

Plagens, Peter. "Knotted, Torn, Scattered: Sculpture After Abstract Expressionism" Review: Mutable Materials," *Wall Street Journal*, 14 April 2021.

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Installation view of 'Knotted, Torn, Scattered: Sculpture After Abstract Expressionism' at the Guggenheim

PHOTO: ESTATE OF TONY SMITH/ARS, NEW YORK/PHOTO: DAVID HEALD

My goodness gracious sakes alive! A current exhibition in a modern art museum that's about form (i.e., what the art looks like and, etymologically, why it does) and not sociopolitical content! True, "Knotted, Torn, Scattered: Sculpture After Abstract Expressionism" (on view through Sept. 19) is a vest-pocket show of six sculptors, tucked away from the Guggenheim's spiral ramps, and offered up as a kind of pendant to the museum's exhibition of Jackson Pollock's revolutionary abstract 1943 mural for the art patron Peggy Guggenheim. Still, it's a stunner in that quiet way a well-chosen and adroitly staged show of moderately unspectacular objects can be.

The back story is this: By the mid-1960s, when abstract painting had lost much of its avant-garde thrust, sculpture acquired a new importance. But it wasn't a return of cold, hard, carved stone (Constantin Brancusi) or welded steel objects (David Smith). Rather, in the museum's words, a younger generation of artists wanted to explore "fundamental experiences of space, materials, and bodily mechanics," and to help make a "shift in emphasis in American art—from gestural painting toward explorations of the physical properties of materials."

The upshot was a reaction against not only Smith's latent anthropomorphism, but also against sculpture's continuing to be more-or-less vertical (not to say phallic), conventionally composed (parts subordinated to the whole), and at least vaguely preplanned. These newer sculptors would let their materials (including in this exhibition vulcanized rubber and rope) be themselves—lying or hanging soft or flat, if that be the case—and allow chance into their objects' creation. The Guggenheim's casting (no pun) of "Knotted, Torn, Scattered" as a sidebar to Pollock's mural may be a bit pat, but the sculptors in the show are influenced—albeit sometimes at a distance—by his embrace of the aleatory, the semifinished, and (his drip to their sag) letting gravity do its thing.

Robert Morris (1931-2018) is the bellwether of the sculptors in the exhibition. One of the leading Minimalists in the mid-1960s (rigid geometry was his thing), at the turn of the decade he allowed his architectonics to soften, to the point of melting, into floppy pieces of industrial felt—either piled in the corner ("Untitled [Pink Felt]," 1970) or draped like huge winter scarves ("Untitled [Black Felt]," c. 1969) over a rod coming out from the wall.

Lynda Benglis (b. 1941), by contrast, had never been a maker of boxes. Her first attention-getting works were configurations of poured and colored polyurethane foam that projected off the wall. In this exhibition she's one of two "knotted" artists (Maren Hassinger is the other), her knots (just over 30 inches at their longest point) made of rolls of tied metal screen coated with the likes of mica, aluminum paint and sequins.

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The two standout pieces in the show are, however, by Tony Smith and Richard Serra.

Smith (1912-1980), an architectural designer, gradually turned to sculpture and an almost scientific version of Minimalism. "Wingbone" (1962), a 10-foot-long warped, expressionistically surfaced and truss-like structure made of plaster, is a bit of a roughly made anomaly in his oeuvre. It's fascinating enough so that we'll take the Guggenheim's word that it's a "translation of spiritual ambitions through organic geometries in "human-scaled forms."



Senga Nengudi 'Performance Piece,' 1978/2013 PHOTO: SENGA NENGUDI/PHOTO: DAVID HEALD



Maren Hassinger 'Untitled,' 1972/2020 PHOTO: MAREN HASSINGER/PHOTO: DAVID HEALD

Mr. Serra (b. 1938)—who's been the lion tamer of postwar American sculpture, bringing to heel everything from vast expanses of black oil-paint stick to giant curving steel walls—is represented here by such an atypical early wall piece that one could be forgiven for thinking it's by somebody else. "Belts" (1966-67) is just that: a row of nine 7-foot-high tangles of industrial-rubber strips—the left-most one decorated with some equally informal neon. It's abstract, of course, but the work emits the eerie vibe of human beings who aren't in the best condition.

Ms. Hassinger and Senga Nengudi —with birthdates of 1947 and 1943, respectively—are the relative kids in the show. Their art has verve and visual knowhow, and feels as if it could have come from 35-year-olds working right now.

Ms. Hassinger's rough but elegant early work was reformatted for this show (it carries the dates 1972/2020). Consisting of eight lengths of thick rope of the kind used on ships, it's spliced and hung to fill an alcove in the gallery. The piece works wonderfully in space, with a bonus of butterscotch color set against all those white walls.

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Finally, there's Ms. Nengudi, whose presence stretches (pun intended) the reach of the exhibition from sculpture into performance and—a minor alas—from art objects themselves to black-and-white photographic evidence of them. Still, Ms. Nengudi's images—of Maren Hassinger semi-entwined with skeins of pantyhose attached to a wall—provide some personal intimacy to "Knotted, Torn, Scattered."

Although drawn from the Guggenheim's own collection, the show of eight works should have, and probably could have, been bigger and fuller, with the inclusion of works by such artists as Eva Hesse, Keith Sonnier, Sam Gilliam and even Bruce Nauman. A catalog would have been nice, too, along with a more main-stage installation on the Guggenheim's ramps.

In these days of Covid forcing upon museums sparse attendance and financial and logistical hardships, and the hovering notion that modern art isn't quite an "essential" good or service, "Knotted, Torn, Scattered" is a thoughtful and sophisticated exhibition for which lovers of modern art should be grateful.

—Mr. Plagens is an artist and writer in New York.