

EMBODIED PAINTING

ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM AND THE GUTAI GROUP



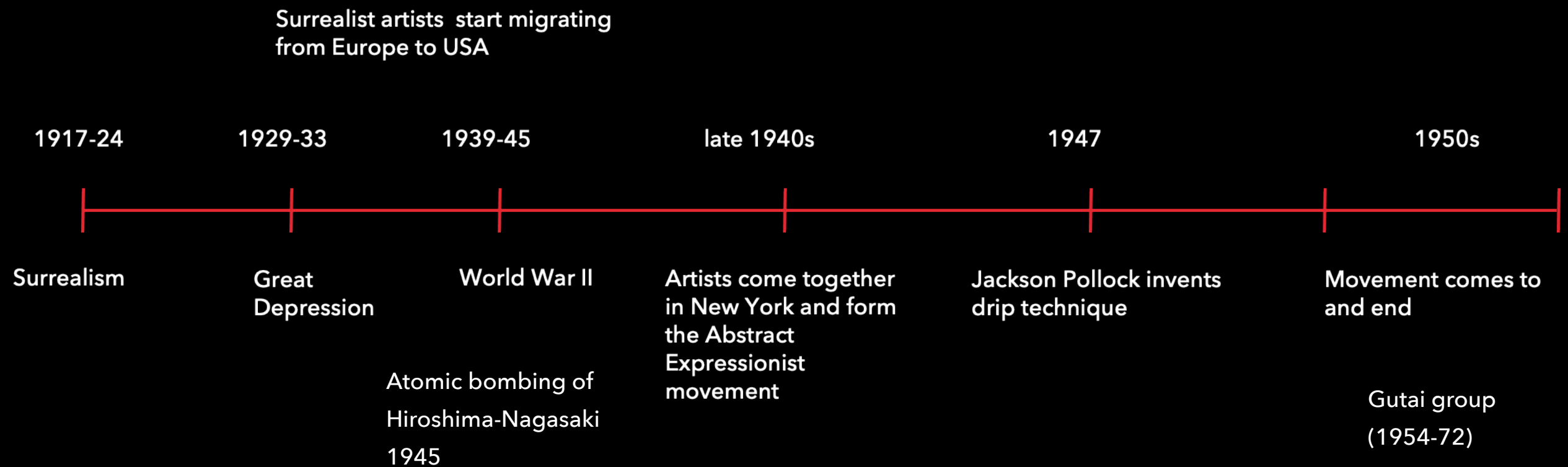
AMERICAN ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM





