



Untitled, 1983
Acrylic, pastel on canvas
52 x 52 inches (132.1 x 132.1 cm)
HS 0811

Exhibited: *Hedda Sterne: Reflections*,
CDS Gallery, March 8–March 31, 1984

HEDDA STERNE

ARCHITECTURE OF THE MIND

VAN DOREN
WAXLER



One of the most fascinating—and consistent—aspects of Hedda Sterne's personality and her long, complex, variegated oeuvre was her habit of cycling between subjects and styles, focusing on one type of work and then suddenly moving on to something different. "This is the period just before the present period," Sterne once explained. "Now I'm in another period."¹

When she fled Bucharest for New York in 1941, having narrowly escaped the roundup and murder of the Jews in her neighborhood, "I was more or less a Surrealist,"² she said, using automatist techniques to create collages and works based on torn paper. For some years following, she recreated memories of rooms from her lost life in Romania, then found herself so captivated by the New World she had landed in that she honed in on its pulsating sights and events. "I started painting my kitchen, my bathroom...the street downstairs, the cars," she told Claire Nivola, a family friend. "New York, it seemed to me, was more unbelievable and poetic and surrealist than anything that the Surrealists imagined." Intensifying her focus on the present was the fact that "I thought I'd never see anybody of my past again, including my family," she added, noting that her sudden displacement had felt "like going to the moon."³

In 1947, after encountering American farming equipment on a trip to Vermont, Sterne began her "anthropographs" or Machine series, depicting fantastical anthropomorphic machines. In the early 1950s, a highway trip across the U.S. prompted her move into gestural abstraction: painting dark, monumental renditions of towers, bridges and roads, often with commercial spray paint—pulsating compositions that now seem to have anticipated graffiti art. Toward the end of the decade came the Vertical-Horizontals, which echoed Minimalism as they explored the tension of a horizon line compacted into a vertical frame.

Other series, of the 1960s and 1970s, used automatic processes, such as dripping paint or pushing a pen continuously to create biomorphic blobs and curvy, curlicued vegetables, like cauliflower and lettuces. During this period, Sterne occasionally dismayed the art world, still focused on modernism, by making—and sometimes showing—keenly observed portraits.

(She once alluded to having destroyed several after her husband, the cartoonist and illustrator Saul Steinberg, warned they'd be poison for her career.)

Some saw in Sterne's variegation a sense of boundless renewal, but it was not always in keeping with her times. "She is, God help her, an artist's artist," the curator Fred Licht wrote of Sterne in 1982, adding that she "modulates quickly to another key just when we think we have caught on to one particular melodic line or harmonic theme."⁴ His essay appeared in a catalog for an exhibition of Sterne's Sign paintings—glowing white canvases covered with dark totemic squiggles, suggestive of eddying waters, undulating snowscapes, people swarming across barren land.

But by the time the Signs show opened, Sterne, then 71, had already moved into a period she later came to call "Patterns of Thought" or "Architecture of the Mind." Initially these paintings and works on paper look like fairly straightforward geometric abstractions, their shapes—squares, triangles, diamonds, rectangles and the like—marked with graphite-like lines against washes of muted color, often sand and gray. Yet they quickly reveal themselves as extraordinarily complex. Each piece contains multiple perspectives that usually contradict each other. They also summon up associations that frequently echo the buildings, roads, vistas and shimmering lines that travel through her earlier oeuvre.

As the years passed, Sterne introduced more layers and brighter colors. She also came to consider herself a conduit for these works, rather than a creator. "Too involved to worry about how 'good' they are," she wrote on a scrap of paper in her studio. "They use me in *their* urge to *BE*. Why this is so and How, is totally beyond me."⁵ In the diary she kept at the time, she often commented that she couldn't tell where she ended and the work began. "I turning into a geometric abstraction, a passage, a channel," she wrote in about 1992.⁶ It came to obsess her so deeply that she kept mining this vein for more than a decade, resulting in one of her longest-running cycles of work.

