

Ce Roser: Abstract Painter

Recently I paid a visit to Ce Roser's New York studio on the Upper West Side. I exclaimed at the expansive views from her windows of the Hudson River. She showed me a tiny evocative watercolor that she had painted of her view with bare trees of Riverside Park in the foreground and towers in New Jersey on the distant horizon. This representational image surprised me, coming from an artist whose work I had long viewed as abstract. This tiny lyrical essay in watercolor set me pondering about the reasons that Ce prefers abstraction. What motivated her to become and remain an abstract painter?

I first met Ce Roser years ago when I was in my twenties and working as a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art. I got to know her as a painter and learned that she was associated with the historic group, American Abstract Artists, founded in New York City in 1936, to promote abstract art. Ce spoke to me then about her good friend, the abstract painter and art critic, Charmion von Wiegand (1896-1983), who had known Piet Mondrian, the Dutch *De Stijl* artist, one of the foremost pioneers of abstraction. For me, Ce was a vivid link to the history of early modernism, which had occupied me for my doctoral dissertation, focused on the influence of Kandinsky on American art.¹ Today, Ce, at more than a hundred years of age, is still vital and her historical heritage is even more precious.

She was born Cecilia Jue in Philadelphia in 1925. Her parents were American-born Chinese, who met while studying at the University of California in Berkeley. Her ancestors came from South China and arrived in the United States during the first significant wave of Chinese immigration, in the eras of the Gold Rush and railroad construction. Ce's well-educated parents encouraged her as a young child to paint and draw. When two of her mother's sisters married visiting Chinese men studying at the University of Pennsylvania, Ce, at the age of nine, went with her aunts and her mother to live in Shanghai, where Ce first learned Chinese. Eventually, she studied at a British high school in Hong Kong, where her mother taught English in a Chinese high school and at several colleges.

Ce's bi-lingual skills served her well, enabling her to find work at the U.S. Embassy's Information Service (USIS) in Chongqing, China, its wartime location from 1941-1946, following the Japan invasion, when the Nationalist Government of the Republic of China moved its capital there. It was at the USIS library in Chongqing that Ce, just nineteen, met an American colleague, Hal Roser (1920-1989), a Princeton graduate who was pursuing a career in the American Foreign Service. At twenty-one, Ce married Hal and his assignments took them to diverse posts. After the Philippines, Roser was assigned to Berlin, Germany, where Ce passed the entrance exam and began to study painting at the Berlin Art Academy.²

Ce's first teacher was the abstract sculptor, Hans Uhlmann (1900-1975). In 1933, Uhlmann survived arrest and subsequent incarceration for passing out anti-fascist leaflets, after which his artworks were categorized by the Nazis as "degenerate" and removed from German museums. Ce recalls, "His method was to have us abstract from the real and then also do an abstraction and make something real from it."³ Perhaps the little watercolor of her New York view is evidence that Ce continues to abstract from reality.

After her husband's foreign service posts to New Delhi, India, the couple went to Pakistan, with their infant son, born during a brief stay in New Jersey in 1948. In the early 1950s, Hal Roser left the foreign service, soon taking a position with the Exxon Corporation. In the 1960s, years after the

¹ See Gail Levin, "Wassily Kandinsky and the American Avant-garde, 1912-1950," doctoral dissertation, Rutgers University, 1976 and Gail Levin, *Kandinsky and the American Avant-garde, 1912-1950*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1993).

² Berlin Art Academy refers to the *Hochschule für Bildende Künste* (now *Universität der Künste – UdK*).

³ Beryl Smith, Joan Arbeiter, and Sally Shearer Swenson, *Lives and Works* (Lanham, MD and London: Scarecrow Press, 1999), 119.

family had settled in New York, Ce began showing at Ruth White's gallery at 42 East 57th Street.⁴ Ce had already begun to observe the unequal opportunities for women artists and noted that women over forty rarely got attention in the press. Identifying as a feminist, she was one of the founders of "Women in the Arts," an activist group, created by artists and professionals to fight sexism, end discrimination, and increase representation of women artists in museums and galleries.

