1-1-2018

Elsie Kalstone: Imaginative Things

Jill Deupi
University of Miami

Bruce Helander

Charles Kalstone

Recommended Citation
https://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/lowe_art_museum_catalogs/20

This Exhibition Catalog is brought to you for free and open access by the Lowe Art Museum at Scholarly Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Lowe Art Museum Catalogs by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Repository. For more information, please contact repository.library@miami.edu.
Elsie Kalstone: Imaginative Things
Elsie Kalstone: Imaginative Things

EDITED BY:
Jill Deupi

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY:
Bruce Helander
Charles Kalstone

Organized by the Lowe Art Museum.

Support for *Elsie Kalstone: Imaginative Things* was generously provided by the Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs and the Cultural Affairs Council, the Miami-Dade County Mayor and Board of County Commissioners, members of the Lowe, and the University of Miami and its College of Arts and Sciences.

Design: Chris Rogers, Yazi

Printing: NuPress of Miami, Inc.

Photography: Sid Hoeltzell – Wynwood, Miami

ISBN – 978-0-9982654-1-4

© 2018 Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami. No part of this publication may be reprinted or reproduced in any form, by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photography, or by any storage or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida.

COVER:

ELSIE KALSTONE
Untitled, 1962
Paper
21 x 17 x 1 inches
© Dr. Charles Kalstone
Contents

Elsie Kalstone: Imaginative Things 4
JILL DEUPI
BEAUX ARTS DIRECTOR AND CHIEF CURATOR

Through a Kaleidoscope: 5
The Multifaceted Artwork of Elsie Kalstone
BRUCE HELANDER

Q & A 9
CHARLES KALSTONE AND JILL DEUPI

Exhibition Checklist 13
Recognition in art should be delayed as long as possible.

—Attrib., Gustave Moreau
(19th-century French painter and teacher)

In Western civilization, we have this idea of an artist ... This person is almost always considered a white man, and he is a genius, and he will do anything for his art. A mother, on the other hand, also gives up everything, but she does so in the guise of selflessness.

—Helen Molesworth
(contemporary art curator)

There are several truths in life that are simply inescapable. One such truth is that, while males and females can both successfully nurture and raise their young, only women can bear children. Another is that for centuries, if not longer, female artists have generally been judged by different standards than their male counterparts, frequently with unfavorable outcomes for the former. These axioms have inflected the career paths of countless women, who have honored their commitments to their families without relinquishing their skills and talents as artists. The most positive fruits of such labors are stable domestic units, with successful partners and well-adjusted children. Another, less admirable result is the stymying of such women’s professional growth and development, which brings with it a concomitant lack of critical recognition. The scarcity of such acclaim should not, however, condemn these artists to the annals of the forgotten or the lapsed. Neither should it sequesrer them to the arenas of “triumpal” (re)discovery and victorious resurrection nor blind us to the very potent and real socio-economic realities at play in such circumstances. Rather, it should encourage us to regard these practitioners’ achievements through the lens of the societal strictures and expectations that shifted—and often restricted—their career paths, making their hard-won successes all the more laudable. This is the lens through which we should regard the oeuvre of Elsie Sisskind Kalstone; a talented artist who lovingly laid aside her own professional prospects to prioritize her role as wife and mother for nearly two decades. This exhibition is a fitting tribute to both aspects of this remarkable woman’s life.

Elsie Kalstone (née Sisskind) was born in 1903 in McKeesport, PA. After graduating from McKeesport High School, she followed her muse—Art—to the Carnegie Institute of Technology (now Carnegie Mellon University), where she studied fine art. Upon graduating in 1925, Kalstone worked as an art supervisor in the East Pittsburgh public school system for six years before marrying Louis Kalstone, a haberdasher. The couple had two children, David and Charles, and it was to her beloved sons and husband that Kalstone primarily dedicated the next twenty years of her life. She did so, however, without fully abandoning her art, which she practiced as and when time allowed. Indeed, as her children grew ever more independent with each passing year, the artist was able to devote increasing Recognition in art should be delayed as long as possible.

—Attrib., Gustave Moreau
(19th-century French painter and teacher)

In Western civilization, we have this idea of an artist ... This person is almost always considered a white man, and he is a genius, and he will do anything for his art. A mother, on the other hand, also gives up everything, but she does so in the guise of selflessness.

