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LYNNE DREXLER (1928-1999)

On October 23, 2022, an article by Ted Loos appeared in the New York Times with the heading, "Out of Obscurity Lynne Drexler's Abstract Paintings Fetch Millions."ⁱ The article was published on the occasion of the opening of a joint show of the work of Drexler's first career phase (1959– 1969) at the Mnuchin Gallery on the Upper East Side and Berry Campbell in Chelsea, which represents Drexler's estate. Not seen in public for thirty-eight years, the paintings on view have awakened viewers to the intense physical vibrancy of Drexler's abstract works, rendered with a combination of the vehement coloristic force of Van Gogh, the sheer almost decadent, kaleidoscopic splendor of Klimt, and the controlled textures of William Morris textiles. The rediscovery of Drexler's art has come at the right moment, providing an antidote in their lyrical joyousness (yet not free of complexity and tension) to worldwide acrimony and strife. The attention to Drexler can also be attributed to the newly awakened recognition of the important contributions of American women artists to twentieth-century abstraction.ⁱⁱ Quoted in the New York Times article, Christine Berry (Berry Campbell's co-founder) commented: "There's a resurgence of women artists right now."ⁱⁱⁱ She notes how the spotlight has shifted from the men who made it seem that Abstract Expressionism necessitated masculine bravado to the exciting inventiveness of the women of the movement, who are the gallery's focus.

Drexler's tale, like her art, has a romantic aspect. As Gail Levin, Ph.D. began her essay in the joint show's fully illustrated 144-page catalogue: "Imagine a story of an artist who escaped from an art world rife with competition and her struggle to find herself, landing on an enchanted island, where she lived happily ever after, painting, though forgotten, for the rest of her life."^{iv} The enchanted island was Monhegan, the tiny, rockbound island off the coast of Maine—long loved by artists. There Drexler drank in the beauty around her and infused her art with her emotive responses to it. Like other second-generation Abstract Expressionists—including Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell, and Larry Rivers—she did not feel art needed to be separate from life and freely turned to the outside world for inspiration. Not a vanitas artist, dwelling on human mortality, she embraced the moment, and her work is filled with resonances of nature, which are always joyous, growing, and uplifting. Yet, having studied with Hans Hofmann and Robert Motherwell, she understood the discipline, theory, and principles of abstract art, and was always pushing form, color, and space in new directions.

Drexler was born in southeastern Virginia, near Newport News, in 1928, the only child of Norman Edward Drexler (1891–1944), a manager at a public utility, and Lynne Powell Drexler (1892–1963), a descendant of a distinguished Southern family; her ancestors included the second Royal Governor of Virginia and Robert E. Lee. By 1930, the family had moved to Elizabeth City, Virginia (now Hampton). Drexler began painting classes in her childhood, and she exhibited the rebellious and irreverent streak for which she was known even then: in an interview in 1998 she recalled that when she piped up in a seventh-grade class that her ancestor Robert E. Lee was a traitor, she was "in considerable disgrace for a while." She commented about Lee: "Well he was a traitor... And if had never fought for the South the war would have been a lot shorter."^v Drexler attended St. Anne's School, a private Episcopal girls' boarding and day school in Charlottesville, Virginia (now St. Anne's-Belfield School). In the late 1940s, she took classes at the



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Richmond School of Art, part of the Richmond Professional Institute, Virginia, which was then affiliated with the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. At the same time, she took a night course with Maine artist Thomas Elston Thorne (1909–1976), who encouraged her to paint. In Williamsburg, she met the modernist architect Ward Bennett (né Howard Bernstein, 1917–2003), who had studied with Hans Hofmann. He implored her to go to New York. She was similarly urged by Hans Peter Kahn, who was an art teacher at the nearby Hampton Institute (also a former Hofmann student). He suggested to Drexler that she study with his brother Wolf Kahn and with Hofmann.

