

HYPERALLERGIC

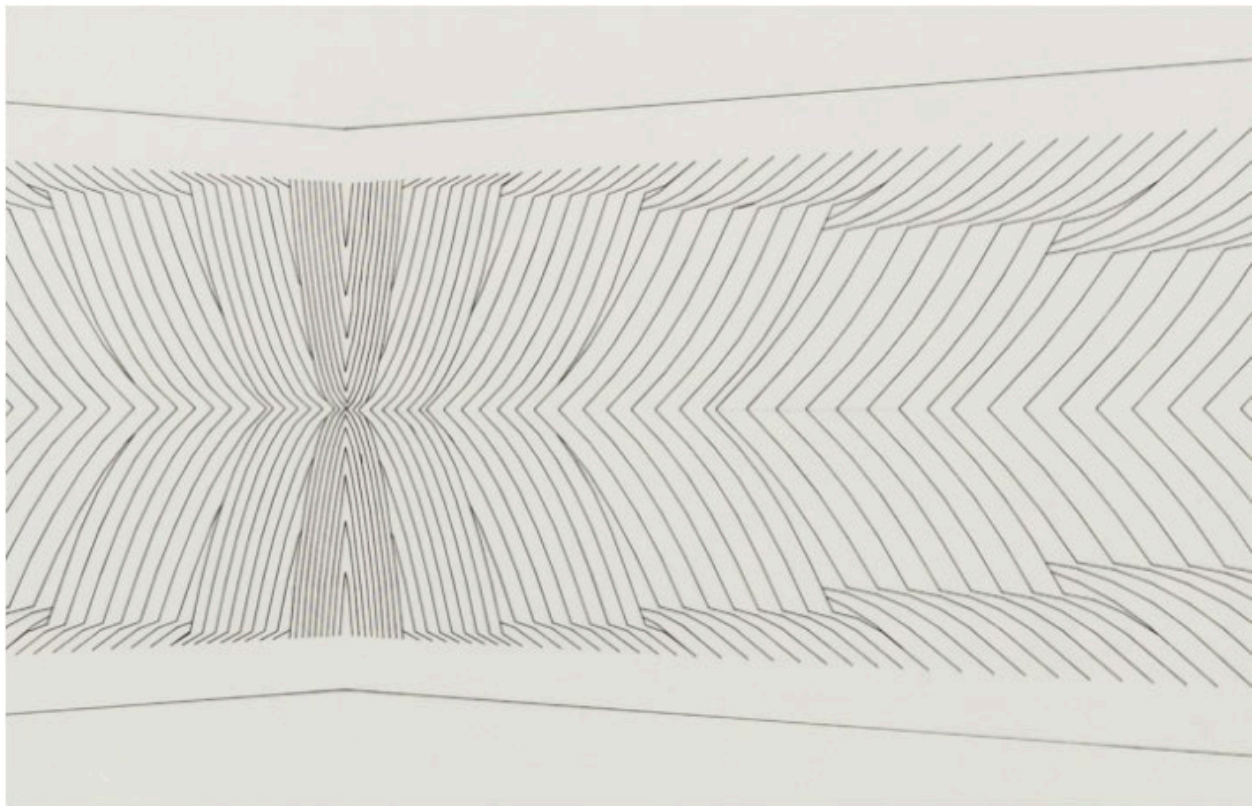
ART

How Channa Horwitz Pushed Beyond the Precincts of Minimalism

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Daniel Gerwin 3 days ago

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Channa Horwitz, "8 Part Fugue III" (1981), ink on mylar, 24 x 96 inches (all images courtesy Ghebaly Gallery)

LOS ANGELES — It is a mistake to think of Channa Horwitz as an abstract artist, even if she thought so herself. She was a realist, working concretely with the numbers one to eight and a small set of rules. Just as DNA uses only four nucleotides in varying patterns to encode 20 amino acids that make millions of proteins, Horwitz’s narrow parameters generated endless arrangements of daunting complexity.



Channa Horwitz, “Variation and Inversion on a Rhythm IV” (1976), black ink on green graph paper, 112 elements, each: 8.5 x 10.75 inches

Horwitz, who died in 2013, produced a series of drawings from 1975 to 1985 called *Structures* that forms an eponymous exhibition at Ghebaly Gallery. Drawn on eight-to-the-inch graph paper, these works follow simple rules, generally involving a small change being made in a stepwise fashion, causing sequential shifts as the drawing develops across the page. The gradually morphing forms in “Variation and Inversion on a Rhythm IV” (1976) suggest the stop-motion photographs of Eadweard Muybridge, mathematical progressions like the Fibonacci series, or natural manifestations like the rippling of water across the surface of a pond and grasses bending in the wind.

Her drawings sometimes have an inescapably architectural character, with “Eight Structures #3” (1980) looking like nothing so much as a grand design proposal for an Olympic stadium.