—Helen Molesworth
(contemporary art curator)

There are several truths in life that are simply inescapable. One such truth is that, while males and females can both successfully nurture and raise their young, only women can bear children. Another is that for centuries, if not longer, female artists have generally been judged by different standards than their male counterparts, frequently with unfavorable outcomes for the former. These axioms have inflected the career paths of countless women, who have honored their commitments to their families without relinquishing their skills and talents as artists. The most positive fruits of such labors are stable domestic units, with successful partners and well-adjusted children. Another, less admirable result is the stymying of such women’s professional growth and development, which brings with it a concomitant lack of critical recognition. The scarcity of such acclaim should not, however, condemn these artists to the annals of the forgotten or the lapsed. Neither should it sequesrer them to the arenas of “triumpal” (re)discovery and victorious resurrection nor blind us to the very potent and real socio-economic realities at play in such circumstances. Rather, it should encourage us to regard these practitioners’ achievements through the lens of the societal strictures and expectations that shifted—and often restricted—their career paths, making their hard-won successes all the more laudable. This is the lens through which we should regard the oeuvre of Elsie Sisskind Kalstone; a talented artist who lovingly laid aside her own professional prospects to prioritize her role as wife and mother for nearly two decades. This exhibition is a fitting tribute to both aspects of this remarkable woman’s life.

Elsie Kalstone (née Sisskind) was born in 1903 in McKeesport, PA. After graduating from McKeesport High School, she followed her muse—Art—to the Carnegie Institute of Technology (now Carnegie Mellon University), where she studied fine art. Upon graduating in 1925, Kalstone worked as an art supervisor in the East Pittsburgh public school system for six years before marrying Louis Kalstone, a haberdasher. The couple had two children, David and Charles, and it was to her beloved sons and husband that Kalstone primarily dedicated the next twenty years of her life. She did so, however, without fully abandoning her art, which she practiced as and when time allowed. Indeed, as her children grew ever more independent with each passing year, the artist was able to devote increasing Recognition in art should be delayed as long as possible.

—Attrib., Gustave Moreau
(19th-century French painter and teacher)

In Western civilization, we have this idea of an artist ... This person is almost always considered a white man, and he is a genius, and he will do anything for his art. A mother, on the other hand, also gives up everything, but she does so in the guise of selflessness.

—Helen Molesworth
(contemporary art curator)

There are several truths in life that are simply inescapable. One such truth is that, while males and females can both successfully nurture and raise their young, only women can bear children. Another is that for centuries, if not longer, female artists have generally been judged by different standards than their male counterparts, frequently with unfavorable outcomes for the former. These axioms have inflected the career paths of countless women, who have honored their commitments to their families without relinquishing their skills and talents as artists. The most positive fruits of such labors are stable domestic units, with successful partners and well-adjusted children. Another, less admirable result is the stymying of such women’s professional growth and development, which brings with it a concomitant lack of critical recognition. The scarcity of such acclaim should not, however, condemn these artists to the annals of the forgotten or the lapsed. Neither should it sequesrer them to the arenas of “triumpal” (re)discovery and victorious resurrection nor blind us to the very potent and real socio-economic realities at play in such circumstances. Rather, it should encourage us to regard these practitioners’ achievements through the lens of the societal strictures and expectations that shifted—and often restricted—their career paths, making their hard-won successes all the more laudable. This is the lens through which we should regard the oeuvre of Elsie Sisskind Kalstone; a talented artist who lovingly laid aside her own professional prospects to prioritize her role as wife and mother for nearly two decades. This exhibition is a fitting tribute to both aspects of this remarkable woman’s life.

Elsie Kalstone (née Sisskind) was born in 1903 in McKeesport, PA. After graduating from McKeesport High School, she followed her muse—Art—to the Carnegie Institute of Technology (now Carnegie Mellon University), where she studied fine art. Upon graduating in 1925, Kalstone worked as an art supervisor in the East Pittsburgh public school system for six years before marrying Louis Kalstone, a haberdasher. The couple had two children, David and Charles, and it was to her beloved sons and husband that Kalstone primarily dedicated the next twenty years of her life. She did so, however, without fully abandoning her art, which she practiced as and when time allowed. Indeed, as her children grew ever more independent with each passing year, the artist was able to devote increasing