Ce worked with fellow artists Pat Passlof and Sylvia Sleigh and the art historian Linda Nochlin on the major 1973 show called *Women Choose Women*, which took place at the New York Cultural Center at Columbus Circle.⁵ Reviewing this show for the *New York Times*, James Mellow quipped: "Women, too, appear to have a natural instinct for color. Or is that another male myth learned at a mother's knee?"⁶ Among the 111 artists in this show was Alice Baber (1928-1982), the subject of my latest biography. While this book was still in progress, I ran into Ce, my old acquaintance, who recalled that she had known Baber.

During the summer of 1974, both Ce Roser and Alice Baber and some twelve other members of group called "New York Professional Women Artists," tried to protest institutional gender bias, staging a walk-thru outdoor exhibition in Battery Park in lower Manhattan.⁷ The show then briefly moved to Central Park at 60th Street and Fifth Avenue for several weekends in September.

Today, Ce Roser's colorful abstract paintings manage both to seem fresh and to recall and renew the rich tradition of modernism that had so captured my early imagination. At the time of Roser's 1980 show at the Ingber Gallery in Soho, the critic Vivien Raynor proclaimed: "her airy and quite attractive paintings seem closest of all to Kandinsky's, especially when she includes calligraphic lines as a counterpoint to the ribbons of color."⁸ The critic John Russell soon concurred, remarking in his review of Roser's 1981 solo show at Ingber Gallery: "there is something of the headlong imagery of Kandinsky's early 'Improvisations.' . . . the color is everywhere light, clear, clean and free. . . ." ⁹ As Lane Dunlop noted in a review of Roser's 1977 Ingber Gallery show, she uses the "white of her primed canvas as a color in itself." ¹⁰

For me, Ce's paintings not only speak as modernist abstractions, but they also represent her history of feminist activism. I am mindful, however, that for all women painters who managed to be both abstract and feminist in the late 1960s and 1970s, there was the risk that their work might provoke certain male critics' suspicions that what could have seemed like "simple kaleidoscopic spectacle," contained some threatening abstract references to female anatomy like those made by willfully provocative feminist artists such as Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, or Hannah Wilke.¹¹ In Ce's case, however, her colorful abstractions with their dynamic forms, recall Kandinsky's improvisations, which are much more evocative of landscape than anatomy. Perhaps Ce's upbeat abstract paintings do contain references to her expansive views across the Hudson.

- Gail Levin

⁴ Ruth White operated her gallery between 1956-1970. Ce Roser showed there in 1961, 1964 and 1967. White, a New Yorker, also showed the work of her former teacher, Kurt Seligmann, the first Surrealist to escape Europe following Germany's invasion of Poland in 1939.

⁵ Ce worked with fellow artists Pat Passlof and Sylvia Sleigh and the art historian Linda Nochlin on the major 1973 show called *Women Choose Women*, which took place at the New York Cultural Center at Columbus Circle

⁶ James Mellow, "Art Focusing on Work by Women," *New York Times*, January 14, 1973.

⁷ Among the other participants were Dorothy Gillespie, Seena Donnerson, Joyce Blum, Joyce Weinstein, Mary Abbott, Sari Dienes, Ann Gillen, Buffie Johnson, Fay Lansner, Therese Schwartz, Margot Stewart, and Susan Weil.

⁸ At the time of Roser's 1980 show at the Ingber Gallery in Soho, the critic Vivien Raynor proclaimed: "her airy and quite attractive paintings seem closest of all to Kandinsky's, especially when she includes calligraphic lines as a counterpoint to the ribbons of color."

⁹ John Russell, "Ce Roser," *New York Times*, October 30, 1981.

¹⁰ Lane Dunlop, "Ce Roser," *Arts Magazine*, September 1977, 15.

¹¹ Levin, *Alice Baber: An Artist's Triumph Over Tragedy*, 212-213, I quote here Peter Schjeldahl, "New York Letter," *Art International*, September 1969, 73.