

WADDINGTON CUSTOT

Press Release

Making It

Women and Abstract Sculpture

1 October–13 November 2021

Private View: Thursday 30 September, 6-8pm



Waddington Custot presents *Making It*, a group exhibition dedicated to a generation of pioneering women sculptors who came to prominence in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Taking an unexpected approach to their chosen media: fusing gold leaf with linen for instance, folding metal or hand-knotting rope, these artists challenged modernist conventions and expanded conceptions of the appropriate media and methods for sculpture. Artists in the exhibition include Olga de Amaral, Lynda Benglis, Françoise Grossen, Maren Hassinger, Barbara Levittoux-Świdarska, Louise Nevelson, Beverly Pepper, Mildred Thompson and Sophia Vari. These artists are known for working on an ambitious scale, building upon the gallery's focus on monumental sculpture.

Active in the mid and late-20th century, these sculptors developed new work during the era of second-wave feminism and within the context of feminist critique, as championed by critics and curators such as Lucy Lippard. While it not overtly feminist in concept, their work does not represent a retreat from politics. Rather, contending with the long-held belief – retained well into the 1970s – that sculpture was a muscular medium best suited to men, these artists stood against the prejudices and difficulty women encountered when trying to access the male-dominated spaces of foundries and woodshops. Lucy Lippard recounted, '*In the winter of 1970 I went to a great many women's studios... found women in corners of men's studios, bedrooms, children's rooms, kitchens*'¹. Undiminished by this unfavourable context, the sculptors in *Making It* actively take up space with their work. Spreading across the walls and from ceiling to floor, reaching across the gallery and hanging in the air, these works prefigure installation art and a broader shift toward process and materials.

The approaches seen here also demonstrate a resistance to the prominent discourse in the 1960s and 70s, around minimal and conceptual art which advocated radically de-skilled methods, replacing the spatial and visual experience of art with a linguistic one.

1 Lucy Lippard, "Changing Since Changing (1976)," in *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Essays on Feminist Art: 1970–1993* (New York: The New Press, 1995) 33.

The exhibited artists in *Making It* present embodied phenomenological experiences: the undulatory movement of gold leaf and woven horsehair and linen in the work of Olga de Amaral (b.1932, Bogotá, Colombia) has it flicker entrancingly with the light, while for Barbara Levittoux-Świdorska (b.1933, Warsaw; d.2019, Warsaw, Poland), and Françoise Grossen (b.1943, Neuchâtel, Switzerland), the emphasis is on the visual, tactile and textural qualities of their material, in contrast to its utility. These artists were among those who disregarded the low cultural connotations attached to materials such as ribbons and rope, developing new installations of ambitious scale. In the works of Beverly Pepper (b.1922, New York, USA; d.2020, Todi, Italy), a pioneer in the use of Cor-ten steel, whose sculptures in the medium predate those of Donald Judd and Richard Serra, we see a process of ripping and tearing into the surface of stainless steel blocks with a violent physicality.

Other artists incorporate found materials to create revolutionary sculpture in asymmetric or biomorphic forms: Mildred Thompson (b. 1936, Florida; d.2003, Georgia, USA), living in Germany, found freedom from the prejudices against her race and gender in the universality of abstraction, and developed ideas around patterns found within systems of science, mathematics and music. In the works seen here, she combines wood sourced from German forests with machine-cut wood segments, resulting in a tension between the naturally-occurring curvaceous lines in wood and those that were manufactured or painted. Maren Hassinger (b.1947, California, USA), developed an innovative practice which challenged orthodox notions of art-making through its adoption of non-traditional materials, particularly an important signature material, wire rope – which she chanced upon in a Los Angeles salvage yard. Hassinger found that the material could be used sculpturally.

Louise Nevelson (b.1899, Pereiaslav, Ukraine; d.1988, New York), also used discarded objects in her work; she articulated her entire artistic process as a kind of alchemy; using rich black pigment to transform them into mystical totems. Working within a similarly monochromatic colour range to Nevelson, Sophia Vari (b.1940, Vari, Greece) makes powerful sculptures of interlocking forms which draw from a lifetime travelling the world, and a fascination with ancient cultures and practices. A perpetual scholar and researcher, Vari continues to innovate her practice and draw upon references old and new to create colossal, abstract sculptures hewn in marble or cast in bronze.

Making It brings together multiple propositions for art making, all of which critically engage with and extend the possibilities of abstract sculpture. The exhibition illuminates the importance of these works within their cultural context and their lasting impact on contemporary art, by artists who often suffered from a lack of visibility and recognition in their lifetimes but persevered to envision new ways of making.

NOTES TO EDITORS

Credit Line

Making It runs at Waddington Custot from 1 October–13 November 2021. waddingtoncustot.com

Image

Mildred Thompson with a free-standing wood assemblage. © The Estate of Mildred Thompson. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co., New York

About Waddington Custot

Waddington Custot was formed through the partnership of French art dealer Stephane Custot and long-time London art dealer Leslie Waddington, in 2010. Located in Cork Street since 1958, formerly as Waddington Galleries, the gallery has a rich heritage and an international reputation for quality and expertise in works by modern and contemporary masters, with a particular focus on monumental sculpture.

The gallery has cemented its reputation over several decades for high quality and well-researched exhibitions of significant artists operating in the mid-twentieth century and beyond. Today, Waddington Custot represents heavyweight contemporary and modern artists and their estates including Peter Blake, David Annesley, Patrick Caulfield, Ian Davenport, Fabienne Verdier, Barry Flanagan, Allan D’Arcangelo, Jedd Novatt, Pablo Reinoso and Robert Indiana. The inventory includes works by important modern European artists including Jean Dubuffet, Pierre Soulages, Joan Miró, Josef Albers, Maria Helena Vieira da Silva, Fausto Melotti, and Antoni Tàpies.

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Exhibition Listing Details

Exhibition: *Making It*
Address: Waddington Custot, 11 Cork Street, London W1S 3LT
Dates: 1 October–13 November 2021
Opening Times: Monday to Friday, 10am–6pm; Saturday: 11am–6pm
Admission: Free
Travel: Piccadilly, Green Park or Bond Street