Women at Yale: Introduction to Audio Guide

NARRATOR: Welcome to the Yale University Art Gallery and to the audio guide of the exhibition On the Basis of Art: 150 Years of Women at Yale.

This exhibition presents the work of an impressive roster of women artists who graduated from Yale University, and commemorates two major milestones: the 50th anniversary of coeducation at Yale College and the 150th anniversary of the first women students at the Yale School of Art, which, when it opened in 1869, was the first professional school on campus to welcome women to study. The exhibition title references a phrase used in Title IX, the landmark U.S. federal legislation passed as part of the Education Amendments of 1972 that declared that no person could be discriminated against “on the basis of sex” in any education program receiving federal financial assistance.

Drawn entirely from the Gallery’s collection, On the Basis of Art features the works of 77 artists that span a variety of media, including paintings, sculptures, drawings, prints, photographs, textiles and videos. The exhibition is presented across the Gallery’s suite of fourth-floor and fourth-floor-mezzanine special-exhibitions galleries in six thematic sections that juxtapose objects made over 15 decades. Such a cross-generational and cross-media installation aspires to create a robust dialogue among artists in a visual essay on artistic influence and reciprocation.

The stops on this audio guide were richly informed by the oral history interviews conducted with the artists by a team of exhibition curators, fellows, and graduate and undergraduate interns, as well as from select archival sources. Narrations about each work are interspersed with direct quotations from the artists. Primacy is given to their voices: in their own words, the artists talk about their work and reflect upon their Yale experiences and their post-Yale artistic practices. Artists featured in the guide span 100 years and nearly four generations, from Irene Weir, who received her B.F.A. in 1906, to Mary Reid Kelley, who received her M.F.A. in 2009.

In-person visitors to the exhibition will encounter audio-guide stops—indicated by an icon by the object—throughout each thematic section of the exhibition.

Please enjoy this audio history highlighting the powerful and multifaceted work of Yale-trained women artists and their revelations about their experiences, influences, and inspirations.

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Ann Hamilton, *RIGHTS*

NARRATOR: A slender blue shape stretches nearly six feet high. Its edges are soft and symmetrical, with curves that imply a human body: a head, shoulders, maybe even arms tucked at its sides.

With a closer look, the body dissolves into a field of words and phrases: “highest aspiration of the common people,” “members of the human family.” The language is familiar, yet hard to place. In fact, this text comes from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a call for human dignity published by the United Nations in 1948, in the wake of the Second World War.

For this 2017 piece, titled *RIGHTS*, artist Ann Hamilton collaborated with the Los Angeles print shop, Gemini G.E.L., to emboss a concordance of the Declaration onto a large, vertical sheet of paper. The printer then rubbed blue ink across the surface, catching the top of the raised letterforms. This process laid the shadow suggestion of a human body into the words dedicated to the international document and its articulation of human rights. Hamilton describes:

   HAMILTON: The print is roughly my height, a little bit taller. We rubbed the surface lightly with ink. It’s almost like a breath of color. The faint rubbing brings the text into legibility, to connect the shadow of a body to the text. For me, it’s a very quiet piece and a subtle surface.

NARRATOR: A spine of capitalized words runs down the center of the print. These words are the opening lines of the U.N. Declaration: “Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world . . . ” The print crosses these words with their multiple occurrences in the full document, creating a woven structure organized by the spine.

Hamilton studied textile art before coming to the Yale School of Art, where she received her M.F.A. in Sculpture in 1985. She credits her training in fibers and fabric as the underlayment of all her work.

   HAMILTON: My practice has evolved and takes multiple scales and forms, always in response to the conditions and questions evoked by the place where I’m working. And always connecting the work is a textile hand. The process and histories of weaving, knitting, and sewing are my first hand, and are transformative acts that structure individual threads into larger relations, which, in turn, always evoke the social metaphors of cloth.

NARRATOR: Hamilton notes that work in textiles was devalued in the art world at that time.

   HAMILTON: I remember during my admission interview at Yale being asked, “You don’t do this weaving stuff anymore, do you?” The question totally flustered me, and at this point I don’t remember my response. But at the time, I know I didn’t have the vocabulary to articulate the importance of textile thinking, even when not making traditional textile forms. The old hierarchies between craft and art continue to play out;
the processes associated with female labor are still denigrated, as are women’s bodies, even at a moment when contemporary artists are increasingly working, in so many disparate ways, with cloth and its social and political histories.

