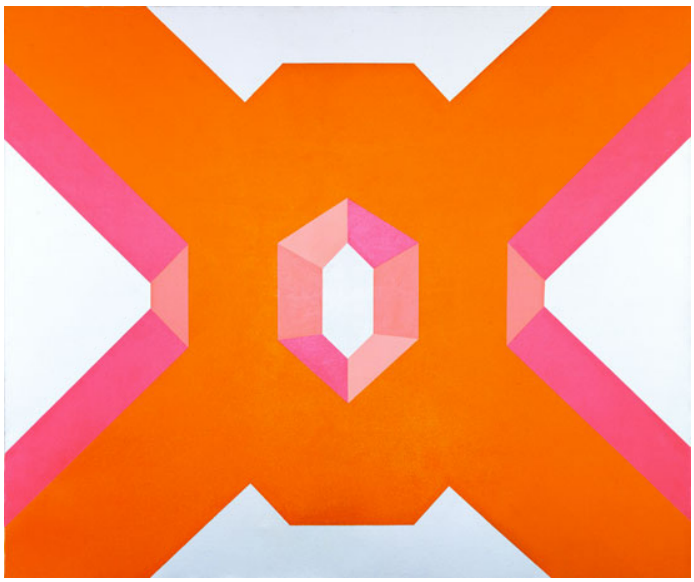
artcritical
the online magazine of art and ideas

Friday, February 19th, 2016

Icons of Female Power: Early Works of Miriam Schapiro

by **Rebecca Allan**

***Miriam Schapiro: A Visionary* at the National Academy Museum and *Miriam Schapiro: The California Years, 1967-1975* at Eric Firestone Loft**
National Academy: February 4 to May 8, 2016
1083 Fifth Avenue at 89th Street
New York City, (212) 369-4880
Firestone: February 4 to March 6, 2016
4 Great Jones Street, between Broadway and Lafayette Street
New York City, (917) 324-3386



Miriam Schapiro, Big Ox, 1967. Acrylic on canvas, 90 x 108 inches © The Estate of Miriam Schapiro, courtesy of Eric Firestone Gallery

In 1972, the year that Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago were creating *Womanhouse* with their students at Cal Arts, my older cousin Annie taught me a game called Masculine/Feminine. Two players would alternate, pointing to an object and asking, "Masculine, or feminine?" *Telephone, driveway, rec-room*: masculine. *Paint brush, river, rhinestone*: feminine. This game was a lot of fun, but it was also strange, because, as a ten-year-old kid, I couldn't understand why *things* would have a gender. Two concurrent

exhibitions of the work of Miriam Schapiro (1923–2015) in New York have me playing this game all over again. As I stand in front of her iconic *Dollhouse* (1972), on view at the National Academy Museum, I think about the broader impact of Schapiro's legacy, as well as the new knowledge that we can acquire by focusing on a distinct period in the work of this luminary of feminist art.

Miriam Schapiro: The California Years, 1967-1975 inaugurates the Eric Firestone Loft at 4 Great Jones Street, a fourth-floor walk-up that is redolent with the histories of artists including Walter De Maria, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Keith Haring, who once had studios nearby. Firestone now handles the Schapiro estate, and his commitment to scholarly research is commendable. Installed within a long, whitewashed space flooded with winter light, this tightly curated exhibition provides a view onto a lesser-known body of Schapiro's work, created during an eight-year period when the artist was living on the West Coast. The Firestone show establishes a connective thread from Schapiro's Abstract Expressionist works, to the "shrines" of the early 1960s, to the geometric abstractions, to the *femmage* works that are on view uptown, in a concentrated if modest survey curated by Maura Reilly at the National Academy Museum.

By the time Schapiro arrived in California in 1967 with her husband, the painter Paul Brach, she was already a successful New York artist. She had attended meetings at the Eighth Street Club (where, like the other few women in attendance, she never spoke up) and was friends with artists such as Jack Tworkov, Joan Mitchell, Jane Wilson, and John Gruen. During the 1950s she exhibited at the Tanager and Stable Galleries before joining André Emmerich, one of the rare serious galleries to include women in his stable, where she showed regularly from 1958 to 1976.

