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ART REVIEW

How Postwar Paris Changed the Expat Artists

An exhibition at the Grey Art Museum explores the fervid postwar scene in Paris, where Ellsworth Kelly, Joan Mitchell and others learned lessons America couldn't teach them.

By Karen Rosenberg
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Americans in Paris

Most people looking to make it as artists today are advised to follow a hyper-professionalized path, beginning with enrollment at one of a select group of M.F.A. programs. But as a new exhibition reminds us, it wasn't always this way. "Americans in Paris: Artists Working in Postwar France, 1946-1962," at the Grey Art Museum at N.Y.U., celebrates the convivial, informal and often self-directed education of expatriates in the French capital after World War II.

"Americans in Paris" inaugurates the university's relocated and renamed art space; it has moved from Washington Square, where it was known as the Grey Art Gallery, several blocks east, to Cooper Square.

The show devotes a lot of scholarly attention to a slice of art history — abstract painting in Western Europe in the 1950s and ’60s — that is not exactly understudied. And it arrives at a moment when the 2024 Venice Biennale, “Foreigners Everywhere,” is advancing a very different idea of the expatriate (with a focus on the Global South, and on queer and Indigenous artists). The exhibit’s title inevitably brings to mind the classic 1951 Vincente Minnelli film, “An American in Paris,” starring Gene Kelly as a World War II veteran turned painter, whose dancing and wooing prove to be more accomplished than his brushwork.

But within familiar terrain, the show (organized by the Grey’s director, Lynn Gumpert, with the independent curator Debra Bricker Balken) finds new voices and perspectives. Among its 70 artists are a number who have been receiving overdue attention from the academy and the market (including Ed Clark, Beauford Delaney and Shirley Jaffe), and a couple of others who haven’t been but should be (foremost among them the sculptor Shinkichi Tajiri).

At heart, the exhibition is also about how artists learn and develop. It would not be inaccurate to call “Americans in Paris” an advertisement for the G.I. Bill of Rights, which financed college educations for veterans and covered many living expenses. (However, some of the show’s most significant figures — Joan Mitchell and Claire Falkenstein, as well as writers like James Baldwin who were critical to the development of the scene — had to make their way to France without government support.)

Claire Falkenstein at her studio in Paris circa 1953. Claire Falkenstein Foundation, via Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York

The curators are also careful to note that while the G.I. Bill helped enable the expat boom, women and men of color who had served often faced discrimination when applying for their benefits. Many of those who could leverage the bill enrolled in an art school or a private atelier and received a monthly stipend of $75 — enough to cover food and accommodations without having to take a day job.

The real schooling took place outside of formal classes: in other artists' studios, on trips to museums in Paris, over long cafe lunches or through participation in exhibitions and salons.

Ellsworth Kelly, who was a veteran, skipped classes at the École des Beaux-Arts, where the focus was figure drawing (something he had already studied at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston). His more formative education overseas took place on a visit to the studio of the elder avant-garde artist Jean Arp in 1950, where he saw collages made with chance processes. And Kelly was also affected by just being out in the public spaces of Paris and its environs, where he took photographs of the shadows cast by balconies, staircases and other architectural features. His marvelous 1951 painting "Talmont" attests to both influences, arranging irregular green curves derived from cut-paper collages into a precise grid.

"Talmont" by Ellsworth Kelly, who took photographs of the shadows cast by balconies, staircases and other architectural features that inspired him. Ellsworth Kelly Foundation

Hanging opposite Kelly's work in the exhibition are paintings by the Cuban-born American artist Carmen Herrera, who exhibited alongside him at the annual Salon des Réalités Nouvelles (Salon of New Realities), an incubator of geometric abstraction. Herrera later said the salon offered "the type of art that my whole life I wanted to make." Its impact on Herrera's trajectory can be seen in three canvases on view, which find her gradually paring down her compositions while calling attention to the edges and surfaces of her supports.

