
ART • WEEKEND

Revisiting the Legacy of Women at Black Mountain College

The school's loosely structured pedagogical model allowed women to play vital roles throughout Black Mountain's brief history.

Chris Crosman July 7, 2018



Susan Weil, "Memory" (2008), acrylic on canvas, 27 x 23 x 2.5 inches (all images courtesy of Yvette Torres Fine Art)

ROCKLAND, Maine — Yvette Torres Fine Art is the perfect backdrop for the eclectic, wildly engaging, museum worthy exhibition [*Women of Black Mountain College*](#). The nine artists included in the exhibition would surely have loved it; their works rhyme with the informal, friendly gallery, reverberating with the sounds of Rockland's Main Street.

Founded in 1933, Black Mountain College was located in the Blue Ridge Mountains near Asheville, North Carolina. The curriculum was loosely structured around John Dewey's progressive educational theories as well as the concept of a total work of art

(*Gesamtkunstwerk*) pioneered at the Bauhaus

in Weimar and Dessau, Germany, which closed in 1933. Several of its teachers were

former Bauhaus instructors, including Josef and Anni Albers. Others, like Ilya Bolotowsky, brought related European movements centering on non-objective abstraction and universal idealism. A defining characteristic of the school was its blurring of lines between teacher and student. This loosely structured pedagogy model allowed women to play vital roles throughout its brief history.

Black Mountain was also a beacon of civil rights. The school's policies countered traditional gender and racial boundaries and biases as it encouraged crossing, merging and mingling among disciplines. A handful of African-Americans came to the school, including Jacob Lawrence and his wife Gwendolyn Knight, who taught there.



Lorna Blaine Halper, "Untitled" (not dated), oil on canvas, 26.5 x 18.5 inches

Dancers, poets, actors, architects, sculptors, photographers, writers and anyone with a creative inclination were recruited, mostly by word of mouth. The only expectations were a shared sense of adventure and a willingness to explore new or innovative ideas, in their own work and that of others.

At age 88, Susan Weil is one of Black Mountain's last living alumni. Perhaps best known for her collaborations with her former husband, the late Robert Rauschenberg, she remains an active presence in the art world. Weil's own work has long addressed the fluid gap between art and life that she and Rauschenberg sought to activate. In *Women of Black Mountain College*, a seductively subversive multi-part painting, "Memory"

(2008), arranges three monochrome panels atop what appears to be a self-portrait, peeking out from beneath the color panels. The importance of Weil's practice has never been adequately examined; she has yet to receive a retrospective exhibition at a New York museum, although she has lived and worked in the city for most of her life.

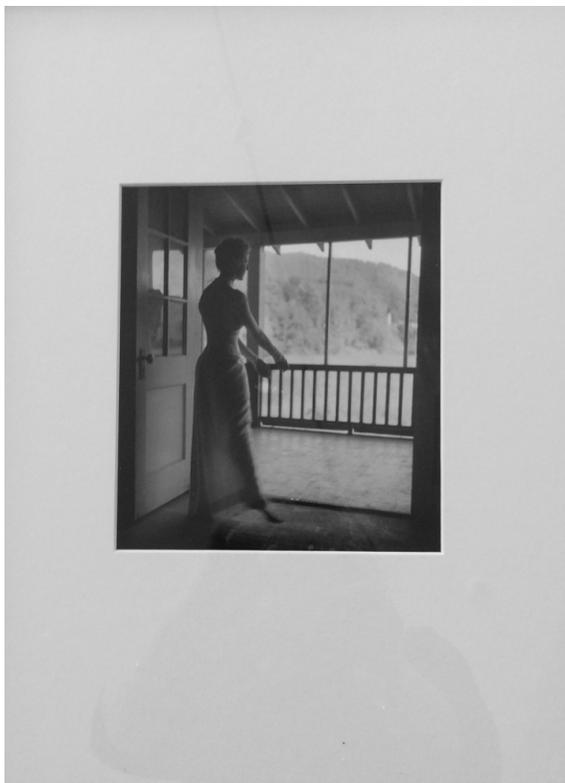
Other notable artists in the exhibition include Karen Karnes, primarily known for her innovative salt-glazed and wood-fired pottery; Lorna Blaine Halper, who recalled that studies with Josef Albers allowed her to see the “bones and muscle” of a visual world; and Elizabeth Jennerjahn, a fiber artist and dancer, whose image as a free spirit is familiar from photographs by her husband, Pete Jennerjahn.

