

ART NEWS

Feminist Art, Barbara Nessim, Judy Chicago, Nancy Grossman



The Feminist Art Explosion: A Global Phenomenon Born In 1970

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Ilka Scobie looks back on a vibrant period of art history and social change - Artlyst Exclusive

Notorious for street crime, a crumbling urban infrastructure, abandoned buildings, and homeless people, New York City, my hometown, was fertile ground for social and creative resolution. 1970 was the year that the Ad Hoc Women's Artist committee challenged the lack of women in the 1969 Whitney Museum Annual, when only eight of the one hundred and forty three artists included were women. New York was where avante garde women artists like Carolee Schneeman, Yoko Ono, and Charlotte Moorman were in the vanguard of performance based work. Schneeman's sexually explicit imagery pioneered the use of her own body to explore the relationship between experience and imagination. In America's "Second Wave of Feminism", women artists and critics banded together to challenge and expand the male dominated art world. At the same time, in London, the first Womens Liberation Art Group founded by Margaret Harrison formed in 1970.

1972 was the year "The Feminist Art Journal" began in NYC, and in England, a women's collective founded the feminist journal "Spare Rib." A few years later, Heresies was born in 1977, and "Chrysalis" began publication in Los Angeles, where Judy Chicago had organised the first feminist arts program in Fresno State in California. Forty years later, her monumental multi media piece, "Dinner Party" has found a permanent home in the Elizabeth Sackler Feminist Art Center in the Brooklyn Museum.

Women-artists like Faith Ringgold, Nancy Grossman, Barbara Nessim, Mary Beth Edelson, Martha Rosler, Miriam Schapiro, Harmony Hammond, May Stevens, Nina Yankowitz used their art as an intersection between politics and creativity. Arlene Raven, Lucy Lippard, Elizabeth Hess and Marcia Tucker were just some of the critics/historians /curators to address the burgeoning artistic movement.



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Speaking with Carey Lovelace, critic, historian and co-Curator and Commissioner (along with Holly Block, director of the Bronx Museum) of the American Pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennale, she recalled the seventies as a time when, “Women began to meet and come to lofts in Soho. It was the first time women saw other women-artists, and to see each other’s work.” Coincidentally, the 2013 American pavilion is featuring a woman-artist, women-Commissioners and fabricators of the exhibition.

As a young woman and poet, I became involved in consciousness raising groups that focused on writing. Womens CR began in New York in 1967. Adapted from a tool of the Civil Rights movement, participants “go around the room, talking about personal issues.” In 1973, probably at the height of CR, 100,000 American women participated. At the same time, visual artists banded together in similar groups to discuss and explore female creativity.

Nina Yankowitz recalls her first show reviewed in the New York Times as a “one man show”, which was followed a week later by critic Cindy Nemser writing a rebuttal article with the headline, “Can Women have One Man Shows?” Nina recalls, “The Feminist Imagery in the 70’s depicted by Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro and Joyce Kozloff and many other women, was invaluable to the Feminist Art movement. They developed a methodology based upon the perception of the then disenfranchised activities commonly associated with women’s work. For example, quilt making, sewing, embroidery, pattern and decoration, hormonal recordings, handicrafts, knitting, pottery, were some of those addressed.” Nina’s installations are internationally exhibited and a recent one woman exhibition was shown in Williamsburg’s Galapagos Space.



Two women-artists (and friends) who began their careers in the late fifties and continue to make vital and exciting work are Barbara Nessim (currently exhibiting at London’s V&A Museum) and Nancy Grossman, both graduates of Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. Barbara began working as an illustrator right out of college and was an early explorer of computer arts.

Barbara welcomed me to her beautiful sunny Village studio overlooking the Hudson River. She showed me her treasure trove of sketchbooks, going back to 1963.

The Bronx born artist recalled being twenty-five and unmarried, and viewed as an oddity. “I was consciously not married. I didn’t want to be married before I could support myself.”

In 1967, Barbara was the second woman to be hired as an instructor at the School of Visual Arts. Teaching was a way for Barbara to exchange ideas, and she became a seminal influence at Parsons The New School for Design, where she helped create their state-of-the-art computer lab.

Because of her high visibility in the illustration world, “Time invited me to be an artist in residence at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. I taught myself and became known as a person working with computers. Computers made the art world open up and the Internet has opened so many creative avenues.” Today, she is heralded as a pioneer in the world of digital arts.

The talented Nessim was “very focused on being an illustrator and making a living. In the 70’s Richard Lindener tried to get me a gallery. The Madison Avenue galleries all liked my work. But one guy said to me, “How old are you? Look at you. People are going to look at you and think you’re going to get married, have kids, and the gallery’s going to lose their artist.” While Barbara did participate in group shows, she focused on iconic illustrative pieces for major publications. When her old friend Gloria Steinem founded Ms. Magazine, Nessim’s signature undulating, sensual line helped define the hip vitality the magazine was recognized for.

