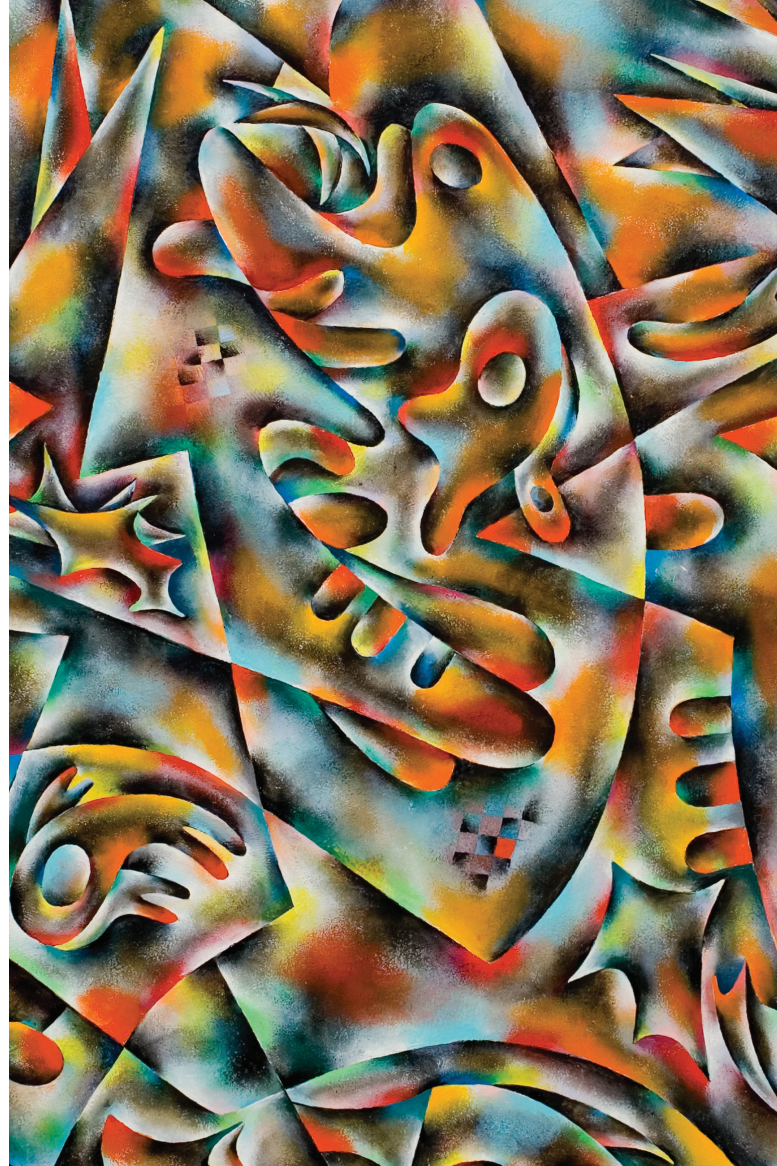


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The Road Less Traveled 50th anniversary program was conceived by Amy Horst, deputy director for programming. The exhibition series was organized and curated by Arts Center Curator Karen Patterson. Special thanks to Emily Schlemowitz, assistant curator, and Amy Chaloupka, guest curator.

Front Image Cutline:
Mary Nohl, Untitled, n.d.; oil on board; 24 x 24 in.
John Michael Kohler Arts Center Collection,
gift of Kohler Foundation Inc.



JOHN MICHAEL **KOHLER ARTS CENTER**

GREETINGS AND SALUTATIONS AND BOO: MARY NOHL

+ Catherine Morris

April 30–August 20, 2017

Mary Nohl (1914–2001) graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1937. After college, she taught art at several schools before returning home to live with her parents and open a commercial pottery studio. It wasn't until after the deaths of her only sibling and her father, and her increasingly frail mother's move to a nursing home in the 1960s that Nohl gave free reign to her imagination. She spent the next fifty years transforming the interior and exterior of the family cottage in Fox Point, Wisconsin.

Voracious and interdisciplinary, Nohl made sculptures, paintings, ceramics, glass, and graphic novels, and adorned nearly every piece of furniture in the home. As indicated by her personal notes tracking her diet, exercise, and art practice, Nohl's approach was methodical, disciplined, and all-consuming, leaving little time for the social interaction that she seems to have both craved and withdrawn from. This exhibition honors the moment and the place where it all began for Nohl—the interior—and brings together her various forms of art making in a complete restaging of her living room.

GREETINGS AND SALUTATIONS AND BOO is one of fifteen exhibitions on view throughout 2017 as part of the John Michael Kohler Arts Center's fiftieth-anniversary series, THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED. Twenty thought leaders were invited to lend their expertise and provide new insight into the Arts Center's collection of artist-built environments.

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Mary Nohl Lake Cottage Environment (interior site detail, Nohl and others in her cottage living room, Fox Point, WI), c. 1960–2001. Photo: 1997.

Catherine Morris is the Sackler Family Senior Curator for the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum. As a curator and writer, she curates exhibitions that look at feminism's enduring contribution to contemporary visual culture. Morris selected several pivotal works by Nohl, linking some of the ways Nohl worked and focusing on how the multiple statuses and the different roles she took up during her lifetime touch the social and political contexts of her time.

How were you introduced to Mary Nohl's work?

An unexpected package from Karen Patterson of the John Michael Kohler Arts Center introduced me to the work of Mary Nohl. As she suspected, I didn't know the work, but as I looked and read, I was hooked almost immediately.