Many of the pieces suggest perspective drawings, like the very early *Rectangles* (1981), a 54" x 72" acrylic painting now in the collection of the Queens

Museum. The canvas is divided into nine rectangles, creating three horizontally oriented triptychs. The top trio leads the eye into distant space, recalling the caverns of a cityscape; the second, toward middle ground, as it suggests a series of interlocking domestic rooms; and the bottom, far beyond the canvas, while conjuring up the specter of a road.

Others bring to mind architectural renderings, as in a small graphite, crayon and watercolor work on paper from the 1980s (HS 1516), in which ochre trapezoids create a tunnel that leads to a patch of grayish blue; logic suggests its interior should be dark, yet it appears suffused with light. Sometimes a painting looks two-dimensional in one part of the canvas, then folds in on itself, as in a 1983 acrylic (HS 0800), whose strict central vertical axis suddenly turns origami-like at the sides. And often the work has a metaphysical bent, being organized around lines and triangles that suggest mandalas, crucifixes and Stars of David. A 1989 diptych (HS 0077) brings two of these symbols into conjunction: a thin blue cross hovers over the upper panel while the lower is grounded with overlapping triangles in warmer colors.

The lines Sterne was making possessed her. “I wake up frequently at 4 am, impatient to draw,” she wrote to her friend, the Surrealism scholar Mary Ann Caws, around the time she made the untitled acrylic from 1988–89, whose intersecting lines, triangles and parallelograms send prisms of color ricocheting around the canvas (HS 00034). “Like going to a place where miracles are the norm, I watch myself live. I am only totally alive when I conjure these images: I wish I could understand what they really are—where they come *from* and *why*...?”⁷

After making *Elegy* (1990), now in the collection of Michigan’s Flint Institute of Arts, whose 160² expanse is divided by multiple perspectives that cross, overlap and bypass each other, Sterne told another friend, the architect Karen Van Lengen, that she had dreamed the lines she made were independent, and she had to coax them to return. “I had to be very nice to them,” Van Lengen recalls Sterne saying, “because I wanted them to obey me. So when I sent them into the space, I had to

say, ‘Come on, dearie, come on back to me.’ It wasn’t me manipulating them.”⁸

Yet the work is far from linear: the great twentieth-century critic and curator Katherine Kuh once compared it to *trompe l’oeil*, noting its shimmering planes of light, and its ability to “project both real and symbolic windows from which we look in and out at one and the same time.” Although the surfaces are always textural and painterly, they seem to channel architectural and sculptural aesthetics that were in the air when she began the work, recalling the angular geometry of the museums designed by her friend I.M. Pei, who had recently completed the National Gallery’s East Building, and the perceptual sculptural installations of California Light and Space artists like Robert Irwin and Larry Bell. This work also seems to presage the interest in overlapping perspectives now being addressed by contemporary artists as diverse as Doug Aitken, known for his kaleidoscopic multimedia installations, and the painter Julie Mehretu, whose monumental canvases layer such elements as architectural plans, urban maps and abstract forms to suggest the forces that shape society.

Sterne told Nivola that her ability to focus so intensely had evolved from her habit of daily meditation, which she began in 1965, some years after separating from Steinberg, the great love of her life. Once decoupled, she withdrew from socializing and romance, and dedicated herself to reflection and work. “I wanted to have a deeper understanding,” Sterne said, calling it “my life’s obsession.”⁹

Curiously, when writing about meditation in her diary, she often seems to be describing the layered perspectives of her paintings. “I notice that ‘clarifying’ one’s mind,” she observes, “is like understanding again and again the same things on another level and arriving through another road from different starting points. A sphere with endlessly faceted surface[s], each facet a point of departure just discovered.”¹⁰

The diary also suggests her intellectual breadth. Her reading is vast, from the cultural critic Adam Gopnik to the theoretical physicist David Bohm, the critic and statesman Václav Havel and the fourteenth-century Sufi philosopher Ibn Khaldun, whom she quotes, saying

his words about slavery destroying the spirit also apply to women. There are dream notations, many involving architecture (“I.M. Pei showing me imaginary houses and his office”¹¹) and observations about art. “My reaction to much art contemporary ‘Is that all there is?’” she writes in about 1986.¹²

Sterne also questions the aspect of her character that prompted her to keep switching styles. “Any attention or praise feels like an attempt/attack at my freedom and equanimity. It also seems to me—as I look back—that even [if] consciously I did try for a ‘career’ as it is generally understood, I, at all times, did also things to block it.”