1 This group was founded in the mid-1940s by “a small coterie of local artists ... Young painters and sculptors who were working against the grain of the conventional idioms at that time, and with very little public acceptance.” Jeannette Jena, “Abstract Group Offers Interesting Exhibition,” Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, February 9, 1960.
3 Kantner continued: “Collages are her specialty, and a selection of them, plus some watercolor and ink drawings, are on exhibition in Gallery K at Carnegie Institute. They are the best I’ve seen there [emphasis added].” Dorothy Kantner, “Glue Pot, Scissors Effects Top Some Painters’ Brushes, Canvas,” January 25, 1958.
5 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
amounts of time to painting and collage: by the late 1950s, Kalstone was publicly exhibiting her work on a regular basis. Between 1957 and 1963, for instance, she was included in the annual Associated Artists of Pittsburgh group show (a juried exhibition) in addition to exhibiting with the “Abstract Group of Pittsburgh.” Other career highlights include a one-person show at the Carnegie Institute in early 1958. Calling this show “[t]he art season’s most exciting surprise,” Pittsburgh art critic Sam Hood opined, “Mrs. Kalstone’s highly personal style of depicting everyday scenes entirely from memory has been in the making for a long time. For a generation she has worked in obscurity and with self discipline [sic], self criticism [sic], and endless patience has created a unique style. Her style is also varied but each painting has the definite Kalstone stamp.”

Dorothy Kantner, writing at the same time, noted, “Elsie Sisskind Kalstone gets better effects with scissors and a gluepot than some painters can suggest with brushes and canvas.”

It was during this same arc of time that Kalstone associated herself with the Pittsburgh Plan for Art, which was founded in 1955 to “serve as a community agency for the display, circulation and sale of paintings, drawings and sculptures … and as a focal point for the merging interests of those creatively and receptively concerned with visual art appreciation and art education.” Through her activities with this group (which—among other things—created itinerant exhibitions that traveled throughout the region, bringing art to communities that might not otherwise be exposed to contemporary visual culture), the artist came to the attention of art critics in Cincinnati and other cities outside of Pittsburgh. Writing for The Cincinnati Enquirer in 1962, for example, Frederick Yeiser noted of that year’s Pittsburgh Plan for Art exhibition (which was housed aboard the University of Indiana’s showboat, Majestic), “The exhibition demonstrates among other things that there is no longer any such thing as ‘regional’ painting—if there ever was; also, that [the painters whose work is on view, including Kalstone] are [of] the abstractionist persuasion …” Just days later, an affirming review in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette of a three-woman show in which Kalstone was featured, noted that the artist was “known especially for her brilliant collages.” The author, Jeannette Jena, continued, “Elsie Kalstone builds her paintings and collages as if fitting bricks into a wall or pieces into a mosaic; making patterns from real leaves and grasses in one instance, from bits of jewel-colored paper in another; from aluminum in another. Out of these emerge … a creative fabric of allusive images, woven together into … imaginative things [emphasis added].” Such critical acclaim did not go unnoticed: the Alcoa Corporation, for instance, commissioned several works from Kalstone, who cleverly collaged scraps of metal from the Pittsburgh-based conglomerate into colorful abstract works.

Like most if not all successful artists, Elsie Kalstone enjoyed the support of her family as well as the teachers and mentors who trained and inspired her. Chief among these was painter Samuel Rosenberg, whom the younger artist credited with developing her talents at the Isaac Seder Educational Center, part of the Young Men & Women’s Hebrew Associations in Pittsburgh (now the Jewish 

8 Rosenberg was a dedicated teacher, with positions at Carnegie Tech, the Neighborhood Art School (which he founded in 1917 at the Irene Kaufmann Settlement in Pittsburgh’s multi-cultural Hill District and which was subsumed in 1961 by the Young Men’s and Women’s Hebrew Association ["YM & WHA"]), and at the YM & WHA, where, in 1926, he was named Director of the Fine Arts Department of the Isaac Seder Educational Center. See Barbara L. Jones, Samuel Rosenberg: Portrait of a Painter (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2003), 90-119. Among Rosenberg’s students who went on to achieve extraordinary fame in the contemporary art world were Mel Bochner, Philip Pearlstein, and Andy Warhol (all of whom were, not incidentally, male).