Miriam Schapiro, Silver Windows, 1967. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 50 inches. Collection of Beau R. Ott

The heroic scale and gestural reach of her paintings in the 1950s demonstrate Schapiro's ambition to be reckoned with alongside the Ab-Ex big boys. Two works in the National Academy exhibition, *Fanfare* (1958) and *Façade* (1959), exemplify Schapiro's engagement with the ideas of her generation and antecedents (Hans Hofmann, Arshile Gorky, Mitchell). However technically accomplished, these paintings feel derivative; they demonstrate what Paul Brach (including his own work) meant when he wrote "Perhaps our generation was starting to realize that we had inherited a successful revolution," and that "Our gestural abstractions came too easily. They needed some resistance. In Mimi's case it was geometry." In 1962, Schapiro began a series of "shrine" paintings with stacked compartments that contained icons of the studio and femininity (*paint tubes*: masculine, *egg*: feminine). The shrines remind me of Medieval altarpieces with their classical arches and precious metals, just as they reference the artist's painful quest for a unified identity, and self-acceptance as a woman and an artist. The cool purity of *Silver Windows* (1967), with its mitered grid lays down the rules of the game for the geometric works to follow.

In 1967 Mimi and Paul moved to California where he became chair of the art department at the University of California San Diego. When they arrived, the man who had promised a position for Mimi told him that there was none. Paul threatened to break his contract, and a lecturer position was found for Mimi. Working with David Nabilof, a young physicist at the university, Schapiro was able to manipulate and transform her geometric drawings. She harnessed the new technology to try new compositional variations after painting *Big Ox (*1967) on view at the National Academy.

Composed of four enormous truss-like "limbs" intersecting a central, open octagon, *Big Ox*, and its companion painting *Side Ox* (at Firestone) are realized in electric hues of cadmium orange, silver, and pink acrylic paint so saturated that these paintings have an almost sonic impact, like a jackhammer pulverizing concrete. Schapiro's radical pinks—from the rosy hues of Giovanni Sassetta's altarpieces to the intestinal color of Pepto Bismol—were all about secrets and private places. This work also looks like a direct response to Ronald Bladen's *X*, (1967), a monumental aluminum sculpture that had been exhibited at the Corcoran Gallery that year.

The *Ox* paintings became icons of female power, eventually claimed by Schapiro and Judy Chicago (her partner in founding the Feminist Art Program at Cal Arts) as the first example of "central core imagery." While in 1968 she explained that *Big Ox* was inspired "by the thought of a large, imposing sense of landscape coming toward the viewer and inviting him to become part of it, Schapiro later described it as her "explicit cunt painting (that) was a real cry in the darkness…for something besides the symbol of the phallus." Indeed, for many early feminist artists geometric abstraction was a formal device for encoding the ideas of a female aesthetic domain that would eventually challenge the hegemony of a male-dominated art world.

In California, the slick surfaces associated with industrial fabrication, spray painting techniques, automotive lacquers, and plastics were very much in vogue among the artists associated with Finish-Fetish and Light and Space who placed a West Coast stamp on

East Coast minimalism. But Schapiro, who could see the Pacific Ocean from her rented La Jolla house, was inspired by the light and water of her adopted environment. *Keyhole*, whose monumental, synthetic "body" projects like an industrial piston into the viewer's space, also floats on a vapor-sprayed ground that could equally be a sky from Tiepolo or Venice Beach.