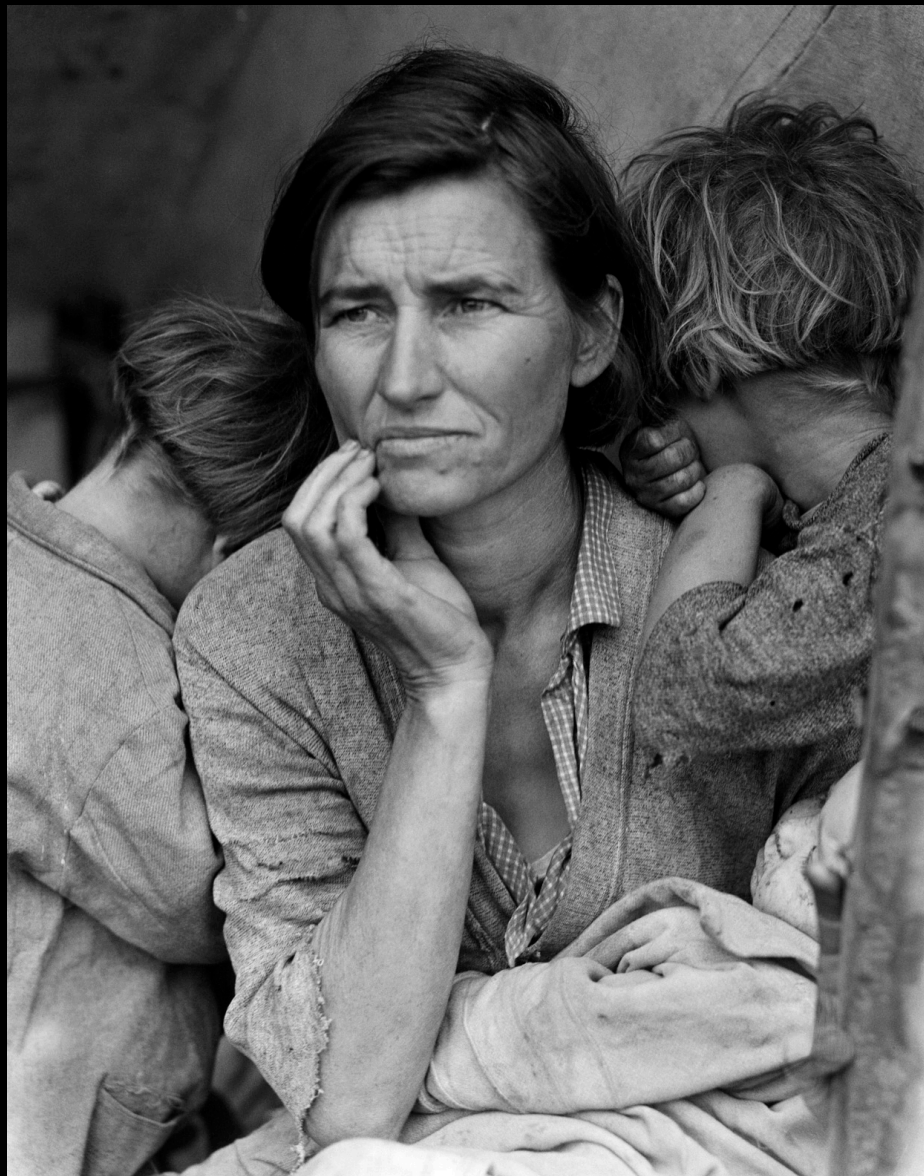
Jackson Pollock
Blue Poles
enamel and aluminium paint with glass on canvas
1952
(National Gallery of Australia)

TIMELINE



Social realism was an art movement, associated with the era of the Great Depression in the US (roughly the 1930s), that depicted **the everyday realities of life**.

Social realism was critical of the social, economic, and racial conditions that made life challenging for the working classes and poor (like some works of the Harlem Renaissance)



Migrant Mother, Dorothea Lange, 1936



Demonstration, Ben Shahn, 1933

Key Characteristics

- ▶ Political instability in Europe in the 1930s brought several leading Surrealists to New York.
- ▶ influenced by Surrealism's focus on the **unconscious**: saw painting as a struggle between self-expression and subconscious
- ▶ Two main styles: **gestural work** (Pollock and de Kooning: dynamic and energetic brushwork) and the **color fields** (Rothko: subtle color harmonies and simple compositions)
- ▶ The emphasis was on the **action** of the painters, **not the end product** of the painting.
- ▶ Although the movement has been largely depicted throughout historical documentation as one belonging to the paint-splattered, heroic male artist, there were several important female Abstract Expressionists during the 1940s and '50s who now receive credit as elemental members of the canon.

AUTOMATISM

The process of creating art without conscious thought, accessing material from the unconscious mind as part of the creative process



Joan Miro
Carnival of Harlequin
1924-25



Action Painting

"At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze, or 'express' an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event."

