

Ida Kohlmeyer

Systems of Color

Essay by MICHAEL PLANTE

Foreword by ERIK H. NEIL

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Published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name at the Newcomb Art Gallery of Tulane University in 2004, *Ida Kohlmeyer: Systems of Color* addresses Kohlmeyer's distinguished career as a painter and sculptor. Michael Plante, professor of art at Tulane and a curator, noted editor, author, and expert on abstract expressionism, brings us to the work and life of a second-generation abstract expressionist who spent her entire career outside the New York art world, opting instead for a life with her family in New Orleans.

Plante's text is a journey into the complexities of an artist who has flown under the radar of most enthusiasts of the period. Kohlmeyer knew the right players (Hans Hofmann, Mark Rothko, Joan Miro, James Johnson Sweeney), showed in the right places (David Findlay Galleries in New York, William Sawyer Galleries in San Francisco, High Museum of Art in Atlanta), and received supportive criticism by such writers as Elizabeth Magowen, Barbara Rose, and Eleanor Heartney. However, she never received the same level of attention as other female abstract expressionists, such as Grace Hartigan and Joan Mitchell, because she was south of the Mason-Dixon line.

Kohlmeyer's work moved through a number of phases, beginning with the figure. Upon entering Hans Hofmann's Provincetown school of art in 1956 at the age of 44, she was a traditional portraitist, but within a week she had been converted to Hoffman's theories of color, space, and abstraction. By the early sixties she was opening up pictorial space under the spell of Rothko, whom she knew and had painted alongside in 1957 while he was a visiting artist at Newcomb College. Her work became object-oriented by the late sixties, and by 1970 she was investigating the figure again, though this time she was interested in the female nude. This was to be short-lived, though, as she quickly found herself back in the nonobjective world, which gave way to a series of "cluster" paintings that began to introduce private symbols or pictographs that were playfully structured on a loose grid. She had also begun investigations in sculpture by 1969 that echo her ideas in paint through three-dimensional form. The eighties brought the Synthesis series, which were rich in color and featured distinctive symbols from her earlier work. The late paintings continued to deal with spatial relationships and large formats.

Kohlmeyer worked right up to the end of her life, a testament to her ambition and need to explore. She never allowed herself to become complacent or comfortable with a particular style, which speaks to her integrity and prolific output. Plante makes a clear case that we should consider Kohlmeyer's work absolutely significant and worthy of our attention and its maker as an incredibly creative and diverse artist of the last half of the 20th century. ■

REVIEWER: **Philip Lindsey** is an assistant professor of Fine Arts at Wilson College.