Powerful Works from a Truncated Life
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Two exhibitions of Eva Hesse’s drawings and sculptures are on view in New York City, one uptown at the Jewish Museum and one downtown at the Drawing Center. Elisabeth Sussman, Curator, Sondra Gilman Curator of Photography at The Whitney Museum of American Art, co-curated both: the Jewish Museum exhibition with Fred Wasserman, Henry J. Leir Curator at the Jewish Museum and the Drawing Center show with Catherine de Zegher, the former director.
there. These shows offer opportunities to encounter Hesse’s significant work; an oeuvre remarkable for its innovation. They are must-see destinations for viewers interested in this artist, in the work of women artists and for anyone who wants to see a vision that remains fresh, even though the artist died over 30 years ago.

Much of the work is informed by the artist’s life experiences; though it is abstract, the changes and decisions the artist made coincide with major moments and the entire oeuvre seems invested with a kind of seriousness, intensity and motivation that comes with the anxiety of a life lived amidst the horrors of World War II, acclimation to a new culture, divorce, death and survival. Yet, it is a body of work that is witty, exciting and highly evolved and all made within a few years. She also made much of this work as the Women’s Movement was just getting underway and, arguably, expresses a nascent feminist sensibility.

Eva Hesse was born in 1936, a Jew in Germany. She escaped Nazi horror on a children’s train to Amsterdam with her sister. Then, they went on to London where they were reunited with their parents. They all eventually settled in New York in Washington Heights. The displacement caused her mother great difficulty and weakened her mental state. The parents divorced and her mother committed suicide soon after, when the artist was ten years-old. The father remarried and the children were raised in a conventional New York Jewish household. Though Eva did not receive high grades in art in middle school, she pursued it with vigor and interest, eventually attending School of Industrial Art, Art Students League, Pratt Institute, Cooper Union and Yale School of Art, from which she graduated. She had odd jobs, began seeing a therapist in her late teens. She tried to establish herself in the New York art world at a time when many younger artists lived in the same neighborhood and everyone pretty much went to all the same openings. She began getting attention as a painter.

In 1961, she married Tom Doyle, a sculptor of note who was eight years her senior. He had an opportunity to work in residence for a private German patron, a textile manufacturer. The idea of a paid situation for both of the artists to make art was too much for them to pass up. For Hesse, the chance to connect with her Germanness was also important. However, the experience proved more confounding than emancipating, resulting in “artist’s block.” Her husband recommended she experiment with some of the materials lying around in the abandoned factory they used as a studio. Hesse’s incorporation of the discarded elements of textile production acted as a catalysis into her work in sculpture. She presented her first show of sculpture in Germany in 1965.

From 1965 until her death in 1970, from a brain tumor, Hesse produced an oeuvre that is both refreshing and overwhelming. Her marital separation and her father’s sudden death in 1966 both occurred as Hesse was finding her vision. She died as a major exhibition of her work was being organized for the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, which went on view in 1972. The show ended up becoming a kind of memorial exhibition. What she accomplished in her truncated life is compelling.

The sculptures on view at both shows are enticing, sensual, erotic, playful, engaging and enriching. This work requires time because it is complex and has a startling newness, even as it has aged and changed since she produced it. Alongside the sculptures in both shows are reliefs, drawings, paintings and sketches, as well as fascinating test pieces. Hesse took the geometry of the day and emancipated it and enriched it by adding quirks, infinity and absurdity. The drawings, in particular, show her investigating how to transgress the principles of Minimalism.

At the Jewish Museum, there are 33 works, as well as interesting biographical documentation and two films, all of which offer a welcome opportunity to examine and observe these impressive works. At the Drawing Center, there are one 158 works on exhibit. Though both
shows have similar media on view, the one uptown is the predominant sculpture show (as the title “Eva Hesse: Sculpture” explains), while the downtown show is focused on drawing.

These two exhibitions are notable destinations for this summer. Hesse’s art has not been the subject of a major exhibition in New York since 1972. There have been key traveling exhibitions originated elsewhere, namely New Haven in 1994 and San Francisco in 2002, which didn’t make it to New York. These current shows bring together fragile works and help expand our understanding of Hesse and her teasing, intensely ordered, messy and hybridized, compulsive vision.