-Harold Rosenberg (art critic and historian)

Hans Namuth

Jackson Pollock painting Autumn Rhythm
1950

"The photos and films helped transform Pollock from a talented, cranky loner into the first media-driven superstar of American contemporary art, the jeans-clad, chain-smoking poster boy of abstract expressionism."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7bICqvmKL5s>



Hans Namuth's photographs of Jackson Pollock

"I'm more at ease. I feel more a part of the painting since this way I can walk around it, walk from all four sides and literally be in the painting." -Jackson Pollock



Jackson Pollock

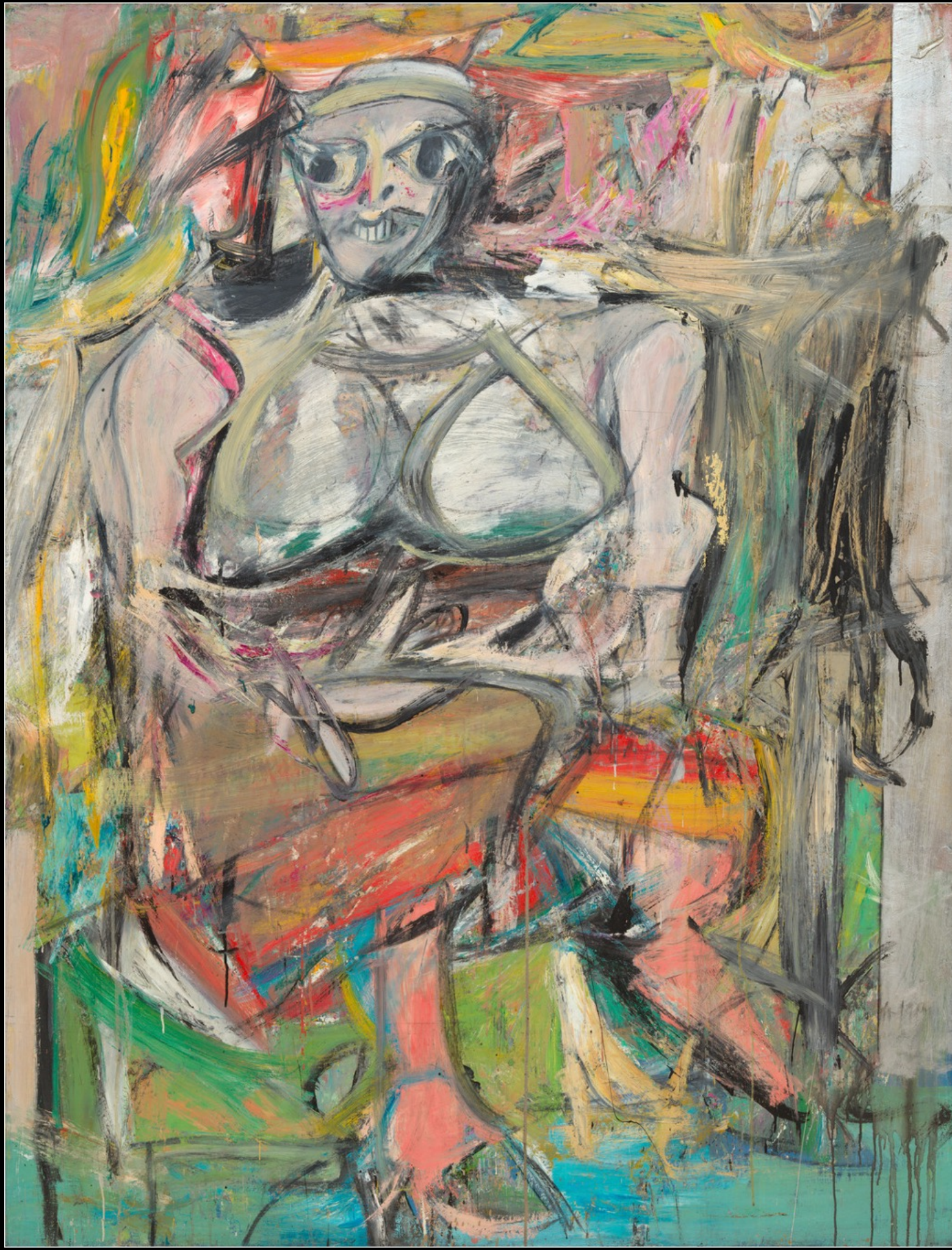
One: Number 31, 1950

Oil and enamel paint on canvas

Collection of MoMA



Jackson Pollock
White Light
1954



"Beauty becomes petulant
to me. I like the grotesque.
It's more joyous."