Other artists had similarly transformative experiences in Paris's museums. When the Musée de l'Orangerie reopened in 1953 after repairs to wartime damage, its galleries dedicated to Monet's late murals of waterlilies astonished the painters Beauford Delaney and Sam Francis. Delaney, as seen in loans from MoMA and the Whitney, started to make allover abstractions of small gestural marks irradiated with golden light; Francis adopted a new palette of deep blues and greens, used to majestic effect in the large-scale canvas "Blue Out of White" (1958), on loan here from the Hirshhorn.

The three Carmen Herrera canvasses featured in the show. David Heald/Grey Art Museum, New York University

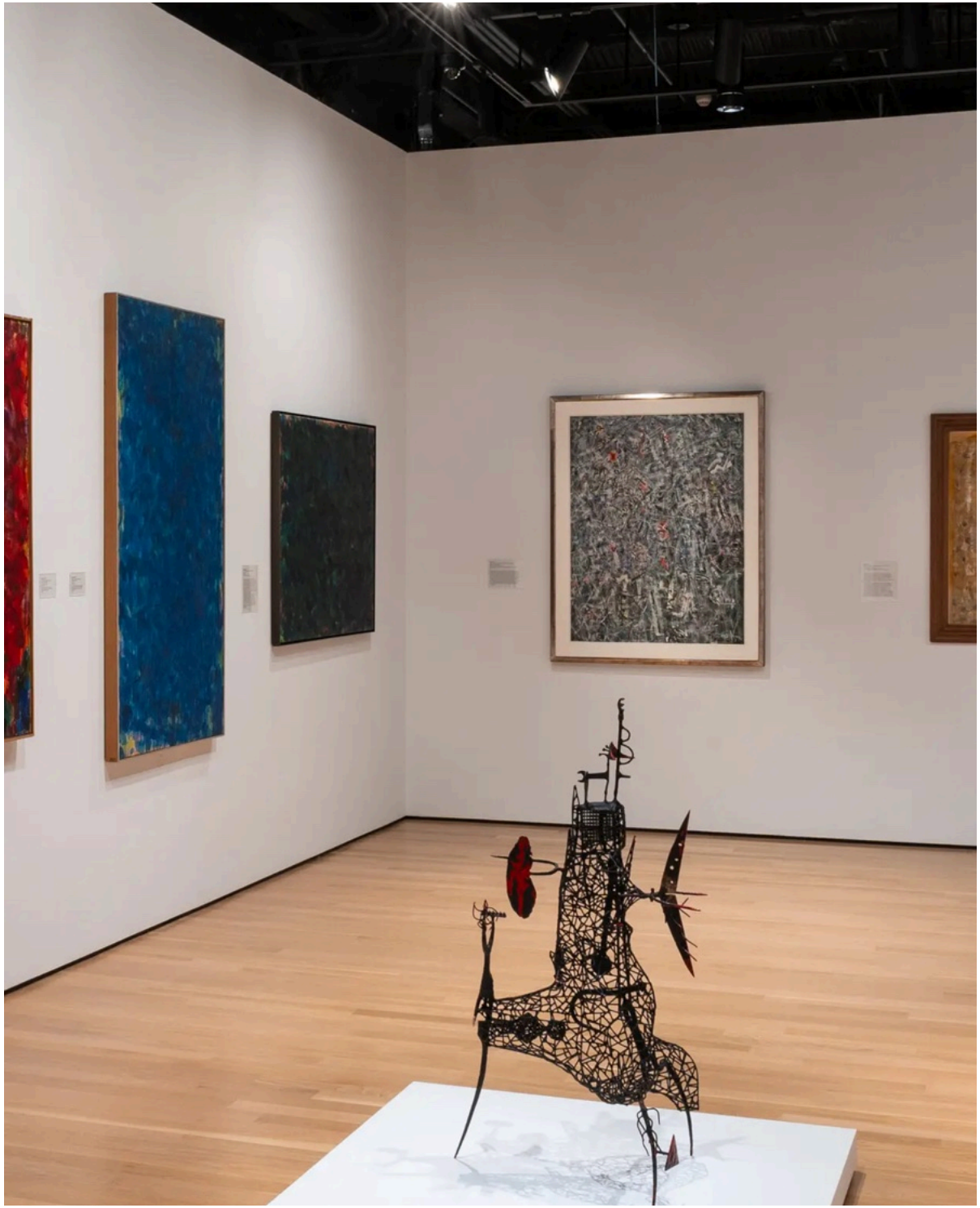
“Composition 16” by Beauford Delaney. Estate of Beauford Delaney by permission of Derek L. Spratley, Esquire, Court Appointed Administrator, via Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York

