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View of “Jeanne Reynal,” 2021. Photo: Jenny Gorman.

Jeanne Reynal
ERIC FIRESTONE GALLERY | NEW YORK

In 1958, Clement Greenberg penned a short essay that posited aesthetic parallels between Byzantine art and modernism. Despite their differences, he said, these movements were united by an emphatic pictorialism, their transcendent qualities tied up with a shared repudiation of illusionism. In this text, the critic cited the work of certain painters, such as Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, and Mark Rothko, as examples. “This new kind of modernist picture,” Greenberg wrote, “like the Byzantine gold and glass mosaic, comes forward to fill the space between itself and the spectator with its radiance.”

Mention of Jeanne Reynal (1903–1983), a first-generation New York School artist who created modernist mosaic works using Byzantine techniques, might have fortified Greenberg’s essay, supplying structural links in addition to aesthetic ones. Reynal’s consummately luminous, endlessly innovative objects—from wall-mounted panels with sprays of semiprecious stones to totems wrapped in tesserae (the square tiles that typically comprise mosaics)—were on view at Eric Firestone Gallery in “Mosaic Is Light: Work by Jeanne Reynal, 1940–1970.” Though the artist exhibited with the Betty Parsons Gallery and had three solo shows at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in her lifetime, this survey, spread across two floors, was the first substantial presentation of her art in five decades.

The exhibition featured only four of Reynal’s works from the 1940s, one of which was a squat table that the artist made in collaboration with sculptor Isamu Noguchi. She had spent the bulk of the preceding decade as an apprentice to Russian mosaicist Boris Anrep in Paris, then in 1940 moved to California, where she began to experiment independently. Equation #2, 1940, a small concrete slab with tesserae the color of flint and flax in a flat linear design, exemplifies that period’s work, which was influenced by the avant-garde painting that she encountered in Paris.

In 1946 Reynal returned to her native New York. Her home, which housed a robust avant-garde art collection, became a gathering place for Surrealists and Abstract Expressionists alike. She wanted to work more intuitively, so she stopped preplanning her mosaics with drawings and instead started sprinkling tesserae atop sketches made directly onto a wet cement base, pressing in the tiles at a bias so that they shimmered. The same techniques were used by Byzantine artists but fell out of favor during the Renaissance: a period when, as Reynal would lament in her writings, mosaics devolved into copies of naturalistic painting.

Of course, Reynal never fully divested herself from painting—she developed her art in dialogue with it. Her pieces from the early 1950s—large wall-mounted panels featuring biomorphic forms in cool grays and moody browns—bear resemblance to mature paintings by her friend Arshile Gorky. Yet her use of Venetian smalti—brilliant glass tesserae that she embedded to articulate dramatic peaks and troughs of pigmented cement—generates a luminous, flickering quality particular to ancient mosaics. With titles such as Icarus Returned, 1951, these sober works bear an almost mythical weight.

Reynal said that she formed a love of color in part because of her marriage to painter Thomas Sills. Vibrant works with broadly dispersed, allover smalti feel airier, while nterspersed bits of shell and large wedges of mother-of-pearl, acquired from a button maker, subtly invoke folk traditions such as the use of memory ware and pique assiette. Dimensionality, too, became amplified in Reynal's art from the late 1950s and the 1960s. Two wall-mounted monochromes from 1959—a winking yellow diamond (Rain Shadow) and a red hexagon (Songs of the Tewa)—called to mind the shaped canvases Minimalists were making at the time. A group of sculptural disks from 1963, perched atop plinths and loosely embedded with smalti and shells on both sides, push mosaic art further away from its wall-bound habitude, despite having been regrettably clumped together along the gallery's back wall.

A copse of Reynal's abstracted personages—such as Young Woman, 1970, and The Pangolin, 1971—which were inspired by her travels to Africa with Sills, dazzled with particular force. The freestanding semifigurative totems, some stretching more than ten feet tall, are packed tight with irregularly set tesserae in primary colors or painted with gold leaf, squares of obsidian, and variously sized pieces of nacreous shell. These mature, self-possessed sculptures blazed with their own interior light, the sun a mere afterthought.

— Cassie Packard