

Gael Zender Stack (1941-2026)

Renowned artist Gael Zender Stack - mother, friend, and teacher - died at age 84 on February 24, 2026, at her home in Houston, Texas. Best known for her heavily layered paintings composed of calligraphic strokes, marks, and scrawls, Gael garnered national acclaim over the course of her half-century-long career. In her position as faculty at the University of Houston, where she taught for over forty years, Gael provided countless students with instruction and mentorship. In addition to teaching, she had more than fifty solo shows, including sixteen exhibitions mounted at Moody Gallery.

Born in Chicago, Illinois, in 1941, Gael drew and wrote voraciously in her youth. In her own words, "I was a quiet, nice child. I always wanted to be an expert, though. I kept silver notebooks for writing and drawing." While raising two young sons, Timothy and Paul, she earned her B.F.A. from the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana in 1970. Two years later, Gael completed her graduate studies and received her M.F.A. from Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. In 1973, she relocated to Texas, hired by George Bunker to teach at the University of Houston. At the University of Houston, Gael would go on to hold positions including Director of the University of Houston School of Art and John & Rebecca Moores Professor. In 2022, she achieved Professor Emeritus status. Additionally, she was invited to teach at the renowned Yale Summer School of Art in the early 1990s. As a teacher, Gael was admired and respected by students and peers and is remembered for her thoughtfulness and honesty.

Until 1978, Gael worked largely on paper. Her drawings eventually grew in scale until they were "simply impractical." She then began working more frequently on canvas. Over time, due to her interests in a diverse array of subjects and topics, which included Renaissance paintings, nineteenth-century *Manga* woodcuts, traditional Japanese mythology, and the literature of the American South, she developed a unique and distinctive iconography in her paintings. Gael blended textual writing, secretarial shorthand, art historical imagery, and gestural markings that read like unintelligible script into a cohesive aesthetic. Commenting on her iconography, Gael humbly joked, "They're just things that strike me as interesting. (It's) what I think my brain looks like." She never consciously maintained a style. She shared, "I really don't believe in even the notion of a style. ... I could no more paint some other way than I could make my shorthand any different."

During the 1980s, Gael had a streak of successful shows, including a major survey exhibition curated by Marti Mayo at the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Gallery in 1989. Early in the 1990s, Gael began showing with Moody Gallery, a relationship that would last until her passing. In the mid-1990s, Gael embarked on a series of paintings unified by a ultramarine blue ground, for which she received significant critical and popular attention. Ultramarine blue quickly became her signature color in painting. She continued adding new canvases to this series well into the 2000s. Paintings

from this series are undeniably visually handsome, vibrantly colored and impressively large in scale. However, these canvases are not purely retinal or exclusively meant to appeal to the eye. As Betty Moody commented, "Gael's paintings were absolutely exquisite. They were not only beautiful, but they were historically well based, well thought out, there was meaning to them."

Gael was a two-time recipient of the National Endowment for the Arts Artists Grant, once in 1982 and again in 1989. She was also awarded the Tiffany Foundation Grant in 1986. In 1997, she was named Texas Artist of the Year by the Art League of Houston. Today, artworks by Gael are in the permanent collections of the Menil Collection, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Blanton Museum of Art, the San Antonio Museum of Art, the Dallas Museum of Art, the Art Museum of Southeast Texas, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Yale University Art Gallery, the Beaux Art Museum, Saintes, the Houston Airport Systems, and the University of Houston.

Gael is survived by her sons, Timothy and Paul Stack, her daughter-in-law Elisa Mora, her three grandchildren, Sebastian Aguilar, Luciana Aguilar, and Nicolas Stack; her sister, Ginny Zender, her niece, Julie Zender, her nephew, Andy Zender, and the many friends who admired and loved her deeply. The family extends their deep gratitude to Elisa "Roque" Mora for her loving, longtime care of Gael.

A celebration of Gael's life will be held at Moody Gallery on Sunday, March 29 from 3-5pm. In lieu of flowers, the family kindly asks for donations to be made to the American Cancer Society or the charity of your choice.