Barbara’s current show at the Victoria and Albert Museum “An Artful Life” coincides with a major monograph of

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the same name. At her studio, the surrealistic collages she is creating dazzled me. A recent project, “Chronicles of Beauty” features thirteen large-scale digital collages printed on aluminum and commissioned by New York’s Eventi Hotel. The images combine classical sculptures with photos gleaned from contemporary fashion magazines.

Nancy Grossman, friend and peer of Barbara remembers, “We were all accomplished and loved each other a lot. Barbara was always so generous and supportive.”



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Born in New York City, to an Italian mother and Jewish father, Nancy’s family moved upstate to Oneonta. Living with her extended family, Nancy became the artist who sewed doll clothes and made toys for the younger children. At twenty-three, after graduation from Pratt Institute, Nancy began showing her drawings and paintings. An early Richard Avedon photo of Nancy shows her with her roommate Anita Siegal, “the only person I believed in.” Together, the young women illustrated children’s books, hung out in downtown bars. As the young women artists painted and played in New York, “we shared a loft, and worked like dogs and went to the bars. We never said we were artists. Anita would say she was a hairdresser and I would say I was a manicurist.” At twenty five, Nancy won a Guggenheim Fellowship for her early paintings, the only woman painter to receive the coveted award that year. In the following years, she illustrated several children’s books, even collaborating on one with Anita.

At the same time, the Civil Rights struggle blazed across America, and later protests over the Vietnam War took center stage. Anita Seigel was creating Op Ed illustrations for the New York Times, and continued to do so for twenty five years. An early group, Women Artists in Revolution (WAR) began to write to museums in protest of their corporate sponsorship, and Nancy became a pivotal member of women’s artist groups that provided both support systems and political protest.

By the time she was thirty, Nancy had five one-woman shows, and by the late sixties began to work on what were going to become her iconic leather covered sculptural heads. Grossman has said that the heads are “self portraits”, and likens the muzzled, locked in heads to portraits of “self imposed and societal restrictions.” Although she is best known for her leather sculptures, Nancy continues producing collages and drawings. She lives in Brooklyn, in a magnificently reconvered lumber yard, and recently had an exhaustive one-woman show, “ Tough Life Diary” at the Tang Museum at Skidmore College.

Until her death, art critic Arlene Raven was Nancy’s companion. In her last years, Arlene, along with Judy Chicago founded Rutgers University’s Feminist Art Project. Nancy and Arlene, both foremothers of the women’s art movement, met through the Chicago Women’s Archives and lived together in New York City, first on the lower east side, and later, in the spacious reconvered lumber yard with sweeping ceilings and room enough for both Nancy and Arlene’s studios.



In writing this, the most rudimentary of introductions to a revolutionary cultural movement, I am awed by the bravery and pluralism of our feminist foremothers, including the two inspirational artists I was fortunate enough to meet with.

Carey Lovelace commented about the Feminist Art movement. "It changed everything. I interviewed Eric Fischl (the prominent American realist painter) at California Arts. He actually and very graciously said that the feminist bravery of expressing emotion through art profoundly influenced him."

"The opening up of the realm of the personal, pluralism, deconstructionism, all came out of feminism. Using art to analyse, gender politics, the re-emergence of collage, are all traceable back to feminism and it's impact on contemporary art."

Half a century after the stirrings of a feminist art movement, there is a strong presence of women artists, curators, gallerists, museum staff, historians, critics. The specific female imagery of the seventies has evolved to a creative cornucopia ranging from traditional painting and sculpture to digital, performance, cyber, installations and multi media works. Male artists (like Nick Cave's costumes and choreography and Will Cotton's painterly confections) embrace what was once designated "women's work."

In today's commercial and complex art world, women continue to explore shifting political agendas while expanding and promoting social change.

In 1970 Ilka Scobie was one of the 20,000 marching down Fifth Avenue in the first Women's Strike for Equality. She is a poet and teacher whose prose have appeared in Artcritical, Artnet and Italian Marie Claire.

Words: Ilka Scobie Photo credits top to bottom: 1.Barbara Nessim photo ©Dorothy Handelman,2.Barbara Nessim c 1976 Photo © Seiji Kakazaki "The Dream", collage and pen and ink 1983 "Untitled", collage pen and ink and watercolor. Nancy Grossman with leather sculptures photo © Artlyst 2013/MOMA/ Tang Museum 4.Margaret Harrison Drawing (Courtesy, Payne Shurvell Gallery London) Judy Chicago The Dinner Party courtesy Brooklyn Museum, Gloria Steinem & Barbara Nessim in 2013 Photo © Artlyst



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