-Willem de Kooning

Willem de Kooning

Woman I

1950-52



Lee Krasner Noon 1947 Oil on linen

The Soak-Stain technique— Helen Frankenthaler's process

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pBKNifpTSFk>





Helen Frankenthaler
Jacob's Ladder
1957

Color field: A movement characterized primarily by large fields of flat, solid color spread across or stained into the canvas creating areas of unbroken surface and a flat picture plane. The movement places less emphasis on gesture, brushstrokes and action in favour of an overall consistency of form and process.





Mark Rothko

No. 5/No. 22

1950

Oil on canvas

Collection of MoMA



Mark Rothko

Untitled

1969

Acrylic on paper

Collection of the Tate

The question of scale

“I paint big to be intimate.” –Mark Rothko

The emphasis is on the personal (authentic expression of the individual) rather than the grandiose.



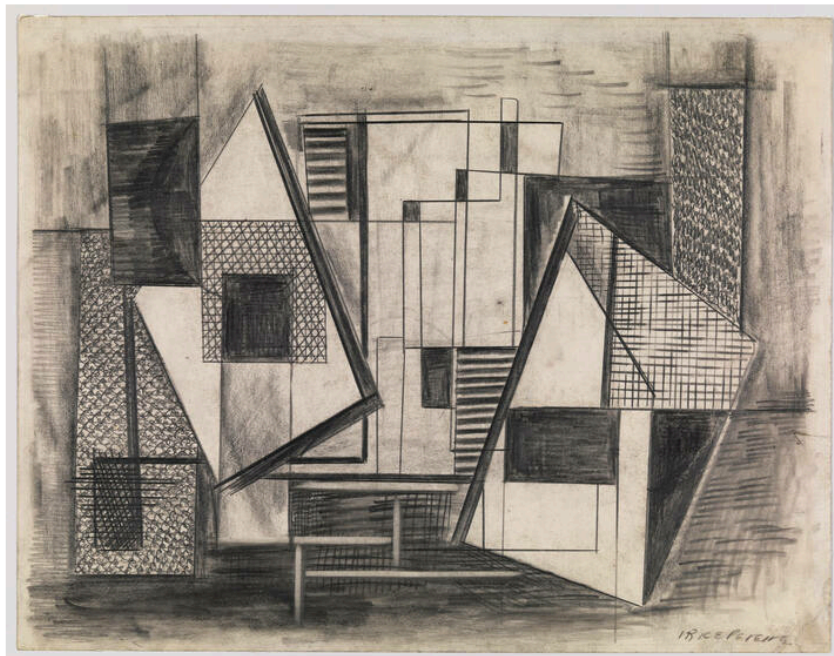


Installation view of *Labyrinth of Forms: Women and Abstraction, 1930-1950* (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, October 9, 2021-March 2022)

LABYRINTH OF FORMS: WOMEN AND ABSTRACTION, 1930– 1950

OCT 9, 2021–MAR 2022

About Artists Essays Photography News



During the 1930s and 1940s, abstraction began to gain momentum as an exciting, fresh approach to modern artmaking in the United States, and a small contingent of American artists dedicated themselves to it. *Labyrinth of Forms*, a title inspired by an [Alice Trumbull Mason](#) work in the exhibition, alludes to the sense of discovery that drove these artists to establish a visual language reflecting the advances of the twentieth century.

A significant number of American abstractionists were women, and their efforts propelled the formal, technical, and conceptual evolution of abstract art in this country. A few, such as [Lee Krasner](#) and [Louise Nevelson](#), have been duly recognized, but most remain overlooked despite their contributions. With over thirty works by twenty-seven artists drawn almost entirely from the Whitney's collection, *Labyrinth of Forms* highlights both the achievements of these artists and the ways in which works on paper served as sites for important exploration and innovation.