**Mary Reid Kelley, *Sadie, the Saddest Sadist***

NARRATOR: In *Sadie, the Saddest Sadist*, the artist Mary Reid Kelley tells a darkly ironic tale of wartime romance and venereal disease. The tale of Sadie and Jack unfolds in a dreamlike, high-contrast world, evocative of early film animation, with expressive makeup and shallow painted sets that invite spatial confusion. The two characters, both played by Reid Kelley and shot by her collaborator, Patrick Kelley, speak in clever poetic verse and monotone singsong.

This project stemmed from Reid Kelley’s extensive research into World War I history and poetry, which she began on Yale’s campus. As a graduate student at the Yale School of Art, the artist took an interest in the Woolsey Hall war memorial, with its huge marble slabs bearing the names and life dates of male alumni of the university who were killed in U.S. wars. She recalls:

REID KELLEY: I eventually ended up transcribing the entire memorial into a document, and I would use the word search function to search for letter combinations. So, rather than just kind of working randomly or by chance, I was able to make little verse forms and little mini nonsense poems. I, of course, was thinking about Dada and Surrealism and the chance-based techniques that were so connected to the era of upheaval in the early twentieth century.

NARRATOR: To further this research, Reid Kelley received a grant to visit the graves of Yale alumni in American World War I cemeteries in France and Belgium. She then pursued a fellowship at Yale’s Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, where she studied archival materials from early twentieth-century poets and literary critics. Reid Kelley was inspired by the role poetry played in everyday life during this period.

REID KELLEY: If you look into early twentieth-century poetry, you realize how democratic an act it was. It wasn’t this kind of specialized, highbrow, artistic act that it’s considered now, like painting would be. It was something that you did for fun and for entertainment.

NARRATOR: Accordingly, *Sadie, the Saddest Sadist* takes its cues from World War I–era doggerel, a form of popular poetry with irregular rhythms and often humourous subject matter.

Reid Kelley was also inspired by the visual art of wartime Europe, including the Cubists. She especially took to Fernand Léger, whose work she encountered in a formative class with Rochelle Feinstein, Yale’s first female tenured Professor of Painting and Printmaking.

REID KELLEY: Léger turned out to be a really important artist to me, and he’s one of my favorite and most enriching artists that I’ve studied. That’s just one thing that
Rochelle did for me in that class, was just by saying, “Why don't you like him? You need
to rethink this.” I did rethink it, and she was right. The impact on me was really profound.

NARRATOR: Reid Kelley was also inspired by studying Léger’s works at the Yale University
Art Gallery.

REID KELLEY: Léger was trying to represent multiple light sources. When Pat and I are
creating our films, we have a light source on the performer. Sometimes I have a drawn
shadow on my face, so that’s a second light source. Then my collaborator Pat adds a third
light source in the three-dimensional backgrounds that go in after we’ve shot the
performance. So, Picasso and Braque and Juan Gris and Léger—studying their cubist
approaches to lighting and perspective in the art gallery was quite important.

An-My Lê, Rescue

NARRATOR: A downed fighter plane sits among the trees, leaking smoke. Beside the cockpit, a
soldier radios for help, while three others stand guard with automatic rifles. What war is this?
Where are we? Visual clues suggest we are somewhere in the past: the image is black and white.
The soldier’s radio looks big and clunky.

This photograph is from An-My Lê’s series Small Wars, produced between 1999 and 2002.
These men are not soldiers, but rather Vietnam War reenactors staging battles in the woods of
Virginia.

Lê was fifteen when she and her family came to the United States as refugees from Vietnam, in
1975. During her graduate studies at the Yale School of Art, she became interested in how her
identity and biography could inform her artistic practice. Lê recalls an important conversation
with Professor Tod Papageorge:

LÊ: I think Tod posed the big question, “You are this interesting woman who had a
complicated childhood, steeped in war, and whose life has been radically changed by
American foreign policy—and how is that in your work?” I’m still trying to answer that
question today.

NARRATOR: After she graduated in 1993 and spent several years photographing in Vietnam,
Lê sought a different way of looking at her personal history. She heard through her former
professor at Yale, Lois Conner, that there existed groups of young men who reenact the Vietnam
War. This led her to research Vietnam War reenactors, and she reached out to a group based in
Virginia.

