

## Denise René

Denise René, the gallery owner, who has died aged 99, was an influential and militant champion of post-war abstractionism, supporting and promoting artists such as Max Ernst, Piet Mondrian, Kasimir Malevich and Victor Vasarely when many critics and curators scoffed at their work.



Denise Rene

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She was unswerving in her devotion to the abstract cause, refusing, for example, to exhibit the voguish painter Yves Klein (who coated his naked models in paint and then wielded them as “living brushes”) because his canvases “did not spring from any abstract impulse” and to display them would have been “to deviate from my programme”.

After more than 20 years of lonely cheerleading for her stable of artists, however, Denise René found the rest of the art world aligning its tastes with hers. The geometric patterns of Op Art, as it was labelled in Time magazine, were acclaimed in America. In her native France, Denise René found herself lauded as the “Pope of abstractionism”.

Denise Bleibtreu was born in Paris on June 25 1913. Her father, Georges, ran a silk weaving firm and her aunt was a buyer for boutiques in the city. Denise grew up in the family house in

the suburb of Asnières, which was frequently host to artists and philosophers who shared her father's Left-wing politics.

In 1939, with the help of him and her aunt, Denise Bleibtreu acquired a large three-room atelier on the Rue La Boétie, which she ran with her sister Renée-Lucienne. By fusing the sisters' first names (slightly modified in honour of René Chambeaud, a cousin killed in the opening days of the Great War), the atelier became known as the Société Denise René, a name which Denise Bleibtreu would come to adopt.

The sisters produced high-quality fabrics which they sold to department stores, but Denise René hated the work, much preferring to frequent the Café de Flore with the fashionable milieu that orbited Jacques Prévert. It was at the Flore that she also met, around Christmas 1939, Victor Vasarely, a Hungarian graphic designer determined to create a Bauhaus-style applied arts movement in Paris.

Their plans were delayed by invasion and occupation, and it was not until the summer of 1944 that the pair were ready to mount their first exhibition – a selection of Vasarely's works. The show, in the La Boétie atelier that would serve as Denise René's headquarters for 50 years, was further delayed by the liberation, but in the months that followed it was succeeded by exhibitions by the painter and engraver Joseph Hecht, then Max Ernst.

Soon the gallery was making a name for itself, hosting heated debates between abstractionists and figuratists, which drew such crowds that Denise René later lamented that she had not charged for entry.

Money was often tight, for Denise René and her protégés too. Accordingly, she came up with a system by which she paid them a monthly stipend in return for exclusivity and a 50 per cent cut of sales – if there were sales. The names of better-known artists often had to be inserted into fliers to draw the public. But a sense of solidarity grew between Denise René and her artists, and the group would gather each Saturday evening to drink and argue and debate.

Though Jean Arp and Le Corbusier gave two solo exhibitions, the gallery remained regarded largely as a novelty in Paris. Beyond France, however, Denise René's reputation was burgeoning, particularly in Scandinavia, where the exhibition *Klar Form* (1952), featuring the work of all her retained artists, proved a sensation.

The exhibition allowed her to “reimport” abstraction into France with greater success, so that, in 1955, she was able to stage *Le Mouvement*, a defining exhibition which displayed for the first time her artists, including Vasarely, alongside established masters such as Alexander

Calder and Marcel Duchamp. Two years later she was the first to exhibit Mondrian in France.

If the 1955 exhibition marked out Denise René as a figure of influence, it was *The Responsive Eye*, staged at the Museum of Modern Art in New York a decade later, that confirmed her as a star. The exhibition's curator, William Seitz, solicited Denise René's help in assembling the finest works of "optic art" possible. Her expertise was not in doubt. In 1962 one critic, Jean-Dominique Rey, had noted that "walking into her gallery, one hesitates to believe that one is actually still in a gallery. So many canvases are based on optical illusions and retinal impressions that it seems more like a mathematician's cabinet de curiosité."

Op Art, as it became known, instantly caught the public imagination in America. Soon swirling geometric patterns were appearing on clothes in *Vogue* photoshoots. A few months later, back in Paris, Yves Saint Laurent sent a model down the runway in a dress bearing the coloured grid made famous by Mondrian.

After 20 years of promoting abstraction, Denise René was fashionable. To meet demand she opened, in the course of the following six years, another gallery in Paris, two in Germany and one in New York. In 1967 The Who played at the opening of her gallery in Krefeld, West Germany.

Supervising her empire was hard work, requiring her to fly to America every month. "I lived like an air hostess," she said. And soon it proved too much. As the oil crisis led to a recession and a collapse in prices in the art world, she was late making payments, and the contracts of exclusivity which for decades had tied her to her group of artists began to falter. In 1970 Vasarely opened his personal museum in Gordes; four years later he laid the first stone of his own foundation in Aix-en-Provence.

Three years after that Denise René's business went into administration. It emerged, slimmed down, with Denise René continuing to pour the fruits of sales of works by established artists into supporting up-and-coming youngsters. She remained an indomitable figure well into her 90s, active in the gallery, and frequently travelling abroad on her own.

In 2001 her career was the subject of the exhibition *The Intrepid Denise René, A Gallery in the Adventure of Abstraction* at the Pompidou Centre in Paris.

She did not marry.

**Denise René, born June 25 1913, died July 9 2012**

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