

## GALLERY-GOING

# Abstract Jewels of Modernism

By MAUREEN MULLARKEY  
 Following the lead of Braque, Picasso, and Gris in the early decades of the 20th century, collage has evolved into modernism's most fertile genre. Just short of a century old, it has outlived the rhetoric of radicalism that hailed its beginnings. It endures as an undisputed gift to visual art.

**IN CONTEXT:  
 Collage + Abstraction**

*Pavel Zoubok Gallery*

**ROLAND KULLA:  
 Bridging New York**

*George Billis Gallery*

Pavel Zoubok's "IN CONTEXT: collage + abstraction" is an exhilarating overview of the myriad ways collage has paralleled the rise of abstraction and continued to expand pictorial means. Fifty-six modern and contemporary artists are sympathetically grouped by formal relations, not segregated into time periods or art historical categories. Some delicious surprises are on view.

Displaying a generous range of approaches, the show branches, as does abstraction itself, into the geometric and the gestural. Within that divide, styles are limitless. The overall impression is of the fecundity of individual achievement by disparate imaginations in conversation over generations. Sensibility, not style or method, reigns.

The lynchpin of the exhibit is the great Kurt Schwitters (1887-1948). His pasted paper "Lady in Red" (1921) is an elegant microcosm of his Merz abstractions. No more than 4 inches by 5 inches, it is perfectly poised, giving the lie to notions that size is synonymous with aesthetic significance. (Looking at that "lady," keep in mind modes of female street dress at the time.) Two tiny jewels, one by Jacques Villeglé from the 1950s and a recent one by Ken Kewley, affirm the same point: Scale, not yardage, is the vital thing.





Schwitters's Baudelairean rag-picker side is the progenitor of Addie Herder's "Sandpaper Soldier" (1966) and Chris Corales's "Avec 68" (2007), an insouciant arrangement of dejecta. Ms. Herder, once collected enthusiastically by Roy Neuberger and the Hirshhorn Museum, is not widely visible these days. One small, playful piece leaves you eager for more. The same for Hannelore Baron (1926-87).

Anne Ryan's subtle, restrained collages rarely appear on the market. Pieces are scarce and tend to circulate among dealers. This single work from 1950, both painterly and architectonic, revels in the substance of her materials and demonstrates her amplification of Schwitters's example into a thoroughly personal art.

Among the unexpected gratifications in this show are works by Louise Nevelson (1899-1988) and William Dole (1917-83). Nevelson worked extensively in collage before concentrating on sculpture. Her signature absorption with tensions between balance and asymmetry is evident in this quilt-scrap collage. It is a great pleasure to see. So is the rectilinear sophistication of "Citadel" (1978) by Dole, recognized in the 1970s as a master of collage.

The apparent ease of Mario

Anne Ryan, "Untitled" (c. 1950).

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Naves's lyrical chromatic play is misleading. Shapes are unconstrained but the design structure — the controlled distribution of color and tone — holds its own in tandem with Motherwell's hard-edged formality. The inimitable Lance Letscher is paired with Adam Fowler. Both create delicate lattices with a gem-cutter's precision, though the emotive weight of color is all on Mr. Letscher's side. John Fraser brings quiet grace to contemporary abstraction.

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Roland Kulla defers to the creativity of classical mechanics by painting testaments to civil engineering. "Bridging New York," his first solo exhibition at George Billis Gallery, opens this Saturday. It is an impressive debut.

The artist has been painting the structure of bridges in several cities for the past 10 years. Mr.

Kulla is based in Chicago, the world's capital of movable bridges and the perfect city to begin a love affair with bridge forms. For this exhibition, he studied and photographed more than 40 New York bridges, from the iconic Brooklyn and George Washington ones to neighborhood viaducts.

Bridges have long had their uses in art to separate spaces and form frames. Giorgione used a trestle bridge to divide the near background from the far background of "The Tempest" (1503). Canaletto evoked local charm with the bridges of Venezia; Whistler bathed the Battersea bridge in London fog. Mr. Kulla, however, foregoes scenic possibilities, refusing to coax romance from urban landscape.

He is interested solely in the structural dynamism of bridge forms and the functional splendor inherent in their components: trusses, bolts, girders, railings, arches, beams, struts, ties, and cables. His hard-edged paint handling is as austere and rigorous as his subject.

Mr. Kulla abstracts structural elements from their context and works on a scale that highlights the monumentality of the forms and, in his words, "the creativity

necessary for their existence." Typical of his approach are "Congress Street" (2006) and "Hell's Gate" (2007), each with its steep spatial rush and severely cropped giant lattice of steel. Consistent with the artist's vantage point, the sight lines plunge upward into darkened recess where tensions and compressions converge. Small windows to the sky appear between girders in compositions that emphasize the ingenuity of weight-bearing constructions.

The 6-foot-high "Queensboro" (2007) admits the surface effects of time and weather. Here, verisimilitude asserts itself ahead of abstract purposes. But, in the main, Mr. Kulla subjugates appearances, including plays of light and shadow, to pictorial design. The striking graphic beauty of crisscrossed structures viewed through one another and against the sky recalls the visual patterns Caillebotte created with balcony grills.

*Collage until August 10 (533 W. 23rd St., between Tenth and Eleventh avenues, 212-675-7490);*

*Kulla until July 14 (511 W. 25th St., between Tenth and Eleventh avenues, 212-645-2621).*