In 1950–52, Drexler took two extended trips abroad, spending much of her time in England. In 1955, she moved to New York and enrolled in Hofmann's school in 1956. That April, she received a scholarship from Hofmann to attend his Provincetown summer school. Inspired by Hofmann's theory of "push-pull," dynamic color relationships became the dominant force in her art, and Hofmann taught her to understand painting in terms of movement, space, color, and mass. After Hofmann stopped teaching in 1958, Drexler enrolled in a graduate program in studio art at Hunter College, so as to be able to teach. There she studied with Robert Motherwell and Gabor Peterdi. When Motherwell learned of her plans, he told her: "I'll flunk you out of here before I see you go to teach. You're too good a painter."^{vi} Drexler followed his advice. She began exhibiting her work in the late 1950s, participating in shows at Sun Gallery, Provincetown (1959) and the Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk Virginia (1960). Motherwell's process-oriented approach to art influenced her painting philosophy and helped free her from the rigid tenets of Abstract Expressionism. By 1959 Drexler had developed her signature brushwork: swatch-like strokes in dense clusters, which allow color, not geometry, to triumph.

In this period, Drexler was part of the dynamic art scene in Greenwich Village. She frequented the Cedar Tavern on University Place, a gathering place for avant-garde artists such as Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, Philip Guston, Grace Hartigan, and Willem de Kooning. She attended the 8th Street Club's Friday evening events, which brought together painters, sculptors, art critics, and philosophers, establishing a culture of vitality that bestowed the international stature on New York that had previously belonged to Paris. Drexler's first solo exhibition was in February 1961 at Tanager Gallery, an artists' collective on East Tenth Street, in existence from 1952 through 1962.^{vii} In *Artnews*, a reviewer stated: "Drexler shows medium and outsized pastoral, florid, bleeding-edge canvases that are built up with swatches of tones that seem like so many technicolor galaxies with or without astral or floral connotations."^{viii}

That year, at a Halloween dance at the Club, Drexler met John Philip Hultberg (1922–2005), a painter born in Berkeley, California, who had moved to New York in 1949, gaining a significant amount of attention for his powerful, gestural semiabstract works with Surrealist overtones. The two were married on May 25, 1962. At the time, Hultberg was represented by the art dealer Martha Jackson (1907–1969), who bought a house for him on Monhegan Island so that he could escape the pressures of the New York art world and his drinking problems. The few months the couple spent there in the summer after their wedding constituted Drexler's introduction to the place that would become so significant in her life and art. That summer she incorporated the

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scenery of Monhegan into her work, and she continued to translate her memories of Monhegan into her paintings in her New York studio in the winter.

During the mid-1960s Hultberg and Drexler traveled throughout North America. In 1963, Drexler accompanied Hultberg to Los Angeles to make lithographs at the Tamarind Lithography Workshop established by June Wayne. The couple traveled to Mexico that same year, where Drexler and Hultberg showed together at Galleria in San Miguel before returning to the United States. By 1964, they settled temporarily in Portland, Oregon, where Hultberg was artist-in residence at the Portland Art Museum. Later that year, the couple moved to San Francisco for a year and a half, where Hultberg had been hired as an instructor at the San Francisco Art Institute. In April 1965, Drexler had a solo show at Esther-Robles Gallery in Los Angeles. In a review in the Los Angeles Times Betje Howell stated that the works on display—from "the smallest preliminary crayon drawing to the largest canvas"—showed "the same strong, purposeful approach," revealing Drexler to be a talented young artist "with great potential significance," who could not be "dismissed lightly." Howell remarked that Drexler was "a true colorist," and noted that her art "usually reflects the world of nature, [consisting mostly of] landand seascapes painted in a vigorous and forceful precision in an idiom all her own." By this time, Drexler had already developed her characteristic geometric forms and swatch-like brushstrokes, applied with Pointillist intentionality, to create organic explosions within structured totalities. Howell incisively observed the "sense of joyous and pulsating growth," filling works that never "presaged death or decay."^{ix} In 1967, Drexler had a solo exhibition at Nuuana Valley Gallery in Honolulu. Despite their peripatetic existence in the 1960s, the couple continued to spend summers in Monhegan.

