When Susan Rothenberg died in 2020 at the age of 75, the New Yorker art critic Peter Schjeldahl noted that the groundbreaking artist had yet to receive a major museum retrospective.

Perhaps such an exhibit is still to come. Meanwhile, Rothenberg fans can visit the Hall Art Foundation in Reading to see a survey of nearly 30 paintings and drawings spanning her career from 1974 to 2012. Most of the works come from the foundation’s collection, with some loaned by Sperone Westwater, Rothenberg’s New York City gallery for 33 years, and other sources.

Titled simply “Susan Rothenberg,” the exhibit first appeared at Kunstmuseum Schloss Derneburg, a 1,000-year-old castle in northern Germany that Andy and Christine Hall rehabilitated to show art owned by them and their foundation. (They likewise refurbished the Vermont venue, a former dairy and horse farm.) Maryse Brand organized the Derneburg exhibition in collaboration with Rothenberg and the Halls for a 2020 opening. Delayed by the pandemic, that show came to fruition in 2021, too late for the artist to see.

Rothenberg was “an artist’s artist,” said Brand, who worked at Sperone Westwater for eight years before moving to the Hall in 2005. During a recent tour of the Reading exhibit, Brand said she received a “flurry of positive feedback” from artists grateful for the show.

Born in Buffalo, N.Y., Rothenberg earned a degree in fine arts at Cornell University in 1967 before moving to New York City. There, she shocked the art world by reintroducing figuration at a time when minimalist and conceptual art reigned and painting had been declared dead.

In a moment that Schjeldahl described as having an “asteroidal impact,” Rothenberg showed three paintings featuring monumental horses at a SoHo gallery in 1975. The Hall show includes one of them, “Algarve,” a 112-by-110-inch canvas in acrylic and tempera.

The painting depicts the front half of a horse in profile, outlined in black on an abstract background of muddled grayish whites. In an illusionistic touch, one of its two hooves oversteps the bottom edge of the canvas. Yet black triangles under the neck and leg and a continuation of the background inside the horse’s outline flatten the image, creating a strange straddling of abstraction and figuration.

Rothenberg’s horses are understood to function as stand-ins for the human figure; by her own admission, she cared nothing about horses or horse paintings. (Ironically, her second husband, artist Bruce Nauman, balances his artistic life with training and selling horses.) But the presence of the powerful animal in her work nevertheless introduced emotion — something deliberately withheld in, say, Donald Judd’s boxes, Agnes Martin’s grids or Frank Stella’s pinstripe paintings.

“Algarve” is the apt centerpiece in the Hall’s horse barn gallery, which shows Rothenberg’s work up to 1990. That’s the year she relocated to Galisteo, N.M., to live with Nauman in a house the couple had designed for themselves. Dark and gray-white tones dominate the earlier, urban paintings — a palette, Rothenberg has commented, that also reflected the struggle of her 1979 divorce from sculptor George Trakas, with whom she had a daughter in 1972.

Her 1980s paintings aren’t just dark; they’re textured. Rothenberg switched to oils during this period on the advice of her artist friend Elizabeth Murray. “Elizabeth” (1984-85) is a portrait of a half-nude Murray rendered in an explosion of brushstrokes that unite the figure with her similarly painted background.

Rothenberg also painted, in 1985, a series of portraits of Piet Mondrian; the Hall show includes “A Golden Moment,” whose layered backstory can be accessed via QR codes on the sole wall label in each building. But the painting of Murray is particularly significant: One of the few acclaimed female artists of her era, Rothenberg helped promote other women in the profession.

In a 1984 interview with the New York Times, she recalled, “I got sick of people
‘How does it feel to be the only woman in the show?’ And I would reply, ‘It feels lousy, it’s not fair.’ Finally, I said, ‘If I’m the only woman, I won’t be in it.’”

Alas, Rothenberg is surrounded by men at the Hall: Two other exhibitions feature Andy Warhol and Ron Gorchov.