9 Jones, 106-107.
Community Center), where she attended evening art classes when her children were grown. Though no documentation of her coursework survives, one can deduce that Kalstone took Rosenberg’s Advanced Drawing and Painting class, as this is the only class that he taught at the Center in the years between 1946 and his retirement in 1964 (the same period when Kalstone was frequenting the Center). As Rosenberg scholar Barbara Jones notes, “This course, which came to be known as the ‘artists’ workshop,’ would be [his] greatest contribution to the Y’s curriculum and the class for which he is most recognized today.” We know from Kalstone’s son, Dr. Charles Kalstone, that his mother’s dedication to these courses was such that, during the day when her husband was not available to take her, she (a non-driver) happily commuted via public transportation more than an hour each way from their family home at 1408 Wilson Street in McKeesport to the Center at 315 South Bellefield Avenue in Oakland.

Clearly, Kalstone was spurred on by a true passion for art and an unquenchable thirst for learning, particularly from a teacher as deft as Rosenberg. For it was likely from him (whom she may have also met at Carnegie Tech when they were both much younger) that Kalstone learned “[t]he importance of the edge of the canvas, balance, color, harmony, and working on the composition as a whole ….”

Also influential were Lois Kaufman and Jane Haskell, both of whom trained with Rosenberg and with whom she shared studio space as well as amity (above all Haskell, who remained a close friend until Kalstone’s death in 1976). At the end of the day, however, it was her own innate talent, coupled with the artist’s grit, her love of “mark making,” and her independent aesthetic impulses that enabled her to create a highly personal body of work. This, together with the fine family that she and her husband raised, is her legacy, and it is this that the Lowe is delighted to be able to share with his audiences.

The Museum would like to extend its deep gratitude to Dr. Charles and Mrs. Ferne Kalstone and their family for making this exhibition possible. Their patience, graciousness, and boundless support are testaments to Elsie and Louis Kalstone. Thanks are equally due to Bruce Helander, who deftly contextualized Kalstone’s work within the larger constellation of art and art history in the essay that follows. Anne Kraybill and Barbara Jones of the Westmoreland Museum of American Art were very generous with their collegial support as were the staffs of the Alcoa Corporation, the Associated Artists of Pittsburgh, and the Carnegie Museum of Art. Rustin Levenson and her Art Care Conservation team were invaluable partners in this project as were Laura Fedynyszyn (Andrew W. Mellon Fellow for Paper Conservation at the University of Miami) and Michelle Reeves (Robinson & Reeves Inc.). As ever, the Lowe’s remarkably talented and hard-working team deserve great thanks for ensuring the success of this show as do President Julio Frenk, Provost Jeffrey Duerk, and Dean Leonidas Bachas for their steadfast belief in and commitment to the power of art.

Jill Deupi, JD, PhD
Beaux Arts Director and Chief Curator
Lowe Art Museum

---

11 Samuel Rosenberg: Portrait of a Painter”, Resource Library Magazine, http://www.tfaoi.com/aa/3aa/3aa607.htm. Barbara Jones’s comments about Rosenberg’s teaching methodologies are quite telling in the context of Kalstone’s mature output: “Rosenberg’s classes at the Y were similar in method to those he taught at Carnegie Tech—informal and simply structured. Most of the participants were practicing artists with prior academic training and professional experience. While Rosenberg encouraged experimentation with different media, he selected inexpensive, disposable materials for the purpose of this class: large sheets of white paper clipped to Masonite backboards, housepainter’s brushes, water-based poster paints, pencil, and charcoal.” Jones, 112.

12 Compare these remarks to the subtitle of the positive review of Kalstone’s 1958 solo exhibition, which trumpets: “Ex-Teacher Shows 25 Collages, Paintings in Display at Carnegie Institute; Most Done in Ink, Poster Paint.” "City Housewife Sets Exhibit of Art Work," McKeesport Daily News, n.d. Equally telling is Jones’s remark that, “[t]he class explored contemporary art movements, especially the New York School in the 1950s. Abstract expressionists Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning were frequently discussed in reference to spontaneity in paint application, and Hans Hofmann’s push-pull theory was discussed with regard to color harmonies and the sensation of color. When Rosenberg talked about experimenting with light, he referred to the Impressionists; when he needed to make a point about color relationships, he talked about Joseph Albers. And always there was Matisse, to whom Rosenberg returned whenever the class discussed the power of color.” Ibid., 113. All of these elements and influences are present in Kalstone’s work, above all, her oil paintings.
Through a Kaleidoscope: The Multifaceted Artwork of Elsie Kalstone