When Hultberg and Drexler returned to New York in 1967, they moved into the legendary Chelsea Hotel on West 23rd Street (opened in 1884), whose owner was an art collector and whose tenants included prominent musicians, actors, artists, and writers. At this time, Drexler began regularly attending the Metropolitan Opera. She often created crayon sketches during performances, including a series of works based on Wagner's Ring Cycle. Opera and classical music were sustaining passions for Drexler, to which she often listened while working. In February 1969, she had the first of several solo exhibitions at Alonzo Gallery at 26 East 63rd Street. A reviewer for Artnews described her surfaces as "encrusted with tiny impasto shapes packed together in homogenous groups, some of which hold the plane while others swell and spill out in front." However, what caught the reviewer's eye most was Drexler's high-keyed color mixtures that were "aggressively designed to dazzle" along with "strained contrasts that sometimes impart a competing physicality in the different areas."× Arts magazine also reviewed the exhibition, commenting, "The father of Expressionism, Van Gogh, is the first painter one thinks of upon seeing all the swirling serpentine striations of color which dominate these canvases."xi The critic also saw aspects of Pointillism, Futurism, and German Expressionism in Drexler's paintings. Her shows at Alonzo in February 1970 and November 1971 were again covered in Artnews. Of the former, a critic noted: "Tiny bare canvas flecks flicker, recalling both the patchiness of Prendergast and the intensity of Soutine."xii The latter show consisted of abstract landscapes, described as images in which the particles, consisting of compacted "arcs,

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bows, and stipples," fight the compression and "begin to whirl and flame up," shaping landscapes "with the drive and irresistibility of magnetic currents." xiii

Although Drexler had a handful of exhibitions in the 1960s, she began to feel alienated from the New York art scene, especially as Pop Art prevailed. At the end of the 1960s, she became colorblind for six months. When her depression reached its nadir, she attempted suicide. She had recovered by 1971 when she and Hultberg began spending more time on Monhegan. Following Jackson's sudden passing, Drexler and Hultberg bought out Jackson's share of the Monhegan house from her estate. By 1973, they moved from the Chelsea Hotel to a loft in Soho at 495 Broome Street. While working abstractly, Drexler incorporated the influences of New York architecture and nature on Monhegan into her paintings. For the latter, she often "got ideas" from snapshots she had taken on the island.^{xiv} Drexler's last show at Alonzo was in April 1975.

In the early 1980s, Drexler not only painted on Monhegan during the summers but also relied on her sketches and memories of the island in the winters in New York. In 1983 she and Hultberg decided to move permanently to Monhegan, but he only lasted one winter, visiting afterwards just in the summers, and eventually the couple separated. Although Drexler painted in her studio rather than in the outdoors, she felt it was important to live full-time in nature, immersed in its cycles and deriving inspiration from the strength and power of her surroundings. Her style was both unique in its brushstrokes and its amalgam of many influences—Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Symbolism, and Fauvism. However, she preferred Impressionism, as she told Eunice Agar in 1988 for an article in *American Artist.*^{XV} Her Impressionism went beyond stylistic factors; she embraced the Impressionist idea that nature does not possess its own reality but is instead a manifestation of subjective experience. Drexler affirmed this idea in her desire to draw people into her paintings so they could enter into the world she had created. Her works have that impact; they demand to be seen in a certain way rather than to be open to many interpretations.

Drexler enjoyed her solitude on Monhegan, but she also made connections in the year-round community. Of her life on the small island, she stated: "There is no isolation in a place like this — but solitude is respected."^{xvi} During the last two decades of her life, Drexler's art became more figurative, in works including elements of her coastal surroundings, still lifes, and a series of paintings incorporating dolls and folk masks. In her later years, Drexler developed more renown locally than in New York, with solo shows held in 1989 and 1994 at Gallery 6 in Portland, Maine, and in 1998 at Lupine Gallery on Monhegan. That show turned out to be the last of her lifetime.

