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Mary Lovelace O'Neal
Photo: Audrey Trinnaman

MARY LOVELACE O'NEAL, PAINTER WHO DEFIED THE BOUNDS OF ABSTRACTION, DIES AT 84

By Richard Whiddington

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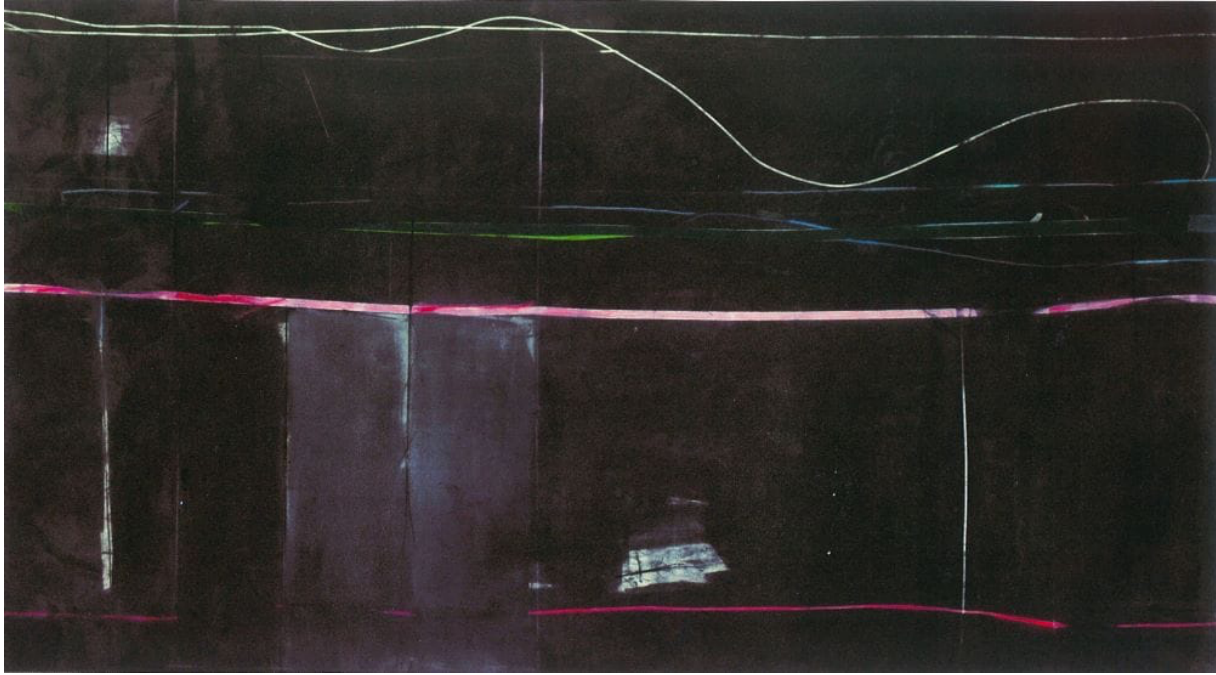
The American painter Mary Lovelace O'Neal, who was active in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s before eventually winning acclaim for abstract works that defy categorization, died in Mérida, Mexico, on Sunday. She was 84. Her death was confirmed by her galleries, Jenkins Johnson and Marianne Boesky, on Wednesday.

In a career spanning more than 50 years, Lovelace O'Neal produced energetic, large-scale paintings whose subjects are blurred among layers of rolled and dripped paint. As a young artist living in New York in the 1960s, she forged a practice that was critiqued by both the Black Arts Movement and the city's avant-garde. But she was determined to chart her own course, and her art would eventually enter the collections of museums across the United States.

Lovelace O'Neal married the playwright John O'Neal in 1965, and their home became a hub for Black intellectuals, some of whom argued that her work should be more explicit in its social politics.

