

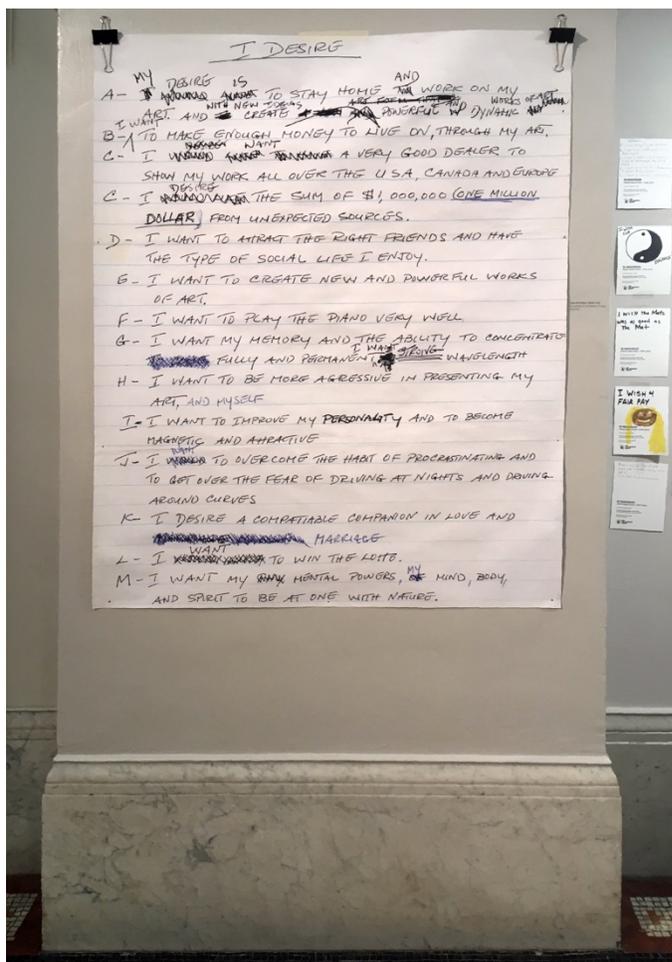
The Art Students League of NY Honors Mavis Pusey

The Art Students League of New York: First Floor Gallery, June 19 – August 16, 2019

By Jennifer Vignone for <http://www.NY-ARTNews.com>

African-American abstractionist, painter, printmaker, and educator, Mavis Iona Pusey, died on April 20, 2019. She was 90 years old. A memorial exhibition of her prints is being celebrated at The Art Students League of New York in the First Floor Gallery.

The intent of this show sets it apart from other memorials. It is a tribute from artist to artist — League members to one of their own. The 13 works in the show are from a selection of prints Pusey gifted to the League in 2004 and hang in the First Floor Gallery of the League as part of the daily footprint of those who pass through. Entitled, “I desire...” it starts with an enlargement of a handwritten “wish list” Pusey wrote, found among her papers in the 1980s. Her own idiosyncratic desire to “get over the fear of driving at night...” is juxtaposed with a touching self-evaluation to “improve my personality and to become more magnetic and attractive.” Another desire to “create powerful works of art” exposes a soul thinking and searching through life. Curator Genevieve Martin states that the list shows the humanness of Pusey and reflects so many barriers to becoming an artist in the way it showcases how an artist is faced with creative and mundane struggles every day. A postcard of the list is available for visitors and provides the opportunity to share their own desire/s and become part of the tribute. The wall behind the information desk is filled those shared wishes. Responses from participants’ posts include similar thoughts to “make art that truly moves people” and “to keep getting better as an artist”, to the simply “want to be happy.”



Handwritten Wish List courtesy of the Mavis Pusey Archive. Copyright 2019 JVignone.

The selected works focus on her talent as a printmaker. Significant influences are music, particularly jazz; textures derived from structural materials such as wood, stone, steel; as well as colors reflecting both the somber and ecstatic qualities of the urban landscape and New York City life. The impact of her contemporaries is reinterpreted in her own unique style; it was at the League where she met her mentor and lifelong friend, Will Barnett, who introduced her to the work of Kandinsky and other abstractionists active in New York at this time. Earthy tones show the impact of Barnett while primary colors and minimal palette remind one of Mondrian, Stuart Davis, Frankenthaler, and Pollack. But her works are her own, their abstracted elements creating a wide array of interpretation.

The etching, “Within Manhattan” (no date), has a sense of structure like a building’s inner workings of elevators and air vents, or like city blocks, with their crosswalks, back alleys and backyards — crisscrossing angles of grays and blacks with a range of reds that keep the eye moving over the minimalist landscape. Are they city streets, jostling New Yorkers, or simply the shapes that they are?



Within Manhattan, Etching (nd) . Copyright 2019 J.Vignone.

Her clean lines and purposefully placed Yves Klein-like blues in the lithograph “Eric” (no date) conjure up a portrait of a person who appears to be at odds with the environment, juggling and angling to keep things from devolving into chaos. It is reminiscent of the man on the old TV shows spinning plates on tall thin sticks adding to the number of them until one finally falls. Eric’s slanted mouth speaks to discontent or mirth as he tries to make sense of it all.