LÊ: They invited me to come down and reenact with them and photograph them. It was a
bit more of an exchange. I think they didn’t necessarily need a photographer, but they
were certainly interested in having a Vietnamese person participate. Thankfully, they
never staged a reenactment of the My Lai massacre or anything that horrific or
controversial, but they were into reenacting more basic operations. I asked them, “What
role should I play that would give me the most flexibility in moving back and forth?” They said, “Well you should play a VC, a Vietcong, and then be captured and then you go on the other side with the Americans.” I think the whole point of the reenactments is that they wanted as much authenticity as possible. So having a Vietnamese playing a VC was a great asset.

NARRATOR: In making this series, Lê blurred the boundaries between photographer, participant, and producer. She explains:

LÊ: I would follow them and run with them and do whatever they do, and then when they pause, if I see something interesting, I would make them reenact the reenactment for a photograph. They loved having me. At first I was worried, but I quickly understood that my participation greatly enhanced their reenactments.

Howardena Pindell, *Free, White and 21*

NARRATOR: In the video *Free, White and 21*, Howardena Pindell reenacts racist acts that she and her mother experienced. Pindell plays both of the characters in the video: the first, herself, and the other, a white woman. When Pindell as herself recounts stories of prejudice, the white character counters with racist remarks, and repeats the phrase “You really must be paranoid.” The artist describes the inspiration for this character:

PINDELL: I kind of went after the women’s movement for not considering the role of racism, and that’s why in *Free, White and 21* I made the persona of a white woman, a white woman and not a white male.

NARRATOR: The video directly addresses the persistence of racism in America, including in Pindell’s generation of artist-contemporaries.

PINDELL: The attitude was that you cannot criticize white male artists. That’s censorship. But it was okay to censor out women of all colors, and people of color from the whole art community. I also ran into problems in the women’s movement. They did not consider racism a topic that they cared to talk about. They considered it political and thought that there was no similarity to sexism. The attitude of some of the leaders of the movement was “Well, I’m white and I’m in charge.” Some non-white women artists called the feminist movement “imperial feminism.”

NARRATOR: Pindell recalls experiencing racism as well as sexism during her time at the Yale School of Art and Architecture, where she graduated with an M.F.A. in Painting and Printmaking in 1967.

PINDELL: What I noticed was if a woman used red and white, it was called pink, and that was an outlawed color. But if a guy used red and white, it was called red and white, not pink.
NARRATOR: Such observations still inform Pindell’s work as an artist and academic. As a professor of art at Stony Brook University in New York, Pindell works to ensure that each student feels comfortable and valued. She attributes this philosophy to Walter Murch, one of her professors at Boston University, whom she remembers as extremely kind and respectful. Pindell describes her own teaching style:

PINDELL: I don’t believe in drawing or painting on anyone’s canvas, and I try to relate to them verbally what I would like to suggest, unless they ask me to draw or paint on their canvas. But I do not like to interfere. It’s boundaries. I try to keep the boundaries not fluid, but very, very clear.

NARRATOR: Fighting against racial and gender prejudices has been a cornerstone of Pindell’s work as an artist, curator, and professor. In *Free, White and 21*, Pindell focuses attention on the idea that there is one “right way” for her to be an artist. The white character states, “It’s gotta be in your art in the way that we consider valid. . . . If you don’t want to do what we tell you to do, then we’ll find other tokens.”

Pindell is best known for her abstract paintings, collages, and prints—examples of which are on view elsewhere in this exhibition—in addition to videos like *Free, White and 21*. She has always been true to her own style, never conforming to white-societal expectations of what “Black” art or “female” art should look like.

**Angela Strassheim, *Untitled (McDonald’s)***

NARRATOR: Photographed at dusk through a plate-glass window, Angela Strassheim’s *Untitled (McDonald’s)* pictures a family preparing for a fast-food supper. At the right, the adolescent daughter looks away as she holds hands with her family in prayer. This photograph is part of Strassheim’s series *Left Behind*, which investigates middle-American suburban life and the roles that religion and family played in Strassheim’s upbringing. She explains:

STRASSHEIM: Me and my siblings were all raised by the same parents and I often question how a child becomes a black sheep, like she doesn’t fit in. I’m a very spiritual person but the Jesus part just never connected with me and still doesn’t.

NARRATOR: Strassheim returned to her Midwestern hometown to make this series. To carefully construct images that reflected her experience, she wanted the family in the photo to resemble her own. She deliberately placed each of the models and choreographed their movements.

