

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Widewalls
Why We Should Pay Attention to Hungarian Artist Ilona Keseru
Phillip Barcio
4 December 2018

WIDEWALLS

Why We Should Pay Attention to Hungarian Artist Ilona Keseru



Stephen Friedman Gallery

Widewalls

Why We Should Pay Attention to Hungarian Artist Ilona Keserü

Phillip Barcio

4 December 2018



It is her love of art that makes Ilona Keserü such a successful artist. It is her appreciation for the art of others, and the art of other times, that helped her become one of the greatest artists of our time. Keserü is sometimes so successful in expressing the underlying feelings and structures of reality that she could be called a realist, even though a comment like that does not make sense, because her work is so purely and elegantly abstract.

Maybe what I am saying is that her work embodies every aspect of nature and the physical universe; she sees beyond the surface of things, and brings the underlying truths to bear. Take for example her piece *Space Taking Shape* (1972). The work hangs on the wall but is sculptural. Its wooden frame has been carved into a series of pulsating, horizontal waves. Covered in linoleum and canvas, the frame was then painted with a rainbow swarm of hexagons, approximating an undulating, honeycomb deluge of color. The full spectacle of nature is present in this one object: the colors of the spectrum; the hidden geometry of the biosphere; the patterns and structures of the wind and water; biomorphic chaos evolving into architectonic logic over the course of time and space.

It is among the oddest and least expected artworks I have ever seen, but the second I saw it I felt I was in the presence of family – a distant, ancient, universal aesthetic relative. I understand her work perhaps because it is an expression of something Keserü understands that is also relevant to me; something happy and satisfactory and logical; something she noticed through observation then translated into her own language, a language that proves even though there are billions of us, there is only one art.

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Widewalls

Why We Should Pay Attention to Hungarian Artist Ilona Keseru

Phillip Barcio

4 December 2018



Left: Ilona Keserü – Space Taking Shape, 1972. Oil on canvas-backed linoleum on shaped wooden frame. 70 9/10 × 43 3/10 × 4 9/10 in; 180 × 110 × 12.5 cm. Courtesy the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London / Right: Ilona Keserü – June Variation E, 1976. Silkscreen print on paper. 37 4/5 × 28 in; 96 × 71 cm. Courtesy the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London

Forever Free

Keserü was born in Pécs, Hungary, in 1933. She sketched and painted compulsively as a child, but her ability to make art was greatly infringed by the circumstances of where and when she happened to live. Hungary joined the Axis powers in World War II. Behind Nazi lines there was no freedom, little joy, and limited time and supplies for things of the imagination. Keserü recalls during this time out of desperation painting on toilet paper. Yet she also once said:

I have been free all my life. In the end, for those who dedicate themselves to art, freedom is the starting point.

When her town was liberated by the Russians, she and some friends scrounged the rubble for cardboard and pencils, anything they could find that would let them make art. That passion and dedication showed through in the quality of her work. As the new Soviet regime established its presence, Keserü benefitted from the official search for new, young Hungarian talent. She was given the chance to study art in school, and was even scouted by Ferenc Martyn, who had spent years in Paris as part of the Abstraction Creation Group. Martyn had just opened a new school, and he invited Keserü to join it. She credits him for teaching her not only how to see the world through the eyes of an artist, but to dedicate herself to the work it takes to become a master.

Ironically, Martyn did not teach Keserü how to paint abstractly. Quite the opposite. He taught her instead how to observe the real world. She has recalled him making her sit and look out the window at the scenes outside. She painted the real world that she saw from that perspective, but not in a

