

Hedda Sterne

Exhibition 29 January–21 March 2020

Victoria Miro Mayfair, 14 St George Street, London W1S 1FE



Hedda Sterne, *Vertical-Horizontal XVII*, 1963
Oil on canvas
219.71 x 127 cm
86 1/2 x 50 in
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Courtesy Van Doren Waxter and Victoria Miro

Victoria Miro is delighted to present the first UK solo exhibition of works by Hedda Sterne (1910–2011).

An active member of the New York School, Hedda Sterne, who was born in Bucharest, Romania in 1910 and fled to the US in 1941, created an extensive body of work that intersected with some of the most important movements and figures of the twentieth century. A bridge between European Modernism, in particular Surrealism, and American Abstract Expressionism, Sterne's work stands as a testament to her independence of thought, moving freely between figuration and abstraction throughout her career. Her work has enjoyed increased critical visibility in recent years, featuring in major exhibitions such as *Making Space: Women Artists and Postwar Abstraction*, held at MoMA in 2017, and the ongoing display *Epic Abstraction* at The Met Fifth Avenue. Paintings by Sterne were included in *Surface Work* at Victoria Miro in 2018, which celebrated a century of abstract painting by women. Sterne's 1954 painting *New York VIII* is featured in MoMA's reinstallation of its permanent collection.

Early international recognition came when collages included in a Paris exhibition in 1938 were singled out for praise by Jean Arp. Through him, Sterne was recommended to Peggy Guggenheim, and was later included in five exhibitions at Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery in New York. Embraced by fellow Surrealist exiles in the city, Sterne was also included in the exhibition *First Papers of Surrealism* in 1942, organised by André Breton and Marcel Duchamp. While her first works completed in the US retain the influence of Surrealism, Sterne quickly absorbed the spirit of the metropolis, drawing inspiration from its architecture, its scale and dynamism. Industrial forms such as farm machinery start to appear in her work of the 1940s following a visit to Vermont with her second husband, fellow artist and Romanian émigré, Saul Steinberg, whom she married in 1944.

By the 1950s, Sterne was increasingly concerned with motion and light, combining formal innovation with material experimentation in her use of commercial aerosol spray paint in her attempt to interpret the increasing speed of the world around her. Looser and increasingly atmospheric, works from this period are characterised by a sense of mergence – of manmade and organic forms becoming as one. Sterne is widely remembered for her appearance at this time in a now iconic photograph for Life magazine, published in 1951, of the 'Irascibles' – a group of artists who protested against the Metropolitan Museum of Art's failure to include abstraction in its exhibitions of American art. Notably, she is the only woman in the image.

The works in this exhibition are drawn principally from the early 1960s when, inspired by a year and a half spent living in Venice as a Fulbright fellow, Sterne embarked upon a series of ostensibly quieter works composed of numerous horizontals that read as multiple horizon lines. These meditative *Vertical Horizontals* are at once self-contained, having a kinship with minimalist abstraction, and poetic intimations of landscape, with water and sky seemingly repeated and reflected multiple times within a single image. Sterne described her work as a process of ongoing exploration and discovery. The romantic tendency on display here – with opalescent whites, creams and greys and sonorous umbers interspersed with flashes of ochre, green and gold – is characteristic of a restless, searching quality, elaborated upon in a quote by the artist in which she states, 'I believe... that isms and other classifications are misleading and diminishing. What entrances me in art is what cannot be entrapped in words.'

About the artist

Hedda Sterne was born in Bucharest, Romania in 1910. She was introduced to Constructivism and Surrealism by the artist Victor Brauner, a childhood friend. Between 1927 and 1932 she travelled frequently to Vienna and Paris, where she attended classes in the ateliers of André Lhote and Fernand Léger, and at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. She studied art history and philosophy at the University of Bucharest from 1929 to 1932. That year, she married Friederich (Fritz) Stern, and during the following decade continued her artist practice while travelling between Bucharest and Paris. In 1938 she was included in the 11th annual *Salon des Surindépendants*, where her collages draw the attention of Jean Arp and Peggy Guggenheim.

Returning to her family in Bucharest in the lead up to World War II in 1939, Sterne witnessed the Romanian Iron Guard Revolt and Bucharest Pogrom in 1941. Later that year, she was able to travel to Lisbon and from there to New York, where she joined her husband who had left Romania on a business visa in 1940. Sterne established a studio on East 50th Street in 1942, becoming close friends with her neighbours Peggy Guggenheim and Max Ernst. Through Guggenheim she was introduced to artists including Piet Mondrian, André Breton and Marcel Duchamp. Breton and Duchamp included Sterne in the 1942 exhibition *First Papers of Surrealism*, Sterne's first group exhibition in the United States.

In 1943, Peggy Guggenheim began to exhibit Sterne's work at the Art of This Century gallery. That year, she also met Betty Parsons, who would become her long-time gallerist and close friend, and through her the artist and fellow Romanian émigré Saul Steinberg, who was commissioned as an ensign in the US Naval Reserve and soon departed on active duty. They corresponded regularly over the following year.

In the summer of 1944, Sterne's divorce from Fritz Stafford was finalised. (Fritz and Hedda had changed their German-sounding surname from Stern to Stafford in 1941, though she soon began to exhibit her work as Hedda Sterne, adding an 'e' to her married name). She married Steinberg in October 1944. While the pair separated in 1960, they were never divorced.

Sterne's first solo exhibition at the newly established Betty Parsons Gallery took place in 1947. She, along with Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and Ad Reinhardt, was one of 16 artists represented by the gallery at its founding. In 1950, Sterne was named one of the country's best artists under the age of 36 by Life magazine and that year was one of 28 artists to sign an open letter to the president of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, protesting the museum's aesthetically conservative group exhibition juries. Life magazine published an article about the letter in a January 1951 issue. Sterne was among 15 of the signatories photographed by Nina Leen for the article. The image, subtitled 'Irascible Group of Advanced Artists' includes, among others, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still, Robert Motherwell, Willem De Kooning, Adolph Gottlieb, Ad Reinhardt. Sterne, the only woman, can be seen standing on a table at the very top. The photograph is one of defining images of the New York School, though Sterne would later comment that 'I am known more for that darn photo than for eighty years of work.'

In 1963, awarded a Fulbright fellowship in painting, Sterne lived and work for a year and a half in Venice, where she developed her *Vertical Horizontals*. She began a daily practice of meditation in 1966, which became important for the rest of her life. Sterne continued to make paintings, drawings and prints, exhibiting widely through to the 2000s. She died in New York in 2011 at the age of 100.

Retrospective exhibitions have been mounted at the Montclair Art Museum, New Jersey in 1977 and at the Queens Museum in Flushing Meadow, New York in 1985. *Uninterrupted Flux: Hedda Sterne, A Retrospective* was held at the Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2006, touring in 2007 to the University of Virginia Art Museum, Charlottesville, Virginia.

Her works are represented in major international collections including The Art Institute of Chicago, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Whitney Museum of American Art and the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and Tate, UK.

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