When Drexler learned she had terminal cancer in 1998, she did not allow her island friends to be gloomy or sorrowful. At her seventieth birthday party on May 21, 1999, she delighted in being the center of attention. She died on December 30, 1999, while listening to Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, which she loved. Admiration for her art gathered steam in the years following her death, when solo exhibitions of her work were held at the Bates College Museum of Art, Lewiston, Maine (2003), the Monhegan Historical and Cultural Museum (2008), and the Portland Museum of Art, Maine (2009). The 2022 shows at Mnuchin and Berry Campbell of the work of

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her first decade are the beginning of further examinations of Drexler and her place in the art world in the late twentieth century.

Lisa N. Peters, Ph.D. © Berry Campbell, New York

iii Quoted in Loos.

viii V.P., "Lynne Drexler," Artnews 59 (February 1961), p. 19.

^{ix} Betje Howell, "Perspective on Art," *Los Angeles Times*, April 1965, clipping from artist estate archive.

^x R.D., "Lynne Drexler," Artnews 67 (February 1969), p. 13.

^{xi} C.F.I, "Lynne Drexler," Arts (February 1969), clipping from artist estate archive.

- ^{xii} K.K., "Lynne Drexler," *Artnews* 68 (February 1970), p. 14.
- ^{xiii} N.E., "Lynne Drexler," *Artnews* 70 (November 1971), p. 21.
- xiv Drexler, Oral history transcript, pp. 19–20.

^{xv} Agar 1988, p. 44.

CV

Born, 1928, Newport News, Virginia 1956, Hans Hofmann School of Fine Arts, New York 1956, Hans Hofmann School of Fine Arts, Provincetown 1958, Hunter College, New York Died, 1999, Monhegan, Maine

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBTIONS

Tanager Gallery, New York, 1961. Esther Robles Gallery, Los Angeles, 1965. Nuuana Valley Gallery, Honolulu, Hawaii, 1967. Alonzo Gallery, New York, 1969 Alonzo Gallery, New York, 1970 Alonzo Gallery, New York, 1971. Alonzo Gallery, New York, 1973. Alonzo Gallery, New York, 1975.

ⁱ Ted Loos, "Out of Obscurity, Lynne Drexler's Abstract Paintings Fetch Millions," *New York Times*, October 22, 2022, section F, p. 32.

ⁱⁱ Sources on Drexler include Eunice Agar, "Lynne Drexler," *American Artist* (May 1988), pp. 42–45, 90; *Lynne Drexler: Painter*, exh. cat. (Me: Monhegan Museum and Portland Museum of Art, 2009); Helen Haring Feibusch, dissertation, University of St. Andrews, School of Art History, Scotland; and oral history interviews, filmed by Tralice Peck Bracy and Beth Van Houten, in September 1998. The films and transcripts belong to the Monhegan Museum archives. See also <u>Katya Kazakina, "The Art Detective," Artnet News</u>, April 1, 2022 and John Dorfman, "Symphonies of Color," Art & Antiques 45 (December 2021–January 2022), pp. 56–63.

^{iv} Gail Levin, "Lynne Drexler," in *Lynne Drexler: The First Decade*, exh. cat. (New York: Mnuchin Gallery and Berry Campbell, 2022), p. 7.

^v Drexler, Oral history transcript, p. 71.

vi Quoted in Dorfman, 2021–22, p. 60.

vii On Tanager, see Brian O'Doherty, "Death of a Gallery," New York Times, April 1, 1962, p. 127.

^{xvi} Drexler, Oral history transcript, pp. 19–20.

