

The Liberation of Form: Four American Abstractionists

September 26 – November 22, 2019

The fact that a new mode of art expression has become more strongly established, that neither heated contradictory discussions nor any available means can stop its natural growth, is sufficient proof of its vitality. Long enough have artists submitted to pretensions of public opinion and lost more or less the respect of a public that has tried to deny them the right of liberation. –Frederick Kann, 1938

Frederick Kann's essay, "In Defense of Abstract Art", published in 1938 in the first American Abstract Artists exhibition catalogue, was a frustrated response to both a Depression-era public hostile to abstract art, and the apparent unwillingness of New York art institutions to display the work of contemporary American abstractionists. Kann was referring to a liberation from the objective, representational art that dominated the 1930s American art scene through the popular Regionalism and Social Realism styles. Despite this atmosphere, Kann, along with Charles Biederman, Flora Crockett, and Albert Swinden continued to work towards pure abstraction throughout the mid-20th century. Viewing pure abstraction as a continuation of the trajectory of art history, a way to communicate the natural world without imitation, and a method of constant creation, these four artists focused increasingly on the unity and concentration of form.

Pure Abstraction—Pure Creation

During the 1930s, the idea that pure abstraction not only had failed to create universal imagery, but was now elitist and inaccessible to the general public, circulated and created factions even within the New York art community. The atmosphere for abstraction was so inhospitable that, as Susan Larsen notes, "many pioneers of abstraction were now returning to the figure and landscape and also to political subjects." Yet, despite this trend, artists like Biederman, Kann, and others were convinced that "abstraction was still a young language and capable of revealing the structural realities of nature." Biederman, who often lamented that the artists around him were always doing the same thing, aimed to look to nature as a source without manipulating it, declaring in 1936 that he "could no longer view nature in terms of art." Likewise, Kann heavily advocated for pure creation as opposed to imitation of nature, with the goal of giving new forms to "nature's working process." Both Swinden and Kann, in their essays for the first exhibition of AAA in 1938, expressed their belief that abstraction is both a continuation of and a necessary break with the

MEREDITH WARD FINE ART

history of art. Swinden wrote, “the abstract method may be understood as a direct concern with the extension of principles used by all the significant artists of the past. What we examine and are affected by in any work of art, past or present, are the relationships expressed in it.” By distilling and focusing on the relationships between forms, abstract artists could create works with more precise and penetrating expression than artists of the past. Stating that there is little to achieve by repeating the art of the past within the context of the present, Kann inquired, “What shall we do? Are we going to stop right here and keep trying to repeat ourselves forever?” Flora Crockett echoed Kann’s concern in her speech to the American Association of University Professors at Clarkson University in 1939, when she asked, “Is art education to be dead and boring or creative and living?”

To Paris and Back—The Abstractions of Biederman, Crockett, and Kann

Birthplace of the avant-garde, Paris was the center of art world in the early 20th century and attracted artists from all over Europe and the Americas who wanted to study modern visual language. Both Frederick Kann and Flora Crockett resided in Paris for significant period of time between 1924 and 1937. Kann began painting in an abstract style after moving to Paris in 1927, teaching and exhibiting with various groups associated with international abstract artist community, including *Abstraction-Création Non-Figuratif* and *Les Artistes Musicalistes*. After moving to Paris in 1924, Crockett studied at the L’Ecole du Louvre and the Sorbonne, and in the late 1930s exhibited at various Parisian salons and galleries, including *Les Surindépendant* for three years, where Kann also exhibited in 1936. She enrolled as a student at Fernand Léger’s Académie Moderne in 1936, where Amédée Ozenfant joined the faculty in a year later, and eventually was named the director of the school until it closed in 1931. Charles Biederman’s time in Paris was relatively short, although he had had access to contemporary European works, including several by Arp and Mirò, through Albert Gallatin’s Museum of Living Art when he moved to New York City in 1934. During his eight months in Paris between 1936 and 1937, Biederman visited a great number of artists including the Surrealists whose work he had admired in New York, and many members of the prominent abstract art alliance *Abstraction-Création*. It is interesting to speculate about the cross-fertilization that occurred through groups like *Abstraction-Création* and *Les Surindépendant* with which Biederman, Crockett, and Kann were all directly or indirectly associated. Perhaps due to their common engagement with the Parisian art world during the height of Surrealism, Biederman, Crockett, and Kann moved through a period of biomorphic, Surrealist-inspired abstraction during this period.