BOESKY GALLERY

A pivotal moment arrived for her in the aisle of a Lower Manhattan paint shop, where she spied a mound of black pigment slowly pooling on the floor through a hole in a paper bag. She lugged four bags of lampblack powder back to her Columbia studio. Soon, she was mixing the black pigment in a bowl and applying it to unstretched, unprimed canvases before working back across their surfaces with lines of color. Her “Lampblack” series was born.



Mary Lovelace O'Neal, *Black Glitter Nights* (1970s).
Artwork © Mary Lovelace O'Neal. Courtesy Mnuchin Gallery, New York

The “Lampblack” paintings “engage with the dialogues around flatness then exemplified by the soak-staining methods of the Color Field paintings,” Lovelace O’Neal told the New York Times in a 2020 interview. “The black pigment paintings were as black as they could be. They can also be seen as my response to my friends in the Black Arts Movement.”

Encasing the fibers of her canvases in black pigment would become a hallmark of Lovelace O’Neal’s paintings in the coming years. After moving to the Bay Area in the 1970s, where she taught widely, she began a series called “Whales Fucking,” which was inspired by the sight of whales mating in a San Francisco aquarium and others she’d seen swimming in the bay while strolling on the beach.

With titles such as *Toni’s Rose Petals* (1981), *Thelonious Searching Those Familiar Keys* (ca. 1980), and *It takes Three* (1981–82), Lovelace O’Neal tried to capture not the whales themselves, but rather their energy and the water they displaced while moving (and mating) in the ocean.

After decades of being something of a painter’s painter, it was these explosive works that introduced Lovelace O’Neal to a wider audience in the 21st century. Works from the “Whales Fucking” series appeared in 2020 shows at Mnuchin Gallery in New York and the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco. *Blue Whale a.k.a. #12* (1983) was selected for the Whitney Biennial in 2024.

BOESKY GALLERY

Born in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1942, Lovelace O'Neal grew up largely in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, where her father, Ariel Lovelace, was the chair of the art department at what is today the University of Arkansas. Supportive of his child's artistic inclinations, he encouraged her to take high school art classes. In 1960, she enrolled at Howard University, where she helped form a non-violent student group protesting racism and segregation in Washington, D.C. She studied under the artist David Driskell, traveling across the U.S. to participate in marches, protests, and voting drives.



Mary Lovelace O'Neal, *Thelonius Searching Those Familiar Keys* (1980s).
(c) Mary Lovelace O'Neal. Photo: Tom Powel Imaging, courtesy of Mnuchin Gallery, New York.

In the early 1950s, Driskell had received a scholarship to attend Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine and years later encouraged his student to do likewise. In later interviews, Lovelace O'Neal would describe her summer in the Northeast as a catalyst, a time when she had the rare freedom to do nothing but paint. Skowhegan was also where she first encountered lampblack pigment, through the demonstration of a visiting sculptor who worked alongside a brewing pot of the pigment. After that show-and-tell was over, she kept the leftover material for herself.

She would become a longtime instructor, teaching at the San Francisco Art Institute, the California College of the Arts, Humboldt State University in Arcata, California, and the University of California, Berkeley, where, in 1985, she became the first Black woman granted tenure in its art department.

After retiring from teaching in 2006, Lovelace O'Neal spent much of her time in Mérida, alongside her second husband, Patricio Moreno Toro, a Chilean-American artist she met in Morocco in 1984. Reflecting on her winding career and broad range of influences in 2021, Lovelace O'Neal detailed the long frustration she had about others attempting to categorize her art.

BOESKY GALLERY

“My art comes from my observation of what’s around. The way I feel about abstraction and how I feel about me within abstraction at this point is really just so specifically mine,” she told the writer and curator Folasade Ologundudu for [Artnet News](#). “It’s not like I have this overwhelming interest in Abstract Expressionism; it just happens to be how I work.”



Mary Lovelace Running with Black Panthers and White Doves (mid-1980s/early 1990s)
Artwork © Mary Lovelace O'Neal. Courtesy Mnuchin Gallery, New York