

[MENU](#)

Long Island female artists on the landscape of inspiration

By **Deidre S. Greben**

[Special to Newsday](#)

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More than 50 years after art historian Linda Nochlin famously inquired in her ARTnews magazine article “Why have there been no great women artists?,” the Long Island Museum is offering up its own examination of the question. Drawing from its coffers, nearby institutions and private collections, “Two Centuries of Long Island Women Artists, 1800-2000,” on view through Sept. 4, renders a fuller picture of local talent and the impact Long Island women painters and sculptors have had on the art-historical canon.

In early 19th-century America “there were not very many female artists, but not many male artists either,” explained the museum’s deputy director, Joshua Ruff. “The art world was itself being formed.”

Still, newly founded schools, such as New York City’s National Academy of Design and the Art Students League, limited the participation of female students, whose creative expression had largely been confined to embroidery and watercolors. In contrast, women were more welcomed at art establishments across Long Island, such as William Merritt Chase’s Summer School in Shinnecock Hills, that emerged with the popularity of American Impressionism and the practice of painting out-of-doors.

The appeal of the bucolic Long Island landscape did not diminish with the onslaught of Modernism at the turn of the 20th century, serving artists as both a respite and as a source of inspiration. “When I’m out on Long Island, I’d have to wear a blindfold to avoid the landscape. It’s the very air one breathes,” reads a quote by Jane Freilicher on one of the show’s wall panels.

While the New York School artist gained a following with her distinctive painterly realism, other modernists made their mark on different regions of Long Island—Helen Torr and her semiabstract canvases on the North Shore township of Huntington, for instance, or Grace Hartigan, Lee Krasner and Elaine de Kooning, all of whom helped to establish the East End as a hotbed of Abstract Expressionism.

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Along the way and since then, there have been countless others. The exhibition’s roster of more than 70 artists includes both the less familiar, such as Edith Mitchill Prellwitz (whose great-great-granddaughter Wendy’s work is also in the exhibition), and higher-profile names like photorealist pioneer Audrey Flack, the first woman to appear in “Janson’s History of Art,” the classic survey of the Western tradition now in its eighth edition.

Admittedly, there are many omissions. “Of course, it’s meant to be a starting — not an ending — point,” noted Nina Sangimino, who organized the groundbreaking show with Ruff and LIM curator Jonathan Olly.

Here, Newsday invited some of the featured artists to look back and forward to consider their place in and affinity with the litany of women who have adopted Long Island as a subject and setting for their artistic endeavors. Each artist talks about another in the exhibit whose work has been inspirational.

WENDY PRELLWITZ (born 1950) and GRACE HARTIGAN (1922-2008)

Wendy Prellwitz, who created "Beyond, 1997," above, says she finds inspiration in Grace Hartigan's lithograph "Cleopatra, 2004," below, whose palette Prellwitz finds "mysterious and powerful." Credit: Long Island Museum

“The piece that jumped out for me is Grace Hartigan’s 2004 lithograph ‘Cleopatra.’ I have admired the strength of her work and her position in the Abstract Expressionist world, particularly as a woman who chose to incorporate figurative elements in her paintings.

“I really respond to her bold, black calligraphic marks and love to see her hand in those brushstrokes – which a lithograph captures well, like a painterly print. I am also a printmaker who makes painterly prints and appreciate the process and particular textures of ink on paper.

Grace Hartigan's "Cleopatra II, 2004" a lithograph. Credit: Guild Hall Museum

"The combination of black on an intense blue background is also striking and a color combo that I'm drawn to: mysterious and powerful, like the night.

"Her simplified image of a cropped torso, akin to a Roman statue, feels equally powerful and muscular, including the womblike opening into her interior with the white marks of something going on inside. Maybe that's her image of Cleopatra — a strong, complicated woman and mother, like herself."

