

Don't Fence Them In

BY HARRY SCHWALB

Something kind of wonderful happened a few months ago, and we can't let it pass by uncelebrated.

Once again a prestigious Associated Artists of Pittsburgh annual has recognized that women, who comprise half the human race, also (like it or not) make up at least half of the planet's creative contingent.

And so, on merit alone (there are no casting couches in the museum world), the exhibition displayed a 50-50 split among the artists selected.

By way of comparison I can look back as recently as 1985 to a Carnegie International where only four women made the cut.

If until now there was a glass ceiling in the corporate world, there was an equally implacable one in the world of art.

Which brings me to my subject, the fiercely talented Jane Haskell, whose *Light Construction I*, a magical concoction of canvas and red neon, was recently acquired by the Carnegie Museum of Art.

The wall label will probably read "Jane Haskell, American, b. 1923." That Tiffany-grade brand already identifies her public commissions around the country, from a Pittsburgh subway plaza to the airport at Fort Lauderdale.

Yet when she started to exhibit – Jane tells me – she felt obliged to sign her paintings "J. Haskell." (That old devil ceiling.)

Jane and her late husband, Edward, came to town from New York in 1949. Like Andy Warhol, she'd gotten her start as a commercial artist, doing windows for Manhattan cosmetics queen Helena Rubinstein.

In Pittsburgh, this slim, trim patrician figure ran a household, raised the children (with the help of industrialist husband Ed), earned an M.A. in art history and taught at a local university – while practicing her art.

Eventually there would be some 16 solo exhibitions, 70 or so group shows, and enough awards and honors

to pave Heinz Field.

I shudder to think this outpouring might have been limited to a slew of little "J. Haskell" paintings – if not for her unrelenting drive for a space to create in.



Jane Haskell: a work in progress

The first "studio" was in her Point Breeze home's playroom, a low-ceiling, low-light affair without walls to set it off from the rest of the place.

The next site was upstairs (*very* upstairs) at an industrial designer's office in Shadyside, which she shared with artist Lois Kaufman.

Then came Penn Avenue, in Bloomfield, no stairs, and roomier – until that sudden note on the door: BUILDING SOLD, GET OUT TOMORROW!

So the gypsies loaded up and moved into Lois's Squirrel Hill cellar. Making lemonade from a lemon, Jane created black-and-white "shadow paintings" (long before Warhol) inspired by the Kaufmans' hulking furnace.

Then Fortune smiled. Artist Troy West was leaving town and his little warehouse of a home was for sale.

The price was right. The neighborhood, less so. This was an Uptown street that featured ladies-of-the-evening at all hours of the day, plus their attentive managers. But for 20 years, from 1978 to 1998, this was heaven. Here Jane created ever larger, more powerful paintings, some measuring 6 by 6 feet, and more.

Eventually she would find a trek to the gritty 'hood less and less compelling, and when two elderly residents gave up adjoining apartments in a venerable Oakland co-op, a then-widowed Jane Haskell signed on for both. One for living. One for art.

At last, a studio spanning almost 500 square feet, 9-foot ceilings, and, for the first time, northern light. Room for assistants, too.

In short, sufficient for a gal who will tackle Plexiglas, fluorescent and neon tubing, fiber optics, sheet metal, wood, lithography, photography, oils, collage. Currently she's making computer-generated drawings of the cosmos.

I think this demonstrates what finding a lady the right space can unleash. Or at least suggests that Mrs. Virginia Woolf was on to something when she wrote a little tract for England's women oh-so-many years ago.

She called it *A Room of One's Own*. ■