

What Hesse, the Painter, Taught Hesse, the Sculptor

The art world tends to see Eva Hesse as an Athena-like figure, an adult from birth. Hesse was just 34 when she died of a brain tumor, leaving behind a prodigious body of work that continues to inform contemporary sculpture.

KAREN ROSENBERG

ART REVIEW

Yet as the Brooklyn Museum's exhibition "Eva Hesse Spectres 1960" makes clear, Hesse wasn't always so self-possessed.

The show's 19 paintings of shadowy figures predate her signature works, the arrangements of cloth and latex and wire that scrambled and softened the standard Minimalist vocabulary.

A few of these vulnerable, experimental canvases have made it into larger Hesse retrospectives, but should we care about them as a group?

We should, because they show Hesse finding her focus (if not yet her medium) and exorcising her influences, which extend from Munch to Giacometti and, especially, de Kooning. (In this regard the show is a surprising footnote to the big de Kooning retrospective that recently opened at the Museum of Modern Art.)

Organized by E. Luanne McKinnon, the director of the University of New Mexico Art Museum in Albuquerque, "Eva Hesse Spectres 1960" comes to Brooklyn by way of that museum and the Hammer Museum at the University of California, Los Angeles. Its Brooklyn presentation has been supervised by the curator Catherine Morris of the museum's Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, where the show is installed.

"Eva Hesse Spectres 1960" continues through Jan. 8 at the Brooklyn Museum, 200 Eastern Parkway, at Prospect Park; (718) 638-5000, brooklynmuseum.org.

In 1960 Hesse was 24 and had just graduated from the Yale School of Art, where the conflicting approaches of her teachers Josef Albers and Rico Lebrun — one a former Bauhaus director, the other a quasi-figurative painter — had left her without a clear mentor. Things were just as confusing outside school; the art world wasn't quite done with Abstract Expressionism, but Rauschenberg and Johns had nudged it toward Pop and Conceptual Art.

"The hell with them all," she wrote in her journal a few weeks before her graduation. "Paint yourself out, through and through, it will come by you alone. You must come to terms with your own

A young artist finding her focus and exorcising her influences.

work not with any other being."

And paint she did, making about 50 oils on canvas and Masonite in the course of a year. She was living in the West Village, in her first real apartment, squeezing in studio hours around various part-time jobs. She was in therapy too, processing the events of her extraordinarily difficult childhood: her German Jewish family's escape from Europe in 1938, when Hesse was 2, and later her parents' divorce and the suicide of her depression-prone mother.

A series of tortured apparitions emerged from her brush: big, skeletal heads pressed up against the picture plane, or smaller wraiths dancing or fighting. She handled the paint with abandon, but restricted her palette to

Eva Hesse Spectres 1960

Brooklyn Museum

smoggy grays and yellows (enlivened by the occasional flash of orange or magenta).

The eeriness of the paintings has less to do with their subject matter than with Hesse's "vacillating movement between flesh and paint, line and abstraction, fig-

ure and ground," as the catalog essayist Helen Molesworth observes.

At the Brooklyn Museum the paintings, all untitled, have been arranged by type: single heads (including self-portraits), small twinned figures and larger two-figure compositions. Any of these groups makes a fine starting point.

The heads feel almost scarily contemporary, as if Hesse had had premonitions of Jean-Michel Basquiat, Dana Schutz and Marlene Dumas. Some, with

dark hair, are thought to be self-portraits; others are blond or bald. All have hollow, masklike eyes and mouths. They're slippery, unpredictable beings rising up from the bottom of the picture or sidling into it.

The smaller figures, sketched quickly on Masonite panels, are more active. Willow sylphs force one another to the margins; zaftig Venuses collide like Sumo wrestlers. In these works Hesse turns Jungian theories of the divided self into a diverting cat-and-mouse game.

Even more gripping, though, are the three large, two-figure works. Here Hesse makes her most explicit references to Giacometti and de Kooning. In one image de Kooning scythelike line is more than evident in the high kick of a being muscling its way into the foreground. And in another, a hooded specter is accompanied by an aloof bride with spindly arms and a pointy head. The thin brush strokes that make up her veil form a delicate cage, as in a Giacometti portrait.

This last picture may be the show's most poignant, and also the most perplexing. Is Hesse identifying with the bride, or the specter? And what kind of marriage is this, anyway? As the catalog reminds us, "The Feminine Mystique" would not be published for another three years. And while Hesse would marry in 1961, she had not yet met the man who would become her husband (the sculptor Tom Doyle, from whom she separated in 1965).

The "Spectres," over all, are incredibly private works; Hesse made them for herself and did not show them during her lifetime. Even now, looking at them can feel a bit intrusive. But by watching Hesse "paint herself out" we can see just how, and with what difficulty, she found her way in.



URSULA HAUSER COLLECTION, SWITZERLAND

An untitled painting by Eva Hesse from 1960, part of a trove of about 50 oils on canvas that she made in her early 20s.