

George Adams Gallery

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Isobel Steele MacKinnon
March/April 2015

For the month of March, George Adams Gallery will exhibit paintings and drawings by Isobel Steele MacKinnon (1896-1972) in its Side Gallery. MacKinnon was an artist who lived and worked in Chicago and taught for 25 years at the Art Institute. This exhibition examines a formative body of work she made in Europe in the late 1920's and early 1930' while studying with Hans Hofmann. A concurrent exhibition in the gallery's main exhibition space, *Jack Beal: Hard Edge Paintings, 1968-1972* highlights MacKinnon and Beal's relationship as teacher and student. This is her first exhibition in a New York gallery.

MacKinnon's time in Europe between the Wars embodies the experience of the American abroad. And her years in Munich studying with Hofmann utterly transformed her work and her life. Prior to this, MacKinnon was an American Impressionist. After being exposed Hofmann's "push/pull" pictorial ideas, seeing cubism first hand as well as absorbing the trenchant atmosphere of Weimar Germany - MacKinnon became a Modernist. When she returned to the United States, she brought back these ideas about demarcating and enlivening the picture plane. As a teacher she turned these concepts into a sophisticated Method, which she then passed down to a generation of students, Jack Beal among them.

In a written appreciation by Jack Beal that accompanies the show, he remembers her distinct manner and searing intellect. He can vividly recall his first class with her - "Suddenly into the room there swept a Scottish noblewoman with a crown of silvery grey hair - tall and slim, she was dressed in a black tailored suit and sensible shoes. She began her lecture immediately and within moments we knew we were about to share a formidable experience - that Isobel Steele MacKinnon was a dynamic, imposing, enthusiastic and eccentric personality - and (as we were to learn later) able to inspire her students to emulate her spirit." Her classes were so focused on imparting knowledge and discussing the mysteries of how objects inhabit space that her students were known as "The Space Cadets."

Beal remembers MacKinnon frequently invoking Hofmann's ideas, yet he feels she expanded on his core ideas with more detail and connections to real life. She used the words and theories of psychology in the service of aesthetics. She urged her students to find the Gestalt of the painting or drawing, have empathy for your subject as well as to project oneself into every work. She instilled a doctrine of the five ways to analyze a picture - (1) the Picture plane (as window), (2) the Fifth Line (as entry), (3) Axis (as focus), (4) Clamshells (as heaven and earth), (5) Receding and Advancing Forms and Planes and Receding and Advancing Air. However, for Beal these seem dry because he remembers her "striding about the room with her customary evangelical fervor, exhorting us to "Feel the air moving.""

In taking in the force MacKinnon was as an artist and teacher, it is not a stretch to see traces of her ideas in the artists who made their mark in the decades that followed including Jim Nutt, Barbara Rossi, Christina Ramberg, Robert Lostutter and other Chicago Imagists.

This exhibition is presented in collaboration with and thanks to Corbett vs. Dempsey Gallery, Chicago.