

'Women Drive Culture': New SAMA Show Focuses on Texas Women Artists

by [Nicholas Frank](#) February 5, 2020



"Reflect" by Margo Sawyer is part of San Antonio Museum of Art's exhibition "Texas Women: A New History of Abstract Art," opening Feb. 7. Credit: Nicholas Frank / San Antonio Report

By all indications, 2020 is shaping up to be the year of the woman artist. In part to mark the 100th anniversary of American women achieving suffrage, arts institutions nationwide are focusing exclusively on women.

Outside Texas, the Smithsonian [Archives of American Art](#) is exploring "creative women who made their mark on American history," while the National Museum of American History is celebrating 2020 as the "[Year of the Woman](#)." In late 2019, the Baltimore Museum of Art announced that it will acquire only work by women artists during 2020, while the Nicolaysen Art Museum in Casper, Wyoming, [has declared](#) that the entire museum will show only women artists for 12 months.

Closer to home, Artpace opened its year with an all-woman show and a [gender parity pledge](#). Now, the San Antonio Museum of Art begins 2020 with [Texas Women: A New History of Abstract Art](#), opening Feb. 7.

Visually stunning and rich in variety, the exhibition gathers work by 17 women represented by 89 works of art in media ranging from paintings in poured oil, oil stick, acrylic, and watercolor, to collages of cyanotypes, Japanese paper, silverpoint, and digital media, to delicate drawings, ceramics, and cast iron and glass sculptures. Dates of the work range from 1947 to 2019, with artist ages from 37 to 100.

But the force of *Texas Women* is not in its numbers. Instead, the ambition, scale, and reach of its artists marks the importance of women artists to Texas art history.

"I don't think you can talk about Texas art without talking about women," said William Keyse Rudolph, interim director and chief curator. "Because women have, historically and stylistically, always driven Texas art. And we all know that, but maybe we need to say that more loudly."

Monumental abstractions by Houston painter Dorothy Hood tower over the second room of the Cowden Gallery, across from the delicate poured canvases of Marcelyn McNeil of Dallas. Glistening anthropomorphic ceramics by Sharon Engelstein in the next room play off of the layered geometries of Houstonian Pat Colville, and the environmentally-focused *Ghosts of the Mississippi* collage paintings of Liz Ward, one of two San Antonio artists in the show.

While Ward's paintings evoke the flowing course of the Mississippi River, Wimberly artist Catherine Lee's repetitive forms resemble artifacts and weavings, balanced between eccentric sculptural shapes and layered square-upon-square *Quanta* paintings. Dana Frankfort of Houston weaves a more lighthearted path to bridge language and visual

abstraction, with the words “Magical Marker” detectable in a brushy, purple and white 4-foot square painting from 2017.

The idea for the show surfaced one year ago, before the [October departure](#) of former director Katie Luber. With a Texas-focused show in mind, Luber, Rudolph, curator of contemporary art Suzanne Weaver, and assistant curator Lana Meador all agreed that 2020 would be a time to focus on women artists. Weaver and Meador spent the year co-curating the exhibition.

Luber’s own personal history played into initial concepts for the show, Rudolph said. “This was something Katie really believed in, partly because her great-grandmother was one of the first art dealers in Dallas,” he said of Katherine Crawford, for whom Luber was named.

A show of female Texas artists might have leaned back into the mid-1800s and covered many styles, he said, but the decision was made collectively to begin in the postwar period, when Dorothy Antoinette “Toni” Laselle became the first Texas artist to firmly stake a claim with abstraction.

Of the influential Laselle’s small paintings, Rudolph said “if they’re somewhat modest in scale, their impact has been ginormous.” Meador suggested that another aspect of the show, the invisible but tactile network of relationships among its artists, is as important as its dynamic visuality. Many of the artists have known each other, some as teacher and student, and these relationships partly informed the choices of which artists to include, she said.



Ceramics by Houston artist Sharon Engelstein foreground paintings by San Antonio artist Liz Ward (left and center) and Dallas artist Marcelyn McNeil. Credit: Nicholas Frank / San Antonio Report

For example, strict geometric painter Suzie Rosmarin of Houston studied under Colville at Trinity University, and according to Meador, during [Laselle’s 44-year teaching career](#) at Texas Women’s University in Denton, she reached over 4,000 students.

“There are many other artists in the show that similarly have made a huge impact on young artists in our state,” Meador said. Some of those artists might eventually wind up in a similar show, Meador suggested, with *Texas Women* as just the beginning of a dialogue. “Certainly this isn’t every woman artist making or who has made work in this state,” she said. “It’s hopefully the beginning of a conversation and more shows and acquisitions ... that can show what’s happening here.”

Rudolph said he hopes the conversation goes beyond art history to women’s rights and equity, and even to the reputation of Texas. “The thing is, women drive and have driven culture in Texas, and women have always been the stylistic innovators in Texas,” he said. “Our state sometimes does not always get the best reputation when it comes to thinking about things like gender parity. There are a lot of stereotypes that we fight against in the state, and I think it’s worth celebrating that, actually, Texas tells a completely different story.”

***Texas Women: A New History of Abstract Art* opens to the public Feb. 7 and runs through May 3. More information is available on the [San Antonio Museum of Art website](#).**