STRASSHEIM: This photograph was inspired by a memory, of course. But it was on an actual drive to Illinois to visit my parents in the process of making this work that I pulled up to a McDonalds and there was this family eating and praying together. So I grabbed my food and I parked outside and I watched them and immediately, like, that… I knew I had to find that family and recreate my own version of that memory. Because I was trying to depict this personal context, it was important to me that all the family members
in the photograph were similar in number and in appearance as those in my family. Like even the father parts his hair in the same way my father does. And all of the ages of the children… like the daughter is the oldest and there are two boys in the middle and the youngest daughter was the youngest, like the same order as my family.

NARRATOR: In an effort to find models that resembled her family, Strassheim would, as she describes it, “go shopping.”

STRASSHEIM: As much as I didn’t enjoy ever going to church, I would go with my parents to church on Sundays when I was visiting them and working on this body of work. I would look around the congregation for subjects that interested me. And then, at lunch time, I would just ask my mom to introduce me to those families or individuals who I was interested in photographing.

NARRATOR: Strassheim describes her relationship to praying in public and the role it has in this work:

STRASSHEIM: Ugh, I was always embarrassed by it, and any time that it was happening, I remember feeling very self-conscious and uncomfortable because it wasn’t aligned with me. I feel like this photograph sums up the idea of a religious family feeling at home wherever they are and keeping a family tradition and that connection alive.

NARRATOR: By printing the photo at a large scale—roughly 38 by 48 inches—Strassheim positions the viewer as a voyeur, standing in the darkness outside the massive windows. Like a camera lens, the glass of the McDonald’s facade allows Strassheim herself to look in from a distance.

Judith Bernstein, Anthurium IV

NARRATOR: Throughout Judith Bernstein’s decades-long artistic practice, her politically charged work has closely reflected her personal, progressive values. She utilizes phallic imagery to address political and societal aggressions of any given moment, such as violence against women, the Vietnam War, and the persistence of white nationalism. The artist explains:

BERNSTEIN: My work is deeply autobiographical. For over fifty years, it has been about the intersection of the political and the sexual, which is the core of what I am about. It is about my rage at injustice.

NARRATOR: This sumptuous print, made by Bernstein between 1982 and 1983, is part of the artist’s Anthurium series and explores themes she has returned to throughout her career.

BERNSTEIN: The anthurium is a tropical and subtropical heart-shaped flower. It’s one of a suite of nine prints that I made in 1982–83 that were all from plant forms. The works became very sexualized, as the flower has a stamen coming out, so it’s very phallic, and plays with the psychological element.
NARRATOR: The curved lines that describe the flower mimic the top of the stamen, and the marks surrounding them describe the encircling petals. Washes of grays fill the space, creating shadow and depth. Bernstein executed the print in etching and aquatint; the etching defined the generalized form of the anthurium, and the aquatint provided the tonal washes.

Bernstein’s works often reflect the political moment in which they were created. The artist graduated from the Yale School of Art and Architecture in 1967 with an M.F.A. in Painting and Printmaking. Her time there was marked by anti-Vietnam War activism. Bernstein engaged in themes of protest in her paintings, which often depicted anti-war sentiments, names of political officials, American flags, and sexual innuendos. Such motifs have persisted throughout Bernstein’s art, and recently appeared in her 2017 series centered on President Donald Trump and the amplification of white nationalism in the United States. Patriarchy, reflected in all of these works, is an important theme in Bernstein’s practice.

BERNSTEIN: My work critiques the inequities that exist as a result of the male hierarchy and is an observation of men and their behavior. There’s a lot of subtext in my work—it’s very in-your-face, strong, and aggressive. It’s critiquing masculinity as well as critiquing all human behavior.

NARRATOR: Bernstein continually addresses the importance of inclusion and speaking against injustice.

BERNSTEIN: My work is about the importance of the female voice, and the rage of not being heard, of not having access to the system. Since the time I made this artwork, I’ve broadened my scope to observe and critique female, as well as male behavior.

Lois Conner, *Da Fu, Le Shan, Szechuan, China*

NARRATOR: In this photograph, artist Lois Conner presents an unusual view of an iconic heritage site in China: the Leshan Giant Buddha. Standing 233 feet tall, this eighth-century stone statue depicts Maitreya, a messianic figure known as the Buddha of the Future.

