

Mary Ann Aitken

September 23 - November 5, 2016

Opening Friday, September 23, 6-9 PM

What Pipeline is honored to present a selection of previously unshown works by Mary Ann Aitken.

Mary Ann Aitken (b. 1960, Detroit, d. 2012, Brooklyn) was for thirty years a voracious artist whose output included painting, drawing, and impastoed assemblages. During the late 1980s she often painted everyday scenes including the view of Downtown Detroit as seen through the windows of her studio at the Cary Building, and objects at her parents' house in the University District of Detroit. Cropped into 48x48 and 24x24 inch squares, these paintings elude being labelled landscapes or still lives; anticipating Aitken's later interest in photography, they evoke the snapshot moment of a Polaroid square. Viewed through contemporary eyes (which might relate them to the cropping of an Instagram post) they escape their original, now decades-old time period and click effortlessly into our post-digital perspective. Yet what may appear effortless in Aitken's work never was: she spent ample time realizing each work. Her dedication to her vision, largely conceived and contemplated behind private studio doors, will continue to engage audiences well beyond her, and our, lifespans.

Aitken grew up in Detroit and attended Wayne State University, receiving a Bachelors of Fine Arts in 1983. Aitken studied and worked in the shadow of the recognized Cass Corridor artists. She later earned a Masters in Art Therapy from WSU in 1989. During those years she maintained, and lived in, a studio in the Cary Building in downtown Detroit, depicting her environment with a heavy palette. Thick layers of paint consumed whatever material she could get her hands on, including linoleum tile, newsprint, cardboard, and used paper. Her rough impressions recorded unconsidered objects and mundane street scenes.

In 1989, Aitken relocated to Brooklyn where she worked as an art therapist in the drug rehabilitation ward of Woodhull Hospital. She exhibited her work in several group shows in Brooklyn as well as Detroit. Her work from 2007–2010 shows a shift toward abstraction with with color fields of red, yellow or black, embedded with hardened crusts of paint, sand, or even lobster shells. She printed out dozens of copies of digital photographs depicting family and cherished locations such as the Brooklyn Botanical Garden, and manipulated these multiples using water, paint and the printer's own settings. Her investigative nature with materials never subsided.

Aitken was hesitant to ambitiously pursue attention for her work. She did not invite people into her studio until she knew them well. Rather than discuss her own art, she preferred to talk about the exhibits she frequented in New York. But that attitude changed along with her fight against what would be a terminal illness and she left wishes with her loved ones that her life's work be seen. Due to their belief in and dedication to Mary Ann, her work is now known and collected worldwide.

Posthumous solo shows include Cleopatra's, Brooklyn; What Pipeline, Detroit; Trinosophes, Detroit; and Urban Institute of Contemporary Art, Grand Rapids, MI. Group exhibitions include Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland, Tomorrow Gallery, NYC; and Marianne Boesky, NYC. 2016 exhibitions include Marlborough Chelsea, NYC; PSM Gallery, Berlin; and What Pipeline, Detroit. Her work is in the collections of Wayne State University, Grand Rapids Art Museum, and the Detroit Institute of Arts.

What Pipeline would like to thank Ed Fraga, artist and longtime friend of Mary Ann, for his assistance and support in realizing this exhibit; as well as her siblings Maureen and Joe, and the Aitken family, for allowing us to be a part of Mary Ann's legacy. Special thanks to Maureen for authoring an insightful piece about Mary Ann.

We would also like to thank Rebecca Mazzei of Trinosophes for collaborating on our first exhibition of Aitken's work in 2013, and her thoughtful words about Aitken (some of which are borrowed here).



Mary Ann Aitken
Untitled (Red Car)
oil on masonite
48 x 48 inches
circa 1985 -89



Mary Ann Aitken
Untitled (Gratiot and Broadway street scene)
oil on masonite
48 x 48 inches
circa 1985 - 89

Why Not Live
by Maureen Aitken

Before she passed from cancer, my sister Mary Ann gave my brother and me specific jobs. Our first task was to collect all of her art from Brooklyn and bring it to Detroit, where Ed Fraga, her longtime friend and designated curator, would store her work and contact galleries.

We opted to rent the biggest SUV, because, we thought then, that the only other vehicle (a moving truck) would be too big and unruly for the winter's drive. Mary Ann lived, like most New York artists, in a condo you could walk through if you turned sideways. It was full of books, pictures, gifts, and items from her travels. She rented studio time in Red Hook. She already stored a massive amount of work at our parents' house in Detroit. Some constructions and paintings were at the cottage. How much art could there be?

We were so wrong.

We found stacks of work above her bed, in the closet next to her bed, in the closet at the foot of her bed and under her bed. We found some artwork in the row of shelves that we thought might be art supplies. We had more art, in the first hour of looking, than we could manage. After two days of sorting her things and collecting work, my brother Joe and I found ourselves staring at a dainty set of doors with a hook latch above the archway to the kitchen.

“You think anything's in there?” Joe asked.

