

Ever seen an Oomamaboomba?

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With a large - but largely unnecessary - show, Tate Modern is bringing the work of Eva Hesse to the UK, where it has not been seen en masse since 1979. Hesse died in 1970, at the age of 34, just as her career was taking off, and is remembered chiefly for the experimental abstract sculpture she produced in the last five years of her life.

Born in Germany but raised in America, Hesse was well known on the New York art scene in the Sixties and was friends with the pioneering conceptualist Sol LeWitt, the minimalist Robert Ryman and the feminist critic Lucy Lippard. Remarkably, given the short span of her career, Hesse's posthumous reputation has kept pace with those of her still-living contemporaries, for her work has starred in a myriad of international shows since her death. Time, however, always catches up. Several of Hesse's major works, executed in latex, have now become too fragile for further travel and so a major, comprehensive exhibition of her work is unlikely to be staged ever again. Perhaps that is as it should be, for though Hesse deserves to be remembered, she died too early in her career to make the kind of impact on the history of art implied by the scale of this show.

The exhibition proceeds in dull chronological order through Hesse's career, and so its first-half is quite forgettable. The small drawings, paintings and collages she was producing up until the mid-Sixties do chart her evolution from weak semi-abstraction into more confident and complex abstract painting and relief collages (such as Oomamaboomba) that made manifest her sculptural interests, but are otherwise of little note.

Hang Up, made in 1966, was Hesse's first major sculpture, and the first piece of real significance. It features a large loop of rope-clad steel tubing that flops into the space of the room, attached at opposite corners to a large, wall-mounted and bandaged wooden frame. The piece is an appropriate expression of Hesse's interest in the absurdity of life, from which grew her desire to make "non-art": art that had no meaning outside itself. Art, in other words, that just was. From this point she went on to produce sculptures consisting of a series of similar elements, often in experimental materials.

Repetition Nineteen features 19 irregular bucket-shaped elements made of translucent fibreglass and resin that sit on the floor.

Better known is her untitled rope piece, made shortly before she died: a chaotic jumble of latex-covered rope, hung in several points from the surrounding walls and ceiling.

Frequently described as the sculptural equivalent of a Jackson Pollock, the rope piece, like much of her late work, succeeds in being a confident piece of abstract sculpture. But, at that point, Hesse's career, and life, came to an untimely end, before she was able to fulfil the promise she had begun to display. ■