MARY ELLEN DOYLE (born 1938) and CLARA WELLES LATHROP (1853-1907)

Mary Ellen Doyle says she sees similarities between her "Farm Terrain, 1987," above, and Clara Welles Lathrop's "Amagansett, Long Island, 1892," below. "The light and the geography of Long Island has inspired me for the past 40 years . . ." Doyle says. Credit: Long Island Museum

"I selected Clara Welles Lathrop's 'Amagansett, Long Island,' 1892, because the size, medium of watercolor, and subject matter — farming — are similar to my painting in the show. Ninety-five years later, I chose to convey the expanse of preserved farmland at my home and studio with a diptych on handmade paper that allows the planes of the field to move back and forth from the foreground to the moraine in the distance.

Clara Welles Lathrop's "Amagansett, Long Island, 1892." Credit: Long Island Museum

"The light and the geography of Long Island has inspired me for the past 40 years, and I have painted at the ocean beaches and in the fields. These aspects of Long Island have been more influential for me than the historical canon."

JANET LYNN CULBERTSON (born 1932) and LISA BRESLOW (born 1957)

Janet Lynn Culbertson, who created "Showtime (Sunrise, Long Island), 1998," above, says she was drawn to "Glade Light II," below, by Lisa Breslow, whose artwork, Culbertson says "shares a sense of mystery that I often create in my work." Credit: Long Island Museum

"After looking through the exhibit, I was particularly struck by how much the work has changed. It is much less restrained, more experimental, and bolder in style, technique and content. I was drawn to several fine works – to Lee Krasner and Jennifer Bartlett's freedom in their work using color and texture as the focal point and subject – but especially to Lisa Breslow's 'Glade Light II.'

Lisa Breslow's "Glade Light II," 1998, oil on wood. Credit: Long Island Museum/The Ronald G. Pisano Memorial Collection

"Her artwork shares a sense of mystery that I often create in my work. I also use extreme contrast, darkness and lightness to create a depth and intensity and, in my own paintings, to portray the idea of the beauty and demise of nature.

"We differ in that my work has an overt environmental and political message. I use the billboard as the icon for human overconsumption and greed. My artistic concern is that I passionately feel art has to have a message (perhaps in my case too strong), but in this world of complex issues, even horrors, how can one remain abstract and decorative? Or do we all need to escape reality?"

LISA BRESLOW (born 1957) and JANE FREILICHER (1924-2014)

"My current paintings are more complex, gestural observations of cityscapes and flowers. They reflect my everyday life, which is what is so moving in [Jane] Freilicher's work." — Lisa Breslow | Credit: Robyn Field Photography

"Jane Freilicher is an artist I've always admired and whose paintings I've been drawn to. I painted 'Glade Light II' in 1998, during a period in which I was refining the essence of a landscape by using a limited palette of muted colors to create expressive and atmospheric abstract compositions.

"My current paintings are more complex, gestural observations of cityscapes and flowers. They reflect my everyday life, which is what is so moving in Freilicher's work. Jane Freilicher was a woman pioneer painter of her generation who remained steadfast in her vision and created beautifully crafted and personal paintings that are a great inspiration for me."

Dee Shapiro, who made "Isla Niños, 1981," above, says she is glad that pieces once considered "craft" or "low art" by women such as Mary Cordelia Bayles Hawkins, who created "Hand-pieced and appliquéd quilt," below, are now seen as works of art. Credit: Heckscher Museum of Art

DEE SHAPIRO (born 1936) and MARY CORDELIA BAYLES HAWKINS (1821-1888)

"Among the wonderful works in the show, I am drawn to the quilts by the 'ladies of Port Jefferson,' 1859, and the Mary Cordelia Bayles Hawkins' hand-pieced and appliquéd quilt, 1846. My interest in pattern encompassed what was considered 'craft' or 'low art' by women. Knitting, weaving, sewing, beading were all inspiration for my piece in the exhibition.