In composing her photograph, Conner chose to look at the landscape from Maitreya’s point of view, instead of focusing directly on the statue. You see his hand and foot and sense the scale of the Buddha compared to the miniaturized people gathered below. Her unusual format produces an elongated vertical (and in some cases, horizontal) image. These aesthetic decisions reflect Conner’s long-standing interest in landscape and Chinese painting. As an M.F.A. student at the Yale School of Art, Conner took an art-history course on Chinese painting that impacted her deeply. She recalls:

CONNER: I took a class during my second year as a graduate student on Chinese painting from the Ming Dynasty, which changed my life. There were seven other students. We made several trips to the Met and to the nearby Crawford collection in New York. As a small group, we looked at these ancient scrolls directly, on a table in front of
NARRATOR: These scroll paintings inspired Conner to purchase a panoramic camera shortly after her graduation in 1981.

CONNER: Because of this class in Chinese landscape painting, I thought that unlike the classic shape of the 8 x 10 that I was using, a panoramic camera could expand the narrative and make a physically bigger picture. Using the elongated 7x17 format profoundly challenged and changed my way of seeing.

NARRATOR: A few years later, Conner was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship and spent nine months photographing in China, where she created this image.

Throughout her career, Conner has embraced a nineteenth-century photographic process known as platinum printing. Platinum images have a unique, soft, rich tonal quality akin to photogravures. The image is formed by inert platinum in the fibers of the paper, much as ink is embedded in the paper in photogravures. Conner shared her love of the medium with Richard Benson, a celebrated photographer and an expert printer, to whom she wrote and met in 1977 after seeing an exhibition of his platinum prints of Tina Modotti’s work at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Conner recalls:

CONNER: I already realized at that point that I was a photographer, yet he was so much more, everything that I wanted to be and deeply admired. He invited me to visit him in Rhode Island, where he was working on a Paul Strand portfolio of platinum prints. We met at the end of the day, after his assistants showed me around the studio and a little of Newport. And later, we traded prints. We had only just met, and I was nobody, coming seemingly from nowhere—and we traded prints, platinum prints, as if we were the oldest of friends and colleagues.

NARRATOR: Both Benson and Conner would arrive at Yale in 1979—Benson as a professor and Conner as an M.F.A. student. Conner took Benson’s course in alternative photographic processes, in which students explored difficult, specialized techniques for printing images—including photogravure and platinum. Years later, in the mid-1990s, Conner herself would take over this course as a faculty member at Yale, mentoring the next generation of photographers.

**Rina Banerjee, *Dangerous World***

NARRATOR: Colors and shapes dance in Rina Banerjee’s print *Dangerous World*. The images guide our viewing; beginning at the three human-like figures at the bottom, we float up through the left-hand figure’s breath into a multicolored atmosphere.
Although it is vibrant, the work generates an eerie feeling. Banerjee’s personal experience drives this emotion. She explains:

BANERJEE: The work was made in 2010 when I was very sick. It was called Dangerous World because I was thinking of how it is dangerous to live, because you’re fighting off death every day; you’re alive, and you’re not aware of that.

NARRATOR: This awareness of mortality informed the piece. Banerjee describes the work’s representations:

BANERJEE: You can see in the imagery a picture of me and a kind of skeleton underneath the body being exposed, and a kind of precarious ground where it almost looks like lava. For about five years, I would do these images of figures that were floating in the air. These kinds of creatures that are ominous floating around you and remind you that they’re waiting for you to leave the Earth. It’s kind of an imagery that is foreboding.

NARRATOR: Dangerous World has an enhanced textural quality from collaged additions, such as the gold raindrop shapes that fall from the mouth of the figure in the red-striped top at the bottom of the composition, and the purple and gray umbrella-like shape hovering above.

This textural aspect reflects Banerjee’s use of nontraditional materials in her practice. The artist received an M.F.A. in Painting from the Yale School of Art in 1995. During her studies, she began to explore the use of various objects, such as fabrics and tchotchkes found in thrift stores, steel scrub brushes from groceries, and ginger leaves from Asian markets. Some of Banerjee’s classmates criticized her for using such unorthodox materials, but this did not dissuade her. Banerjee has emphasized the integration of found objects in both her sculptural works and her drawings and prints.

Banerjee’s eclectic practice parallels her uncommon journey to art. After earning a bachelor’s degree in engineering, she worked as a polymer engineering research consultant, and during that time, she decided to pursue a different career path. She advises current students to be open to their own creative paths.

BANERJEE: I would say, explore, be reckless and dangerous with your imagination while you’re at school. It’s a place where you can share so easily. To make sure you bring as many people into your studio as possible, to have as many conversations as you can.

NARRATOR: Such a willingness to embrace the unknown is clear in Banerjee’s focus on her personal experience that is presented here in Dangerous World.

