

A Carousel in Continuous Motion

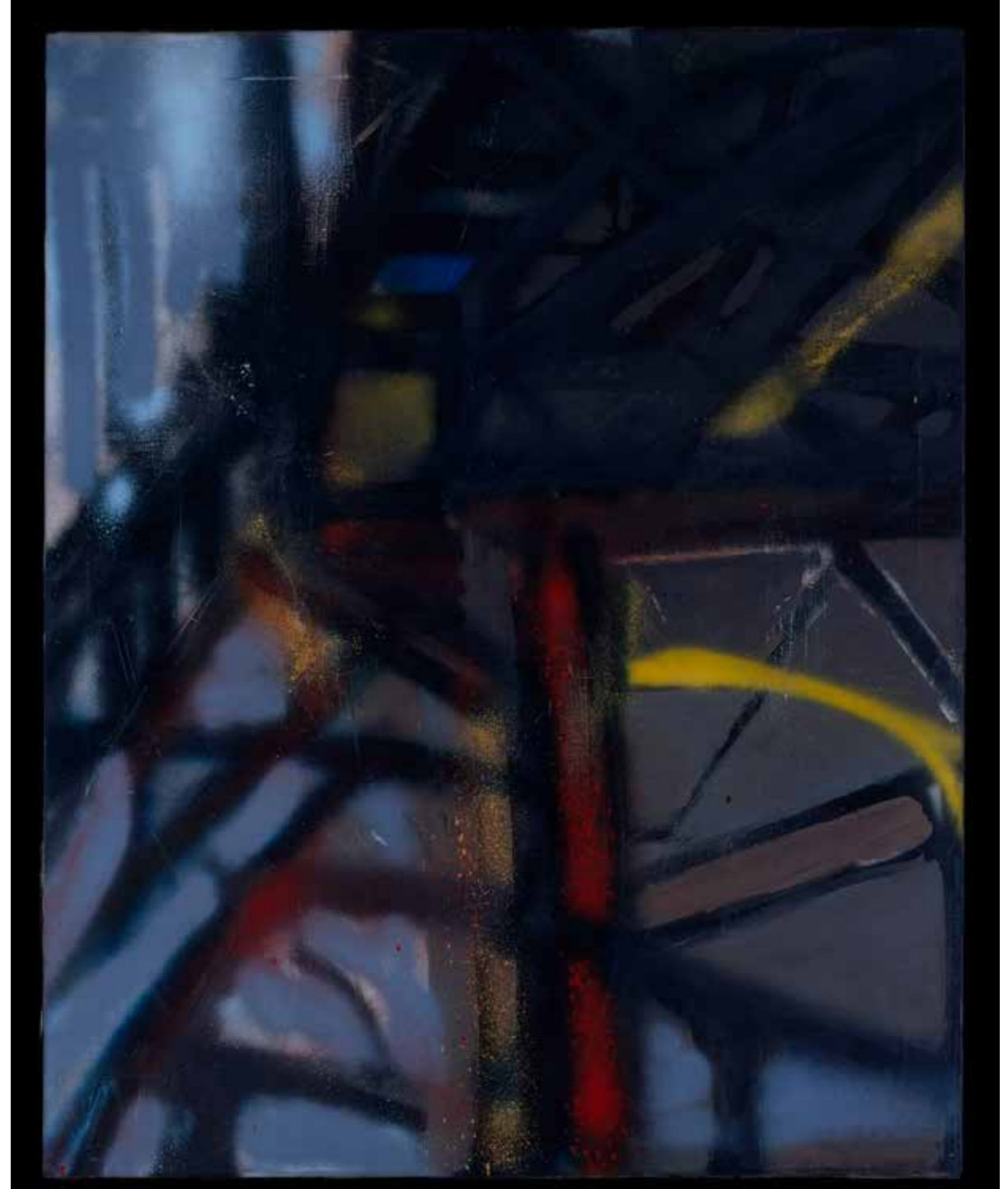
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Artist Hedda Sterne was "always searching, never satisfied."