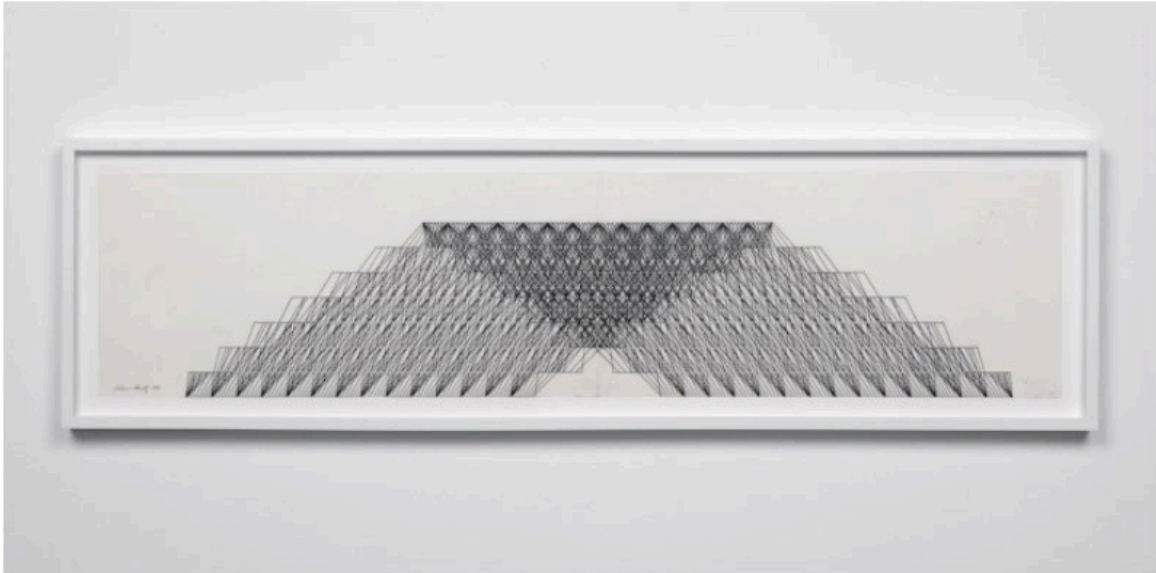
A Los Angeles native born in 1932, Horwitz had three children by the time she received her BFA from CalArts at the age of 40. The scant recognition she received during her lifetime is correlated not merely with her being a woman who became an artist later in life, but a mother who made her art while raising her children. Though her art shares common ground with Sol LeWitt, with whom she had a warm correspondence and even traded work, Horwitz was not granted even a fraction of his renown. In the second half of the 20th century, women artists were only begrudgingly celebrated, and those who were recognized were generally supposed to curse and smoke heavily, or at least remain childless. Eighteen years into the 21st century the situation has improved, but not as much as we’d like to think.



Channa Horwitz, "Eight Structures #3" (1980), ink on graph paper, diptych, each framed: 41 x 37 inches

In a 1976 essay on Horwitz, Agnes Denes, and Joyce Cutler Shaw, Lucy Lippard argued that "the fragmentation of women's lives, the multiple roles most women must play each day, is the counterpart of that imaginative shift of focus that permits all materials to be seen in the full diversity of their potential uses." Lippard's point, and I fully agree, was that being a mother probably contributed to the insights that became fundamental to Horwitz's art, pushing it in directions divergent from LeWitt's more strictly conceptual approach.

Horwitz and LeWitt had certain affinities, including an engagement with seriality, repetition, and the strictly limited parameters that were hallmarks of minimalism at the time, but the spirit of their work was quite different. LeWitt's work cleaves to Frank Stella's maxim, "what you see is what you see," meaning that his art represents only itself and nothing more. His wall-based works do not generate an image that might suggest nature or a built structure; they are patterns of line or simple geometric volumes approaching the Platonic. His sculptures based on stacked cubes lean a bit more toward urban architecture but in the end always read to me as abstract exercises.



Channa Horwitz, "Canon Fragment" (1982)

In contrast, Horwitz's methodical drawing systems went far beyond the normal precincts of minimalism. "Canon Diamond – Two Halves" (1982) is like lacework, the white gaps sparkling between the elegant black lines. "8 Shapes Explanation for Flowing and Numbers" (1980) resembles spans of a bridge traversing a chasm. "8 Part Fugue II" (1981) has eight sections that are doubled in bilateral symmetry, resulting in what might be a turbulence pattern in a wind tunnel. Horwitz's approach also deviated from minimalist practice in that she incorporated mistakes into her systems when she found them interesting. The works in her series titled "Variation and Inversion on a Rhythm" (1975–1977) arose from an error she made counting within the graph paper, leading her to realize, as she put it, that she could "use the miscounted error deliberately." Her incorporation of chance mistakes is akin to genetic mutation in evolution — if a mutation helps an organism survive, it will be reproduced. Horwitz rigorously demonstrates that when simple systems emerge randomly and are repeated enough times they eventually produce seashells, flowers, diatoms, and all manner of organic and inorganic arrangements; in short, life and the world as we know it.

Channa Horwitz: Structures *continues* at *Ghebaly Gallery* (2245 E Washington Blvd, Los Angeles) through October 20.