While abstraction would prevail in the United States after World War II, in the preceding decades American abstractionists were vastly outnumbered by realist practitioners. Maligned by critics, and largely ignored by museums and galleries, these artists nevertheless saw themselves as aesthetic revolutionaries. In contrast to their European counterparts, who were often involved with movements defined by manifestos, they felt free to experiment, harnessing a broad range of styles to express the mood of the modern United States.

Buoyed by modernist art courses and new venues for viewing European avant-garde art, they forged a network of overlapping communities, organizations, and creative spaces—including the American Abstract Artists and the Atelier 17 print studio—that allowed them to support one another, exchange ideas, and exhibit their work. Women were key figures in such groups, often taking on leadership roles. They also wrote and lectured on abstraction and advanced methods of making, particularly in print media. Though many of these artists still deserve wider acclaim, their influence and ideas resonate even today.

This exhibition is organized by Sarah Humphreville, Senior Curatorial Assistant.

LABYRINTH OF FORMS: WOMEN AND ABSTRACTION, 1930–1950

BOLDNESS KNEW NO LIMITS: WOMEN AND THE EMERGENCE OF AMERICAN ABSTRACTION

Sarah Humphreville,
Senior Curatorial
Assistant



Lee Krasner, *Still Life*, 1938. Oil on paper, 19 × 24 3/4 in. (48.3 × 62.9 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase in honor of Charles Simon, with funds given by his friends from Salomon Brothers on the occasion of his 75th birthday, and with funds from an anonymous



JAPANESE GUTAI GROUP

Historical Context



The Gutai group formed by Jiro Yoshihara in Japan in 1954

Key characteristics of Gutai

- ▶ During World War II, Japan's totalitarian regime promoted totalising nationalistic ideas and suppressed any individual expression.
- ▶ Emerging in the postwar period, Gutai therefore emphasised **individualism** in their works. "Never imitate others: make something that has never existed before." –Jiro Yoshihara
- ▶ **Gu (tool) Tai (body)**: sought to use the body as a tool for mark making and connect the use of material with action
- ▶ They believed in **concept over form**, and entirely rejecting representative art.
- ▶ They wanted to move away from the emphasis on the physical art object towards the invisible world of ideas and philosophies.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xCg79GrWaM>



Kazuo Shiraga in his studio



Kazuo Shiraga , Work II, Oil on paper, mounted on canvas, 1958



"Performance Painting"