As a curator, my recent career has focused on examining how feminism—one of the most important political, cultural, social movements of the twentieth century—has influenced the way we look at and interpret both art history and contemporary art practices. In the history of art in the twentieth century, what little success or critical attention women artists received was often inexplicably constructed around personal narratives. Biography seemed to be the primary means critics, curators, or dealers had for talking about the work of women artists; these same reductive methodological tools just didn't get applied to male artists of the same period. For instance, while we acknowledge Jackson Pollock's alcoholism and his philandering, we don't understand his art through those biographical facts. In the stories of women artists, the personal details are highlighted—Louise Bourgeois's fraught childhood, Frida Kahlo's medical trauma, Georgia O'Keeffe's independent streak—establishing them as other, or outsider, or exceptional examples of their sex.

Details such as a life lived alone and narratives of wealth and privilege are forefronted and are used very specifically as the means of examination and critique, and unsurprisingly demean the art in the process. Credentials of eccentricity often are foisted upon women artists. These undermining narratives sometimes calcify into fables and myths of witchcraft. And, as the history of "witchiness" teaches us, rather than confirming any actual threat of danger, the designation is an invitation to persecution and ostracism.

For women artists, and artists of color, these elaborate deflation campaigns serve to position women artists as outside the mainstream, even though, as in the case of Mary Nohl, they are sometimes the ultimate insiders. Typical markers of privilege abound: wealth, education, extensive travel, connections, and access. If you throw into this mix a formal style that strays from the artistic mainstream—favoring unusual materials, quirky execution, implications of metaphor, and mysticism—outsider status solidifies and the offending free spirit becomes an eccentric. In the twentieth century, the designation of outsider in the art world came with its own set of rules—developed by insiders like Jean Dubuffet and his term Art Brut—that were typically applied to people of color and the disabled, but the term has become increasingly feeble and awkward in the twenty-first century. All these ideas about biography, status, reception, and categories came to mind as I looked at the information Patterson sent me. And Mary Nohl's exceptional work and her clear determination to make it captured my imagination.



Mary Nohl Lake Cottage Environment (site detail, Fox Point, WI), c. 1960–2001. John Michael Kohler Arts Center Collection, gift of Kohler Foundation Inc. Photo: 2006.



Mary Nohl, brooch, 1949–75; silver; 3 3/8 x 3 1/8 x 3/8 in. John Michael Kohler Arts Center Collection, gift of Kohler Foundation Inc.



Mary Nohl, *Blue Stick Figure*, n.d.; wood, paint, glass; 18 x 39 x 3 in. John Michael Kohler Arts Center Collection, gift of Kohler Foundation Inc.



Mary Nohl, untitled, c. 1970; wood, glass, concrete, varnish; 23 1/4 x 7.5 x 8 in. John Michael Kohler Arts Center Collection, gift of Kohler Foundation Inc.

How does your own background inform your response to Nohl's work?

My response to Nohl's work is very much informed by my interests in how work by women artists gets contextualized and written into history. I am also very interested in how those perceptions change over time and how artists are appreciated differently by succeeding generations. Nohl's work feels so specific and idiosyncratic, but it also has strong roots in modern design and twentieth-century painting. Nohl was an artist who clearly digested and explored the history of art, taking from it an aesthetic sensibility that she adapted to her own vision. I suspect the clarity of this aesthetic lineage looks fresher and sharper in 2017 than it did in 1980.

Nohl's story features a number of narratives that typically took artists out of the running for serious consideration in the art world of the time—she was a woman, she made work in and for a personal and unique domestic context, her work had a bent toward the narrative rather than toeing the purely abstract line favored in her day, and her stylistic approach was ultimately seen as naïve and unconventional. Combine these features with an obsessive approach to self-care and making (the visual link between graphs charting diet and exercise and the horror vacui of her interior patterning cannot be an accident) and a general inclination toward not engaging with the world, and there is a great chance an interesting body of work could not only be overlooked, it could also be lost.

But there are parallel narratives that are equally true. Her story aligns closely with the twentieth-century history of modernism, and it reflects many of the aesthetic and materials interests of that time. Her work incorporates this modernist history into personal narratives that emerge from the home, landscape, and lake where she lived and worked for decades. She devoted the last fifty years of her life to turning her childhood home into a fantastic yet fragile environment that reflected intense training and a freedom to create. The site specificity of her project—its rough-hewn materials gathered from local environments—also put it in danger.

Has working on this exhibition changed or expanded your notions about what you do?

Being introduced to Nohl's work is energizing. Discovering an artist who worked devotedly over decades, clearly driven by an internal need to make objects, yet fully informed by a sophisticated understanding of the history of art—from surrealism and Jean Arp to abstract expressionism and, perhaps, pop art—opens up new opportunities for research and for exhibition making.

Feminists of the 1970s famously introduced the adage "The personal is political" into our common thinking. And it seems important to understand that Mary Nohl and her commitment to being an artist contain a political component. The decisions a person like Nohl had to make to set up her life the way she did must have been difficult, involving personal sacrifice and knowledge of the possible pain involved in bucking social norms. We know she paid a price in her reputation, her sense of personal safety, and damage to her work by her own community. I think of the decision to build a chain-link fence between her beloved home and art and the equally cherished lake outside her door. A woman working alone, from and with her own financial and physical means, would automatically be a suspicious character in almost any setting, an increasingly affluent Milwaukee suburb being no exception. And there is a socially constructed politics that must be read into this narrative. It's a politics of middle class conformism, a suspicion of the fine arts as foreign, and a deep distrust of an unconventional and aging woman.

My introduction to Nohl's work has confirmed how narrow the art historical canon I was taught truly is. Knowing her work encourages me to think about ways artists like Nohl can be added to this history, enriching it, and making me see what I think I know in new ways.