An untitled vase by Karnes from 1990 resembles a slender torso with perfect posture, an androgynous, well-balanced marriage of organic and geometric form, while Jennerjahn’s brightly colored textiles suggest life as they float freely from the ceiling, dancing in the gallery’s natural light; Halper’s abstract silkscreen prints evoke the stylized graphics of the Bauhaus aesthetic.

Cora Kelley Ward was a well-respected artist whose late-career paintings caught the eye and admiration of Clement Greenberg. An untitled painting from 1954, like many of her best works, consists of an overall color field, in this case, a tactile, red-orange expanse articulated by flickering linear elements which seem to pulse with organic life. A native of Louisiana, she lived most of her adult life in New York where she became a one of the foremost photographers to document revelatory moments in the New York art scene from the mid-1950s through the 1980s.

Hazel Larsen Archer was both a teacher and student at Black Mountain College. Her photographs provide the most comprehensive visual record of life at the school. An untitled and undated photograph by Archer depicts a backlit Katherine Litz standing in a doorway, motionless but embodying dance through the arch of her back and pointed toe, and the sensuous, torso-caressing light animating the image.

M.C. Richards, a nationally acclaimed poet, taught writing and literature but was also a pottery student under Karen Karnes. Richards participated in what may have been the first Happening in 1952, collaborating in a staged but improvisational event with John Cage, David Tudor, Robert Rauschenberg, and Merce Cunningham, among others. Elaine Schmitt Urbain captures her remarkable spirit in an informal sketch.



Hazel Larsen Archer, "Untitled" (not dated)

Urbain is also represented by a drawing titled "The Conversation," a dual portrait of Black Mountain cohorts Ruth Asawa and Ray Johnson — the latter perhaps the most free-spirited artist in the history of post-War contemporary art. Another portrait of Ray Johnson is attributed to both Urbain and Asawa. It is impossible to say who contributed what in this wonderfully expressive work, which — like so many works in this exhibition — exquisitely captures the lightness of being that was the essence of Black Mountain.

Thoughtfully and meticulously curated by Yvette Torres, the installation suggests exuberant cross-talk among the exhibited paintings, ceramics, textiles and photos — the kind that is touchingly personal, intimate and disjointed, as if overheard at a summer cocktail party among close friends, which the artists were. Most of them knew each other during and after their sojourns at the school, yet many remain unknown to the wider art world.



Elaine Schmitt Urbain, "The Conversation" (1984), ink on paper, 15 x 22 inches

The diverse artworks in the exhibition are deceptively unassuming. Although modestly presented, its richness and depth rewards close looking. The work reflects an extraordinary moment and place, immensely enriched by the artists' presence. They provided the necessary fire, air and grace that artists found at Black Mountain College and that it's fair to say could not have existed elsewhere in the male-dominated, mid-

century American art world.

Women of Black Mountain College celebrates an exemplary and diverse group of artists, as well as the unique place in which women were integral contributors, equal to men and critical to advancing the idea and look of contemporary art in

America. Their work has never been more necessary or inspiring. To paraphrase what has been rightly said about Black Mountain poet Robert Creeley, there is no American art without theirs.

Women of Black Mountain College *continues at Yvette Torres Fine Art (464 Main Street, Rockland, Maine) through July 29. There will be a poetry reading including artists in the exhibition at 4 p.m. on July 15.*

MORE FROM HYPERALLERGIC