She certainly had the opportunity. Sterne’s work was always widely shown, and in the years leading to the development of the New York School she was one of a few women who held a seat at the table. From the beginning, she was embraced by Peggy Guggenheim and included in important shows, starting with André Breton and Marcel Duchamp’s *First Papers of Surrealism*. She was also part of Betty Parson’s early stable, together with Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko and others who became the giants of Abstract Expressionism.

Then came her part in the famous 1951 *Life* photograph—the only woman in the group dubbed the Irascibles and “the worst thing that happened to me” career-wise, Sterne always maintained, for the men had been “furious” about her presence, feeling it “took away from the seriousness of it all.”¹³

The other issue, of course, was her seeming changeability. “Hedda was so intelligent and so serious,” Parsons observed. “But she changed all the time, and the damn critics thought she wasn’t serious. Maybe they thought that because she was a woman.”¹⁴

“Hedda, just stick to one thing and you’ll be famous,” Sterne once recalled Rothko telling her. But “that was not my idea of being an artist,” she said.¹⁵

Yet in her diary Sterne examines that proclivity—why enter a new “period” just as she was gaining recognition for the last? In interviews, she often implied she did it because she had no interest in the brand- and ego-driven culture that had buoyed the Abstract

Expressionists to fame. But here she concludes it might have been partly a hair shirt, used to prod herself to greater heights: “‘Fear of success’ is a very unsatisfactory theory. Fate could serve much better—but I certainly helped! I wonder, is pain and frustration the only means to achieve, to keep on the way to spiritual evolution?”

Today, however, a career embodying restless experimentation seems far more acceptable than it did then. We are also more inclined to accept it as a hallmark of brilliance in women, not only in men. And perhaps Sterne, who outlived all the other Irascibles and kept making work until she drew her last breath, in 2011, had the foresight to see beyond the art world that made her.

“I am preparing a great show, and that is a post-humous show,” she told a radio interviewer in 1970, in her charming, musical accent. “Remember that Isak Dinesen talked about a life which is like a drawing in the sand and you only understand its meaning when it’s totally completed.”¹⁶

CAROL KINO

Endnotes

1. Interview with Hedda Sterne conducted by Phyllis Tuchman, December 17, 1981, Hedda Sterne Papers: 1944-1970, Archives of American Art.
2. Interview with Hedda Sterne conducted by Claire Nivola, September 26, 2005, Hedda Sterne Papers: 1944-1970, Archives of American Art.
3. Nivola interview.
4. CDS Gallery, 1982.
5. Notes, collection of the Hedda Sterne Foundation.
6. Diary, p. 49.
7. Mary Ann Caws, “Hedda Sterne: Re-Cognizing the Last of the Irascibles,” *Art Papers*, September/October 2000.
8. Karen Van Lengen, interview with author, August 21, 2021.
9. Nivola interview.
10. Diary, p. 26.
11. Diary, p. 50.
12. Diary, p. 8.
13. Tuchman interview.
14. Lee Hall, *Betty Parsons: Artist, Dealer, Collector* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1991), p. 108.
15. Van Lengen interview.
16. Interview with Hedda Sterne conducted by Ruth Bowman for WNYC Radio, April 23, 1970.

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Hedda Sterne with three recent paintings in her studio at
179 East 71st Street, January 6, 1993. pg. 6 © Brian Coats - www.briancoats.com

Hedda Sterne in her backyard pg. 44 © Renate Ponsold Motherwell

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