



Virginia Holt

My work is intuitive and emotional, about movement and the figure in space. The physical action of making a bold mark on a canvas is a direct reflection of my own controlled body movement, and overcoming the fear of making that mark.

Virginia Holt began painting in earnest in southern California in the 1960s, and over the next decades, would establish a bold and experimental body of work that encompassed mural-sized oil paintings and collage, etchings, large scale soft sculptures, and ceiling-height burlap hangings. Holt's earliest work was in figure drawing, but after studying etching and printmaking with Leonard Edmundson and painting with Emerson Woelffer at Chouinard Institute (later CalArts), her work quickly evolved into an abstract style. The core qualities of her extensive body of work are characterized by a fundamental interest in color, shape, and energy, yet she remained devoted to the character and

charisma of human faces and figures as she sought to understand and experience dynamic color and form on their own terms. Compelled throughout her career by the physical, emotional, and aesthetic challenges of working at a range of scales in abstraction, her largest paintings are mural-sized and the smallest are just one foot or a few inches square.

In her large, open loft studio in the then-gritty area of old town Pasadena, working nearby other emerging artists of the period such as Judy Chicago, Holt experimented freely with a range of materials. Her subject matter was shaped by the culture around her: rock and roll, literature, scientific and technological advances, and mythological stories all loom large in her visual vocabulary. Her large, abstract paintings were created in this solitary studio setting, while with other projects she sought collaboration and performative, surrealist-inspired modes of working. From 1967 - 1971, she worked closely with the South Coast Repertory Theater and other theatrical companies to create large-scale burlap tapestry stage sets: these included work for Samuel Beckett's play *Act Without Words* followed by The Who's *Tommy* rock opera (1972). The painted tapestries collectively comprised close to 100 portraits of musicians on individual burlap sacks—such as those that would transport potatoes or other produce. The faces included Jimi Hendrix, band members of The Who, Cream, Bob Dylan, Patti Smith, Bob Marley, Laurie Anderson (a subject of enduring fascination), Captain Beefheart and others inspired by her emerging love of live rock and roll performances in Los Angeles venues such as the Shrine Auditorium, the Roxy, and the Hollywood Bowl. She also enjoyed blues and jazz, seeing live B. B. King, Miles Davis, and Charlie Mingus. Each burlap portrait was sewn together, the largest group comprised a nearly 40' x 38' backdrop. Holt's consistent variety of innovative materials is testament to her experimental and open spirit in artmaking. Rarely did a woman of her era—in Los Angeles or elsewhere—work at such consistently large scale.

Along with music, Holt was avidly interested in literature's imaginary, mythological, and surrealist worlds. Andre Breton's novel *Nadja* (1928), in which Breton's alter ego character follows the elusive and mysterious Nadja

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throughout Paris, inspired Holt's own Nadja pilgrimage, seeking out Breton's sites of (semi)-fictive Najda sightings around Paris. Back home in her studio, Holt created ethereal and otherworldly renderings of each conjured encounter on loosely woven, irregularly shaped, suspended burlaps. The series (1980-1984) includes portraits of Nadja and Breton, and sites including Place Dauphin, Porte St. Denis, and Rue Lafayette. Through her own real visits to the sites of Breton's imagined encounters, Holt found an imaginative form of literary encounter perfectly suited to its surrealist subject, played out in gauzy, almost gossamer form.

Holt's engagement with the art and literary worlds was fueled by a network of friendships (with, among others, artists and teachers Leonard Edmondson and Corwin Clairmont, the musician Captain Beefheart, artists Suzanne Caporael, James Lee Byars and Eugenia Butler, and the writer Mary Jane Moffat), often sustained through extensive personal correspondence. She traveled extensively, frequently in conjunction with her husband's geothermal energy interests. Not content to fill the typical spousal role accompanying him on his business trips, she more frequently shaped these opportunities toward her own creative ends. In Iceland, for instance, a literal hotbed of geothermal energy, she devoured Njál's legendary thirteenth century Icelandic saga, soon after painting a second large-scale series (Njál's Saga, 1987) of suspended burlaps that again featured hallucinatory faces, their delicacy belying the intrinsic effect of their bold scale, looming over viewers at 10-12' each.

During her lifetime, she exhibited her work at venues including the Long Beach Art Museum (1969), the Brand Art Gallery in Glendale, CA (1973), Otis Art Gallery (1973), the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art (c. 1976), George Sand Gallery, Los Angeles, CA; The Mudd Club, New York (1981); and more recently at Jancar Gallery (2007); WPA Gallery, Los Angeles (2010); and 60 Wall Gallery, New York (2017). She also exhibited in erotic art shows in the 1970s and 80s and several feminist exhibition spaces including the 1977 exhibition *Autobiographies: Art by 13 Women Artists*, and *From History to Action at the Women's Building*, Los Angeles, CA, curated by Lucy Lippard (1984).

Biography

Born in Pittsburgh, Virginia Holt (1915-2015) moved with her family to Pasadena in 1925. She earned a BA in social sciences at Stanford University in 1937, where she also took courses in art history. Holt enrolled at Pasadena City College in 1960, after she had raised her family, and later transferred to Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles. From 1952, she lived with her family in a home designed by the architect Irving Gill in South Pasadena, CA.

— Kate Palmer Albers, 2020