

Going Global

Abstract Art at Mid-Century

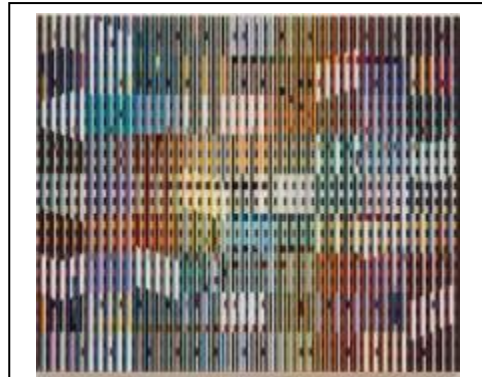
OVERVIEW

June 21, 2022— Like the US dollar, air travel, and space satellites, abstract art encircled the globe or at least the capitalist West during the mid-20th century. Whether with lush brushwork or hard, geometric edges, it was for a time the dominant form of avant-garde art. From some, abstraction symbolized the improvements of modern life—the technological and industrial wonders transforming how humans lived. For others, abstraction was yet another wave of cultural colonialism from Europe and America that displaced existing artistic practices. This exhibition shows just how far abstraction reached and some of the forms it took during the Cold War, when glossy art magazines, proliferating fairs, and commercial aviation brought an international art world into being.

Going Global has approximately 35 works by artists born in Argentina, Colombia, Germany, France, Hungary, Israel, Japan, Mexico, Portugal, Peru, the United Kingdom, Venezuela, and the United States—all of which come from the Museum’s permanent collection. It runs the gamut of mediums, from painting and sculpture to photography and lithography. Some artists even invented new mediums, including forms of kinetic art that appear to change as a spectator moves.

The presentation includes familiar names, such as Isamu Noguchi (b. USA, 1904–1988), Bridget Riley (b. UK, 1931), and Pierre Soulages (b. France, 1919). There are also artists who deserve broader followings, such as Kenzo Okada (b. Japan, 1902–1982), who arrived from Japan in 1949 and showed with Betty Parsons, one of the leading gallerists of the 1950s. There is also Edward Chávez (b. New Mexico, 1917–1995), a muralist for the Federal Art Project in the 1930s. His painting *Elemental Landscape* (1956) reconfigures the desert as a mosaic of earth tones and bright colors that might be mesas, dry riverbeds, or adobe buildings. His dazzling abstraction refutes the pernicious myth of an “empty” desert by evoking the millennia of human habitation before colonization. Maria Helena Vieira da Silva (b. Portugal, 1908–1992) is well known in France where she lived for 60 years. Her elegant blue and grey paintings suggest bustling cities or agricultural landscapes. Another abstract artist with a limited reputation outside of Europe is Ernst Wilhelm Nay (b. Germany, 1902–1968). The Santa Barbara Museum of Art owns a brilliantly colored abstraction of his that was shown in the German Pavilion of the 1956 Venice Biennale.

To make sense of the sprawling topic of global abstraction, the exhibition is divided into four sections: “Op Art,” “Layers,” “Gestural Abstraction,” and “Signs & Symbols.”



Yaacov Agam, *New Year, III*, 1971.
Acrylic on aluminum. SBMA, Gift of
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Society (ARS), New York

“Op Art,” short for Optical Art, was an international phenomenon in the 1960s that excited the public but was met with derision from critics. The artists wanted to use optical effects to break through the barriers of culture and history, to create art that reached directly into the mind of the viewer. Bridget Riley’s painting *Annul* from 1965 fades to white towards the center, as if being erased. Yaacov Agam (b. Israeli, 1928 active in Paris) uses a corrugated colored surface in *New Year, III* (1971), which appears to change as you move. Artists from Latin America used optical illusions or prompted viewers to move around to take in an artwork under varying conditions. *Going Global* has dazzling examples of works by Jesús Rafael Soto (b. Venezuela, 1923–2005, active Paris), Carlos Cruz-Diez (b. Venezuela, 1923–2019), Rogelio Polesello (b. Argentina, 1939–2014), and Eduardo Mac Entyre (b. Argentina, 1929–2014).

The “Layers” section considers artworks that depict shallow spaces and fractured or jigsaw-puzzle shaped forms, a visual strategy reflecting the legacy of cubism. Photographs by Kansuke Yamamoto (b. Japan, 1914–1987) and André Kertész (b. Hungary, 1894–1985, active New York) are in a dialogue with paintings by Ben Nicholson (b. UK, 1894–1982), Gunther Gerzso (b. Mexico, 1915–2000), and Mathias Goeritz (b. Germany, 1915–1990, active Mexico). The Museum’s holdings of Japanese modernist woodblock prints are also part of the conversation, including an exquisite print by Hiroyuki Tajima (b. Japan, 1911–1984).

“Gestural Abstraction” contains energetic paintings that hold an emotional charge, including some exquisite pieces by Soulages, Nay, Fernando de Szyszlo (b. Peru, 1925–2017), and Matsumi Kanemitsu (b. US, 1922–1992). The final section, “Signs & Symbols,” contains artists who use symbols, such as rows, road signs, and written language. These artists are less about visual abstractions than the philosophical and linguistic ones that shape language, thought, and how humans come to understand the world.

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