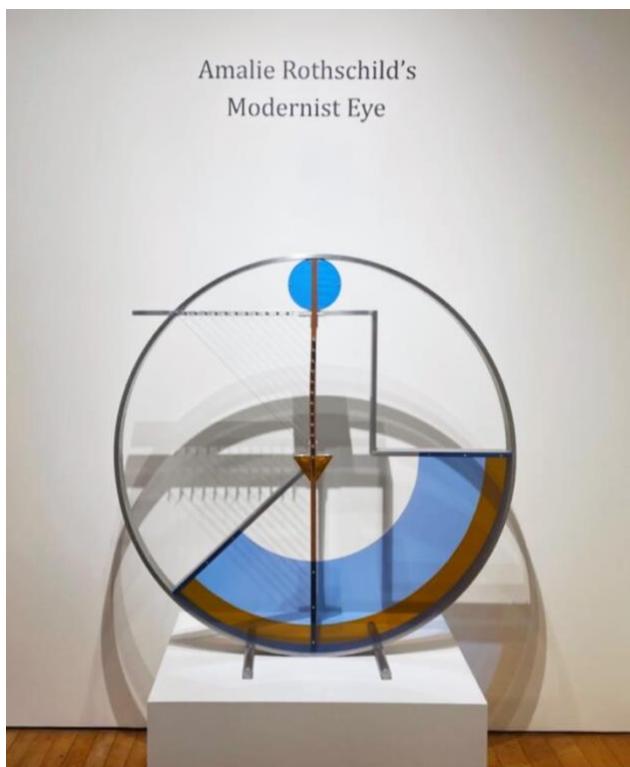


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Long Overdue Essays in Abstraction: Amalie Rothschild's Modernist Eye

Rediscovered Modernist Amalie Rothschild at Goya Contemporary

Words: Kerr Houston

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Installation view of *Amalie Rothschild's Modernist Eye*, with *Rondo*, 1990 (aluminum, Plexiglas, wood, steel, nylon strings). Photograph by Kerr Houston.

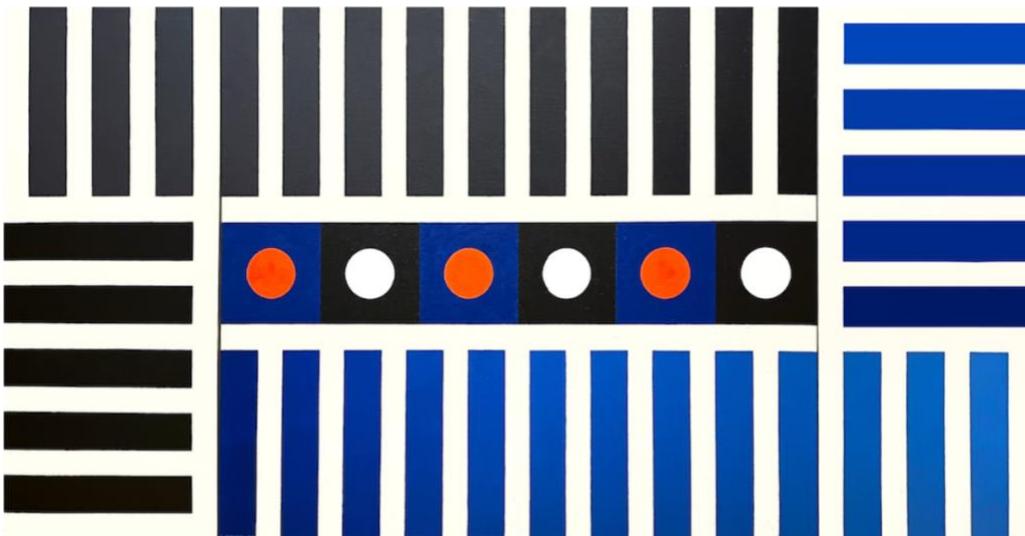
As art historians, gallerists, and collectors continue to mine the past for interesting work that was unfairly overlooked, dismissed, or marginalized, one of the most exciting results has involved the excavation of powerful bodies of work by numerous female modernists. Hilma af Klimt, Lee Krasner, Ruth Asawa, Marthe Donas, Grace Crowley: although their work was widely ignored for decades, they're now justifiably bright stars in the artistic firmament.

Amalie Rothschild's Modernist Eye, at Goya Contemporary through January 23, is worth considering in this context. Rothschild was a Baltimore-based artist who died in 2001 after a productive career that spanned six decades and saw her forge a modest regional reputation.

Since her death, one of her daughters has worked to catalogue 1,400 of her works, and in 2024 Goya was selected to represent her estate. Carefully calibrated exhibitions of work by Rothschild at the Armory Show and the Jewish Museum of Maryland introduced broader audiences to her work—and were followed by this show, which seeks to position her, too, as a pioneering, under-recognized modernist.

