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WEEKEND Arts

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Postwar abstract art at home in the Guggenheim, which shares its era.

Outsiders as Trendsetters

The excellent collection show “Art of Another Kind” finds the Guggenheim tunneling back in time to 1959 — when its Frank

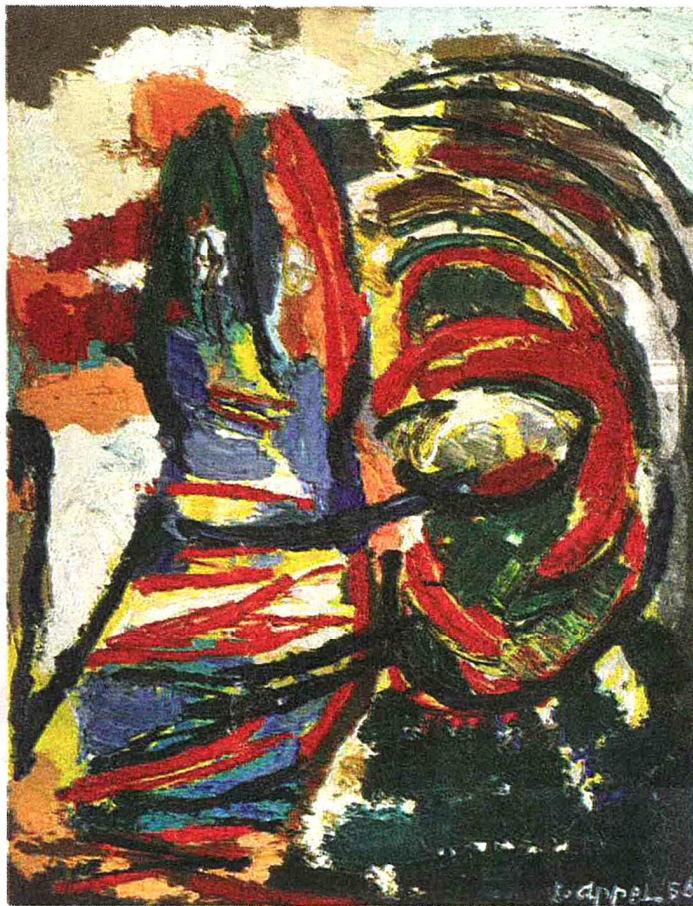
**KAREN
ROSENBERG**

**ART
REVIEW**

Lloyd Wright building first opened — and returning with a treasure trove of postwar abstraction, much of it made by artists you have probably never heard of.

The show is a great-looking period piece, with confident, dynamic canvasses that look very much at home in architecture of the same vintage. But it’s also living history. The 1950s was the time of the rise of a global avant-garde and the resurgence of abstract painting, two phenomena that define the art world of right this minute.

At the time of the 1959 inaugural the Guggenheim had just been through an aggressive rebranding under its second director, James Johnson Sweeney. Founded in 1939 as the Museum of Non-Objective Painting, it was still known in the early 1950s as an excellent repository of pre-World War II abstraction by Kandinsky, Mondrian et al., but was thought to have ossified in the hands of its original director, Hilla Rebay. (Among her many quirks, Rebay favored blue-gray walls because she found MoMA’s white ones too “hospital-like.”)



2012 KAREL APPEL FOUNDATION/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

Karel Appel’s “Crying Crocodile Tries to Catch the Sun” is part of the exhibition surveying 1950s avant-garde art.

In 1952, Rebay was pushed out, the museum was rechristened as the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and Sweeney arrived with charisma, connections and a mandate for change. During his eight-year tenure he opened up the museum to American Abstract Expressionism and a host of related European art movements like Art Brut, CoBrA and Art Informel.

This process was chronicled in the Guggenheim's 2009 exhibition "The Sweeney Decade," but that show of 24 paintings and sculptures was a cursory salute. "Art of Another Kind" is a full-on celebration. It fills the ramps with nearly 100 works, smartly installed by the curator Tracey Bashkoff and the assistant curator Megan Fontanella. (Some post-Sweeney acquisitions dating from the same period are also included.)

