

Sculptors in the Shadow of a Minimalist Master

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RIDGEFIELD, Conn. — The German-born American sculptor Eva Hesse left an indelible stamp on Minimalism. By the time she died of brain cancer at the age of 34 in 1970, she had converted the style's often rigid, repeating forms into containers of charged feeling. She had also proved that new materials like resin, latex and everyday string could reflect an artist's touch as powerfully as paint or clay.

Her art came in squares and spheres, but in also bulbous phallic shapes and chaotic linear skeins; her pieces sat on the floor, but also hung suggestively from walls and ceilings; her methods included casting, but also rather obsessive wrapping and, at certain points, a practice of shading reliefs with delicate gradations of gray and black.

In all, Hesse's beautifully wavering surfaces and ambiguous forms balanced Minimalism's intellectual rigor and physical inventiveness with unusual degrees of both humor and restrained expressionism. Not surprisingly, her achievement set, and still sets, a high standard.

The height of that standard is especially noticeable at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art in Ridgefield, where "In the Lineage of Eva Hesse," a flawed if engaging show of work by eight sculptors, has been organized by Barry Rosenberg, the museum's director, and Marc L. Straus, a physician, collector and museum trustee. The eight artists represented here include well-known figures like Kiki Smith, Rona Pondick and Maureen Conner, all of whom have been in recent Whitney Biennials, as well as Petah Coyne and the relative newcomers Lisa Hoke, Julie Trager, Linda Matalon and Marcia Lyons.

As a rule, it is unfair to burden recent art with its precedents, but "In the Lineage" is a partial exception. Hesse's example has been especially liberating for younger women working in sculpture; all the artists here are indebted to the form or spirit of her art, as several of them acknowledge in the round-table discussion that serves as one of the catalogue's essays. Specifically, almost all have in some way excavated and made more overt the intimations of the body, of sexuality and of the feminine that inhabit the core of Hesse's art.

Hesse herself is represented here by only three monographic catalogues of her work that visitors may read or leaf through: a helpful thing to do, although some actual examples of her sculptures, or enlarged photographs of them, would have been much better, needless to say. Nonetheless, her presence is palpable, providing needed focus and coherence.

To move from gallery to gallery, examining the work of each artist and its relationship to Hesse's work, is to re-experience Hesse's achievement in bits and pieces and to ruminate on the ways and means of artistic influence. Her hands-on approach to idiosyncratic materials and processes, her penchant for obsessive, but su-

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The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art
A detail of "Little Bathers," by Rona Pondick, at the Aldrich Museum.

Eva Hesse showed a way of using both humor and sexuality.

premely controlled repetition, her eerie evocations of the body are all here, but in constantly shifting ratios and manifestations, as each artist takes what she wants and adds what she can.

In Kiki Smith's hands, the winding tubes and hanging strings of Hesse's sculptures become specific, metamorphosing into an umbilical cord connecting two life-size female figures made of cast paper, or turning into the strands of flowing hair and streaming breast milk in the rather sentimental "Mother," another husk-like paper figure. Ms. Smith's strongest contribution, however, is her most abstract: a thick, irregular blanket made of felt and human hair from 1988 titled "Dowry Cloth." Implicitly earthy, suggestive of a skin that is neither human nor animal, the piece evokes a sense of human experience that encompasses both suffering and perseverance.

Often what is added is a layer of social meaning, or ritual, as in Ms. Coyne's hanging, festering candelabra-wedding cake sculptures, made of chickenwire, ribbons and, most of all, white candles and their extensive drippings. These remarkable feats of pyromaniacal engineering make of the feminine something dense, fierce and a little crazed, despite the initial impression of delicacy. (Think of Miss Havisham.) But the best parts may simply be the large blotches of melted wax that have dripped to the floor.

Too often one has a sense of an artist's latching on to a signature material and never looking back. Ms. Trager works almost exclusively with artificial hair and mohair, her most effective piece being "Persephone," a small cyclone of black mohair lying on the floor that is at once a wig, an empty cocoon and an irregular spool of thread. Ms. Lyons concentrates on inflated inner tubes, bound with cord and dripped with resin to resemble female genitalia, which reduce the sexual subtleties of Hesse's art to sophomoric obviousness. And Ms. Hoke seems overly preoccupied with buttons, which she hangs in long Medusa-like strands, stuffs into tubes of gauze or baby-food jars, or embeds in wax. More developed is the work of Ms. Matalon, whose semi-abstract cone shapes, made of gauze, tar and

wax, perform double duty as breasts, female legs and vulvas without overdoing it.

The device of obsessive repetition makes its most riveting impression in Ms. Pondick's "Little Bathers," which consists of several hundred baseball-size pink plastic spheres, spread about the floor, their only feature a yellow-toothed mouth that seems about to swallow a small black wad. A rather frightening conflation of infancy and old age, and of eating and excavation, the piece gives Hesse's sculpture "Sequel" — a herd of little walnutlike spheres — a Surrealism-goes-Hollywood thrill that is a trifle cheap, bringing to mind less the fur-lined teacup of Meret Oppenheim than the movie "Gremlins."

And repetition makes its weakest impact in the video installation of Ms. Connor, in which six columns made of stacked, off-white lampshades, lighted from within and flickering with a video projection of a spider building a web and capturing an insect, bring to mind the translucent cylinders of Hesse's "Repetition Nineteen III," in the Museum of Modern Art. The idea

of Ms. Connor's columns as large abstract spider's eggs (which may be nothing she intended) fits with the many organic forms in this show, but her hands-off, distanced approach to her materials seems antithetical to Hesse's involved approach.

In the end, Hesse's art seems for the most part more profound, more physically considered and diverse, and more complex in meaning than anything here, making this show almost an inadvertent argument for her particular brand of impure abstraction. But the eight artists here are of a different time and generation, struggling to find a more explicit balance of the political, the personal and the formal. This show is a tribute to their determination, if not their triumph.

"In the Lineage of Eva Hesse" remains at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, 258 Main Street, Ridgefield, Conn., through May 1.