

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

April 1, 2021

Inman Gallery is pleased to present

Toni LaSelle:
A State of Becoming

April 6 – May 15, 2021

Open by appointment Tues-Thurs
Open 11-6 without appointment Fri-Sat
Masks required and social distance enforced
Maximum 8 visitors at one time

Image: Toni LaSelle, **Theme 1-C**, 1952
oil on canvas, vintage frame
44 x 25 in (111.8 x 63.5 cm)
44 1/2 x 25 3/4 in (113 x 65.4 cm) framed



Inman Gallery is pleased to present **Toni LaSelle: *A State of Becoming***, an exhibition that focuses on Texas modernist Dorothy Antoinette (Toni) LaSelle's work during a time of significant artistic exploration for the artist. The show will include paintings and works on paper from 1946-1971, beginning with two paintings from the late-1940s, a period when LaSelle was assimilating ideas from European modernism while also immersing herself in the cutting-edge developments happening in contemporary American painting. During the period represented by the works in the *A State of Becoming*, LaSelle developed her own language of abstraction, which is informed by geometry and nature.

LaSelle embraced abstraction very early in her artistic career, taking her cue from the French fin-de-siecle painter Maurice Denis's dictum: "Remember that a painting—before it is a battle horse, a nude model, or some anecdote—is essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order." Her work was in fact resolutely abstract by the mid-1930s, a time when American art was dominated by representational traditions such as Regionalism and Social Realism.

LaSelle was an intuitive student of modernism and conscious of the European and American avant-garde milieus as they mixed in New York in the early to mid-20th century. From 1928–1972, LaSelle lived in Denton, Texas, and taught art and design at what is now known as Texas Women's University, all the while seeking knowledge of and exposure to the burgeoning concepts and processes of modernism. During sabbaticals and summers, LaSelle also sought out teachers and mentors, the most influential being European émigrés Hans Hofmann and László Moholy-Nagy. LaSelle studied with Moholy-Nagy in the early 1940s at the New Bauhaus School in Chicago, and, starting in 1944, she spent her summers at Hans Hofmann's School of Art in Provincetown, MA, until it closed in 1953.

LaSelle's pictorial vocabulary of choice was geometry—most often the circle, square and triangle—which she used to fill the picture plane. She gradually moved away from a volumetric depiction of space in the 1940s to a flat, planar painting surface, abandoning the figure-ground relationship in the 1950s and favoring a hard-edge, geometric abstraction from the 60s onward. Her artistic development, however, was never a linear trajectory. She frequently changed directions and experimented with different artistic modes of expression—often within the same year—as well as frequently moving across different formats and mediums—paintings and drawings, along with cray-pas, charcoal and ink.



Toni LaSelle, *Movements Toward Bay*, 1967/1970, acrylic on paper
18 x 12 in (45.7 x 30.5 cm)
22 ⁵/₈ x 16 ⁵/₈ x 1 ⁵/₈ in (57.5 x 42.2 x 4.1 cm) framed

In addition to the important 1940s paintings, the exhibition features two bold geometric canvases from 1952 and 1953, along with a selection of drawings from a 1953 notebook. The title of each of these drawings, *3 Soper Street*, refers to the address of one of LaSelle's studios in Provincetown, MA, where she spent almost every summer, starting in 1944. These drawings are classic examples of LaSelle's use of geometry—her fundamental formal vocabulary—as well as her interest in design, stained glass and color structure. *3 Soper St. no. 4*, for instance, is a clear indication of her continued interest in the works of Piet Mondrian, while the bold vertical and horizontal black lines recall the works of the French painter Georges Rouault, whose early 20th century Expressionist compositions were compared to stained-glass. Equally important, the drawings in this notebook show LaSelle's transition into a more hard-edge form of abstraction, which expressed itself fully much later, in the exceptional *Indian Summer (Aug. 8-13)* from 1971.

The second notebook on view, from 1967/1970, contains five works and is presented in its entirety. This group is particularly remarkable for its unusually large size (18 x 12 inches), as well as for the fact that the artist made revisions to three of the drawings a few years after the notebook's initial execution.

Originally completed in 1967, in 1970 she returned to the three drawings and used acrylic white paint to carve into the existing geometric shapes. This creative act of subtraction became a revelation for her the following year when she commented, "I didn't know until 1971 that subtracting was adding." With their execution date of 1970, these works thus mark an important step in the evolution of LaSelle's thinking and oeuvre.

A State of Becoming marks the first the first time the drawings from these two important notebooks will be seen publicly, and all the paintings on view are being exhibited for the first time in Houston.

Dorothy Antoinette (Toni) LaSelle (born 1901, Beatrice, NE, died 2002 Denton, TX) earned a BA from Nebraska Wesleyan University in 1923 and an MA from the University of Chicago in 1926. What started as a temporary position at Texas State College for Women (now Texas Women's University), in Denton, Texas, in 1928, turned into a full-time position when she became responsible for development of the art history program at the school. She remained at TSCW/TWU until her retirement in 1972, a dedicated teacher for 44 years. She was well known in the Dallas area as an expert on European Modernism, lecturing frequently. She exhibited in New York, Provincetown and Texas in her lifetime and two museums acquired her work – The Dallas Museum of Art and The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Since her passing in 2002 at the age of 100, her work has entered the collections of the San Antonio Museum of Art, the Dallas Museum of Art, the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, the Davis Museum at Wellesley College, and the Menil Collection. For a full biography, or more information about the works in the exhibition, contact the gallery.