MEREDITH WARD FINE ART

In Biederman's brightly colored canvases of the early to mid-1930s, which feature unidentifiable creatures, outstretched wings, and gliding serpentine forms, the influence of Arp and Mirò's biomorphic Surrealism is evident. Perhaps because of his contrarian personality, Biederman turned away from the prevalent Surrealism and his biomorphic canvases during his time in Paris. Studio visits to Russian constructivist Antoine Pevsner and leading De Stijl artist Piet Mondrian had a lasting impact on him, as did his relationship with Fernand Léger. Noting Léger's influence, Susan Larsen states, "Biederman's [work] of this period has much in common with machine-age design and shows a taste for the geometric combined with the frank interest in the new industrial landscape." Towards the end of the 1930s, Biederman's work became increasingly geometric and three-dimensional until he abandoned painting in favor of sculpture for the remainder of his career.

Many of Frederick Kann's works from the early 1930s present a mass of intersecting geometric planes and nebulous forms that float across an eerie landscape. However, like Biederman, within the decade these echoes of Surrealism disappear from his work. Before returning to the United States to teach at Kansas City Art Institute in 1936, Kann signed the Dimensionist Manifesto along with Arp, Picabia, Kandinsky, Delaunay, Duchamp, Mirò, Moholy-Nagy, and Calder. Expressing the idea of "Cosmic Art", the Dimensionist Manifesto upheld the ability of modern art to investigate modern science, particularly new conceptions of time and space. On Kann's works of the 1930s, Larsen writes, "he charted the ever-changing dynamism of the universe, the action of particles of nature, the infinite complexities of human perception journeying through time and space." While his goals of exploring universal mysteries and providing "the viewer with greater pleasure and an abundant sense of joy" endured, in the mid 1930s he shed his atmospheric abstractions for flatter imagery that retained its geometric planes and overlapping forms.

Flora Crockett's engagement with the avant-garde community in Paris led her to paint non-objective compositions when she returned to the United States in 1937. Again, the influence of Léger and Ozenfant's Purism is clearly evident in Crockett's work from the 1930s, becoming more thoroughly subsumed in her own style in her abstractions of the 1940s. In these biomorphic abstractions, amoeba and serpentine forms move within a patterned or shimmering background. These "mental landscapes" have an otherworldly presence akin to Kann's supernatural landscapes as well as the liveliness of Biederman's biomorphic canvases. After working as artillery inspector during the war, Crockett held a variety of jobs to make ends meet and seemingly did not return to painting until the mid 1960s, when she pushed her work further into the realm of pure abstraction, flattening her canvases by tangling the distinction between color and form. In reference to Crockett's paintings of the 1960s, *New York Times* critic Roberta Smith notes:

MEREDITH WARD FINE ART

Ms. Crockett's paintings are elegant, knowing and at ease, made by a practiced hand. They indicate a familiarity with 20th century abstraction: Mondrian's quietly robust brushwork, and the levitating compositions of Kandinsky, Mirò and Léger...But the sharp colors and dynamic compositions feel hip, fresh and very much her own.

Simplification—The mature work of Swinden

Due to a studio fire in 1940, we do not know much of Albert Swinden's works from his formative years. He began working abstractly in the late 1920s but, unlike Biederman, Crockett, and Kann, did not spend time in Paris. Like Frederick Kann, Swinden was a founding member of the alliance American Abstract Artists (AAA), which aimed to provide a forum for abstract artists to exchange ideas and exhibit their work. Additionally, he served a term as secretary and many meetings were held in his studio. In 1938, Swinden penned "On Simplification" in which he states, "By first limiting oneself great concentration is made possible, permitting progression to fuller, richer forms, I understand simplification to mean a reduction of forms to an equivalent concept which embraces greater clarity and precision." Akin to Flora Crockett's later abstractions, Swinden does not treat color and form as separate entities. Larsen writes:

His handling of color balance is absolutely unique. He would often emphasize one color by presenting it in as a clustered geometric core, risking a state of imbalance only to restore order by the intricately calibrated structure of his interwoven planes. It is a distinctive and amusing strategy, highly dramatic and completely his own.

In his mature works, Swinden borrows elements from avant-garde styles such as Cubism, Fauvism, and DeStijl, but his exceptional, color-blocked, rhythmically geometric compositions are thoroughly original.

Throughout their careers, all four artists pushed their work further into pure abstraction, striving to create within the confines of non-objective art. Charles Biederman swiftly worked through European affected canvases to three-dimensional geometric constructions and sculpture. Frederick Kann's work retained a nucleus of mysticism as he compressed and reassembled geometric planes. Achieving both "simplification" and invention, Albert Swinden united color and geometric form to create cadenced yet serene surfaces. Flora Crockett's bold and vibrant early abstractions teem with life, evolving into confident explorations of form, line, and color. Champions of abstraction, all four artists persevered with their vision of liberation through form. The range of imagery they produced is a testament to their belief that abstraction could lead to boundless creation and innovation.