

Art Agency, Partners

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The Hesse at the Messe



Eva Hesse, *No Title* (1960-61) © The Estate of Eva Hesse. Courtesy Hauser & Wirth and The Rachofsky Collection

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It was 2002, the Basel art fair. We waited at the front of the line at our secret entry (sorry, not sharing). In the third booth we saw a painting that stopped us in our tracks, one we wouldn't otherwise have known to look for—a self-portrait by Eva Hesse

made in 1961; a three-foot square; her face in anguish; her body cut off below the shoulders; with no arms articulated, as though she were bound.

The work appears to have been painted in a frenzy, and the palette was a grisaille range from pearl white to pale gray, except for teeny orange-red lips, or maybe it was a tongue. I remembered this painting had been in a Sotheby's auction several years earlier, when I was writing about the art market and had only just begun working as an art advisor, for Howard Rachofsky.

I was at the fair with Howard—by this point, we had been working together for about five years—and the collection was beginning to form in two different directions: one exploring non-objective art in the post-war period from the United States and Europe (which has since expanded to include Japan), and the other focusing on art that deals with identity and issues of self. Two years earlier we had wavered when it came to the last major sculpture of Hesse's to come to market (and we had been kicking ourselves ever since). So here, just two years later, we saw a very different way of representing the artist, and to develop a different strand of the collection.

She had to get away from the terror of seeing her inner self

This painting was so psychologically intense and truthful that it must have terrified the artist to look at this image of herself. The way I viewed her artistic trajectory (even if this was my own projection) was that after these brutally frank self-portraits of the early 1960s, of which she had made a few, she had to get further away from the terror of seeing her inner self and so moved artistically further into abstraction.

Hesse started making paintings with compartmentalized compositions (each compartment containing a body-related or abstract form) and eventually worked her way into making sculptures, some within the geometric language of Minimalism, and others with organic form, often sensual and usually suggestive of the female body, but always more at the abstract than the figurative/psychological end of the spectrum.

It couldn't have been ten minutes into the fair. We tried to buy the painting but it was already on hold, and as the day progressed, the dealer told us it was sold. I was bereft. This was one of those magical moments when you discover something so unexpected that it becomes a lynchpin acquisition (or almost acquisition) that opens the door to a fresh range of possible ways in which the collection could evolve. This was a loss, the door closing just as quickly as it had opened for a moment.

Two days later I was in Paris, where I met some art dealer friends for lunch. I was still so unsettled by missing out on this exceptional work that I did something I ordinarily never would—talk about a client's activities, in this case, the work that got away. As I described the painting in great detail, one of my friends said there was another painting very similar to it that had been in the inventory of another gallery. Right away we contacted the gallery to see if the work was still available. Sure enough, it was.

Back in New York a few days later, I went to the gallery to view the work and it was virtually the same painting—only better, in my opinion—with a dark purple background, her hair disintegrating into golden drips (Hesse, a Jewish brunette whose family fled Nazi Germany, had portrayed herself with the Aryan blonde straight locks she did not possess, in this case, a kind of deadly metallic gold), her upper body even more intensely bound, armless, her lips without separation, as though she could neither speak nor move. And so we bought it. And it cost about \$50,000 less than the one we had seen at Basel.

That cliché about when a door closes, a window opens, proved true. It was a loss that was truly meant to be.