

"A TINY LITTLE NERVOUS BREAKDOWN": THE MAGIC FEMINISM OF RUTH MILLER KEMPSTER

By William Poundstone
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LACMA on Fire



One of this art season's sleepers is "Something Revealed: California Women Artists Emerge, 1860-1960." It's a big show—300+ works by 100+ artists—at the relatively small Pasadena Museum of History. Curator Maurine St. Gardens has done a deep dive into the material, excavating oeuvres and biographies. The show has generated so much buzz that it's been extended a few weeks, to April 13.

The biggest find may be Ruth Blanchard Miller Kempster (1904-78), an inventive painter and muralist who worked in a Magic Realist mode. In her unfinished 1950 self-portrait, Kempster casts a withering side-eye at this man's, man's, man's world. She holds her paintbrush like Cruella de Vil would.

Born in Chicago to a wealthy family, Ruth Miller feigned what she called "a tiny little nervous breakdown" to avoid being packed off to Vassar. Convinced that Ruth was a basket case, her family agreed to send her to art school.

She studied in Pasadena, New York, and Paris. When she ended up living in Florence with an Italian artist, her family went ballistic and demanded she return to the U.S.

(The story so far may recall the saga of Flora Mayo, subject of Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler's installation *Flora*, now on view at LACMA. Kempster's oeuvre survives, while Mayo's does not; yet Mayo may presently be better known than Kempster is.)

Ruth returned to California, married, and taught at the Pasadena Art Institute. In 1932 she won a silver medal at the Los Angeles Olympics—for art, then an Olympic category. David Alfaro Siqueiros was the celebrity judge.

Kempster's prize-winning painting, *The Struggle* (not in the show), intuits the globe's conflicts as male and racial. That turned out to be a premonition of the 1936 Berlin Olympics of Hitler, Jesse Owens, and Leni Reifenstahl.

Other works of the 1930s treated the American Scene with a female eye. Kempster's c. 1935 *Housewife* is literally boxed in by Renaissance perspective and an oblivious child and husband.

Death of a Christmas Tree (1941) is a found still-life mocking consumerism, capitalism, and war. The inverted tree's base is a cross and corpus christi, as mordantly clever as John Heartfield's swastika/crosses. Kempster signs her name on a gift tag.

Kempster's success didn't stick. By the 1950s AbEx made her work look old-fashioned. Unlike fellow Chicagoan Helen Lundeberg, Kempster did not evolve an abstract style. Though Kempster continued working until her 1978 death in Santa Barbara, her last single-artist show was in 1953, at the Pasadena Art Institute.

"Something Revealed" ought to change that. Maybe it already has. *The Struggle* was recently acquired by the Huntington for its Virginia Steele Scott Galleries of American Art. The Crocker Art Museum also added a Kempster in 2017. As far as I can tell, these are the first Kempster paintings to enter a major museum collection.