Marie Watt, First Teachers Balance the Universe

NARRATOR: Titled First Teachers Balance the Universe, these paired textiles on reclaimed Pendleton blankets are the work of Marie Watt, an artist who received her M.F.A. from the Yale
School of Art in 1996. In bright tangles of pink and blue thread, Watt summons a world of flying things. Hot-air balloons, a military drone, and even a spaceship from Star Wars are juxtaposed in space and time. Watt remakes images from history, memory, science fiction, and her heritage as a citizen of the Seneca Nation. She explains:

WATT: I’m Seneca and our tribe is part of the Iroquois Confederacy. We call ourselves the Haudenosaunee, People of the Longhouse. In our creation story, Sky Woman falls from a hole in the sky world and is helped by a motley crew of animals to start her life on what we now refer to as Turtle Island. Because of the way the animals helped Sky Woman, we consider them our first teachers. Our clans also take the names of animals as a way of acknowledging this historic relationship. I’m from the Turtle Clan, one of four clans that walk the earth—but we also have four bird clans, and historically you would marry someone from the opposite clan. And that would create balance.

NARRATOR: The idea of relation and balance runs throughout Watt’s artistic method. For several years, she has produced her work in collaborative sewing circles, often hosted at schools, museums, and Native institutions. Look closely at the embroidery in this work; some stitches are tight and neat, while others wander, revealing the presence of many different hands.

Watt uses masking tape to mock up her designs on fabric in advance of the sewing circles. Her marks serve as a guide for stitchers to follow, but she also stresses the importance of shared authorship and improvisation.

WATT: One thing that I think really attracts me to the sewing circle experience is this kind of call-and-response with the object and the community and myself. I think when I set out to make pieces in sewing circles, I really try to be open to what is revealed in the process, because it might tell me something about the way the piece should move forward.

NARRATOR: For Watt, First Teachers Balance the Universe manifests a sense of interconnectedness. Suspended in the air like a pair of wings, the works gently respond to the movements of air and people. The artist has observed that blankets contain reservoirs of history and memory, particularly in Indigenous contexts. Blankets circulate, transform, and take on new meanings, just as they do in Watt’s sewing circles.

WATT: You know, we really are all connected. And for me this object, this transformative object, embodies that.

Sylvia Plimack Mangold, Opposite Corners, 1973

NARRATOR: Focus permeates Sylvia Plimack Mangold’s lifelong practice, in which she has concentrated on a few singular subjects. This method was informed by the artist’s Yale experience, starting with her first visit to the Yale School of Art and Architecture in the late 1950s, where she encountered Eva Hesse, who had also attended Cooper Union in New York.
PLIMACK MANGOLD: Around 1955 I went to visit the School of Art at Yale. The painting division was in Street Hall in a large room on the second floor. In this large room there were numerous painting booths, and each student was assigned to their own booth for the semester. When I entered this large room, I saw Eva Hesse sitting in her booth reading. The sight of Eva reading, and not painting but surrounded by her work in progress inspired me. And I thought that this would be a possibility for myself.

NARRATOR: Throughout Plimack Mangold’s time at the school, interactions with other artists and professors continued to impact her practice. During a critique, Josef Albers, an artist and the Chairman of the Department of Design, told Plimack Mangold to “only tell one story at a time.” Sumner McKnight Crosby, an art-history professor whose career focused on a single medieval church in Saint-Denis, France, relayed a similar idea. Plimack Mangold recalls:

PLIMACK MANGOLD: What I learned from Sumner Crosby was how you can spend your whole life exploring one subject. How you can keep looking at the same thing and finding new ways of seeing it. Saint-Denis had gone through centuries of structural and engineering developments. Like a time capsule, it becomes a living monument. His dedication to Saint-Denis Church showed me the possibility of such a singular focus.

NARRATOR: Plimack Mangold’s work is also influenced by the spaces of her everyday life. In the 1960s, after graduating from Yale, she moved to New York City, where she and her husband, Robert Mangold, started a family. At that time, her works began to focus on the interior of her apartment, particularly the shape, perspective, and texture of the wood floors. Plimack Mangold’s mirror series stemmed from her interest in “paint[ing] more space.” She describes the introduction of the mirror into Opposite Corners:

PLIMACK MANGOLD: In the mirror paintings, I wanted to expand on the earlier paintings of the floor but I didn’t want to enlarge the subject, like gymnasiums or such. When I found this old rectangular mirror, it opened up ideas of space and reflection for me in a way I wouldn’t have considered without having this object, this mirror, to help me organize a new group of paintings. And one of them is Opposite Corners, where the mirror is in one corner and reflecting an opposite one. And the corners are also opposite forms or in and out corners. Even if the mirror is an object, a mirror opens the space and doesn’t fill it. The mirror was the plane I used to increase the space of my studio, so that I could paint more space.