Among the more satisfying benefits of being an art critic and curator as well as a professional artist is receiving innumerable museum press releases and exhibition invitations each and every day. Even though one can only visit a small fraction of the most promising and exciting of these shows each week, such material offers a remarkable perspective on the current state of the art world. As I look back on my career of writing about art and artists in a variety of publications, from ARTnews to The Huffington Post, I am struck by the fact that one of the most exciting components out there is the element of complete surprise and personal satisfaction that comes from stumbling onto a particular artist’s idiosyncratic style that brings something new and valuable to the table. Often these types of delightful circumstances can be hiding in plain sight, just around the corner within your own community, perhaps revealed by mistake or through some serendipitous circumstance. A remarkable example of such an unexpected encounter involves Abstract Expressionist Harold Shapinsky. A talented artist, Shapinsky originally had studied with Wilhelm de Kooning and Robert Motherwell, but World War II shipped him off to Europe in his prime. The artist later returned to Manhattan, believing he would remain in complete artistic obscurity. Encountering Shapinsky’s work by chance, I offered him his first one-man exhibition in the United States at my Palm Beach gallery; the show was a sensation and sold out to distinguished collectors, including Henry Ford. After the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. acquired his work, Shapinsky became a celebrated artist who went from rags to riches. Another story of chance encounter involved the artist Carrie Mueller, whom I met when she was 99 years old, blind, and on her death bed. Her Grandma Moses type of naive painting style was the best I have ever seen. So, I visited Mueller in a nearby hospital to let her know in what high professional esteem I held her work; a visit she said would comfort her forever. The artist passed away soon after, but the paintings in her estate ultimately were all acquired by distinguished collectors. Jed Perl’s review of my own New York gallery show of a series of paper collages had a similar impact on me. Entitled “Successes” and published in The New Criterion, Perl’s piece stated that, though unfamiliar with my work, he was impressed with my collages. The critic ended his review by suggesting that this uptown exhibition illustrated the benefits of always keeping your eyes open to discovering something new and worthwhile, which leads me to the unfamiliar but remarkable works of artist Elsie Kalstone and the exciting show mounted by the Lowe Art Museum at the University of Miami.

Born in 1903, Kalstone recognized early in her childhood her innate knack for painting, which she continued to explore on a regular basis with vitality and energy almost up to the time of her passing in 1976. Like Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso, who are credited with inventing Cubism and collage, Kalstone’s work evolved into colorful abstract canvases that allowed her to distance herself from narrative pictorials.1 In doing so, she delved into complicated abstract images requiring intuitive intellectual gestures;

---

1 Picasso’s very first shocking “papier collé” (literally “glued paper” in French), utilized a piece of newspaper appropriated from the masthead of Le Figaro and pasted it down on canvas. This set the stage for artists to employ another medium to express themselves, one that would be slowly but surely accepted by critics and collectors.
work that is reminiscent of early experiments by “AbEx” painter Lee Krasner, who pushed the envelope by exploring uncharted but challenging territory in her two-dimensional compositions. One canvas in particular, entitled *Kaleidoscope* (1955-65), is a perfect hybrid of a Cubist-inspired painting on a shaped canvas accented with painterly cut-outs of fragments of newsprint and commercial advertisements. It was just a matter of time until Kalstone’s keen interest in cutting up and manipulating the printed page became an obsession, as this novel form of visual expression seemed to be a natural format for her. Simultaneously, to keep her studio activities balanced, Kalstone often would switch back to painting, which was marked by a clear “collage aesthetic.”

During my interview with Dr. Charles Kalstone, the artist’s son, he pointed out that Mrs. Kalstone was a dedicated wife and mother, who balanced her domestic responsibilities with a burning desire to create artworks. As her children became more independent, Kalstone wasted no time in catching up with her life’s passion. Dr. Kalstone told me that, though his mother did not drive, she regularly would take a streetcar with several transfers to the Pittsburgh Museum, where she attended art classes religiously. It was there that she learned of collage. Kalstone was mesmerized by this medium, with which she began an artistic “love affair” that continued for the rest of her life. Soon the artist began showing her work in local galleries and received her first commission: a series of collages for the Alcoa aluminum company. In the mid-1950s, her son remembers his mother constantly surrounded by piles of used magazines with a small box of single edge razor blades and an assortment of scissors. She used these tools for slicing and dicing up interesting textural printed pages that, in due course, would be adaptively reused in a completely different context to create her collage work. Dr. Kalstone also recalls that she had amassed “a ton of art books” (Cézanne being one of her favorites) that were a constant source of inspiration, stimulus, and guidance as well as a primer on the enjoyable experience of studying other influential artists, such as Joseph Cornell, Paul Klee, and Picasso, among others. They also gave Kalstone additional confidence and motivation: She continued to gain attention with her unusual compositions and in 1958 received a surprise invitation from a local curator to mount a solo exhibition at the Carnegie Institute (now Carnegie Museum of Art). The show received remarkable reviews in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, under the headline “Artist Scores Triumph.” The feature went on to say:

