

Cite this article: Emma Acker, "Bay Area Abstract Expressionist Display at the de Young Museum," in "In the Galleries," edited by Elizabeth McGoey and Sara Picard, *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 12, no. 1 (Spring 2026), <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.21002>.

Bay Area Abstract Expressionist Display at the de Young Museum

Emma Acker

Visitors to Gallery 13 at the de Young Museum in San Francisco encounter three striking works by the Bay Area–based Abstract Expressionists Bernice Bing (1936–1998), Sonia Gechtoff (1926–2018), and Zoe Longfield (1924–2013) (fig. 1). All three artists developed their signature styles while living in San Francisco and studying at the California School of Fine Arts (CSFA, later the San Francisco Art Institute). In the mid- to late 1940s, artists associated with the New York School, such as Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still, taught at the CSFA and transformed the school into an important center on the West Coast for Abstract Expressionism.

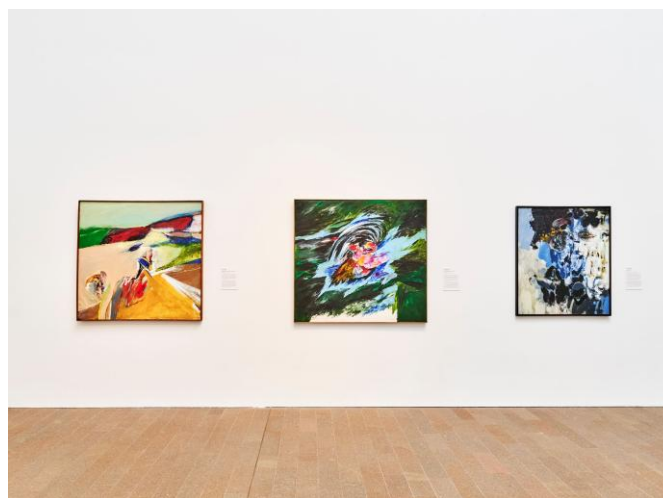


Fig. 1. Installation view of Gallery 13 featuring artworks by Bernice Bing, Sonia Gechtoff, and Zoe Longfield, de Young Museum, San Francisco. Photograph by Randy Dodson, courtesy of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

Gechtoff's work *Lucia and the Wave* (1961–62) was recently acquired by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, and it is the first painting by this pioneering Abstract Expressionist artist to enter the American art collection at the de Young. Gechtoff was born in Philadelphia and attended the CSFA from 1952 to 1953. She returned to teach at the school in 1957, the year she had a solo exhibition at what was then called the M. H. de Young Memorial Museum. In *Lucia and the Wave*, Gechtoff used lush, painterly brushstrokes and bold color relationships to express the drama and poetry of the natural world, with its intense creative and destructive energies. The name Lucia in the title stems from the Latin word *lux* and the Italian word *luce*, meaning light. It may relate to the burst of brilliant, flame-like colors at the center of the composition. Above, the swirling strokes of black, white, and blue paint evoke a vortex or a cresting wave, surrounded by roiling green waters.

Longfield’s painting [Glacier](#) (1949) is also a new addition to the de Young’s collection. Longfield was born in San Francisco and studied at the CSFA from 1947 to 1949. She was recognized early on for her talent and was one of a small number of artists invited to take Still’s coveted graduate painting seminar at the CSFA. Inspired by Still’s noncommercial approach to art making, twelve of his students, including Longfield, cofounded the co-operative Metart Gallery in San Francisco, in April 1949. Longfield exhibited *Glacier* (originally titled *No. 9*) in her December 1949 solo exhibition at Metart Gallery. With its richly layered colors and forms reminiscent of icy crags and precipices, *Glacier* has a magnetic presence that pulls the viewer in and invites quiet and prolonged contemplation.

Born in San Francisco’s Chinatown neighborhood, Bing, an artist and activist known to family and friends by her nickname “Bingo,” studied at the CSFA from 1957 to 1961. Bing created [Mayacamas No. 6, March 12, 1963](#) (1963) during a three-year stay at the Mayacamas Vineyard in the Napa Valley, where she harvested, bottled, and labeled wines, ran the tasting room, and gave tours. She was inspired by the expansive landscape surrounding the winery, which she depicted in *Mayacamas No. 6* using loosely brushed, broad planes of both vibrant and earth-toned colors. Bing later described the “overpowering spirituality that one feels when one is in a natural environment.”¹

These lyrical and powerfully expressive works reveal the important contributions of Bing, Gechtoff, and Longfield to the development of postwar American abstraction. Their nature-based compositions resonate with the work of other Bay Area artists represented in the de Young Museum’s Gallery 13, such as Jay DeFeo and Richard Diebenkorn, who also merged their sensory and emotional impressions of the Northern California landscape with the gestural brushwork of Abstract Expressionism.

Emma Acker is curator of American art at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

Notes

¹ Bernice Bing, quoted in “Selections from Interviews with Bernice Bing by Moira Roth and Diane Tani, August 13 and 24, 1991,” in *Bernice Bing*, exh. cat. (SOMAR Gallery, 1991), 12.