NARRATOR: Plimack Mangold plays with depth and perception as she depicts the reflected corner of an empty room. Look closely at the reflections in the mirror. Observe the point at which the wall meets the wood floor and compare the reflections in the beveled edge of the mirror to those in the center of the mirror. It is clear that the artist took great care to consider the angles of the bevel as she painted the point of contact between the wall and the floor.

Plimack Mangold’s subject transitioned from interiors to the outdoors when she moved to Washingtonville, New York, in the 1970s. Since then, she has focused her practice on the trees and landscapes that surround her home. Works from this later period are on view in the exhibition section “Modeling Nature, Tracing the Human Footprint.”
Jessica Stockholder, *JS inventory #241*

NARRATOR: Jessica Stockholder’s *JS inventory #241* of 1994 proposes a relationship between the sculpture/painting and its two- and three-dimensional surroundings. In this work, a long green string connects the painted couch to the wall. Stockholder explains:

STOCKHOLDER: This piece is related to the *Kissing the Wall* series, which were some of the first sculptures I made after I graduated from Yale, in the M.F.A. program. Most of my work, as it is now, is made in relationship to the wall and architecture, and takes notice of context and the support that architecture provides the work. If the work isn’t framed and it’s not on a pedestal, one might ask how does it become distinct from the environment around it? There is also some humor in how this couch piece is touching the wall in that very slight way.

NARRATOR: Stockholder has chosen to have the couch face the wall.

STOCKHOLDER: The couch is facing the wall, and is in relationship to the wall, which is traditionally the site of painting. There is literal and conceptual tension between the wall and the artwork, proposing a kind of dialogue, and a dichotomy, between itself and its context. And by making it a little difficult to see the painted parts of the couch, attention is called to the activity, and the agency of the viewer looking at the piece.

NARRATOR: Observe the orange bull’s-eye on the couch from which the string protrudes. This orange color is in dialogue with its complement: the turquoise rectangle to its left. Stockholder says that these colors, and the tension that this work proposes between itself and the wall, bring to mind a piece made by Ann Hamilton while the artists were classmates in the Sculpture program at the Yale School of Art in the mid-1980s. Hamilton’s 1985 piece played with these same complementary colors: she set an empty fish tank across from a turquoise couch covered in toothpicks. The turquoise color was the exact complement of a goldfish; Stockholder remembers that when she stood between the couch and the fish tank, in her mind she saw a goldfish in the tank that wasn’t there.

Stockholder’s experience at the School of Art, with its tradition of regular critiques by professors and visiting artists, helped her develop how she communicates about her work.

STOCKHOLDER: The variety of conversations enabled by graduate school certainly helped me to articulate my interests. My work isn’t made of words and I learn things through the process of making. That said, I also learn a lot by putting the work in the world, and sharing it with others, which helps to put words to it. For this reason, the process of discussion and conversation that we call critique, helps to further the thinking that is embedded in objects, especially in art objects.

NARRATOR: This process of articulation proved to be an important tool for Stockholder when she returned to Yale in 1999, as the first female tenured Director of Graduate Studies in Sculpture at the School of Art. When asked what piece of advice she would give to a current M.F.A. student, Stockholder says:
STOCKHOLDER: Hang on to the things that really you care about and be articulate about them in your work and with your words.

Irene Weir, *The Noon Hour, Chinon, France*

NARRATOR: At first glance, Irene Weir’s *The Noon Hour, Chinon, France* has the unassuming air of a quickly dashed-off watercolor sketch. But look closely, and you might start to notice the artist’s imaginative rendering of light and texture. At the bottom right, Weir describes a woven basket in contrasting hatches of orange and blue. Along the top edge of the page, she indicates the movement of windblown leaves in gentle variations of green.

The composition features five women arranged in a circle that leads your eye through the painting. The figures are uncomfortably close to one another, yet none of them make eye contact. All elements of the composition appear pushed up to the picture’s surface, including the bottle of wine at the far right, which looks like it could topple off the bench at any moment.

Weir took a conventional subject and filtered it through a modernist lens, using intense colors and distorted perspective. She once wrote that “the classic culture of the artist does not exclude a tendency towards reasonable modernism.”