“Blue Out of White” by Sam Francis. Sam Francis Foundation, California/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

For Tajiri, a Japanese American who was imprisoned in California and Arizona internment camps after Pearl Harbor and later served with the segregated 442nd Regimental Combat Team, known as the “Yankee Samurai,” Paris offered a reprieve from the discrimination he had faced in the United States and its military (and at the Art Institute of Chicago, where he had briefly enrolled on the G.I. Bill). He found a sense of belonging as a founder of the artist-run Galerie Huit, where the other members included the Black Americans Harold Cousins, Herbert Gentry and Haywood Rivers.

Tajiri, like Kelly, found material in easily overlooked features of the city, scavenging scrap metal and machine parts from junkyards along the Seine, composing transient “One-Day Sculptures” that now exist only as documentation by the photographer Sabine Weiss.

Among Tajiri’s extant works at the Grey are two extraordinary sculptures on loan from collections in the Netherlands, where he eventually settled. “Lament for Lady (for Billie Holiday),” a 1953 assemblage, honors Holiday with a small photographic portrait perched atop an unusual metal instrument incorporating trumpet valves and a shower head. “Wounded Knee,” from the same year, extends Tajiri’s personal experiences of pain and displacement to Indigenous Americans, with whom he felt a kinship. (His internment in Arizona was at a camp within the Colorado River Indian Reservation.) The work’s title and its red-tinged spikes of welded iron allude to the artist’s leg injury during his wartime service, as well as to the 1890 massacre of the Lakota people at Wounded Knee in South Dakota.



Tajiri's "Wounded Knee" at the Grey Art Museum. David Heald/Grey Art Museum, New York University

While Tajiri found community in Paris, other artists arrived in the city looking for productive isolation. Joan Mitchell, represented by two robustly gestural green-on-white canvases from 1960, was looking to escape what she called the "star system" of the New York art world. Claire Falkenstein, the mathematically and scientifically inclined sculptor, left the Bay Area "to be alone and work out certain problems that I had to have answered for myself," as she later put it.

Still, art critics of the time often wrote about Mitchell and Falkenstein's work in relation to art being made back in the United States. Michel Tapié, for instance, linked Falkenstein to Francis and Mark Tobey in what he called the "Pacific School" (a sort of West Coast variant of Abstract Expressionism).

The show's substantial publication has much more on the international rivalries of the day and the movements and sub-movements that defined the Paris scene. (A partial list would include Art Informel, Tachisme, Nouvelle Réalisme and Abstraction Chaude.) And it has a crucial narrative thread that is not as present in the show, linking Black American artists such as Delaney and Clark with writers, including James Baldwin, who were following the civil rights movement in the United States and, in Paris, the struggle for Algerian independence.

Baldwin is quoted throughout the book's main curatorial essay, and a passage from his 1961 essay "The New Lost Generation" stands out: "What Europe still gives an American — or gave us — is the sanction to become oneself. No artist can survive without this acceptance." Among the many invaluable forms of art education detailed in "Americans in Paris," this may be the most important one.

The writer James Baldwin and Beauford Delaney in Paris circa 1960. Estate of Beauford Delaney by permission of Derek L. Spratley, Esquire, Court Appointed Administrator, via Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York

Americans in Paris: Artists Working in Postwar France, 1946-1962

Through July 20, Grey Art Museum, 18 Cooper Square, Manhattan; 212-998-6780, greyartmuseum.nyu.edu.

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