The Schapiro Retrospective

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By Nancy Porter

In its early manifestations, women's studies celebrated the artistic achievements of women. In the past ten years, the labor of scholars has resurrected numbers of individual artists, expanded our acceptance and understanding of the diverse forms women's creative expression has taken — diary, quilt, and song as well as novel, painting, and sonata — and provided the theory and practice of studying the individual's achievement in relation to her cohorts, past and present. The decade has also brought the fruit of contemporary artists who have incorporated feminist perspectives into statements innovative in form and content.

For celebration, documentation, and discussion. For instance, Schapiro's introduction of actual artifacts (aprons, doilies, handkerchiefs) into highly complex and self-conscious formal designs raises questions worth pursuing. What happens, aesthetically and politically, when an artifact is transposed from one context into a far different other? Essays in the catalogue argue that Schapiro affirms her discovered continuity with women of the past, raises the private forms to new prominence in the public forum of art, and in the process celebrates rather than obliterates the original creators. This, I think, is an arguable point. One might introduce another perspective via Alice Walker's short story "Everyday Use." Would it have been better to leave the needlework and fabric swatches in the Collector's Corner at Goodwill Industries? Where is the resurrection of our — or someone else's — ancestors leading? The materials to discuss these and other questions central to women's studies will be in the catalogue and in the classroom.

Nancy Porter is Associate Professor of English at Portland State University in Oregon.

FUTURE EXHIBITION DATES

Through May 2, 1981: Vassar College Art Gallery, Poughkeepsie, New York
May 30-July 5, 1981: Midwest Museum of Art, Elkhart, Indiana
August 17-October 4, 1981: Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas
January 23-March 6, 1982: Visual Arts Gallery, Florida International University, Miami, Florida
March 20-May 4, 1982: Lock Haven Art Center, Orlando, Florida

Not everyone will have the opportunity to view the exhibition. We may, however, purchase the catalogue. Sixty plates, twenty-five in color; interpretive essays by Thalia Gouma-Peterson, Linda Nochlin, Miriam Schapiro, Norma Broude, and John Perreault; two interviews with the artist by Paula Bradley and Ruth Appelhof; and a cover designed by Schapiro treat the eye and stimulate reflection.

Those familiar with the artist primarily as participant in the creation of the environmental piece Womanhouse (1972) and pioneer in the "pattern painting" movement with her fabric collages will experience, as I did, surprise: Schapiro the abstract expressionist and Schapiro the painter of struggling shapes imprisoned in towerlike structures. As one essay argues, and the plates illustrate, Schapiro's quest for integration — artist, woman, feminist, past and present — whether overt in symbol or overt in image and experimental form, unifies the development. Thus we are led to see the conflict between the public artist and the private woman in the 1958 abstract Interview by its juxtaposition with the inspiration—a newsclip photo of Charles Lindbergh seated between his dutiful appearing wife and the independent Gloria Swanson. (The painting may symbolize the fragmented female identity of the era, but the statement is also highly amusing visually.) And we are persuaded, again by the thoughtful combination of text and plate, that the egg imprisoned in the tower (1961 Shrine series) transformed to the assertive octagon of Oz (1968) represents a change in the terms and resolution of the conflict. "My aim," says editor and curator Gouma-Peterson, "was to produce a record of the work done in twenty-six years. And to produce a catalogue useful for the art historian and women's studies teacher."

As a teacher who uses some of the traditional forms of women's expression in women's studies courses, I am struck by the catalogue's promise to stimulate study, the feminist artist Miriam Schapiro and the feminist art historian Thalia Gouma-Peterson have collaborated in the production of a traveling exhibition and accompanying catalogue: Miriam Schapiro, A Retrospective: 1953-1980.

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