Such a claim is somewhat compelling. Featuring twenty paintings, sculptures, and works on paper executed between the early 1950s and the 1990s, the show establishes Rothschild as a prolific, versatile, and committed maker. To be clear, she was neither a visionary nor a revolutionary. Rather, she often learned from others: echoes of the charming formalism of Paul Klee, the taut abstraction of Frank Stella, and the tactile curiosity of Eva Hesse are all apparent here. But if this show is not a revelation, it does have a certain appeal—which is due largely to Rothschild's earnest curiosity and her game willingness to explore a spectrum of formal and material possibilities.

Sensitively installed, humanely scaled, and satisfyingly paced, the show spans five rooms and deliberately intermingles works from different decades. Still, it's worth thinking chronologically, for Rothschild went through several pronounced personal and professional evolutions. After studying fashion illustration at the Maryland Institute, she worked briefly in commercial illustration before marrying and developing a home studio that allowed her to balance motherhood and her creative practice. The earliest works on display, an oil painting of a cityscape and two gestural ink drawings of figures, are nothing remarkable, but they testify to her desire to make, even as a young parent.



Amalie Rothschild, *Six by Fourteen*, 1967, acrylic on canvas, triptych



Amalie Rothschild at Goya Contemporary, L-R: *For Jeff*, 1991, and *Ripening of the Oranges in Sicily*, 1968, courtesy of the gallery

By the late 1960s, she was working more confidently, and two assertive paintings in the back room speak more forcefully. *Six by Fourteen*, a sizable triptych painted in acrylics, is an abstract work built out of bars and circles—which vaguely recall, in their stately complexity, the component parts of the ground plan of a Doric temple, such as the one at Segesta. Refusing to resolve, always slightly exceeding our perceptive abilities, the forms are surprisingly engrossing.

They also point, in their subtly modulated hues, to Rothschild's attentiveness to color. That interest is also on display in a nearby 1968 painting called *Ripening of the Oranges in Sicily*, in which 16 orange circles seem randomly distributed against a nocturnal field of triangles. Orange seems to have appealed to modernists—both Frank O'Hara and Wallace Stevens wrote seriously about it—and it appears often in Rothschild's works. Here, she delights in both its abstract and its representational (orange suggesting oranges) capacities, and the result carries the formal and theoretical tensions of a Japanese rock garden.

I'm less impressed by the six paintings which she executed in the 1970s and early 1980s, and which largely feel of their time, instead of transcending it. John Dorsey once wrote in the Sun that Rothschild's work can feel "pleasing, disciplined, often clever but not amply challenging." It lacked, in his view, a persuasive sense of struggle, or a desire to transgress boundaries. Such a judgment feels applicable to these works, which are competent but unremarkable exercises in a familiar mode.



Amalie Rothschild, detail of *Arbus*, 1972-75



Amalie Rothschild, detail of *Josepha*, 1983

But at about the same time, Rothschild was also working in three dimensions, and several of the resulting pieces are more engrossing. *Arbus*, begun in 1972, is an intriguing combination of ancient techniques and modern materials. Made primarily of thick, woven strips of aluminum and knit cord, it's a weird mashup of medieval and modern: chain mail, chemise, and cyborg, all in one.

Not far away, *Am*, a small sculpture made of particle board covered in gold leaf, summons ancient images of the Egyptian god Horus, while also evoking the noble simplicity of a Brancusi. And *Josepha*, made in 1983, is comprised largely of small hemispherical forms cast from handmade paper and delicately sewn together. Roughly the size and form of a blouse, dyed in a range of silvers, slate grays and yellows, it's a tender meditation on a garment: Joseph's multicolored coat, abstracted.



Amalie Rothschild, *LXV*, 1981, and *Am*, 1980, courtesy of Goya Contemporary Gallery



Installation view of Amalie Rothschild's *Modernist Eye* at Goya Contemporary, with *Witwaters Rand*, 1977 (acrylic on canvas, diptych), and *Arbus*, 1972-75 (aluminum, knit cord, telephone cable). Photo by Kerr Houston

Such works embody a winsome interest in materiality and interdisciplinarity: a tendency also apparent in a group of three very different pieces that she produced in the early 1990s. Increasingly intrigued by industrial materials such as Plexiglas and steel, Rothschild also began to experiment with gravity and

various forms of tension. *Rondo* features a large circular steel frame that is subdivided by judiciously placed wooden elements, a plane of Plexiglas, and twelve nylon strings stretched through space. Solid and void, translucent and reflective, it feels like a Cubist version of a futuristic harp, or an analytic distillation of music and geometry.

