

Marcia Hafif 1929–2018

We are devastated to announce the death of **Marcia Hafif (1929-2018)**. Hafif's six-decade career encompassed painting, drawing, film, photography, and sound installations; and the singular and uncompromising nature of her practice has drawn a dedicated audience in Europe and the United States since the early 1970s.



Marcia Hafif and Sandro Nitoglia, Rome, 1968 © Marcia Hafif; Courtesy of Fergus McCaffrey, New York

Marcia Woods was born in 1929 in Pomona, California. She studied at Pomona College from 1947 to 1951, marrying Herbert Hafif. After interning at Fergus Gallery in Los Angeles in 1961, she set out on what was to be a year-long stay in Florence, Italy. However, upon encountering Rome, she settled and spent the next eight years there, making her first mature work. She exhibited her "Pop-Minimal" paintings at her first solo show at Galleria La Salita in 1964 and was criticized for the "American size" of her paintings and their "American cold squalor – similar to that provoked by traffic signs hung on the wall of a driving school." Commenting later upon the response to her work, she wrote, "It never occurred to me that I could not succeed in painting on the basis of being a woman... Painting was painting, as math was math."

Returning to California in 1969 and leaving painting for a time to experiment with film, photography and sound installation, Hafif completed a MFA degree at the University of California at Irvine. In 1971, she moved to New York City to search out a return to painting at a time when the validity of painting was in doubt. Not finding a satisfactory path, she woke on the morning of January 1, 1972, to make her first *Pencil on Paper* drawing. Using short vertical marks, Hafif covered from top to bottom a 24 x 18 inch sheet of drawing paper. This method was later used in the development of her "color study" paintings. In *An Extended Gray Scale*, 1972–73, a work that occupied her for nearly a year, she painted gradations from black to white. Painting as many gradations she could distinguish, she completed a total of one hundred and six 22 x 22 inch oil paintings on standard cotton canvases.

In her influential *Artforum* essay "Beginning Again" from 1978, Hafif outlined what would become the operational basis of her career over the next four decades where she "examined the pigments used in making paintings in order to make visible the qualities and attributes of a specific pigment color in a specific medium and format." Further, she continued that painting became "a thing to be examined...color became opaque, seen for itself rather than being used to create an illusion or to express. Line was used for itself rather than to delineate shape or form. Personal touch was readmitted as the sign of the brush and the artist's hand was again visible. These are the elements of painting."

Exhibiting for more than eight years with Sonnabend Gallery in New York and Paris from 1974 to 1981, Hafif developed series of paintings that would become the basis of what came to be called *The Inventory* (*Mass Tone Paintings*, 1973; *Wall Paintings*, 1975; *Neutral Mix Paintings*, 1976; *Broken Color Paintings*, 1978; *Black Paintings*, 1979). Hafif continued to add to *The Inventory*, "building my project of examining the methods and materials of Western painting in the form of works of art." *The Inventory* grew into twenty-six different series of works including the *Splash Paintings*, 2009–10, and the *Shade Paintings*, 2013–18.

Hafif was part of a continuum of conceptually-minded and materially-engaged abstractionists that began with Alexander Rodchenko (1891–1956), continued through Władysław Strzemiński (1893–1952) and Josef Albers (1888–1976), onto Ellsworth Kelly (1923–2016), and peers Robert Irwin (1928), Robert Ryman (1930) and Gerhard Richter (1932).



Installation View of *An Extended Gray Scale* (1972-73) at Kunstmuseum St. Gallen, Switzerland, 2018.
© Marcia Hafif; Courtesy of Kunstmuseum St. Gallen, Switzerland

Hafif's work has been exhibited widely in Europe and the United States. Recent major exhibitions include *Marcia Hafif, The Inventory: Painting* at Laguna Art Museum, 2015; *Marcia Hafif: The Italian Paintings 1961–69* at Fergus McCaffrey, New York, 2016; and *Marcia Hafif, The Inventory: Paintings* at Kunstmuseum St. Gallen and Kunsthaus Baselland, Switzerland, 2017. A solo exhibition of Hafif's work is on view until April 25th at Galerie Rupert Walser, Munich; and forthcoming exhibitions include: *Marcia Hafif: Films (1977–99)* Lenbachhaus Munich, July to September, 2018; and *Marcia Hafif: A Place Apart*, Pomona College Museum of Art, September to December, 2018.

For the last three decades Hafif divided her time between Laguna Beach, California, and New York City. She is survived by her son Peter Nitoglia, her daughter-in-law Julia and four grandchildren, Olivia Giulietta, Alessandra, Sebastiano, and Soren.

Commenting upon Marcia Hafif's life and career:

"Marcia Hafif will be remembered as a very sensitive being. Her generosity, the quality of her thoughtfulness, the grace of her expression and her serenity made her a rare artist. May the artistic community at last do her pioneering work of the 1960s justice. May the painting she deployed since the 1970s find the place it deserves in our history."

