

Columbia Celebrates Laura Spong

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Laura Spong, "Untitled", c. 1965, lacquer and sawdust on masonite, 24 x 30 in.

work was selected from paintings in the Spong's possession rather than from all the work she has produced.

Still, the exhibition aims to do what solo exhibitions often do: show the work among its own and as such give the viewer a good idea of the sustained quality, the artist's ability to handle different sizes, formats and pallets and the variety as well as coherence within a body of work. Those elements are the main *raison d'être* for a solo exhibition, more important than a good line on the resume, especially later in a career. While an artist's work can look very good in group exhibitions, there's no substitute for seeing it among its own to experience breath and consistency. Spong's 80th birthday exhibition in 2006 at Gallery 80808/Vista Studios in Columbia, which presented more than 70 paintings from the previous decade, was a revelation in that respect.

The current exhibition also allows viewers to get a sense of the development of Spong's work, even though it's not precisely clear for all works when exactly she created them. Mark Flowers elsewhere in this catalogue points to the Cubist legacy that affected Spong's work from the late-1950s to mid-1960s. The pallet mostly was subdued, and the paintings had an angular, sometimes soft-geometric quality. This was certainly true for the few representational but abstracted paintings, decidedly modern, that Spong made of flowers, figures, architectural scenes and still lifes, which typically were produced as assignments for classes at the Columbia

Museum of Art. It also was true for many of the non-objective works, for which Spong always has had a strong preference, even though other paintings already displayed the more organic looseness she would become known for.

The paintings were very much of the time, not just because of Spong's use of era-defining media such as lacquer and sawdust. Still, they already were accomplished, which was underscored by the awards Spong won at prominent local and statewide art exhibitions. That some of the early work still is readily available is a stroke of luck. While Spong at best took a casual approach to preserving the work, a few exceptions notwithstanding, one of her sons kept a stash of them in a shed. Eventually they returned to her studio and were shown in an exhibition of early works at Columbia's if ART Gallery in 2007.

In the second half of the 1960s, Spong's production seems to have become more sporadic as she stayed busy with her children and their activities. In the early 1970s, Spong picked up steam again, still painting with lacquer on panel, creating paintings with more organic shapes, albeit in compositions that did not yet have the complexity of later work. After her husband's death in 1973, Spong took a full-time job, and painting again took a back seat. In the late 1970s, she nevertheless entered juried shows and had some exhibitions, in the latter showing older work, too.

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Laura Spong, "Hang Some O's", 2015, oil on canvas, 20 x 20 in.

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Not until Spong had resigned from her full-time job in 1983 and after that abandoned several short-lived occupations in the mid-1980s did she gear up to become a full-time artist. At first she took art classes again in the second half of the 1980s and resumed painting regularly, now exclusively in oils, mainly on canvas. In 1991, at age 65, she rented a studio at Vista Studios, where she has worked full time as an artist since.

Spong gradually developed what would become her mature style. Her late-1980s – early-1990s work veered from the angular to the organic, both within and between individual paintings. Large open areas or dense, fitful brushwork defined part of the work. As she truly hit her stride, Spong created more intricate paintings with complex, more-subtle compositions in any conceivable pallet. In them, large shapes and small scribbles and other marks interact at once with ease and tension. The square-inch action activates the large shapes and spaces, delivering at close range what the paintings promise at first encounter from a distance.

Spong now is widely considered among the state's most accomplished

non-objective painters. Her 80th and 85th birthday exhibitions were a smashing critical and commercial success, and in between those large shows, her work has been much in demand. Since 2006, several museums and prominent public and private art collections have acquired both early and current paintings. In the past decade, Spong has had solo exhibitions and participated in groups show in museums, art centers and galleries in the Carolinas, Georgia and Tennessee, her native state where she was born in Nashville and in 1948 graduated with an English degree at Vanderbilt University, taking two studio art classes.

Spong continues to challenge herself. In 2008, she created a 100" x 80" painting consisting of 25 small canvasses. Next, in 2007, she created one 80" x 60" in size consisting of 12 canvasses. In January – February 2014, just before her 89th birthday, she decided to really go big, creating single-canvas paintings of 96" x 192" and 72" x 149". She still paints five days a week and in late 2015 announced plans for another round of mural-size paintings.

Wim Roefs is the owner of if ART Gallery.



Laura Spong, "Primeval", 2015, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 in.

Laura Spong and the Relevancy of Painting

an essay by Mark Flowers

I recently had the honor of meeting Laura Spong. At 89, there was an intensity and sharpness to her that belied her age. Once you see her work in her modest studio you quickly realize that she is working in the moment, and that her visual language is very current. Her work reveals the energy of someone who has cheated the trappings of old-fashioned. Her work is relevant, vibrant and visually stunning. She paints among the now, not the forgotten. But her work has a history that reflects a life of searching for the image of now.

Early in her career she was dancing on the Cubist side of non-objective painting. Muted tones of grey and brown were the colors of serious artists at the time. Her structured composition soon evolved into more organic shapes, which stay with her today. Yet in those days of the late 1950s and early-1960s her works were more about searching. Today there is a confidence of imagery that shows she is familiar with her subject and now owns it. Maybe it is about the vibrant color she uses, or how she sets herself free from style, so heavily tagged by Cubism. The chaos and order of the imagery are in perfect competition. Without reference to recognizable form, the viewer "gets" the image. She would not be painting what she paints now if she hadn't traveled the journey. We are awash with the "bright new, young artist" of the moment. But give me an artist with the scars of a long journey any day of the week.

I tell my students in painting class this fable about the role of painting: In the distant past, most of us would have been some kind of indentured servant, possibly a farmer working for 'The Man' up on the hill. You slaved all week for whatever freedoms given by the one in charge. Your life had very little hope beyond the con-

finer of servitude. Every once in awhile you were allowed into the cathedral on the hill, the gathering place where you were taught the great lessons of life. Those lessons gave you hope for the future, mainly the afterlife, where you would be rewarded for the good life you lived.

In that place of lessons, there were images, amazing images that had all the trickeries of illusion. The images danced off the wall, they mesmerized you, made you humble and in awe of the lessons they told. You learned those lessons because the image delivered them convincingly. Painting was a god. Actually, the illusionary devices were a god. Painters figured out perspective, and all of a sudden the notion of illusionary space delivered the goods and kept the viewer entranced. They were the HDTV of the day.

Here we are in the 21st century. Images are the gods. Or perhaps it is the devices that deliver the images that are the gods. They come to us fast and furious. You wake up to your cell phone, tablet, and TV delivering visions of monkeys dancing in India, cats being tormented by cucumbers, politicians trying to sell you their version of reality, and horrific images that make you reach for the cat videos as a numbing antidote from reality. No longer the poor laborer planting potatoes, you are still enslaved. Your technology and the quest for connection still make you labor. In all of that bombardment of images, maybe, just maybe, we walk past a painting. We hardly give it a glance as we go about our daily lives. The static nature of a painting demands too much of our time. The glow of the flickering back-lit screen beckons. The image only allows a quick glance, and then we are on to something else.

A successful painting seduces you from across the room and asks you to look. It

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