Hedda Sterne, *Third Avenue El*. 1952-53. Oil and spray enamel on canvas, 40 3/8 × 31 7/8 in. (102.6 × 81 cm). Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Daniel H. Silberberg, 1964 (64.123.4). Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY

When I first moved to New York City in 2013, I worked in a Midtown skyscraper, catty-cornered from both Rockefeller Center and the scrolling news ticker of the Fox News building. My memory of that time is one of relentless momentum—the work, the pace on the sidewalks, the morning commuters streaming onto the subway platforms. I found some peace, ironically, in the very center of Times Square, where one day I stumbled upon a strangely sonorous metal grate near 45th and Broadway. It was a sound sculpture by Max Neuhaus, a recording hidden under the grate, such that if you stood directly on top of it, ambient sound envelops you completely. The sensation was as if the entire square had been plunged suddenly into water; the traffic, the advertisements, and the crowds continued apace, but the absence of noise made everything feel suspended, serene. Weirdly—inexplicably—still.

I was reminded of this feeling recently while coming across another artwork, Hedda Sterne's painting *Third Avenue El* (1952-53). The piece, all strong lines and brief strokes of color, hint at the shape of an elevated subway track. There's the suggestion of tall buildings in the background, though it's hard to be sure. Made using aerosol spray paint, brand new to hardware shelves at the time, the painting has a thick, hazy quality to it, like it's trapped behind a window pane obscured with condensation. Sterne was fascinated by the machinic quality of New York, and loved the same speed of the city that had initially overwhelmed me. "New York seemed to me at the time like a gigantic carousel in continuous motion," she once said, "lines approaching swiftly and curving back again forming an intricate ballet of reflections and sounds."¹ To her, spray paint was a way of putting that cacophony to canvas, giving the city a blur that indicates it's too quick to be caught perfectly in the frame. To me, the painting evokes the same paradoxical mixture of speed and stillness that I'd felt with Neuhaus' installation. It holds a moment – captures the sublime amid the rush.

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If Sterne felt differently than I about the city's pace when she came to New York, she also arrived in profoundly different circumstances. Born in Bucharest, Romania, to a Jewish, middle-class family, Sterne continued to live there, with stints abroad, until she was in her early 30s. Sterne's father was a language teacher when she was younger, later inheriting a family drugstore business. With her father's increase in income, the house filled up with books, including art books that Sterne devoured.

"She got a kind of non-chronological art history" from reading them, said Shaina Larrivee, director of the Hedda Sterne Foundation. "She's reading Picasso beside Leonardo, and she realizes that artists do what they want; they don't have to stick to a stylistic profession."²

One of her father's students was a young M. H. Maxy, who was then emerging as a central artist in the Romanian avant garde. During a tutoring session at their house, Maxy saw Sterne's drawings and told her father that she should take art lessons. She later studied under Maxy's contemporary Marcel Janco, one of the founders of dadaism. When she was 14, Victor Brauner, who became a major figure of surrealism, took her to an exhibition organized by Maxy and his group Contemporanul, which had a huge impact on her desire to make art.

Brauner also painted her. A constructivist painting of a teenage Sterne ran in his publication *75HP*. In that same publication, a manifesto of sorts proclaimed that "whenever what we do becomes a formula, we shall relinquish it." That was likely the seed of one of Sterne's core philosophies, according to curator Sarah Eckhardt: "this idea that [one] was not going to stay with something just because an aesthetic or a movement was formed... [Hedda] was always moving forward."

In the 20s and the 30s, as the avant garde in Bucharest was shifting from constructivism and dadaism to surrealism, Sterne was learning drawing and sculpting, traveling to Vienna and Paris, and studying philosophy at university. While in school she met her first husband Fritz Stern (after they divorced, Sterne kept his name but added the extra 'e'). Just as her early surrealist collages started earning her international recognition, WWII began, and Sterne stayed in Bucharest despite her husband fleeing to the U.S. She only decided to leave after German soldiers started to round up and execute Jews in her neighborhood.