*Arguably the art season’s most exciting surprise is the one-artist exhibition of collages by Elsie Siskind Kalstone. Not only is the exhibit an artistic triumph, but it has been phenomenally accepted by the public at a place where actions speak louder than words—through the pocketbook, as [she has] already sold half of the works on exhibit. For a generation she has worked in obscurity and with self-discipline, self-criticism and endless patience has created a unique style that has obviously been in the making for a long time. Credit goes to the chief curator at the Carnegie Institute for discovering Mrs. Kalstone and backing up his convictions by offering her a one-artist show.*
Looking at Kalstone’s work through the lens of critical analysis, one is struck by the fact that her paintings and collages possess a clarity of spirit that one also would expect from a well-known artist in a career survey. Even after all these years, hers is a unique voice with a strong, distinctive style that comfortably shifts from collage to painting without skipping a beat. For example, Kalstone created a number of works with her palette knife that offers the same rich and aggressive texture that she created with the built-in illusion of space in her collages. One palette painting in particular, Blue Note (1955-65), demonstrates a combination of professional skill, adventuresome textural surfaces, and graceful, abstract composition. And, although her work is essentially non-narrative, the artist possessed a mature aptitude for abstracted representation, evident in St. Francis and the Cow (1955-65). She also produced several repeat designs that ingeniously preceded the “Op Art” movement. But the true uniqueness of Kalstone’s early collages appears to have evolved from an innate design sense coupled with a flair for compositions that often incorporated a multitude of letter forms, appropriated from publication headlines that anticipate many of today’s “text” art by Jenny Holzer or Glenn Ligon, among others. And yet Kalstone’s work maintains a novel essence that is undeniably innovative and does not seem dated, despite being created well over a half century ago. Some of her painting, built up with multiple layers of vintage paper, are reminiscent of the Parisian collage artist, Jacques Villeglé, who ripped apart layers of street posters, as well as torn paper works by Henri Matisse, Man Ray, Nancy Spero, Kurt Schwitters, and Hannah Höch. In still other instances, Kalstone’s oeuvre relies on a strict common denominator of collage materials, which are purposely built up like bricks in a wall and creating intriguing twist that would be appreciated by the French artist Arman.

At the end of the day, this is an exhibition that should be remembered for its historical innovation and its singular perceptible style coupled with the accolades that should go to the Lowe Art Museum for having the insight and courage to mount a truly innovative exhibition based on quality and craftsmanship, as opposed to contemporary artists who may be an exciting flash in the pan, but perhaps would not withstand decades of time and still remain original and exuberant and thrilling like the works of Elsie Kalstone. If any other credit is due it should go to Dr. Jill Deupi, the Lowe’s Beaux Arts Director and Chief Curator, for having the courage and vision to commit to a career survey of this relatively unknown but remarkably gifted artist whose artwork, even today, seems fresh and innovative.

Bruce Helander

Bruce Helander is a collage artist who writes on art for The Huffington Post and ARTnews. His collages are in over fifty museum permanent collections including the Whitney, Guggenheim and Metropolitan Museum of Art. He is the former Provost of the Rhode Island School of Design, a former White House Fellow of the National Endowment for the Arts and is a member of the Florida Artists Hall of Fame. He is the former Editor-in-Chief of The Art Economist magazine, and is the author of the recent books “Chihuly: An Artist Collects” (Harry Abrams, Inc.) and “Hunt Slonem—Bunnies” (Glitterati Press).
Q & A

JD = Dr. Jill Deupi
Beaux Arts Director and
Chief Curator, Lowe Art Museum

CK = Dr. Charles Kalstone
OB-GYN and son of
Elsie and Louis Kalstone

JD: What are your first memories of your mother’s artistic practice?

CK: My earliest memory of my mother’s art-making dates back to when I was in the 7th grade. That year, my basketball team won the city championship, so our picture was in the local paper. She painted an interpretation of this news photo, which—in her version—shows huge smiles as our only legible facial feature. It remains one of my favorite works by my mother. After that time, I did not see any of her paintings until after I graduated from high school.