Kazuo Shiraga
Challenge to the Mud
Performance
1955



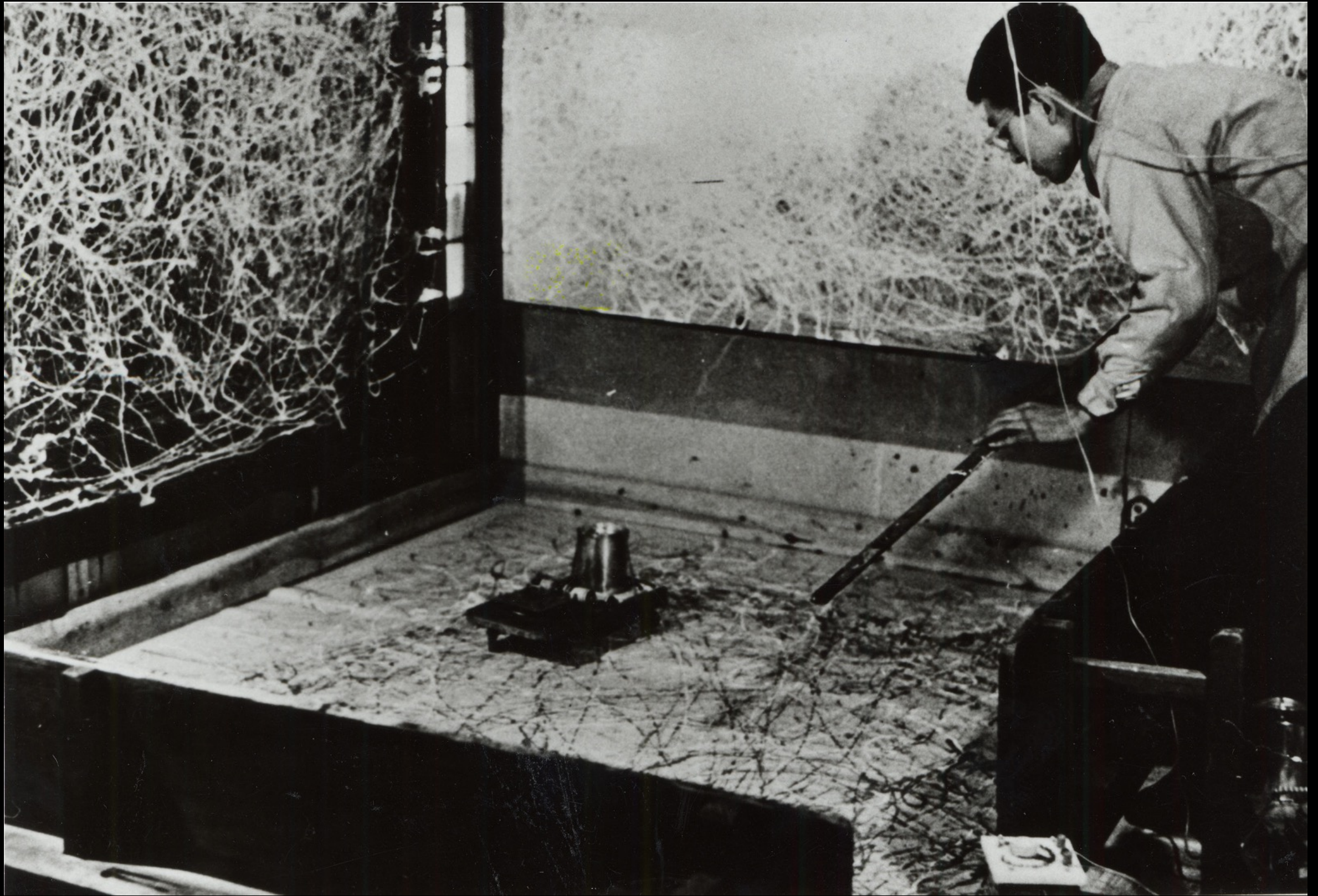
Saburō Murakami
Laceration of Paper
1956



SHOZO SHIMAMOTO making a painting by hurling glass bottles of paint against a canvas at the "2nd Gutai Art Exhibition," Ohara Kaikan, Tokyo, c. October 11-17, 1956



SHOZO SHIMAMOTO, *Work*, 1955



Akira Kanayama

Work

1957

ADDITIONAL VIDEO RECOMMENDATIONS:

Compilation of Gutai performances: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SH2RFsfcpT4>

Exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, NY

Gutai: Splendid Playground: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NY25hyMx8z0>

GLOSSARY

Abstract: A term generally used to describe art that is not representational or based on external reality or nature.

Action painting: Art critic Harold Rosenberg coined the term “action painting” in 1952 to describe the work of artists who painted using bold gestures that engaged more of the body than traditional easel painting. Often the viewer can see broad brushstrokes, drips, splashes, or other evidence of the physical action that took place upon the canvas.

Allover painting: A canvas covered in paint from edge to edge and from corner to corner, in which each area of the composition is given equal attention and significance.

Expressionism: Encompasses varying stylistic approaches that emphasize intense personal expression. As Expressionism evolved from the beginning of the 20th century through the early 1920s, its crucial themes and genres reflected deeply humanistic concerns and an ambivalent attitude toward modernity, eventually confronting the devastating experience of World War I and its aftermath.

Performance art: A term that emerged in the 1960s to describe a diverse range of live presentations by artists, including actions, movements, gestures, and choreography

Picture Plane: The virtual, illusionary plane created by the artist, parallel to the physical surface of a two-dimensional work of art; the physical surface of a two-dimensional work of art, e.g. a painting, drawing, or print.

Scale: The ratio between the size of an object and its model or representation, as in the scale of a map to the actual geography it represents.