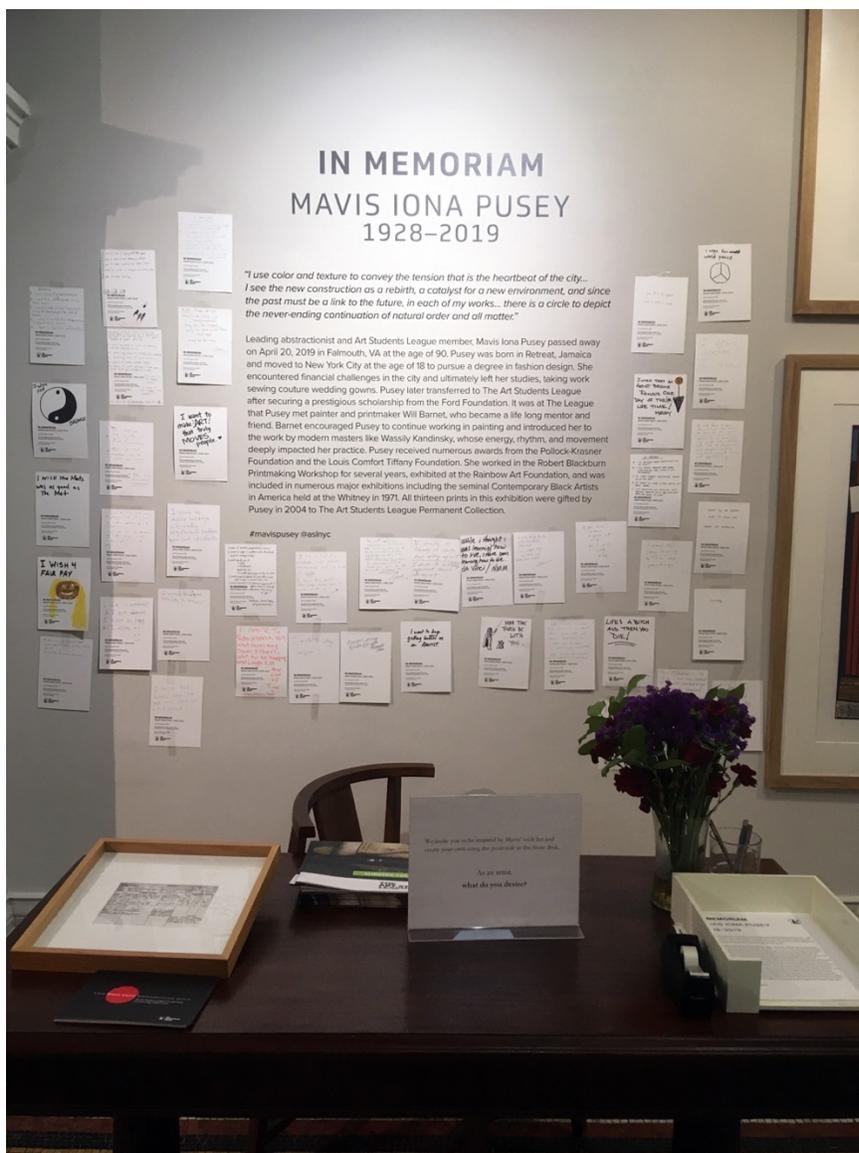


Eric, Lithograph (nd) . Copyright 2019 JVignone.

Ms. Pusey presents an endless combination of abstract, representational, and symbolic experiences with her work. The viewer brings their own interpretation of the visual story unfolding before them. It is interesting to note that the methodology Pusey uses to create these images, lithography and etching, require control, and dedication to process. Given that, her images are energized, possessing a fixed presence on the verge of eruption, in other words — life in New York City.

Ms. Pusey was not just a living being, but an African-American female abstract artist, struggling to find her way in the city whose tempo she embraced and clearly loved. Her solid, constructed images present a vision that invites interpretation to be many things — in Ms. Martin's words, creating "an essential and human space that activates and reanimates the work". Pusey sums it up herself:

"I am inspired by the energy and the beat of the construction and demolition of these buildings — the tempo and movement mold into a synthesis and, for me, become another aesthetic of abstraction. I use color and texture to convey the tension that is the heartbeat of the city... I see the new construction as a rebirth, a catalyst for a new environment, and since the past must be a link to the future, in each of my works.... there is a circle to depict the never-ending continuation of natural order and all matter."



"Desires". The list continues with contributions from visitors of the exhibition paying tribute to Ms. Pusey. Copyright 2019 JVVignone.

The Art Students League of New York is one of the first venues to celebrate Mavis Pusey for all that she was in her lifetime — a woman living in New York, an African-American, a successful contemporary abstractionist, a teacher, and as one of theirs — a student of art and the world. Ms. Martin observes that by overcoming all obstacles in her relentless pursuit of her vision, Ms. Pusey created opportunities for other artists. In doing so, she created triumphant work that still speaks to us today. The written notes about desires, fears, and expressions of joy and thankfulness create the link from past to future, the circle of continuation Pusey encourages us to strive for.

The show is at The Art Students League of New York through August 16, 2019. The first monograph of Ms. Pusey's work will be created by Hugh Kaul Curator of Contemporary Art, Hallie Ringle, who will also create an archive of the artist's work. For more information about the work of Mavis Pusey, please visit the website <http://mavispusey.com/> and email: info@mavispusey.com.