation, nothing will be realized but sorrow. The Socratic injunction to "know thyself" is a categorical imperative.

The distinction, if a painting should **be** or **do**, fades somewhat as the painter's work becomes history. Great intuitive painting has elements unrecognized in its day, but later discovered through analysis, these elements may be so ordered as to form the basis of a **school** in the classical sense. Yet since it is not hard to note the degree to which an artist solves his problems as he works, these problems will be solved in terms of classical elements, though the individual artist may work intuitively. He will tap his knowledge, however subconsciously. Painting, regardless of all the theoretic denial of some artists and in spite of the unperceptive groans of the academicians, can never depart very far from its elements: form, color, spatial depth and spread, etc. And the least thing we have to worry about is whether it is objective or non-objective, representational or abstract . . . matters largely decided by attitudes outside the final realm of art. What we should be concerned with is the success the artist has in making his picture either **be** or **do**. And, paradoxically, if he succeeds in either he shall have succeeded in doing both.

Of these nine painters, the pictures of seven fall loosely into a style usually called Abstract Expressionism, a style romantic at base and counting heavily on intuition and discovery for its effects. The other two, by Fannie Hillsmith and Alice Trumbull Mason, are examples of the classical.

Fannie Hillsmith's painting indicates that she has a clear image in her mind of what a picture should be before she begins work. One would guess she makes sketches and takes a long while to complete a canvas. Her system of values, her foreknowledge, is essentially cubist and the effect, a restrained dryness, reminds one of the early Leger.

Alice Trumbull Mason also comes out of a tradition established in cubist principles. One sees that the design and the formal means of composing it are well worked out in advance and that her problem while painting will be to avoid becoming involved in other than a purely objective and compositional manner.

I sense a division between what a painting should **be** and what it should **do** in the pictures from Hedda Sterne and Sonia Sekula. In neither is it fatal since both lean heavily enough on intuition to define their painting in terms of the emotional impact they seek rather than the ordering of given elements. Yet the elements are strongly present, though introduced it would seem in order to be obscured. It is a delicate position, and can account for some of the best and some of the worst painting. An artist so divided ought to be judged, like Shakespeare, on his total output rather than on single pictures.

Pennerton West, Helen Frankenthaler and Linda Lindeberg demonstrate how clearly romantic painters reveal themselves through their techniques in handling the materials. Paint is not a medium but a part of the expression. Of the three, Pennerton West is the most abandoned to intuitional expression; Linda Lindeberg, the least. One knows West works fast, Lindeberg slowly. Neither has a predetermined notion of what the picture should be, but waits to see what it has done. Frankenthaler is probably also a fast painter but her canvas does not become her palette; she can paint thinly because she sees what is going to happen before she does it.

Joan Mitchell compares with Frankenthaler in this last respect, but perhaps steals a little more from the classical method. At first glance her painting seems to slash out in protest against organization of any given elements but on close inspection one finds her brush has been loaded with the right color and applied, as Cezanne used to, in a very exacting manner.

Perle Fine is the boldest of all, and is willing to risk everything (the prime quality needed for success in the romantic approach). Beginning with no other elements than paint, color and canvas and, indeed, an exceptionally clear idea of what a painting should **do**, she comes out with a certainty of statement we are accustomed to find only in classical art.

It is the tension between these two modes which characterizes and accounts for the unprecedented vitality of modern painting. Since the recent war, the romantics have had a slight edge (romantic as herein used applies to the point of view of the artist and has nothing to do with subject matter). Nevertheless, the sharp conflict between them is analogous to all other divisions in modern life. There are those, for example, who are certain beforehand what the political organization of society should **be**, and there are those who are equally certain what it should **do**. But art feels rather than determines such conflicts and merely stands as historical evidence of them.

E C Goossen