

ART SPIEL

Judy Pfaff Taught Them to Break the Rules—Now They're Sharing the Stage

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Brooklyn, NY: Art Cake, "Beyond the Canvas: Touch, Trace, Tangle," February 2025. Installation view, Image courtesy of JMay Studio.

Judy Pfaff has never played by the rules—her art bends them, her teaching breaks them, and her career is proof she never needed them. A MacArthur “Genius” who reshaped installation art, she has spent five decades throwing order out the window in favor of energy, movement, and sheer creative force. That ethos is on full display at Art Cake in Brooklyn, where Pfaff and three former students have reunited—not in a classroom, but as equals in a space that refuses to sit still.

This is *Beyond the Canvas: Touch, Trace, Tangle*, an exhibition running from January 31 to February 28, 2025. It's more than a show—it's a collision of past and present, a testament to Pfaff's lasting influence, and a reminder that the best teachers never really leave you.

In academia, most teachers fade from their students' lives when they graduate. Pfaff does the opposite—she remains a force that pulls people back. Back to the lessons, back to the work, back to the instinct to go further.

The three artists featured alongside her in this exhibition—Chere Krakovsky, Sylvia Schwartz, and Suzan Shutan—have long since forged their own paths. But this is the first time they return to her side, not as students, but as peers.

Judy Pfaff is why they are here.

Breaking the Frame

At 78, Pfaff has spent five decades dismantling the boundaries between painting, sculpture, and architecture. Born in London in 1946, she arrived in the U.S. as a teenager, studied at Washington University in St. Louis, and earned her MFA at Yale in 1973. There, she studied under Al Held, an abstract painter known for his bold geometries, but she quickly outgrew the flatness of the canvas.

By the late 1970s, Pfaff was creating vast, immersive environments that felt more like energy fields than traditional installations. When she represented the U.S. at the 1982 Venice Biennale, critics hailed her as one of the most radical artists of her generation. Her work spilled across rooms, layering neon, wood, metal, found objects, and color into structures that felt alive, restless—as if they might reassemble themselves when no one was looking.

But her influence extends far beyond her own work. In 1994, she joined Bard College, shaping a generation of sculptors, installation artists, and painters. She didn't simply teach; she pushed, unraveled, and rebuilt her students, forcing them to confront their instincts and break convention.

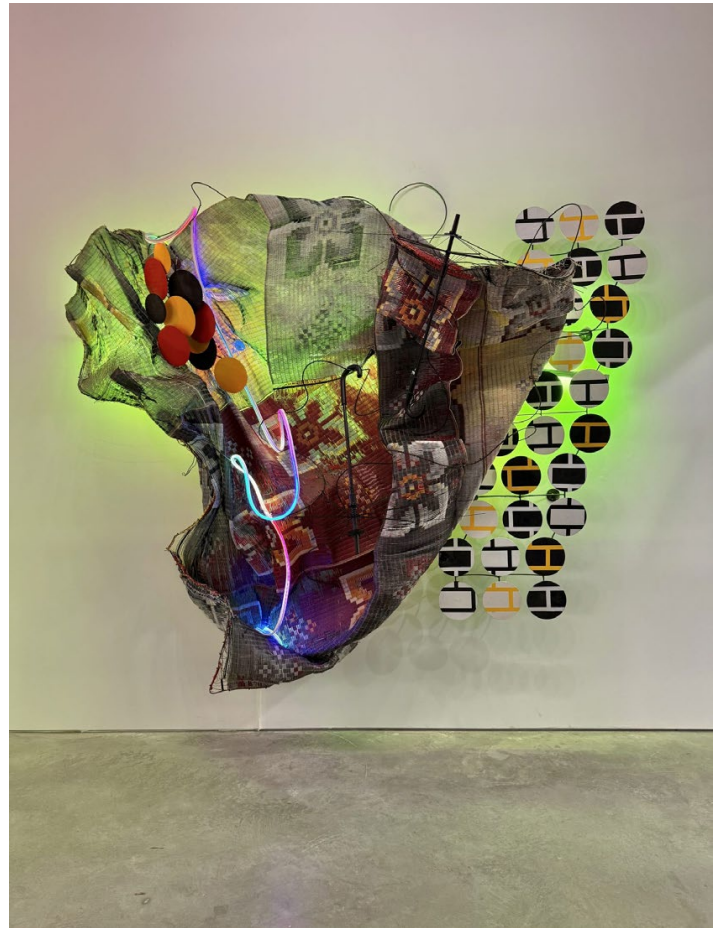
For her contributions to contemporary art, Pfaff has received a MacArthur Fellowship (2004), a Guggenheim Fellowship (1983), and a National Endowment for the Arts Grant (1986). Her work is housed in MoMA, the Whitney, the National Gallery of Art, and other major institutions worldwide.