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Veydras ltd., New York, 1983. Aldona Gobuzas Gallery, New York, 1983. St. John's University, New York, 1984. Middlesex Community College, Piscataway, New Jersey, 1984. Gallery 127, Portland, Maine, 1989. Judith Leighton Gallery, Blue Hill, Maine, 1989. Gallery 6, Portland, Maine, 1989. Gallery 6, Portland, Maine, 1994. Lupine Gallery, Monhegan, Maine, 1998. Bates College Museum of Art, Lewiston, Maine, Drawings by Lynne Drexler, 2003. Lupine Gallery, Monhegan Island, Maine, Lynne Drexler: Selected Works, 2003. Greenhut Galleries, Portland, Maine, Lynne Drexler: A Life in Color, 2005. Jameson Modern, Portland, Maine, Lynne Drexler: Early Paperworks, 2007. Monhegan Historical and Cultural Museum, Monhegan Island, Maine, Lynne Drexler–Painter, 2008. Portland Museum of Art, Portland, Maine, Lynne Drexler-Painter, 2009. McCormick Gallery, Chicago, Lynne Drexler: Early Spring, 2010. Ferguson's Frame & Gallery, Palm Desert, California, Lynne Mapp Drexler, Post-War Paintings (1957-1965), 2015. Ferguson's Frame & Gallery, Palm Desert, California, Lynne Mapp Drexler, Paintings of the 50s & 60s, 2018. Ferguson's Frame & Gallery, Palm Desert, California, Lynne Mapp Drexler, Small Wonders, 2019. Elizabeth Moss Galleries, Falmouth, Maine, Lynne Mapp Drexler: Bathed in Color, 2020. Ferguson's Frame & Gallery, Palm Desert, California, Lynne Mapp Drexler, Her Way, 2020. Jody Klotz Fine Art, Abilene, Texas, Explosions of Color | Dimensions of Sound, The Art of LYNNE MAPP DREXLER, 2022. Elizabeth Moss Galleries, Falmouth, Maine, Lynne Mapp Drexler: Orchestrations in Color, 2021-2022. Jody Klotz Fine Art, Abilene, Texas, REPRISE: The Art of Lynne Mapp Drexler, 2022. Hunter Dunbar, New York, 9th Street and Beyond: 70 Years of Women in Abstraction, Part I: The Gestural, 2022. Berry Campbell, New York, Lynne Drexler: The First Decade (1959-1969), 2022. Mnuchin Gallery, New York, Lynne Drexler: The First Decade (1959-1969), 2022. Jody Klotz Fine Art, Abilene, Texas, Lynne Mapp Drexler: Through the Years, 2023. Meredith Ward Fine Art, New York, Lynne Drexler; The Monhegan Island Years, 2023. Kasmin Gallery, New York, 2023. J. Kenneth Fine Art & Estate Collection, Palm Springs, Lynne Drexler: Play of Color, 2023. Elizabeth Moss Galleries, Falmouth, Maine, Lynne Drexler: All the Decades, 2023. J. Kenneth Fine Art & Estate Collection, Palm Springs, Lynne Drexler: Works on Paper, 2023. Farnsworth Art Museum, Rockland, Maine, Lynne Drexler: Color Notes, 2024-2025. SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS Sun Gallery, Provincetown, Massachusetts, 1959. Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, Virginia, 1960. Twentieth Century Gallery, Williamsburg, Virginia, 1960. Tanager Gallery, New York, 1962. Galleria, San Miguel Allende, Mexico, 1963. Westerly Gallery, New York, 1965. Sproul Museum, Louisville, Kentucky, American Painting, 1966. (Travelled to Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond)