In the Hall’s cow barn, 18 large works represent the last 30 years of Rothenberg’s life. Living in the Southwest changed her color palette. She dove into reds and greens, albeit muddled rather than straight from the tube. And she continued fearlessly to disregard both artistic convention and the confines of the canvas. Rothenberg’s figures, both human and animal, are occasionally inscrutable and often merely suggested by a few discreet body parts.

“I’ve never felt comfortable painting a complete figure,” the artist said in a 2005 episode of Art21’s “Art in the Twenty-First Century” on PBS. “I don’t want to get too literal about things; I want the viewer to be able to do the work, too.”

In “Boodis and Kiggy,” a 58.75-by-61-inch painting, a reddish-purple human arm and leg followed by a dog with nose to the ground crowd the left and bottom sides of the canvas. The marching pair seem not to notice the prairie dog-like figure confronting them, an arrangement that suggests a layering of perspectives to make a story. “Dog and Snake” portrays the animals’ confrontation in body fragments amid an abstract swath of yellows.

One late series is based on fragmented marionettes or prosthetics, including “The Master,” in which a pair of isolated yellow arms and a floating yellow face manipulate various jointed limbs. The motion of the “master” is conveyed through repetition: One of the yellow arms appears twice. As in “Boodis and Kiggy,” a good portion of the canvas is a textured void; meanwhile, its top edge abruptly cuts off some fingers and limbs.

What seems to interest Rothenberg in these paintings is how color and perspective...
MIDDLEBURY AREA SHOWS P.56


TEXTURE: Artworks that are rough, soft, scratchy, silky, furry or glossy in a variety of mediums by more than 50 artists. Through July 6. Info. 989-7225. Sparrow Art Supply in Middlebury.


andy warhol: "Small is Beautiful," 100 of the artist's smaller-format paintings, from the Hall collection. Through June 30. Info, info@hallartfoundation.org. 3rd Floor Gallery in Brattleboro.

brattleboro/okemo valley
ANDY WARHOL: "Small is Beautiful," 100 of the artist’s smaller-format paintings, from the Hall collection.

JOHN GORDON: A 50-year survey of the American abstract artist works, featuring shaped canvases from the 1970’s to large-scale paintings in his last years.

SUSAN ROTHEMBERG: Nearly 30 figurative, gestural paintings by the late American artist from throughout her career. Weekends only, reservation required. Through November 26. Info, info@hallartfoundation.org. Hall Art Foundation in Reading.

THE ART OF HANDMADE PHOTOGRAPHY: A group exhibition in a variety of genres, mediums, styles, sizes and approaches by more than 30 local and national photographers, juried by Dr. Rio. Through July 2. Info. 251-6003. Vermont Center for Photography in Brattleboro.

KEITH HARING: SUBWAY DRAWINGS: Samples from the more than 5,000 chalk drawings the New York artist made from 1979 to 1986 in subway stations.

CATHY CONE: "Portals and Portraits," modified tints and mixed media by the Vermont photographer that speak to the power and limitations of memory.

DANIEL CALLAHAN: "En-Mass;" works from two series in which the Boston-based artist painted his own face and the faces of others and detailed the performances with photographs, writing, and audio and video vignettes.

JUAN HINOJOSA: "Paradise City," collaged figures made from found objects that reflect on the challenges of immigrants creating a new home in a new place.


ART SHOWS

manchester/bennington
ALBERTO REY: "Cultural Landscapes," a major exhibition featuring the artist’s Batteken River project, including large-scale painting projects, drawings, notes and photographs; as well as Rey’s Cuban heritage and bicultural identity. Through June 25. Info. 367-1311. Southern Vermont Arts Center in Manchester.


outside vermont

KATHY BLACK, MICHAEL HIEFFERMAN, SUSAN CALZA & HARRISON HALASKA: Paintings and video installation by the regional artists in four galleries. Through June 3. Info, 603-448-3177. AVA Gallery and Art Center in Lebanon, N.H.


THE GREAT MYSTERY: Four new paintings by the Cree artist along with five works in the museum’s collection that inspired them. Through October 30.

INFO

Susan Rothenberg. Through November 26 at Hall Art Foundation in Reading.

hallartfoundation.org