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AT 99 DENTON'S TONI LASELLE IS THE OLDEST LIVING VETERAN OF THE ARTISTIC REVOLUTION THAT RESHAPED OUR WORLD.

AUGUST 2001 | *by* MICHAEL ENNIS

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“I was my family’s seventh child, the first one born in the twentieth century,” says Dorothy Antoinette “Toni” LaSelle, the venerable Denton artist who will be one hundred years old in November.

Though LaSelle stopped painting about a decade ago, her rigorous yet poetic geometric abstractions continue to surprise if not shock, as evidenced by the effect her recent one-person show at Dallas' Barry Whistler Gallery had on second-generation postmoderns long inured to animal corpses floating in formaldehyde but apparently startled by the austere purity of old-fashioned modern art. Failing eyesight having done little to diminish her laserlike acuity and fierce independence, LaSelle still stands as a towering eminence in our cultural landscape: Texas' first true modern, the oldest living veteran of the artistic revolution that reshaped our world. That LaSelle's life should so neatly span the past century is only fitting for a story that could be a panoramic, Michener-esque novel titled "The Moderns," about the improbable entwining of a small-town girl's life with personalities and events at the center of the twentieth century's defining aesthetic. Born in the prosperous farming town of Beatrice, Nebraska, LaSelle entered a world whose generational markers were conflicts we now regard as ancient history: Her father's brother had

fought in the Civil War, and her eldest brother ran off to enlist in the Spanish-American War just three years before she was born. The family owned a large pasture along the Big Blue River, where they kept bees and raised dairy cattle. “The rhythms of nature,” LaSelle recalls, “were a very mysterious and wonderful kind of reality to grow up around.”

LaSelle also grew up around art. “I can still remember my first art lesson in the first grade,” she says; her two sisters were china painters and dress designers while her aunt, “one of two town artists,” taught her to paint watercolors. But LaSelle yearned for something beyond Beatrice; she pored over art books in the town library and regularly read the literary supplement to the London *Times*: “I was dying to see if I could catch on to what they were talking about.” When LaSelle was sixteen, Chicago sculptor Lorado Taft came to Beatrice to lecture and publicly sculpt a clay bust. Afterward, LaSelle went home in utter despair. “I put my head in a pillow so my mother wouldn’t hear me and cried for an hour,” she says. “I cried in frustration, because after

seeing what this man could do, I realized how ignorant I was.”

LaSelle became a voracious student at Nebraska Wesleyan University, in nearby Lincoln, where she majored in English and studied zoology, geology, and psychology in addition to her literature and art courses. But her real awakening came during her senior year with the arrival of an art teacher who had seen the sensational 1913 New York Armory Show, the sprawling introduction to European modernism that had rattled the foundations of American culture. “She woke us up to the Post-Impressionists—Cézanne, Gauguin, and van Gogh,” LaSelle says. “The opening of the modern movement from 1890 on. There it was, just like a miracle, right there in the middle of the Middle West.”

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Working odd jobs to support herself, LaSelle went on to graduate school at the University of Chicago, where she studied the

new imagist poetry, audited modern-dance classes, and made regular weekend visits to the Art Institute of Chicago (which had a roomful of Monets and a small Picasso). Aware of the influence of African and Oceanic art on European modernism, she wrote her thesis on the New Guinea masks in Chicago's Field Museum. After receiving her master of arts degree in 1926, LaSelle made her first trip to Europe, heading south from Paris through Italy, recording in her sketchbook fluent little studies of towns, cathedrals, and peasants, always searching for the geometric structure beneath everyday appearances. In the fall of 1927, leaving Florence's Uffizi Gallery, she ran into a parade of black-shirted men that culminated in a harangue by Benito Mussolini, a chilling prelude to the Fascist repression that would expatriate so many of the continent's leading artists.

LaSelle came home to look for a job. At the University of Chicago's placement bureau, she ran into a recruiter searching for someone to teach art at a small college that would later become the Texas State College for Women (now Texas

Woman's University) for the 1928 summer session. Arriving at the Denton campus, LaSelle found a "fairly well-developed, surprising art department"; she was offered a full-time position when the summer ended and decided to stay. At the time, Texas art was about to enter one of its most fertile periods, an explosion of sophisticated, modernist-inflected representational art—much of it portraying the brutal impact of blowing dust and falling cotton prices on rural Texas—led by a group of painters known as the Dallas Nine. "I went to all their parties and whoop-de-dos," LaSelle recalls with girlish enthusiasm. "It was great." But despite the personal friendships, LaSelle, whose work at the time was largely figurative abstraction, remained a school of one, still searching for something beyond.

In the early thirties LaSelle took a one-year sabbatical to study at the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco. Later in the decade, working with architects O'Neil Ford and Arch Swank, she supervised the design of the stained-glass windows for the Denton campus' Little Chapel in

the Woods, a landmark Texas building that inaugurated Ford's signature synthesis of lean modern forms and rich natural materials. While working on the project, LaSelle noticed Ford and Swank perusing a book by the Hungarian-born painter and photographer László Moholy-Nagy, a principal author of the curriculum at the Bauhaus, the German design school that has become almost synonymous with twentieth-century style; when the Nazis shut down the Bauhaus in 1933, Moholy-Nagy fled Germany and settled in Chicago, where he founded the New Bauhaus (later renamed the Institute of Design).