BERRY

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Alonzo Gallery, New York, Mr. & MRS. PAINTING AND SCULPTURE, 1969. Hudson River Museum, New York, Ciba-Geigy Collection, 1971. Spring Arts Festival, Educational and Cultural Trust Fund of the Electrical Industry, 1971. Finch College, New York, Martha Jackson New York Collection, 1973. (Traveling exhibition) Allentown Museum-Monhegan Artist Show, Allentown, Pennsylvania, 1974. Tanager Gallery, New York, Christmas Exhibition, 1974-1979. Alonzo Gallery, New York, Christmas Exhibition, 1974-1979. Landmark Gallery, New York, Christmas Exhibtion, 1974-1979. Ciba-Geigy Collection, Women Artist Show, 1975. Landmark Gallery, New York, 1977. Veydras Ltd., New York, 1980. Veydras Ltd., New York, 1981. Veydras Ltd., New York, 1982. Barridoff Gallery, Portland, Maine, 1983. Portland Museum of Art, Portland, Maine: Museum Invitational Drawing Show, 1983. Veydras Ltd., New York, 1983. Barridoff Gallery, Portland, Maine, 1984. Veydras Ltd., New York, 1984. Anita Shapolsky Gallery, New York, 1986. Anita Shapolsky Gallery, New York, 1987. Leighton Gallery, Blue Hill, Maine, 1989. The Art Gallery at 6 Deering St., Portland, Maine, 1992. Bates College Museum of Art Lewiston, Maine: Monhegan: The Abstracted Island, 2001. Anita Shapolsky Gallery, New York, Women of the 50s, Drexler, Delaunay, Krasner, Park, 2002. Bates College Museum, Lewiston, Maine: Monhegan Modernists, Collection of John Day, 2002. Lore Degenstein Gallery, Susquehanna University, Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania, Monhegan Modernists: 1940-1970, 2003. Farnsworth Art Museum, Rockland, Maine: Abstraction in Maine: Drexler, Brooks, Loew, Lynch, Nevelson, Rothschild, 2003. Elizabeth Moss Gallery, Falmouth, Maine, 2005. Greenhut Gallery, Portland, Maine, 2005. Lupine Gallery, Monhegan, Maine, 2005. Monhegan Museum, Maine, A Century of Women Artist on Monhegan Island, Maine, 2005. Opalka Gallery, Albany, New York: New York School: Another View: Drexler, Krasner, Nevelson, Frankenthaler, Brooks, Bolotowsky, Mitchell, 2005. Portland Museum of Art, Portland, Maine, 2005. Jameson Modern, Portland, Maine, Modern Maine, 2006. Anita Shapolsky Gallery, New York, Three from Maine, 2007. Anita Shapolsky Gallery, New York, Collector's Choices, 2007. UNE Gallery, Portland, Maine, On Island: Women Artists of Monhegan Island, 2007. (Traveled to Albright Knox Museum, Buffalo, New York; Finch College, New York; Sproul Museum, Louisville, Kentucky; University of Maryland; Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond) Quidley & Company, Moving to Abstraction, 2017. Amar Gallery, London, Hiding in Plain Sight, 2018. Jody Klotz Fine Art, Abilene, Texas, The Muse | Visions of Nature, 2020. Elizabeth Moss Galleries, Falmouth, Maine, Maine Masters of Modernism, 2021. Jody Klotz Fine Art, Abilene, Texas, Celebrating Women in Art, 2021.

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Anita Shapolsky, New York, Salon Du Papier, 2022. Graham Shay 1857, New York, COLOR 2022. David Benrimon Fine Art, New York, A Female Perspective, 2022. Farnsworth Art Museum, Rockland, Maine, Farnsworth Forward: The Collection, 2022. (Curated by Suzette McAvoy) Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine, At First Light: Two Centuries of Artists in Maine, 2022. Karma, New York, Kathy Butterly, Lynne Drexler, and Marley Freeman, 2023. Jody Klotz, Abilene, Texas, re.e.mer.gence, Women AbEx and Color Field Artists, 2023. J. Kenneth Fine Art & Estate Collection, Palm Springs, Abstraction 1953-1972, 2023. Ogunquit Museum of American Art, Maine, Networks of Modernism, 1898-1968, 2023. Southampton Arts Center, New York, Heroines of the Abstract Expressionist Era: From the New York School to The Hamptons, 2023. Berry Campbell, New York, Perseverance, 2024. Farnsworth Art Museum, Rockland, Maine, Lynne Drexler: Color Notes, 2024-2025. SELECTED COLLECTIONS Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois Bates College, Lewiston, Maine Farnsworth Art Museum, Rockland, Maine Greenville County Museum, South Carolina Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, California Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, New York Mint Museum, Charlotte, North Carolina Monhegan Museum, Monhegan, Maine Museum of Modern Art, New York National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Portland Museum of Art, Maine Prentice Hall Collection, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey Provincetown Art Association and Museum, Provincetown, Massachusetts Queens Museum, Queens, New York Tamarind Print Collection, Los Angeles University of Massachusetts, Amherst