A friend hid her in her apartment, and in February 1941, Sterne managed to get an emigration visa through her husband. But it wasn't until over nine months later that she was finally able to leave Europe through Portugal. "If you can imagine your life being threatened, and then feeling stuck and trapped in a place from January to October..." said Larrivee, "I think it's against all odds that Hedda was able to spend the number of months that she did trying to get out of that country and actually made it out."³

1. *Uninterrupted Flux: Hedda Sterne, A Retrospective*, exhibition catalogue, Krannert Art Museum, 2006.

2. "More Surreal than Surrealism. Hedda Sterne's Emigration" Sarah Eckhardt & Shaina Larrivee, June 3, 2020. Live stream recording. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MsbBzrX8110>

3. "More Surreal than Surrealism. Hedda Sterne's Emigration" Sarah Eckhardt & Shaina Larrivee, June 3, 2020. Live stream recording. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MsbBzrX8110>

4. "Stillness," Anne Carson, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 48 No. 1, 2021 <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/715987>

5. "More Surreal than Surrealism. Hedda Sterne's Emigration" Sarah Eckhardt & Shaina Larrivee, June 3, 2020. Live stream recording. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MsbBzrX8110>



Hedda Sterne, *New York*, 1956. Oil on canvas, 81.6 × 127 cm (32 1/8 × 50 1/8 in.). Gift of Society for Contemporary American Art, 1956.62. The Art Institute of Chicago/Art Resource, NY © 2022 The Hedda Sterne Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Anne Carson, in her lecture “Stillness,” describes refugee status as “a certain kind of stasis, in between real states of life” in which people “have their time emptied of everything but time.”⁴ Sterne spent those in-between months, day after day, in immigration offices awaiting various permissions for travel.⁵ When she finally arrived in New York, it was to an estranged husband and a city like nothing she had ever seen before. “You think of the ‘20s and the Dada movement and their fascination with machines, but here she is in New York, the land of machines,” said Eckhardt. After a year of waiting, a brutally elongated interval, Sterne had landed in a city of continuous motion.

“I became a passive observer, for a while...” Sterne recalled.⁶ At first, she processed her war experiences through the surrealist language of collage, cutting out images from the *LIFE* magazines that were everywhere at the time. Then her art started the first of many shifts, a swift, decisive rotation from collage to abstract paintings of machinery. She started with the American kitchen, then painted animated, anthropomorphized farm machinery she saw on trips to Vermont. She then moved to roads and spiraling highways and underpasses, and finally to the urban environment outside her doorstep, to New York, a city always under construction, continually being remade. The rising steel beams, the changing light, the suspended structures and skyscrapers, all of the activity around them—Sterne was translating not just the image of New York, but also the feeling, the bodily experience of being inside this enormous clanging machine.

She finds the perfect tool for this type of translation: “As commercial spray paint comes out, Hedda gets it from the store, and this is this fusion for [her] of the sensation of the city,” said Eckhardt. “She finds in the spray can this movement—and it’s a machine, a technology,” Eckhardt again. “It brings together the look and feel, and her own body in motion.”

Spray paint is new; it’s held differently than a paintbrush, it’s louder. Its expulsion of paint requires a constant movement, the rhythm of which affects the weight, the color of the line. In Sterne’s paintings, loose paint particles gather in places and disperse in others, translating light and shadow, and giving the city’s imposing infrastructure a feeling of ephemerality, like something just out of grasp (she chose spray paint, she said, since “it could not be done in skywriting with jet planes”⁷). Whenever I see one of Sterne’s aerosol paintings, a dislodged fragment from a Natalie Leger book

6. Oral history interview with Hedda Sterne, interviewed by Phyllis Tuchman, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, December 17, 1981 <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-hedda-sterne-13262>

7. Hedda Sterne Foundation <https://heddasternefoundation.org/artwork>

8. “Hedda Sterne, an Artist of Many Styles, Dies at 100,” William Grimes, the New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/12/arts/design/hedda-sterne-artist-of-many-styles-dies-at-100.html>

rings repeats in my head: a *filter shaken loose from the frame*.