JD: I know that she shared studio space with Lois Kaufman and Jane Haskell but wonder if your mother also had a dedicated space for making art in your family’s home?

CK: We lived in a modest house with no extra space, so she did not have a studio at home. Rather, my mother made her art—mostly collage—while either seated on the living room sofa (and sometimes the floor) or at our dining room table. It was only later, when she began commuting to Pittsburgh to work in the studio space she shared with Lois and Jane, that she started making larger abstract works on canvas.

JD: What are your recollections of Kaufman and Haskell?

CK: Both women were very accomplished Pittsburgh artists, and both were at least twenty years younger than my mother. They became my mother’s lifelong friends and colleagues.

JD: Was there much of your mother’s work hanging in your family’s home when you were young?

CK: I don’t remember there ever being any. Even in later years, when my mother and father moved to Sarasota, FL, the white walls of their condo were bare except for one painting, an Op Art black and white graphic work that she designed. My father, who had excellent penmanship, meticulously painted in the black squares for her.
That is probably why she displayed it. By then she had given most of her works to my brother and me. The rest were stored under my parents’ bed.

JD: Did she ever try to teach you and your brother how to draw or paint? If so, was your mother successful?
CK: Though my mother did not teach my brother or me to draw or paint, she did give my children lessons; something that she loved as much as they. She cut out and framed some of my 8-year-old daughter’s paintings, which sometimes have been mistaken for her work.

JD: Your mother received positive critical reviews for her collages in particular. Do you recall what she was using as her source materials for these works?
CK: Her favorite publications for collaging were the New York Times magazine and Life. The other tools of her trade were razor blades, paste, staples, watercolor paint, and India ink: She would combine all of these elements and collages would magically emerge. Eventually my mother exhibited these works, some of which she sold, while others she gave away to friends and relatives.

JD: In interviews, your mother acknowledged her great debt of gratitude to her teacher, the painter Samuel Rosenberg. Did you ever have the chance to meet him? If so, what were your impressions of him?
CK: I met Sam Rosenberg once at an exhibition when I was home from college. He seemed polite and humble, but I did not get to talk with him. If I could do so now I would thank him for helping my mother tap into her gifts and fulfill her potential as an artist.

JD: Was your mother “a reader?” If so, who were some of her favorite authors?
CK: She was not an avid reader, but when she did, she would immerse herself in her large collection of art books, mainly studying the Impressionists and contemporary art. I think my mother bought these books in the many museums that she frequented. We still have many of them. Art was definitely her passion.

JD: Were there other pastimes that your mother particularly enjoyed?
CK: She enjoyed knitting and sewing as well as creating dolls and doll clothes for her grandchildren; my mother never used a pattern for any of these undertakings. Her creations have now been passed on to my grandchildren (her great grandchildren). She also wove on her loom—making beautiful area rugs and wall hangings—and carved animals from small blocks of wood with surgical precision. Family trips often included her sister, who lived with us: We would spend a month at Miami Beach in the winter and a month in Gloucester, MA in the summer. The latter, in particular, inspired my mother, who would sketch and paint for hours while sitting out on the rocks along the Atlantic shoreline. There were also side trips to Rockport and Folly Cove [both MA], which had printing factories and inspired some of her works depicting rubbings of fringes and graphic design elements.

My mother was also interested in Modern interior design. We had Knoll furniture in our home for as long as I can remember. In fact, one of Pittsburgh’s leading designers, a family friend, used to present his projects to her with regularity. He valued my mother’s opinion because he knew that she was a woman well ahead of her time. Her taste was minimalistic; less is more.

JD: Your mother seems to have had quite an independent spirit. How would you describe her disposition?
CK: She was calm, warm, authentic, a good listener, both intelligent and intellectual. People of all types found her engaging. I never heard her say a bad word about anyone. My mother would find and emphasize the positive things about people, never dwelling on the negatives. This was
a tremendous strength. In her work, she had an independent spirit but in her regular daily life she could connect with anyone on any level and, if needed, offer them the most constructive advice possible. My mother had the common touch.