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Widewalls

Why We Should Pay Attention to Hungarian Artist Ilona Keseru

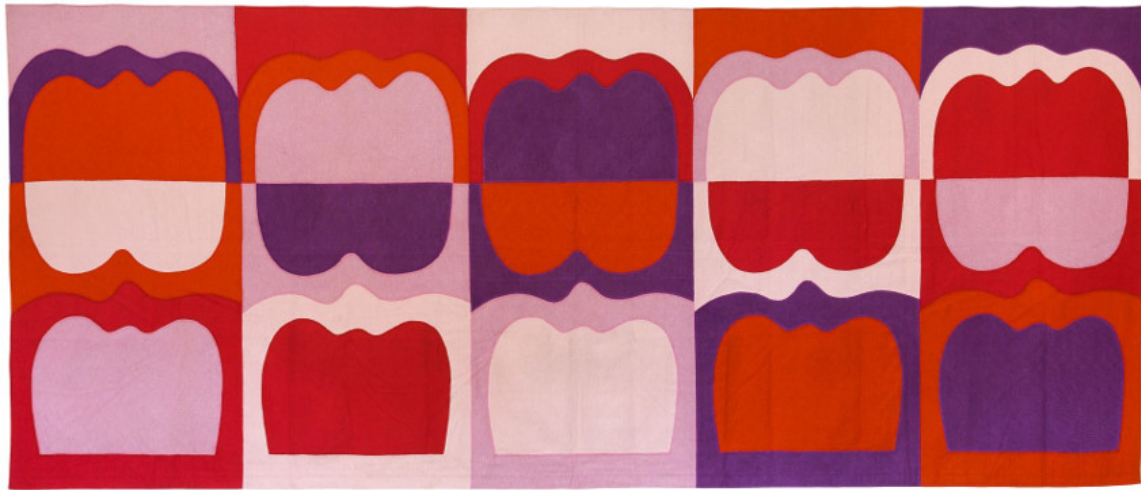
Phillip Barcio

4 December 2018

precise way. Rather, she translated the different components of the world that she could see in a way that reveals both what is visible and what is hidden.

The paintings and sculptures Keserü has been making since are defined by color, form and structure. They harken back to this early lesson. They are not images of trees, nor flowers, nor landscapes, nor buildings, nor people. And yet they are images of those things in a way. They convey the structure of the human body; the rhythm of the forest; the explosion of spring colors.

One of her most famous works is a tapestry called Wall Hanging with Tombstone Forms (1969). It takes as its basis a common heart-shaped tombstone motif. Keserü repeats the form in a pattern, each tombstone reflecting its own image. She employs color, shape and pattern in a harmonious and comforting way, a peaceful portrayal of the harshest limitations of life.



Ilona Keserü – Wall-Hanging with Tombstone Forms (Tapestry), 1969. Stitching on chemically dyed linen. 61 3/8 x 145 5/8 inches, 156 x 370 cm. Courtesy the artist, Elizabeth Dee New York and Kisterem Budapest

Nothing is Missing

Keserü has long been held in high esteem in her native Hungary. Her work has been exhibited extensively there, in solo exhibitions in the most important museums. Yet only recently has the rest of the world caught on. She was included in recent large-scale retrospectives of 1960s and 70s Hungarian vanguard art in New York and London recently.

And in December 2018, her Wall-Hanging with Tombstone Forms will share gallery space at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York with the works of the most important names in modern and contemporary abstract art, in Epic Abstraction: Pollock to Herrera, a show of more than 50 large-scale abstract works. This show is a fitting environment in which to introduce mass audiences to what Keserü does. She talks often about the importance of going to see the works of other artists. She tells her students:

Art is an immense, ever-moving stream, a living club to which you can belong to as an artist if you are lucky enough. You can build a relationship freely with the other members, whether they are alive or not. Because the works are alive!

Viewers who see her work there among the works of her most accomplished contemporaries will see that nothing is missing—everything in the universe is there, if you just look. And they will hopefully also feel inspired by being in the actual presence of the work – not seeing it online or in a

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Widewalls

Why We Should Pay Attention to Hungarian Artist Ilona Keseru

Phillip Barcio

4 December 2018

book, but being there with it. When Keserü is successful, even though nothing is missing, we feel compelled to go out and add to what she has done, to follow her example and extend the one universal ever-moving stream of art.

Ilona Keserü – solo show at Stephen Friedman Gallery, installation view. Photo courtesy Stephen Friedman Gallery. All images used for illustrative purposes only.