The show's title comes from the French art critic Michel Tapié, who, writing of "un art autre," defined the avant-garde painting of his day by its otherness, irrationality and rejection of

Art of Another Kind

International Abstraction and the Guggenheim, 1949-1960
Guggenheim Museum

all traditions — even modernism. Sweeney had another term for it, championing "tastebreakers" who "break open and enlarge our artistic frontiers."

Some of his tastebreakers now look more like tastemakers: Pollock, de Kooning and Franz Kline, maybe also Alberto Burri and Asger Jorn. Many others — Jose Guerrero, Takeo Yamaguchi and Pierre Soulages, to name just three — do not. But as you move up the spiral, the canonized and the obscure frequently and unexpectedly intersect: Pollock with the neo-primitivist Karel Appel; de Kooning with the maker of cloudy abstractions known as Afro; Kline with the large-scale calligrapher Kumi Sugai; Twombly with the fellow scrawler Gastone Novelli.

In places the less familiar names have strength in numbers (if not always enduring talent). Ascending Ramp 5, for instance, you will see in quick succession works by Alfred Manessier, Zao Wou-ki, Martin Barre, Maria-Helena Vieira da Silva, Etienne Hajdu, Sugai, Judit Reigl and Jean-Paul Riopelle.

As this list suggests, Sweeney was quite the cultural diplomat. He had an eye for Asian art, embracing not only American abstractionists who borrowed Eastern themes but also Japanese artists like Yamaguchi and Kenzo Okada. And he kept a close watch

on the various regional strains of the European movement known as Art Informel, with its loose, blobby compositions and emphasis on unconventional materials. ("Art of Another Kind" does double duty as a geographic survey of that movement, particularly along the upper ramps of the rotunda.)

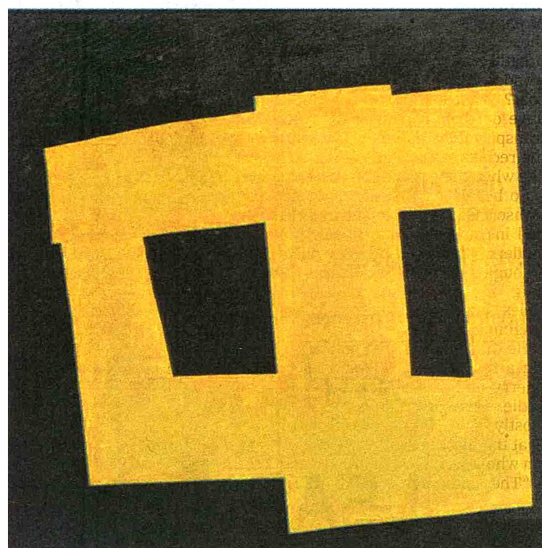
He also had the foresight to realize that gestural abstraction would eventually tip over into performance, an idea that linked American "action painting" to the activities of the Japanese "Gutai" group (the subject of an forthcoming Guggenheim show) and the "Anthropometries," or body-imprint paintings, of Yves Klein.

Sculpture is not the focus here, though it's addressed in a catalog essay by the scholar Joan Marter. Calder's "Red Lily Pads" floats in the rotunda; a few columnar wood carvings by Isamu Noguchi and Louise Bourgeois punctuate the bays.

Also reserved for the catalog is an in-depth exploration of cold war cultural politics, specifically the relationship between postwar abstraction and anti-isolationism, though the topic is a sort of undercurrent in the wall text.

For all its historical bona fides (which include fully digitized catalogs from half a century ago), "Art of Another Kind" cuts right through to the present. Take, for instance, Sweeney's declaration that "a museum should be a vital organism." He continued, "It should constantly prod the observer to reach out from the familiar to the unfamiliar." It has the ring of a mission statement, and you hope that the Guggenheim will continue to embrace it.

"Art of Another Kind: International Abstraction and the Guggenheim, 1949-1960" continues through Sept. 12 at the Guggenheim Museum, 1071 Fifth Avenue, at 89th Street; (212) 423-3500, guggenheim.org.



TAKEO YAMAGUCHI, SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM, NEW YORK
Takeo Yamaguchi's "Work - Yellow" is on display in the show.