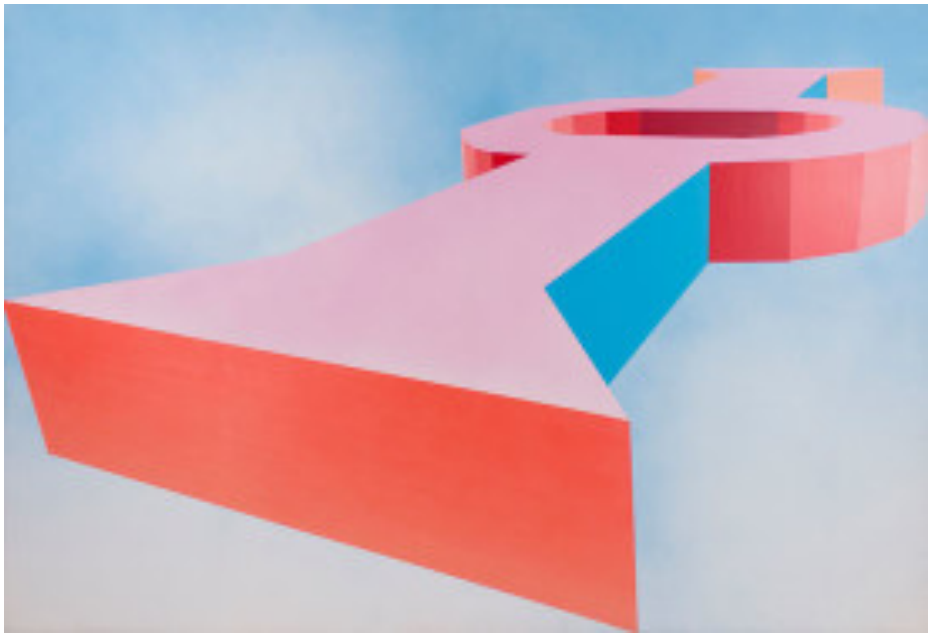
Miriam Schapiro (with Sherry Brody), Dollhouse, 1972. Wood and mixed media, 79-3/4 x 82 x 8-1/2 inches. Smithsonian American Art Museum

By 1972, when she created *Dollhouse* (installed within *Womanhouse*) in collaboration with artist Sherry Brody, Schapiro had redefined collage as *femmage*, establishing a continuity between high art collage and works made by anonymous women using traditional craft materials. In their playfully illustrated essay "Waste Not, Want Not: An Inquiry into What Women Saved and Assembled," a classic feminist text that was first published in the magazine *Heresies*, Schapiro and artist Melissa Meyer laid out historic precedents and criteria for femmage. As Meyer remembers it, during a meeting at Joyce Kozloff's loft, Mimi had a phone call with the art critic Grace Glueck and together they coined the term "femmage."

Reflecting this deepening interest in domestic materials*, Flying Carpet* (1972), at Eric Firestone, reveals the fragment of a staircase seen through a tear in a tilted rectangle (carpet). This transitional work includes bits and pieces of Japanese paper and calico-patterned wallpapers and fabrics that break through the painting's interior boundaries. With its allusion to Middle-Eastern textiles and myth, Schapiro must have been charged up about the fact that she was finding a way to move beyond the pure, hard-edged abstractions by way of materials that were cut, torn, frayed and literally pliable.

From the mid to late 1970s, Schapiro was a leader of Pattern and Decoration movement. Coming to a variety of conclusions in their own work, these artists were nevertheless unified by the consciousness-raising dialogues of the Women's Movement as well as a shared interest in the ornament and decorative arts traditions (especially ceramics, textiles, and gardens, and architecture) from around the world.

Schapiro's dedication to forging an artistic language that would recast women's work, along with the varied phases of her production, has yielded a rich inheritance. Look at Carrie Moyer's poured and stenciled paintings, the arena for what she describes an "erotics of craft," or Mickalene Thomas's explorations of female erotic power and mind-bending domestic interiors that incorporate (gender-indeterminate) rhinestones, copper pots, animal prints, and fake wood paneling. Consciously or not, these artists channel Schapiro who can be thought of as their enabling Athena.



Miriam Schapiro, Keyhole, 1971. Acrylic and spray paint on canvas, 71.5 x 106 inches © The Estate of Miriam Schapiro

Miriam Schapiro, Flying Carpet, 1972. Acrylic and collage on canvas, 60 x 50 inches © The Estate of Miriam Schapiro

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