He opened the door, and out fell her entire yellow period. Painting after painting. Pictures next to her computer. By her computer we found drawings in her sketchpads. In boxes we found slides, photos, paintings on photos, things we thought might be damaged or might be art.

We hadn't even gone to Red Hook. There we found that artists had their own space for current work. My sister's paintings clung side-by-side, indifferently, carelessly, together, and then on top of the stack, as if tossed onto a pile, huge pieces, little ones, a mess of medium sized paintings. Many of them had multiple layers of paint. How they didn't crack under the weight of other work seemed miraculous to me.

I don't know why we were surprised. My sister lived her life with a wondrous intensity, as if always staring into the sun. Whenever our family got together, we all trailed behind Mary Ann. When my husband and I visited Mary Ann in Park Slope, she wanted to take us to a restaurant a few blocks away. Thirteen blocks later, our feet hurt, and she was saying, “Just one more block.”

We went to her favorite restaurant because she liked the dark beer. We went to the cottage where she could paint and have space. She made sure all of us were happy, and content, but there was no mistake that whatever happened, it was often Mary Ann's inspiration, design, and plan. We all preferred it that way.

When she left us, she left a massive hole. She knew this would happen. She worried about her departure ahead of us even then. One day she said, “See, everyone has someone. Mom has Dad.

You have Jeff and my cat has Joe. Joe has Lori.” Even the drive back from Park Slope felt designed to minimize the grief of her loss. Yes, we drove to my sister’s funeral, but we also drove her artwork to a new and promising life.

Mary Ann started painting in grade school, where a nun recognized and encouraged her talent. She studied art all the years she attended high school. We grew up in the City of Detroit, mesmerized by its urban wonder, the DIA, the neighborhood, the city streets at Christmas. When she attended Wayne State University, she found a refuge in The Cary Building, where she met her friend Ed and painted in seclusion. She studied art therapy and, when she couldn’t find an art therapy job in Detroit, she accepted one in New York. If a drug addict was convicted of a crime, and could chose detox over incarceration, that person probably met Mary Ann in an art therapy class. She loved working with patients.

It should have been no surprise that, when she got sick, and was given the final diagnosis of stage four cancer, she turned to art as her own therapy and refuge. Most days at the cottage, I would find her outside, on the east end, painting on the steps, using sand, shells, pieces of plastic and various parts from the beach. She would lean in, work for some time, then step back, tilt her head, and study the outcome, a bead of sweat on her forehead, her hands and shoes streaked with paint.

Mary Ann would work on several pieces at once, then one for some time, and then the next. From the point she was diagnosed, my sister made a decision. She stopped worrying about whether the art was successful or complete. All of her energy went to creating, to entering into that divine intensity of the piece, mining what the moment asked of her.

I never saw Mary Ann make the large pieces in this show. But when I imagine her in front of a wall of art, it makes me smile. It fits her personality. I can see her with the careful but large strokes, the exactness, standing on her tip toes, getting that corner. In the large paintings I see her: a big presence. Larger than life.

Someone said to me recently, “Isn’t it a shame that Mary Ann found so much attention for her art after she died.”

I don’t think so. When I think of how gallery shows like this one, I see her smiling. The attention started before she passed. At a gallery opening in Ann Arbor, she made sure to talk with the other artists in the show, the friends who came, and family. She showed everyone her own paintings, then talked about other work she liked. But was it her defining moment? No. Painting on a step at the side of the cottage, giving everything she had, a little bead of sweat on her forehead, studying, questioning, leaning in; that was her artistic life.

What came after, she organized and released to Ed. Ed found Alivia Zivich and Daniel Sperry. They found Mary Ann’s work, and all four of them together ushered her art into the world. Thanks to them, her paintings have been sold in Japan, Europe, and across America. “Too funny,” I can hear her say now, leaning her head back in that full way she had, as if laughing at the sky.

So how could Joe and I be surprised that art spilled out of all four corners of her life, and that she gave us, who missed her so, a project to keep us occupied, a reminder of the importance, not of the

big loss, but of the small curiosities that turned to bigger ideas? Here is a huge work. Here is a little piece. What do we do with this? How do we fit this? Where will this go? She knew it would keep us occupied. She knew finding pictures of ourselves as artwork would make us happy. She knew we would look at a painting and say, “Hey, that looks like ...” She knew our brother would say to some of her pieces, “If this is art, I’m picking up a paint brush and making some money.”

I wonder if Mary Ann would have been touched that her largest pieces would come together four years after her passing. Like every decision she made in her last years, it holds within it surprise, oddity, and wonder. In full circle, this later show embodies her early artistic drives. I hope she would think it is good to remember those years, so far away now that she might have seen them in a new way, admired their boldness, their courage. “Yes, yes. Why not?” I can hear her say. Why not celebrate. Why not live. If death must come, why not live. In the face of my sister’s diagnosis and physical decline, her art is a powerful message of rebellion knitted into the seams of her final, huge, and beautiful years.