“Eva Hesse: Sculpture” at the Jewish Museum is a stunner from the moment you enter the show. Is it Ringaround Arosie, the playfully, erotic Surrealist, Pop relief of the breast and a penis that signals something exceptional or is it the ironic wit and humor of the dark draping phallic forms of Several, looped like frankfurters over a nail for installation that most interestingly forecasts the plays, whips, rips, illusions and contrasts in the exhibition? This show is a lush, vibrant encounter with the artist’s work. It intentionally recalls the 1968 “Chain Polymers” exhibition, held at the Fischbach Gallery. The name of that exhibition describes some of the traits of latex and fiberglass, her hallmark materials and was an important exhibition for the artist. It is a real joy to see so many of the works in concert. The exhibition is engrossing—offering visual experiences that don’t waste any bit of the physical act of looking on marginal moments. Hesse’s work is entirely original, even as it reveals resemblances to others, from Jackson Pollock to Louise Bourgeois. This exhibition shows her willingness to experiment and identifies her sculptural vocabulary as utilizing the lexicon of Minimalism while finding a different path.

Hesse’s work can look like speculations, unsure attempts to try out a process or a method. But that aspect of experimentation was minimized here, almost absent in this show; even the test pieces were shown to spectacular advantage and installed for easy inspection. As is the case with Sans II, a series of box units arranged along a wall like windows that one cannot see through or out of, made of a fiberglass that has turned varying shades of brown, gold and amber, which is installed at a comfortable viewing level in relation to several other works of the same phase. The slight dips and variations in the edges are especially interesting, as are the simplicity of the forms within the piece contrasted to some of the more free form pieces around it which drape off the wall and onto the floor (like Area nearby) or have been scattered about (as seen in the disarrayed Sequel on the floor next to the ordered Schema.)

Finally, the section installed with the last pieces was impressive; the exhibition ended with several high notes, such as Untitled (Rope Piece), a virtuoso messy tangle of a sculpture hanging from the ceiling and located in a corner, a position adding dimensions to an already complicated work, which has influenced and will influence many other artists. The room that follows has many pieces of documentation, especially her family history, their Jewishness and her investigations into materials, drawn from the family and from Hesse’s personal files.

“Eva Hesse: Drawing” is actually the biggest exhibition ever of her work. This show provides an opportunity to see a few of her sculptures and reliefs accompanied by many of her rarely exhibited paintings and drawings, including several from her notebooks. Each drawing from pre-1964 is a revelation of the future forms, where Hesse employed the geometric and the biomorphic, in wild homage to artists as diverse as Yayoi Kusama and Oyvind Falhstrom. The works on paper have a refinement that evidences the sumptuousness and richness of her images. This is evident in the 1966 black ink wash and pencil drawing, without a title, of three sets of concentric circles—subtle, elegant and appealing in its simplicity. There is a 1966 papier-mâché
sculpture of a tied black mass that has never been included in an exhibition before; this work is of interest to anyone who knows Hesse’s work, as it is messy in its wrappings, made at a time that the artist was focused on order. It is a piece worthy of inspection and reflection.

The total effect of this exhibition is a phenomenal opportunity to see so much of Hesse’s work and her thought processes on display. The relationships between the drawings and the sculptures are vital, as is the reality that, here in this show, the drawings truly stand on their own, independent of the three-dimensional works, which is not a small task since past exhibitions haven’t always achieved this balance as successfully. Of particular note here are the paintings included in this show, particularly the “window” motif images towards the end, as they are each exciting, even though all were made more than 30 years ago. Many of the drawings provide insight into the balance Hesse sought in her works between contradictions of fancy and compulsion, rigidity and amusement, among many, many other pairings.

In both exhibitions, the equilibrium between sculpture and drawings was carefully done so that the sensuality of the sculptures didn’t overwhelm the rationality of the drawings. Both also have helpful accompanying exhibition catalogues, which are major contributions to Hesse scholarship and the study of women in art history. The role of these exhibitions and the books is staggering, because so many voices collectively speak about the value and pertinence of this small, powerful body of work.