

Feminist painter Susan Michod, founding member of Chicago's Artemisia Gallery, dies at 81

[Bob Goldsborough](#) September 18, 2026



Chicago painter Susan Michod. (Alec Michod)

Chicago painter Susan Michod specialized in producing bold, vibrant and expansive paintings, including of landscapes, as part of the Pattern and Decoration movement that sprang up in the 1970s as a necessary response to aspects of painting — such as patterns — that some had deemed to be feminine or not Western.

A fierce champion of female artists, Michod in 1973 co-founded the nonprofit Artemisia Gallery, a Chicago artists cooperative that gave women and outsider artists a dedicated venue.

“She was unstoppable. Her commitment to the arts stands out to me, as well as her feminist leanings,” said School of the Art Institute of Chicago art history professor Lisa Wainwright. “Susan’s participation in the Pattern and Decoration movement was significant. It also was a feminist undertaking as the decorative was seen disparagingly as merely feminine, when we now understand it as a global style that spoke to ... ideas of abstraction, ornamentation and the nexus of art and design.”

Michod, 81, died of natural causes Aug. 8 at a Chicago skilled nursing facility, said her eldest son, Alec.

A longtime Lincoln Park resident who also had homes in Michigan and Boca Grande, Florida, Michod had suffered a grand mal seizure in 1992, after which doctors discovered a rare brain cancer. She recovered, eventually learning again how to walk, talk and paint.

Born Susan Alexander in 1945 in Toledo, Ohio, Michod grew up in Toledo and in a nearby suburb, Ottawa Hills, and graduated from Ottawa Hills High School. Though her parents weren’t artists — her mother was a teacher and her father was an automotive

engineer who helped develop the wraparound windshield for General Motors — Michod met artists through her parents, including a family friend, noted glass artist Harvey Littleton.

Michod attended Smith College in Massachusetts before transferring to the University of Michigan to study art. After college, Michod moved to New York City's West Village neighborhood, where she produced abstract geometric paintings and cultivated alliances and community in the art world. She then earned a Master of Fine Arts in 1969 from Pratt Institute in New York.

"Her ambitions told her to stay in New York, because this was a time when it was hard to earn respect in the art world outside Fortress New York," Alec Michod said.

But after marrying her husband, Charles, in 1969, Michod moved to Chicago, where he had accepted a job, and they settled in Lincoln Park.

Both in New York and in Chicago, Michod built ties with other female artists, including Joyce Kozloff, Miriam Schapiro and Ellen Lanyon. She taught painting and drawing at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts and she soon joined the Pattern and Decoration movement.

"Modernist art and the big heavyweights always looked down on the decorative arts, and my mom and other Pattern and Decoration painters really embraced that and saw an opportunity to bring about social change and be part of the heightened political activism and cultural awareness of the time," Alec Michod said. "And it kind of caught fire as part of second-wave feminism."

Michod sat unapologetically at the forefront of the Pattern and Decoration movement, producing vibrant, large-scale paintings. Her work frequently showed at Jan Cicero's River North gallery.

The paintings Michod produced "are complex patchworks of interlocking geometrical forms which play games with positive-negative space," then-Tribune art critic Alan G. Artner wrote in 1975. "Everything is in flux, the relationships constantly changing. Colors are brilliant; the mode of expression is exacting, but narrow."

In 1973, Michod and 20 artists, including Vera Klement and Margaret Wharton, founded the Artemisia Gallery, which operated for 30 years before closing in 2003 after its main benefactor's death.

Michod and other Artemisia artists participated in the 1985 show "Critical Messages: The Use of Public Media for Political Art by Women," which produced 18 ad placards and billboards on issues such as sexism, racism, women's health and nuclear health for installation on Chicago Transit Authority buses and train platforms. The agency rejected 10 of the works, labeling them "disturbing and offensive."

Michod continued painting into the 1990s, producing large paintings, some as long as 20 feet. She experimented with different forms and styles, and traveled to Mexico and Guatemala to research ancient patterns and cultures that she could integrate into her work. She continued developing close friendships with artists across disciplines and cultures, and she often penned essays about art on an old manual typewriter. She wrote in one essay that “there is at least one ‘fact’ I know about my painting: It is an excuse to play with color.”

After having a brain tumor, Michod had to re-learn how to paint. She then continued producing art, showing new work until 2006. Her work was displayed at a host of galleries and museums, including Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art, the Bronx Museum, the Indianapolis Museum of Art and the State of Illinois Center gallery.

In 2019, Michod’s work drew renewed recognition when it was included in an exhibit at Los Angeles’ Museum of Contemporary Art, “With Pleasure: Pattern and Decoration in American Art 1972-1985.”

Artist Lorri Gunn, a friend and fellow Artemisia artist, called Michod “warm, sweet and absolutely devoted to her art.”

“Like my late husband (artist Karl Wirsum), Susan was the kind of artist who could not not work,” Gunn said.

Artist Pala Townsend said Michod’s art “had beautiful patterns and abstract arrangements.”

“There was always some kind of theme there,” Townsend said. “She had a wide range of paintings, and they weren’t all alike. She was a very hard-working artist and very serious. She fit in well with the Chicago art scene.”

Michod loved raising her children as a working mother, and she appreciated Chicago’s tapestry of neighborhoods and cultures, her son said. She also enjoyed transforming interesting and unique objects left in alleys into works of art, he said.

Michod is survived by her husband of 57 years, Charles; two other sons, Mike and Rick; and three grandchildren.

A celebration of life is planned for October.