"Hedda was always searching, never satisfied," said the gallerist Betty Parsons.⁸ "She had many ways; most artists just have one way to go." In 1943, not two years after Sterne arrived in New York, Parsons curated her first solo show in a small gallery in the Wakefield Bookshop on East 55th St. Later she would open her eponymous Betty Parsons gallery, known for representing abstract expressionists like Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, Barnett Newman, and Willem de Kooning. And also Sterne, who was both of this group and also not of this group, though she considered many of these artists friends.

Sterne may have arrived in New York on her own, but she soon found that she was not alone; the city was full of immigrant artists displaced by the war. André Breton and Marcel Duchamp included her work in the legendary exhibition "First Papers of Surrealism." Peggy Guggenheim, an American whom Sterne first met in Paris, was one of the first people to show her work in the U.S., at her Art of This Century gallery. Sterne soon married Saul Steinberg, a fellow Romanian refugee. By the late '40s, she had shifted entirely from surrealist collage to abstract painting. "A lot of the art history we learn has emigre artists bringing surrealist techniques and handing them off to artists like Pollack," said Eckhardt, "but then we have Hedda, who embodied that, learned it, came herself, and on U.S. soil, learned this new technique."

In 1950, Sterne joined Pollock, Rothko, de Kooning and many others in signing an open letter to the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art protesting the jury selection for group exhibitions, which they considered too aesthetically conservative. The letter was printed in the *New York Times* and incited a controversy that played out in the press, during which the artist group gained the name "The Irascibles." Soon after, many of the letter's signatories posed for a photograph that ran in *LIFE*, taken by Nina Leen. The now famous image shows them looking sternly at the camera, appearing, per instruction from Newman, "like bankers."⁹ In the very back is Sterne, the only woman, standing on top of a table, towering a few feet above everyone else, "the feather on top."¹⁰

The Irascibles label stuck, thanks largely to the photo, which united a group of otherwise loosely affiliated artists under the banner of a new movement. Several of the artists rejected the label, including Sterne, who

later said the others didn't want her in the photo in the first place ("the men were sufficiently macho to think that the presence of a woman took away from the seriousness of it all"). Still, there she is, frozen in the frame, at the very peak of her recognition, the sole woman in a photo that would be printed and reprinted in art history books and biographies. Sterne, of all people, knew how an image in *LIFE* could live on, be repurposed and reimagined. "Even artists let themselves be entrapped," Sterne said at the age of 96.¹¹ "I've been working... since I was seven. And the one thing people remember is that photograph with those artists."

But Sterne has said that she didn't consider herself part of that group or any other group,¹² and indeed, her style changed continuously throughout her life—"no logo," as she drolly put it.¹³ At the end of the '50s, she stopped using spray paint and went on to other kinds of work ("when something becomes a formula we relinquish it"). She moved from paintings of machines to her abstract "Vertical-Horizontal" paintings, to portraiture and ink drawings. Sterne's 1976 work *Diary* consisted of huge gridded canvases of text that she would keep on the floor of her apartment. At the end of her career, her eyesight dimmed and blurred by macular degeneration, she created a prolific series of white, web-light drawings. She only gave up drawing after she was incapacitated by a stroke. "I am watching my life," she said. "As if I'm not quite in it, I watch it from the outside. Because after so many years of working unceasingly, and enthusiastically, being idle is a tremendous effort of concentration and adjustment."¹⁴

"I see myself as a well-working lens, a perceiver of something that exists independently of me: don't look at me, look at what I've found." I love that description of herself as the lens, the roving machinic eye, the technology. Perhaps that's why she never fully identified with the *LIFE* photo, when the lens was trained on her. Or maybe it's because that photo is a moment trapped in amber, and Sterne didn't like feeling trapped. Better to be moving, blurry and unfixed. There's a lot of peace to be found there.