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Review: 'Show of Hands' offers plenty of substance at the hands of the Northwest's female artists

By Gayle Clemans
Special to The Seattle Times

First of all, let me put my hand in the air and testify that "Show of Hands," an exhibition of 130 years of art by Northwest women at the Whatcom Museum, is a compelling roundup of big names and smaller histories.

But I need to ask: Is a women-only exhibition needed in this day and age? Does it tell us something different from, say, the recent "Concise History of Northwest Art" at the Tacoma Art Museum, which included men?

There are those who would say that we live in a post-feminist time, with battles won and equality achieved. Certainly, for many female artists working today, their identity as women is not the primary force driving their art, and many gender-blind opportunities exist. But consider this: The Whatcom show coincides with the centennial of women's suffrage in Washington state, which means that many of the women represented in the earlier portions of this show could not even vote. And simply to proclaim oneself a professional artist was once an audacious, controversial act.

The exhibition successfully draws a line (or several lines) from the early days of women painting the Northwest landscape to contemporary artists working in myriad media and subject matter. The exhibition establishes the historical and continual presence of extremely talented women with ties to the Northwest.

Most of the art selected by curator Barbara Matilsky is very, very good. And I like that she didn't try to force the



RICHARD NICOL
An untitled oil painting by Emily Carr (1871-1945).



RICHARD NICOL
Margie Livingston's acrylic and adhesive "131 angles and a few drizzles," from 2010.

EXHIBITION REVIEW

'Show of Hands: Northwest Women Artists 1880-2010'

More than 90 works of art by 63 women from Washington, Oregon and British Columbia, noon-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays, through Aug. 8. Whatcom Museum, Lightcatcher Building, 250 Flora St., Bellingham; \$4.50-\$10 (360-778-8930 or whatcommuseum.org).

show into the typical art-historical categories, many of which have been established through the critical framing of male artists (for example, the "Mystical" Northwest School of Mark Tobey and Morris Graves). The organization of the show is a bit fragmented and nonlinear, which means that it's more faceted, with side trips into smaller themes and visual junctures.

Two engrossing videos by Margot Quan Knight — one captures her self-reflections on bubbles that form and burst and the other shows her mashing white paper over her face — are hung next to a mask painting by Gwendolyn Knight, creating a dialogue about identity and representation.

Matilsky has included artists who spent their working lives in the Northwest, like Emily Carr and Mary Henry, and others, like Agnes Martin, who made a name for themselves elsewhere but have biographical ties to the area. Seattle is a big presence in the show with great work by contemporary artists Claire Cowie and Margie Livingston, among many others.

A recent transplant from the East Coast, Matilsky seems to have relished the process of gathering artists and institutions together; she drew on the expertise of — and acquired loans of art from — key figures within key institutions in the region, including the Tacoma Art Museum, Seattle Art Museum, Museum of Northwest Art and Martin-Zambito Fine Art. You can learn about individual artists and strands of history through the concise object labels, yet I wish that the catalog was more substantial; such an impressive gathering of works of art could have easily sustained a meatier, more analytical text.

But there is plenty of substance in the art, straight from the hands of women.