Weir was the niece of the inaugural dean of the Yale School of the Fine Arts, John Ferguson Weir, and she came to study at the School from 1881 to 1882. The works of art she encountered at Yale would inspire her for the rest of her career. More than two decades later, she would write, “At the School of [the] Fine Arts, Yale University, most of [John] Trumbull’s works are collected. Many a time have I pored over those paintings, marveling at their skill and eagerly trying to find out the secret of their fine execution.”

After leaving Yale, Weir led a distinguished career as an artist, teacher, scholar, and administrator. Throughout her life she published prolifically on subjects ranging from classical Greek painting to modernism and art pedagogy. As a teacher of art, she insisted that her students learn from firsthand encounters with objects. She wrote, “In order to secure a concentration of interest, weekly visits to the Museums of Art form a common meeting place for all. . . . History and literature are intimately at home there, each correlated to the other in every fragment of pottery, every precious marble, every painted surface, every fabric that tells its tale of the past.”

In 1923, already in her sixties, Weir took a year’s sabbatical from her job as the first director of the New York–based School of Design and Liberal Arts. She traveled to Fontainebleau, France, where she joined the first class at the École des Beaux-Arts. *The Noon Hour* and the other watercolors displayed here date from this mature period of Weir’s career. An elegant dialogue between the modern and the classic, this work reflects four decades’ worth of practicing, teaching, studying, and, most of all, looking at art.
Ellen Carley McNally, *Sister Mary Margaret*

NARRATOR: Sister Mary Margaret looks straight at the viewer, her blue-green eyes magnetic in their intensity. She wears the traditional clothing of a Catholic nun—which in its solemnity makes her face appear all the richer in color and detail. Look closely at how artist Ellen Carley McNally renders the sister’s skin, using tiny, parallel brushstrokes of pinks, blues, and greens.

McNally painted this portrait using egg tempera, a medium that combines dry pigments with egg yolks. This was the most widely used painting medium in Europe for centuries, prior to the rise in popularity of oil paint during the Renaissance. Tempera enjoyed a revival among American artists starting in the 1920s, after the pathbreaking work of Yale art historian Daniel V. Thompson and his protégé, the painter Lewis York. McNally studied with York at the Yale School of the Fine Arts, where she received her B.F.A. in 1945.

During her time at Yale, McNally held a work-study job as a hostess in the dining room of the Faculty Club. She lived at the club in a small bedroom that served as an occasional studio. In 2018 she recalled:

**MCNALLY:** This is my room at the faculty club. It was so tiny I had to cut off the top of my easel to fit in. That’s the Graduate Club next door. This is my bed, and to make a desk, I had a drawing board and a canvas stretcher to hold it up. Sometimes if I bumped that, it all landed on my knees.

NARRATOR: Nevertheless, McNally looked back fondly on her studies at Yale:

**MCNALLY:** Oh, memories of walking across from the Faculty Club, across the Green, past the church, every morning—and just being so happy that I was in art school and going to Yale. Then walking up the wooden steps and getting ready to paint for the day. That was heavenly, yes.

NARRATOR: For this painting of Sister Mary Margaret, McNally followed the traditional tempera process as taught at Yale. First, she made a preparatory drawing, which was then transferred directly on the panel. She then created a value underpainting in India ink and green tones. This became the groundwork for the full-color painting, which McNally built up slowly with many crosshatched layers of thin, transparent paint. The top layers of warm tones in the subject’s face complement the green layers underneath, evoking a lively presence.

McNally inventively reinterpreted other artistic techniques from the early Renaissance. Behind Sister Mary Margaret is an image of the school that she attended as a child, which McNally created by scraping away the reddish-brown background paint with a sharp tool—a technique known as sgraffito. In these passages, McNally has scratched through and revealed some of the colors from the underlayers of paint.

But who is the subject of this picture, the woman with such striking eyes and an elusive expression? The artist’s daughter Maura Cochran explains:
COCHRAN: Sister Mary Margaret was a nun at a boarding school that my great-aunt Ruth attended at a young age, upon the death of her mother. The nun was a mentor to her young pupil, and Aunt Ruth commissioned my mother to paint this portrait in the early 1950s as a token of thanks. But the nun’s convent wouldn’t let Sister Mary Margaret accept it because it was vainglory to have a portrait of yourself. My mother would have had to paint all the nuns, not just one. As that was not happening, the portrait hung in my great-aunt’s home until her death, when it came back to my family, where that portrait has hung in our living room ever since, before being donated to Yale.