

Artist Resources – Eva Hesse (American, 1936-70)

[Eva Hesse Archives, Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College](#)

[Hesse at Hauser & Wirth](#)

“I think art is a total thing. A total person giving a contribution,” Hesse told *Artforum* in the final year of her life. In [an interview originally published in 1970](#). “It is an essence, a soul, and that’s what it’s about ... In my inner soul art and life are inseparable.”

Friends and curators discuss the Guggenheim’s 1972 Memorial Exhibition in audio interviews conducted in [1972](#) and [1977](#).

In 1983, *Art in America* published [an intimate profile of Hesse](#) through excerpts of diaries, notebooks, sketches, student essays, and letters written between 1955 and 1970. In one of her final entries, she writes: “My life never had anything normal or in the center. It was always extremes; and in the forms that I use in my work is contradiction . . . order vs. chaos, huge vs. small, stringy vs. mass.”

[SF MoMA](#) honored Hesse with a major survey of her paintings, drawings, and sculpture in 2002, bringing together over 150 objects. Watch videos about [conserving her sculptures](#), an interview with [former studio assistant, Doug Jones](#), and reflections from Hesse notions of [permanence in art and life](#).



Hesse ca. 1959
Photograph: Stephen Korbet

[The Tate Modern](#) also celebrated Hesse’s prolific creativity and consistent relevance with a 2002 retrospective, bringing together early drawings with her most famous late work. Tour the galleries in a [digital exhibition guide](#) and dive deeper with [accompanying resources](#). Her sister, Helen Charash also [sat down with the museum](#) to talk about Hesse’s life and work.

In 2011, [The Brooklyn Museum](#) brought together nineteen paintings never before seen in public, fondly referred to as Hesse’s “spectre” paintings, made when she was just twenty-four.

In 2013, [Hamburger Kunsthalle](#) brought the first major survey Hesse’s work to her city of birth, Hamburg, Germany, which she fled in 1938.

[Converging Lines: Eva Hesse and Sol LeWitt](#), presented by the Cleveland Art Museum in 2016, honored the close artistic and personal friendship between the two American artists, who met in New York in the 1950s.

The PBS series *American Masters* dedicated [an episode in 2018 to Hesse’s personal life and career](#), tracing her early entry into the art world through painting and then sculpture, through interviews with family and friends, and readings from her diaries. “I would like the work to be non-work. To find its way beyond preconceptions. To go beyond what I know, and can know. It is something. It is nothing.”



Hesse in her New York studio, 1965

Eva Hesse (American, 1936-70)

Compass, 1967

Sculp-metal, steel, wood

Private Collection; L2023:74.6

Born to a Jewish family in Germany at the eve of World War II, Eva Hesse came to the United States at the age of three and endured a tumultuous childhood. After graduating from Yale University, Hesse moved to New York and became close to the emerging artists Sol LeWitt (1928-2007) and Donald Judd (1928-1994), who represented new strains of Minimal and Conceptual Art. Like the Minimalists, Hesse was interested in grid structures, repetition of visual motifs, modulation, and investigating the new industrial materials of latex and plastic. However, unlike many of the Minimalists, such as Judd, her work was both handmade and came mostly from her own hand, although she did have a studio assistant who helped create some of her best-known pieces. Today Hesse is often regarded as one of the principal artists whose work came to be called “Post-Minimalism” in the later 1960s.

Compass was produced in 1967, when Hesse often focused on round shapes and rectangular grids in both her drawing and sculpture practice. As the artist said at this time: “What makes a tight circle or a tight little square box more of an intellectual statement than something done emotionally, I don’t know. Art is an essence, a center.”

On view August 16 – November 19, 2023





Eva Hesse (American, 1936-70)
No title, ca. 1960
Oil on canvas

Private Collection; L2020:36.2

In an exhibition career that lasted only a decade before she died at the age of 34 from a brain tumor, Eva Hesse changed the landscape of contemporary art. The German-born multi-media artist studied painting at Yale under the watchful eye of German color-theorist Josef Albers. She first received critical recognition in New York in 1961 with a series of oil paintings alternating between figurative and abstract forms. In works such as this one, from around 1960, Hesse offers an powerful version of abstract painting that is simultaneously structured and improvisational, intense yet subdued.

Ultimately Hesse would become renowned as a sculptor, but her early paintings are attracting increasing attention and admiration for their psychological depth and intuitive rebellion against academic definitions and critical restrictions. Confronting a traumatic childhood through creativity, in 1960 she reflected: “Only painting can now see me through and I must see it through. It is totally interdependent with my entire being. It is source of my goals, ambitions, satisfactions and frustrations. It is what I have found through which I can express myself, my growth—and channel my development... Within its scope I can develop strength and conviction.”

On view January 27 – May 2, 2021

Eva Hesse (American, 1936-70)

No title, ca. 1962

Oil on canvas

Collection of Allison and Larry Berg; L2020:39.1

Born in Hamburg, Germany, Eva Hesse fled the Nazi occupation with her sister in 1938 and immigrated to New York in 1939 after reuniting with her parents. After attending the Pratt Institute, Cooper Union, and Yale in the late 1950s, Hesse quickly gained critical recognition for her paintings. Her career reached new heights following a sojourn in Germany, where she began experimenting with latex and fiberglass in dynamic sculptural constructions. In the five years prior to her untimely passing at the age of thirty-four, Hesse ushered in a new era of contemporary sculpture for which she is still revered.

In her paintings, spontaneity merges with intentionality as biomorphic forms drift in nebulous space, bonded by an expressive use of color. In a diary entry from 1960, Hesse reflected: "I will paint against every rule I or others have invisibly placed...I should like to achieve free, spontaneous painting delineating a powerful, strong structured image. One must be possible with the other. A difficult problem in itself, but one which I shall achieve."

On view June 25 – September 27, 2020