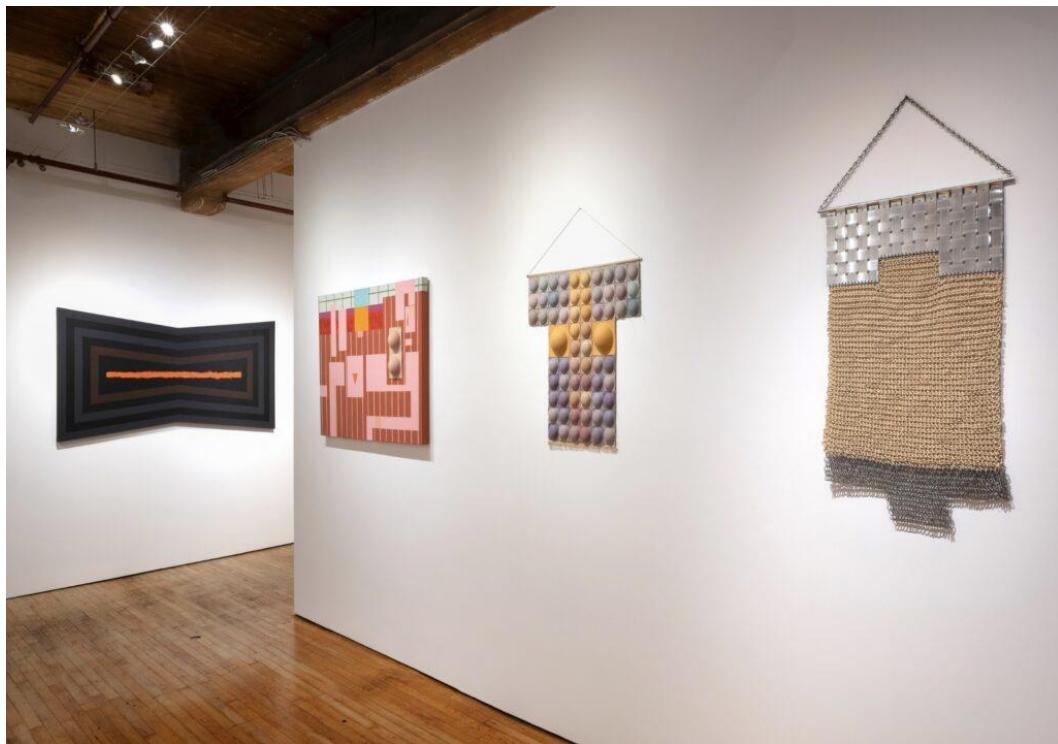
Similar interests are apparent, too, in a 1991 piece entitled *For Jeff*. Made of polyurethane on aluminum and stainless steel, it's framed by a five-foot tall triangle—which in turn holds a circular frame that defines several airy compartments. Eight long chimes, a pristine metal triangle and a small beater or mallet hang neatly from them. The work's almost Platonic forms resemble the geometric elements visible in the nearby *Six by Fourteen*. But here they almost seem to solicit our touch, quietly inviting us to sound them. Pure form thus acquires a phenomenological aspect.



Amalie Rothschild at Goya Contemporary, L-R: *Rondo*, 1990, and *Nut*, 1968, photo courtesy of the gallery

How, then, to add all of this up? Surely, the show does a handsome job of documenting the evolving forays of a restless artist. Or not just an artist—for Rothschild also played an active role in developing Baltimore's art scene, co-founding Gallery One and contributing to the formation of Maryland Art Place. Rothschild was candid about the challenge of committing to her work while also raising children ("I have not fully resolved it," she once said, "other than a compromise.") But these twenty pieces collectively yield an air of accomplishment, rather than of sacrifice.

In a sense, then, this show is an extension of a daughter's abiding fascination with her mother's generative power. Interestingly, one can also see this show as a project of her daughter, also named Amalie. The younger Rothschild is best known for a number of documentary films she made between the late 1960s and 1990: the same era in which her mother was especially productive. Several of those films, moreover, foreground female creativity and intergenerational female relationships, and one of them included an extended conversation with her mother about her artistic practice. In a sense, then, this show is an extension of a daughter's abiding fascination with her mother's generative power.



Amalie Rothschild at Goya Contemporary, L-R: *Tyger*, 1977, *Pink Nude*, 1983, *Josepha*, 1983, and *Arbus*, 1972-5, courtesy of the gallery

And, finally, the show also constitutes a serious case for the value of Rothschild's work. This is evident in the show's rhetoric: "Rothschild's work," we read in the press release, "is long overdue for broader recognition." But it's also true in a monetary sense. Most of the works here are priced ambitiously; as a group, these pieces would cost you well over a half million dollars. Time will tell if the market bears out such numbers. But the governing spirit of this show seems one of ambitious optimism.

But of course you don't have to purchase a thing to enjoy what it offers. So try standing near the long brick wall along the far edge of the gallery. Nearby, you'll see the 1977 painting *Witwaters Rand*, in which a series of nested stripes articulate a disciplined but jazzy rhythm; in the distance, on a further wall, *Arbus*, toys with the distinction between metallurgy and the fiber arts. The two works, made within a few years of each other, stand only a few feet apart. But materially, conceptually, and formally, they are leagues distant: a tight proof of the wide-ranging interests and abilities of an artist worth knowing.

Words: Kerr Houston

Photos by the author and courtesy of Goya Contemporary Gallery