- Christian Bernard, Former Director, Musée d'art Moderne and Contemporain, Genève

"Marcia Hafif was an extraordinary artist who was finally getting her due. Her career spanned from early body-inspired, erotic pop paintings, in which she developed a palette of saturated color, to minimalism and drawings made from serial mark making, to photography and finally to the glorious monochromes which occupied her mature career. Hafif was inspired by the colors of architecture and Renaissance frescoes in Italy, where she spent formative years in the early 1960s, as much as by the light and colors of the coastal atmosphere in Laguna, California, where she spent the last years of her life. She considered her monochromatic canvases conceptual objects as much as color studies, and her paintings emanated light and an incredible range of surface treatment. Hafif always found greater appreciation for her work in Europe, although, in recent years, her practice was brought back into public view by a younger generation of artists in New York and Los Angeles."

Angeles, including R.H. Quaytman, Laura Owens and many others, and the rigors of her painting practice are now widely recognized. Hafif's work had remarkable integrity and she was a person of great grace which was always reflected in her work."

- Connie Butler, Chief Curator, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles



Installation view of *Marcia Hafif: The Italian Paintings, 1961-1969*, Fergus McCaffrey, New York, 2016.
© Marcia Hafif; Courtesy of Fergus McCaffrey, New York

"*Marcia Hafif will always be known for her relentless investigation of color, with monochrome painting, always square and modestly scaled, as her preferred vehicle. But Marcia's true gift was patient and astute observation--not just to color and its wild potential, but to the weeds that appeared in her Laguna yard, which she photographed, and to language, which she marshaled into experimental texts and provocative essays. All of this, together, comprises an extraordinary life's work.*"

- Michael Ned Holte, Co-Director, School of Arts, California Institute of the Arts

"*Rolande Wäspe, Director of Kunstmuseum St. Gallen, and I had the wonderful opportunity to work with Marcia on her big retrospective that took place at both our institutions in the Autumn of 2017. We are shocked by her passing. When I think of her work, I am fortunate, optimistic and thankful – knowing that they possess the capacity to change people who breath them in. Marcia's work remains an invitation to everyone, from all generations, whether they are familiar with art or not, to strengthen themselves by being in their presence.*"

- Ines Goldbach, Director Kunsthau Baselland

"*Marcia Hafif was a painter; a strong and consistent radical-painter, a monochromatic painter (both terms she didn't particularly like). But she was more than a painter too; a writer, a film maker, a photographer; an artist in the richest and most complicated meaning of the term. She was an artist who hung, arranged, and choreographed her shows more precisely and spatially than any other painter of her generation. She was an artist who in each situation combined her separate works to create a complicated single place that doubled and skewed their individual powers. She was a careful maker who built strangely moving worlds out of those juxtapositions of her seemingly silent disparate works.*

Marcia was for 60 years a strong, always powerful, always surprising, and sometimes annoying artist. She was the real thing."

- Richard Nonas

“For four years, I’ve worked closely with Marcia Hafif to plan an exhibition that highlights her intimate drawing practice, “Marcia Hafif: A Place Apart.” This represents the first exhibition of her drawings, and the first at her alma mater, Pomona College, Claremont, California. Bringing her back to campus on multiple occasions over the last few months meant so much to her and to me to see her reflect back on the fullness of her life in Claremont. It was an immense pleasure to spend numerous sun-filled days at her beautiful home in Laguna Beach planning our exhibition and book. We collaborated at every step of the process, and the opportunity to talk in-depth about her work, art, and so many wide-ranging topics was an experience I will never forget. It has been an honor to work so closely with an artist in such command of her vision for her artwork, her life, and her legacy.”

- Rebecca McGrew, Senior Curator, Pomona College Museum of Art

“I am very sad that Marcia has passed. I personally think we have lost one of the greatest American painters of the last 80 years. I think of her with great love.”

- Hubert Winter, Galerie Hubert Winter, Vienna

“Christian Bernard and I met Marcia in 1999 at MAMCO. The gallery owner Josselyne Naef introduced us. This introduction secured the fate of her Roman works (1961–1969) which had remained in Europe after her return to California. The unprecedented study of this important corpus, led to an exhibition in 2001 and a catalogue raisonne in 2010, forging a relationship of mutual affection along the way. Marcia was seductive; a perfect traveling companion, a demanding artist, determined and passionate, still full of projects. I will miss her.”

- Sophie Costes, Conservateur de la collection, Musée d’art Moderne and Contemporain,
Genève

“As is common with so many of the great American artists of her generation, Marcia’s work found favor first in Europe. Her “Italian Paintings, 1961–69” exhibition in New York in 2016 provoked deep institutional soul-searching as to how such an important body of work by an American artist had remained unrecognized for so long. There is so much more for America to come to terms with. I will miss Marcia’s gentle laugh and steely certainty.”

- Fergus McCaffrey, Fergus McCaffrey, New York & Tokyo