



## **Eleanore Mikus**

July 25, 1927 – September 6, 2017

Professor Eleanore Mikus was born in Detroit, Michigan on July 25, 1927. As a child, growing up in Detroit, she demonstrated an early interest in drawing and painting. While in high school, she attended classes at the School of Arts and Crafts in Detroit. She received an undergraduate degree in art and art history from the University of Denver and an M.A. in Asian art history from the University of Denver, with a focus on Tang-dynasty painter and poet Wang Wei. After moving to New York City, in the late 1950's, she took classes at the Art Students League and New York University.

Her first major solo exhibition was at the Pietrantonia Gallery in New York City in 1960. Other exhibitions followed at Pace Gallery in Boston and New York, and participation in a group exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art. During the 1960's, she developed the series of works, Tablets, that extended the abstract language of her paintings into reliefs—built up surfaces of laminated wood and other materials. The Tablets reflect a common practice as "we carry a tablet to write down our lessons, reference notes, memories, poetry, drawings, our private thoughts and even our doodles." It is also with work from this period that Eleanore utilized a singular color applied across the surface of the work, relying on the varying topography of the shallow relief of the surface to provide a complex arrangement of lighter and darker variations of the color. This approach was further explored through her Paperfold series—sheets of paper folded repeatedly horizontally and vertically across the entire surface resulting in intricate geometrical patterns. They utilized many different types of paper of different scale and were produced throughout the rest of her career. She shared an interest in this very particular approach to abstraction with the painter Ad Reinhardt who initiated a friendship after seeing her work in the exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

In the 1970's, Eleanore produced quite a different body of works with images relating to childhood—toys and animals—painted in a childlike way, but on quite a monumental scale. The new works were presented in 4 exhibitions by the gallerist Ivan Karp at his seminal gallery O.K.

Harris in New York City between 1971 and 1974. In the 1980's she returned to abstraction and monochromatic paintings, concerns that sustained her studio practice throughout the rest of her life. In 2006, her depth and breadth of her artistic production was acknowledged with a large and significant exhibition at the Drawing Center in New York City, curated by Luis Camnitzer. The exhibition included 150 works from the period 1959-2006. In a review in the New York Times, it was noted that her work has "a still, quiet patience and a devotion to process that can be felt in nearly every work." This exhibit was followed by one at the Marlborough Gallery in New York.

Eleanore's works were shown at the Craig Starr Gallery in 2017. The show as reviewed by John Yau in *Hyperallergic*, "[s]he brought together nuance and structure, making them (the art work) into a subtly captivating experience."

Her works are represented in the permanent collections of The National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; and the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England. And her work has also been the subject of numerous articles and publications.

Eleanore began her distinguished teaching career at the Cooper Union in New York City in 1971. During the years 1973-76 she taught in England. She began teaching at Cornell University in 1979, continuing until her retirement in 1994. Her contributions to the Art Department were varied, focusing primarily on painting and drawing courses, but she also served as a valuable mentor to many graduate students. Judith Eisler, an undergraduate art major who studied with Eleanore has written that she "studied art at Cornell from 1980–1984. My first interactions with Eleanore immediately challenged my youthful perception as to what it was to make art and what it was to think about art. She talked about color and composition, about how an understanding of abstraction was the foundation for making strong figurative work. She asked us to name five female artists which was, at that time, a challenge that definitively shifted my mindset. Eleanore talked often about her own practice, about how she worked wherever and whenever one could, about her studio in the South Street Seaport in the 70s, her artist neighbors and friends. The determination and grit she applied to her work inspired me tremendously." In addition to practical technical instruction and extremely well-articulated views on more theoretical subjects pertinent to art-making, Eleanore provided, in a warm and often humorous way, advice on how best to function as a sensitive, responsible and empathetic person in the world, as recalled by Ms. Eisler: "The advice that always echoes in my head, however, was given to me when I once told Eleanore that I wished such and such would happen in my life. She raised her head slightly, smiled broadly, and said "Ohhh, don't wish your life away!"

Eleanore extended to her colleagues the same personal interest and concern she directed towards her students. Professor Gregory Page remembers: "Eleanore was a supportive colleague, and a mentor who wanted to make sure I could do well in the department. I remember lunches at the faculty club in the Statler and hallway chats with her to see how my classes were going and what new images I was working on. She would often approach me and say, "let's go to the faculty club, I would like to give you some advice." It was always good information about staying busy in the department with my classes, getting on committees, and of course exhibiting and going to New York." And the following from Professor Stan Taft: "Eleanore and I would often cross paths in Tjaden Hall while she was teaching—the doors to our studios close to each other, and

often she would grab my arm and pull me into the painting studio to see the work of one of her students—eyes wide open, that grin, the gestures of enthusiasm, pure joy and pride in the accomplishments of her students. It was infectious, and I’m thankful to have been able to witness that kind of deep engagement with students.”

Professor Eleanore Mikus died September 6, 2017 at her home in Ithaca, New York. She was 90. She is survived by her sister Virginia Wenzel, and her three children, Gabrielle Burns, Hillary Burns (Kamischke), and Richard Burns, Jr.

*Written by Stan Taft and Gregory Page*