Yet for all her accolades, Pfaff's greatest legacy may be the countless artists she has set on their way.

The Students Who Kept Going

Each artist in this show learned under Pfaff's guiding chaos—not through imitation, but through transformation.

Chere Krakovsky, an interdisciplinary artist born in Japan, brings film to the show—a fitting medium for someone who never saw art as static. Her award-winning collaboration with filmmaker Mark Ezovski, *The Straight Curved Line*, on view at Art Cake, is a meditation on movement and the body as a canvas. Krakovsky started as a painter but, like Pfaff, quickly abandoned the square. In this show, stills and actual film clips offer the viewer a glimpse into her evolution. What's most striking is that while she once painted, she ultimately chose to become the art itself—her performance-driven films are deeply personal.



Judy Pfaff at Art Cake,
Image courtesy of Sylvia Schwarz.

Sylvia Schwartz, originally from Australia, sculpts in fiber, shifting into cast paper and resin as though those materials were obvious extensions—an approach very much learned from Pfaff. Her work holds multiple pieces within pieces, embracing color with endless associations, nudged gently by actual found objects—lace fabric that then becomes cast lace, meshed with cuttlefish bones and plant matter. These elements inhabit space on equal terms, dissolving distinctions between what is natural and what is made. Color and texture are both separate works and unifying forces, coming together in unexpected ways. It is through unrepressed play that personal insights emerge.



Brooklyn, NY: Art Cake, “Beyond the Canvas: Touch, Trace, Tangle,” February 2025.
Installation view, Image courtesy of JMay Studio.

A major work in the gallery immediately seizes the viewer’s gaze: Suzan Shutan, a former Pfaff student at CalArts and later Rutgers, sculpts with tar paper, manipulating its folds and voids to create deep contrasts of color and darkness. These pieces ripple between material and emptiness, playing with density and absence. The weight of the tar paper, its matte texture, and the interplay of shadow and light give her sculptures a raw physicality—forms that feel both structured and precarious, as if they might shift at any moment.

In another striking body of work, Shutan moves in the opposite direction—toward exuberance. Her brightly painted wooden round pieces explode with color, forming a theater of vibrant grids that seem to turn inside out as you look at them. They capture an impossible moment—continuous movement between rigid architecture and unruly growth. These pieces pulse with energy, drawing the viewer into a dynamic interplay of form and motion.

At Art Cake, Shutan’s works may appear distinct, but they are linked by a fundamental question: How do structure and instability coexist? Whether through the weight of tar paper or the buoyancy of color, her art resists stasis. This isn’t about rejecting the past; it’s about expanding it.

Pfaff, the Firestarter

And then there is Judy Pfaff herself, whose installation doesn’t just glow—it blazes. Neon ignites the space, tangled webs of material refuse to sit still, and colors ricochet off every surface as if the entire room is breathing. No one else works like this—a hurricane of shape, light, and texture, tied together by a mind that never stops racing.

For decades, she has refused to stand still, pushing forward while her former students carve their own paths beside her. Pfaff's work doesn't just electrify space—it supercharges the air, daring viewers to step inside and keep up.

Art can't teach us everything. But in the hands of someone like Judy Pfaff, it can remind us that boundaries are meant to be broken—and sometimes, that's enough.

And if you want to hear the stories behind these boundary-breaking works, I'll be moderating the artist talk on February 23, 2025, at 1:00 PM. I'd love for you to join in, perhaps with your own questions. This isn't just an art show—it's a rare, living conversation about what it means to be taught by a master, to challenge the limits of a medium, and to create something truly new.

Beyond the Canvas: Touch, Trace, Tangle runs from January 31 to February 28, 2025, at Art Cake in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. Gallery hours are Wednesday–Sunday, 12–6 PM, or by appointment.

Photo courtesy of JMay Studio unless otherwise indicated.