After reading Moholy-Nagy, whom she found "electrifying," LaSelle arranged for him to lecture at the Texas State College for Women in the spring of 1942. "The lecture seemed to wake quite a few people up," she says. That summer she brought Moholy-Nagy back to the college for a series of talks and later attended summer classes in Chicago at the Institute of Design. She made an impression there; Moholy-Nagy's wife confided to LaSelle that her husband had hoped to offer her a teaching

position at the Institute of Design but his budget wouldn't permit it. Had the job materialized, it would have put LaSelle at the hot center of a revolution in American taste: In the late forties the Institute of Design merged into the Illinois Institute of Technology (where Moholy-Nagy joined former Bauhaus director Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, the father of the International style of architecture) and brought the Bauhaus to your house, defining the look of post-war America from its typefaces to its toasters to its office towers.

Despite her enthusiasm for Moholy-Nagy's futuristic vision, LaSelle realized it wasn't hers. "Moholy represented the machine age, the space age," she says; she felt a much closer affinity with another European émigré. Although she had never met Hans Hofmann, his work and theories had fascinated her ever since she first heard about him, during her San Francisco sabbatical. Hofmann was a German painter who had observed the genesis of Cubism in Paris during the first decade of the century and in 1915 had opened his own school in Munich, where he stressed that

color itself could convey the deepest emotions. After leaving his homeland in 1930, Hofmann eventually settled in New York, where he mentored the American generation that would take the initiative in modern painting away from Europe in the fifties. For years LaSelle had planned a pilgrimage, but a strange litany of family crises and professional exigencies had always intervened; finally, in the summer of 1944, she enrolled in Hofmann's summer school in Provincetown, Massachusetts.

When LaSelle arrived in Provincetown, she had already tentatively entered the rarefied realm of nonobjective art. (A cubist might fracture a violin into a welter of geometric fragments without abandoning some semblance of the original object; a nonobjective painter, like Mondrian, would use abstract forms that no longer had any relationship to the material world.) Listening to "Hof's" theories about the "push-pull" of warm and cool colors, following the master around as he critiqued each of his student's work, LaSelle arrived at a mature style as assured and

polished as that of any American nonobjective artist of the time—and far less derivative of Mondrian's. A small, untitled oil-on-board in the Barry Whistler Gallery show, painted in 1947, was a finished study for the larger *Puritan*, now in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Working with a palette limited largely to green, black, and white and a minimalist vocabulary of triangles and rectangles, LaSelle juggled her forms into an intricate balance of classical serenity and expressive animation; her entirely original use of white as a sort of limitless negative space evoked the vast horizons of the sea as well as the prairie where she grew up.

In 1950 LaSelle got her first and only one-person show in New York, at the Rose Fried Gallery, on the heels of an exhibit by the French modern master Robert Delaunay. But the American avant-garde was an exclusive men's club, and within a few years testosterone-rich Abstract Expressionists like Jackson Pollock dominated the scene. "Women," LaSelle dryly notes, "are not often credited with innovations." She continued to return religiously to Provincetown

(she lived there full-time in the eighties) and remained a powerful voice in Texas, both as an artist and a lecturer; Hofmann himself wrote the catalog introduction for a major LaSelle exhibition at the Fort Worth Art Museum (now the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth) in 1959.

LaSelle's saga ends with the triumph of modernism, not only among the few who proselytized for it but also among the many who, though they might still pass a Mondrian and mutter, "I could do that," daily demand the progeny of modernist design theories in countless things they watch, listen to, drive, sit on, and reside in (try marketing an MP3 player that looks like a rococo music box). Nowhere is that disconnect more pronounced than in Texas, where arts cognoscenti and cultural conservatives alike cherish the notion that our state's nostalgic mythos was a lethal barrier to an ideology as iconoclastic as modernism; in most cultural histories, the state seems to leap from Victorian to postmodern in a single bound.

But the modernist chapter is

actually long and lively, beginning with those Prairie-style homes of the teens and twenties—so venerated by preservationists from Dallas to El Paso—which represent Frank Lloyd Wright’s then-radical emphasis on pared-down lines and mass production. Texas began to concertedly market itself as distinctly Texan at the 1936 Centennial Exposition in Dallas, staged in a huge new complex of buildings in the stylishly moderne art deco style. LaSelle herself was at the center of a vital enclave of advanced artists in Denton in the late forties; her TWU colleague Carlotta Corpron’s innovative abstract photographs were deeply influenced by the Moholy-Nagy visit, and Denton-born nonobjective painter Myron Stout also owed LaSelle a significant debt. Despite the oft-cited organized opposition to “Commie” modernism in Dallas in the mid-fifties (similar protests took place in every major American city at the height of the red scare), by 1959 the city was busting its buttons over Wright’s newly completed Dallas Theater Center, a work as aggressively modern as his Guggenheim Museum in New York. Houston, where abstract painter

Robert Preusser (who also studied with Moholy-Nagy) led the way, came under the sway of Mies's disciple Philip Johnson in the fifties (Mies himself designed the Museum of Fine Arts' Cullinan Hall in the middle of the decade); by the sixties the city's business district was so relentlessly modernist that it served as ground zero for the inevitable reaction, postmodernism, in the mid-seventies.

Houston's Rothko Chapel, Louis Kahn's Kimbell Art Museum, Donald Judd's Chinati Foundation—the list of signal modernist monuments goes on and on. LaSelle's centennial, coming at a time when we can dispassionately accept “modern” as the period style of the preceding century, invites a revisionist theory about Texas and modernism in the broadest cultural sense: Maybe our retro-garde collective myth, largely coined from the thirties through the fifties by the Webb-Dobie-Bedichek literary troika and their acolytes, was more of a reaction against, rather than an obstacle to, Texas' surprisingly avid embrace of the new.

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