"The handwork and pattern in both those early pieces exemplified the skill and creativity of women during that period. I am glad to see that those pieces are considered works of art."

Mary Cordelia Bayles Hawkins' "Hand-pieced and appliquéd quilt," 1846. Credit: Long Island Museum

TY STROUDSBURG (born 1940) and MARY ABBOTT (1921-2019)

"I know that Mary Abbott was extremely influential to my early work. When I first came to Southampton from New Jersey in 1962, she invited me to her studio and was very complimentary about the abstract work I was doing. Her abstractions, and our studio visits, were important to me because until that time I had only seen contemporary work in reproductions.

One painting, although small in size, hit me like a ton of bricks: Mary Ellen Doyle's dual landscape, 'Farm Terrain,' 1987. Her work skillfully merges landscape with abstraction, which is a problem I have dealt with for several decades in my own work.

"And the other major influence on my early work is reflected in Mary Abbott's 'Untitled' from 1951. In 1964, these direct experiences with abstraction, and meeting their creators, resulted in a renewed dedication to my painting and a permanent relocation from New Jersey to Long Island."

MARY STUBELEK (born 1951) and RUTH HAWKINS MOUNT SEABURY (1808-1888)

Mary E. Stubelek, who painted "Portrait and the Burning Bush," above, noted the work of Ruth Hawkins Mount Seabury, whose "Portrait of a Woman in a Blue Dress," below, shows a classic sensitivity with its use of embroidery and watercolors. Credit: Long Island Museum/Baker/Pisano Collection

"The common thread in the exhibition aside from 'women' artists is the life and passion derived from living and working on Long Island. The incredible and ever-changing light, the bays, the ocean and natural landscape all have contributed to the creative urge. This heightened exposure over time is internalized, becoming a ground force for an artist.

"Two artists working in the 1800s in this exhibition of note are Ruth Hawkins Mount Seabury (1808-1888), 'Portrait of a Woman in a Blue Dress,' whose work displays a classic sensitivity along with the combination of silk embroidery and watercolor, and Evelyn Mount (1837-1920), with the expression of dramatic light, composition and exquisitely painted oils of still life.

"The Long Island environment has nurtured so many wonderful and unique artists, be it the women of Chase's Shinnecock School or the Peconic School (I grew up daily looking at a wonderful Caroline Bell in the living room) or the East Hampton women artists represented in this exhibition."

Ruth Hawkins Mount Seabury's "Untitled (Portrait of a Woman in a Blue Dress)." Credit: Long Island Museum

CORNELIA FOSS (born 1931) and ELAINE DE KOONING (1918-1989)

“An odd thing happened in the so-called Hamptons around the '60s. Women painters had suddenly emerged and were being shown in the galleries in Southampton, Bridgehampton and East Hampton. These paintings were not the pretty ladies' paintings of posies and such, but strong, interesting and vibrant paintings — some landscapes and some abstract visions. They said, 'We're here!' They could not be ignored. Some were very good painters, some were more than that — they were great.

"An odd thing happened in the so-called Hamptons around the '60s. Women painters had suddenly emerged and were being shown in the galleries in Southampton, Bridgehampton and East Hampton." — Cornelia Foss | Credit: Christopher Foss

"I love the strength of the black lines in Elaine de Kooning's 'Standing Bison, Cave #92,' 1986. They melt magically with the busy surroundings, and they are beautifully drawn. Sometimes one isn't quite sure if it's describing the outlines of a shape or the inside of another object — a wonderful 'now you see it, now you don't' effect. However, one is aware that she is in control all the time. Nothing is haphazard.

"I think — I can only speak for myself here — that's where inspiration comes in. There are times when my hand seems to know what to do before I do. It's a wonderful feeling and I'm very grateful when it happens."

WHAT "Two Centuries of Long Island Women Artists, 1800-2000"

WHEN | WHERE Through Sept. 4, Long Island Museum, 1200 North Country Rd., Stony Brook

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