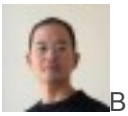
Obituary: Mary Henry, 1913-2009

 By D.K. Row, The Oregonian
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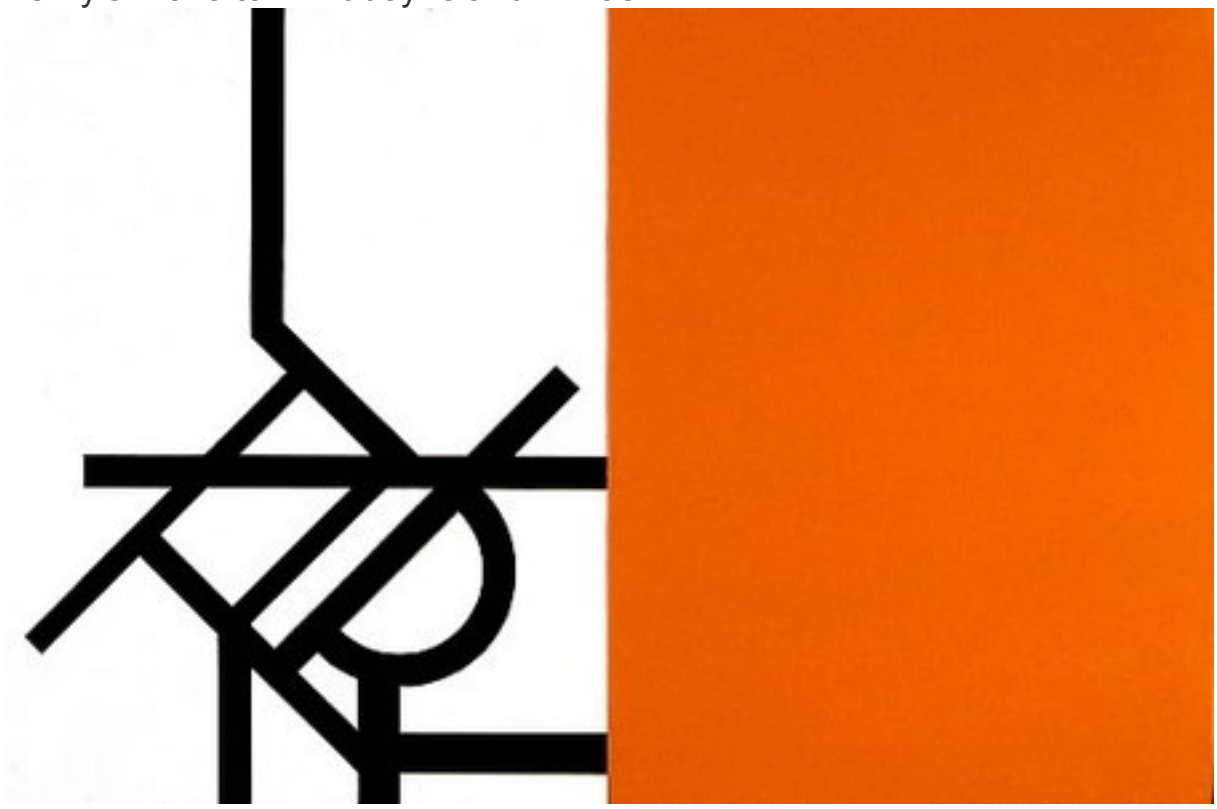
‘  Mary Henry in 2004

Mary Henry, the Whidbey Island painter who lived in single-minded isolation for roughly the past quarter-century and pursued one of the most rigorous forms of painting, died Wednesday evening after recently suffering a stroke. Henry was 96. Henry's Portland dealer, Jane Beebe, notified The Oregonian with details of her death.

Henry leaves behind a body of extraordinarily disciplined artwork, and also a remarkable life of steely focus; her razor sharp clarity empowered other artists, many of them women, who found a model in Henry's discipline and the way her art and life merged seamlessly.
"She was an example of a strong woman who defied the odds to become a good painter and a positive role model," says John Olbrantz, director of the Hallie Ford Museum of Art, the Salem-based academic university museum whose mission includes highlighting Northwest artists. Hallie Ford produced a one-person show of Henry's works in 2005.
The prevailing image of Henry, especially in the latter part of her career, is as a kind of Emersonian heroine. But the first half of her life would have been material for a contemporary version of a Jane Austen novel.
Born in 1913, Henry attended the California College of Arts and Crafts at a time few women were sincerely accepted by the public and the art world as artists. Then, in the late '30s, Henry experienced a life-altering moment whose full effect wouldn't command her life for another 25 years or so: a lecture by the constructivist pioneer and Bauhaus champion Laszlo Moholy-Nagy.
Henry was gripped by Bauhaus' formal ideas and Moholy-Nagy's fascination with pure expressiveness through line and color. Those ideas brewed and steeped in Henry's imagination as she lived a life of domesticity: married with children.
Henry even left her family for a time to study with Moholy-Nagy in Chicago in the '40s, but it wasn't until 1964, the year she got divorced and became a working artist, that Henry would truly pursue her ambitions. Thus initiated, her journey began to perfect a spare yet expressive visual language out of geometric shapes and bold graphic colors.
To some, geometric abstraction was mathematical, tedious, faint. But its supplest champions, like Henry, who was a second-generation

geometric abstractionist, located spiritual essences and elicited the highest passion. To its followers, geometric abstraction was as energetic as a rousing landscape or recognizable figurative work.
Though the years, Henry garnered praise -- even a review in Artforum magazine -- and though she had exhibits in San Francisco and was collected in major Northwest museums, Henry remained a kind of cult regional figure.
One reason was because her particular school of painting was highly specialized, even narrow in its public appeal and thus similarly limited in its allure to collectors. Another reason might have been because of Henry's move to Whidbey Island in 1981.



There, Henry, who did not remarry, authored a spartan but powerful life. In a house surrounded by alder and rhododendron trees, Henry painted and drew, intensifying and heightening her familiar vocabulary. That vocabulary never changed radically, but Henry's facility deepened into something recognizably her own there, a language of few words that touched something universal.

Locally, Henry began exhibiting with PDX in 1998 and her work and personal story inspired many local artists, some of whom whose work is different from Henry's.

"I didn't know her personally," says Marie Watt, the nationally acclaimed Native-American sculptor and installation artist whose dealer is also Jane Beebe. "But one inspiring thing about her was that she was part of the Bauhaus movement in her training. As a Native artist, that school was reflective of the way we live: no division between art and life and music and regalia."

People who knew Henry say nothing really swayed her from work. Beyond family and gardening, her life reflected her art: nothing wasted, all economy and simplicity.

"She never spread herself thin," says Beebe. "She didn't do a zillion things. She knew what she wanted. She was so single-minded, so directed."

And tough.

When she won $25,000 from the Flintridge Foundation in 2001, she used the money to buy a stove for her studio. For years, she'd been working there without heat.

In a 1998 interview with the Oregonian, Henry eloquently summed up her work in a way that also captured her rugged, sparse approach to life.

"I've always wanted to create that feeling in my work, of getting down to the nitty-gritty and getting rid of all the things that aren't important, to get to the essence of life. What do I hope people get from my work? Honesty. Simplicity. I wanted it to be uncomplicated and direct."