JD: Your father, a haberdasher, was also involved in a creative business. Did he consider himself an “artist”?  
CK: No. He owned a small men’s fine clothing store, which my grandfather had started. My father’s talents lay in his intimate, expert knowledge of his field and his exquisite taste and style; he was the best dressed man I have ever met. He and my mother shared this quality, an understated, sophisticated approach to expressing themselves, whether in dress or fine art. They complemented each other beautifully, and she was extremely proud of him. But he knew my mother was the real artist.

JD: Clearly, your father was supportive of your mother’s work as an artist. Can you say a little bit about this?  
CK: My father was equally proud of my mother; he was her best critic and biggest fan. He loved her work and her exhibitions. Since she did not drive, he would take her to her night classes and wait for her because it was a one-hour drive from McKeesport to Pittsburgh. During the day she would take a streetcar or bus.

JD: What is the one thing that you want visitors to this exhibition to know about your mother?  
CK: What a woman! She did it her way. My mother pursued her passion by studying and teaching art, but after marriage she made her family her priority. When her sons left home and became independent and accomplished, her priorities shifted. My mother’s passion and talent exploded into a productive phase as she made art in her own humble but exemplary way, leaving a legacy of art for her family to enjoy, cherish—and now, 42 years after her death—publicly exhibit once again. Our family is extremely grateful to the Lowe for recognizing her worth and for creating this exhibition, which will provide an opportunity to immortalize her gifts.

JD: If Elsie Kalstone could see this exhibition what would she say?  
CK: I think she would say the work withstood the test of time. She would also say “thank you!”
Exhibition Checklist

All works by Elsie Kalstone
(American, 1903-76)
© Dr. Charles Kalstone
Untitled, 1965
Oil on canvas
47 ½ × 69 ¾ × 3 inches
Playtime, 1962
Tempera on paper
20 ¾ × 16 ¾ × ¾ inches
Untitled, 1962
Tempera on paper
20 ¾ × 16 ¾ × ¾ inches
Untitled, 1961
Tempera on paper, staples, pins
27 ¼ × 53 × 1 ¼ inches
Untitled (details), 1961
Tempera on paper, staples, pins
27 ¾ × 53 × 1 ¼ inches
Untitled, 1960
Tempera on paper
34 3/4 × 34 × 1 1/8 inches
Untitled, 1959
Tempera on paper
21 ½ x 16 ¾ x 1 ½ inches
Kaleidoscope, 1958
Tempera on paper, staples
21 × 17 × 1 inches
Untitled, 1958
Aluminum, tempera on paper, staples, pins
19 ¼ × 16 ¾ × 2 inches
Untitled, 1956
Tempera on paper
16 3/4 × 20 ½ × 1 inches
Untitled, 1956
Tempera on paper
20 1/2 x 16 3/4 x 1 inches
Blue Note, 1955–65
Oil on canvas
32 ⅜ × 44 ⅛ × 1 ⅜ inches
I See a Redbird, 1955-65
Tempera on paper, staples
25 ¾ × 19 ¾ × 1 ½ inches
At the Docks, 1955-65
Paper, staples
20 ¾ × 16 ¾ × ½ inches
Two Act Circus, 1955-65
(not on view)
Tempera on paper
12 ½ × 15 × 1 inches
Untitled, 1955-65
Oil on canvas
31 × 24 ¾ × 1 ½ inches
St. Francis and the Cow, 1955-65
Tempera on paper
23 × 16 ⅜ × 1 inches
Untitled, 1955-65
Oil on canvas
29 × 40 × 1 inches
Untitled, 1955-65
Tempera on paper
16 ¾ × 20 ½ × 1 inches
The Flood, 1955–65
Tempera on paper
20 ¾ × 17 × 1 inches
Untitled, 1955-65
Tempera on paper
16 3/8 × 20 3/4 × 3/4 inches
Untitled, 1955-65
Tempera on paper, staples
21 ¾ × 17 ¼ × 1 inches
Highland Park, 1955-65
Tempera and graphite on paper
23 ¾ × 18 × 1 inches
Untitled, 1955-65
Oil on canvas
37 ⅜ × 44 × 2 ⅜ inches
Gulf & Sky; 1955-65
Oil on canvas
31 ¼ × 1 ½ inches
Untitled, 1955-65
Oil on canvas
25 1/2 x 21 1/4 x 2 inches
Untitled, 1955-65
Tempera on paper
23 ¾ × 18 ¾ × 1 inches
Untitled, 1955-65
Aluminum, tempera on paper, staples, pins
16 ¼ × 19 ½ × 2 inches