

ARTSEEN

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MIRIAM SCHAPIRO

by *Kim Power*

MIRIAM SCHAPIRO: *A Visionary*

NATIONAL ACADEMY MUSEUM | FEBRUARY 4 – MAY 8, 2016

MIRIAM SCHAPIRO, *The California Years: 1967-1975*

ERIC FIRESTONE LOFT | FEBRUARY 4 – MARCH 19, 2016

Two concurrent exhibits, one uptown at the National Academy Museum and one downtown at the Eric Firestone Loft, offer versions of the legacy of Miriam Schapiro (1923 – 2015), one in the vaunted halls of academic history and the other within the white walls of a contemporary gallery setting. Context is everything, from the frame that surrounds a painting (or lack thereof) to the space that encompasses it. Despite their common denominator, the Academy and Firestone create divergent perceptions of the same artist.



Miriam Schapiro, *Agony in the Garden*, 1991. Acrylic on canvas with glitter, 90 3/16 × 72 3/16 × 2 inches. © Miriam Schapiro. Courtesy the Brooklyn Museum. *Miriam Schapiro: A Visionary* is the premier exhibit of the Academy's newly

appointed chief curator Maura Reilly, previously the founding curator of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum. Intended as a mini-survey, the selection jumps from Abstract Expressionism to Abstract Classicism, from Schapiro's Pattern and Decoration period to her collaboration series and shrine paintings. This meandering path makes it difficult to form a cohesive impression of the artist's work. Additionally, the setting of this staid Beaux-Arts building creates an atmosphere of bygone days, making the work appear dated.

Among the works of note, *The Dollhouse* (1972), made as an extension of Schapiro's shrine paintings with the collaboration of artist Sherry Brody, should not be missed. Its rooms, extracted from the Dollhouse Room in *Womanhouse* (1972)—a site-specific conceptual art and performance space conceived by art historian Paula Harper and organized by Schapiro and artist Judy Chicago as part of the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) Feminist Art program—present miniature dioramas with scenes that correlate to the surreal shadowboxes of Joseph Cornell and include an assemblage of objects: an illustration of a bear in a sunny landscape pasted to the exterior of a window looking in on the folk-art head of a demon resting in a bassinet, while a black rubber snake wound around a fake tree stump sits menacingly close to a plastic baby peeking out of a plant pot, behind which a toy alligator lurks on a miniature bookshelf. It is all very odd, with a sense of the uncanny as if taken from the playroom of a precocious child in the late '60s whose imaginary narrative has been interrupted in medias res. Although the contents of *Dollhouse* are intriguing from an archival point of view, the actual concept, of elevating the quotidian of women's belongings and craft to an art form, is lost in the ambiguousness of the presentation.

Compartmentalization and enshrinement of meaning resurface in Schapiro's later mixed-media painting *My History* (1997), a house-shaped canvas displaying autobiographical windows of meaning which include signs from her Jewish heritage: the word "Jew" spelled out in French, Dutch, and German next to badges of the Star of David, a picture of Anne Frank and a menorah just under the pointed roof. Other objects include a lace doily and fabric from Schapiro's extensive collection of textile remnants and black-and-white photographs: a portrait of Frida Kahlo and one of suffragettes lining up to vote. With no sense of irony in its unabashed resemblance to a sentimentally handcrafted scrapbook, *My History* risks invalidation as fine art in spite of its documentation and representation of weighty and important events. A modern equivalent of this kind of visual profile exists in social media such as Instagram with its cellular narration of personal identity and branding.

Consistent throughout the show is Schapiro's postmodernist search for identity, evident both in her exploration of diverse visual languages as well as in her choice of subject matter. *Agony in the Garden* (1991), from the "Feminography" series, identifies one of

Schapiro's favorite female icons, Frida Kahlo. Utilizing the device of appropriation under the guise of collaboration, Kahlo's self-portrait *Broken Column (La Columna Rota)* (1944) is placed amongst flowers and swirling amoeba-like shapes in an ornamental lushness that suggests fecundity. Ironically, Kahlo's painting refers to the injury that left her barren. The original painting's desert landscape has been deleted and replaced with an organic tree form, possibly an abstract representation of a Kabbalistic Tree of Life, transforming this trauma into a more optimistic scenario. Was Schapiro referencing the El Greco painting by the same name, creating a transliteration of Kahlo as a Christ figure? Kahlo's own self-representation as a martyr gives this conjecture plausibility. Given Schapiro's extensive knowledge of art history and her personal identification as a Jewish woman, one can only assume that she was at least conscious of these references, if not deliberate.

It takes some sleuthing to connect all the styles represented at the Academy show without some prior knowledge of Schapiro's history and iconography. The exhibit displays thorough labeling and explanations throughout. However, from a purely visual standpoint, it lacks cohesiveness, diluting the potential of Schapiro's work to deliver a more powerful message.



Miriam Schapiro, *Dollhouse*, 1972. Wood and mixed media, 79 3/4 × 82 × 8 1/2 inches. © Miriam Schapiro. Courtesy the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

In contrast, the exhibit *Miriam Schapiro, The California Years: 1967-1975* at Firestone, not only updates the frame of reference of Schapiro's paintings by the inference of its modernistic space and Noho location, but, by limiting the scope of the presentation it creates the impression of a united body of work. The large majority of paintings on display deploy the sharp clean edges and flat geometric forms made familiar through the

1959 exhibition *Four Abstract Classicists*. The boldness of the work, synonymous with the intent, reflects the radical use of this visual language for a female artist of the 1970s—something that we take for granted today.

The exhibit manifests a subtly subversive message of feminine assertiveness throughout. *Byzantium's* (1967) forms dynamically jut out into space, floating with forward thrusting momentum. All of the structures are rectangular with the exception of one pencil pointed tip, quietly affirming its otherness. Hanging catty-corner to *Byzantium*, *Study for Jigsaw* (c. 1969) complements its convexity with four rectangular forms that meet in the middle, creating the illusion of movement towards the interior. The abstract allusion to male and female identity is easily detectable.

Side OX (1968) emblazons the symbol OX, painted in bright orange acrylic with pink sides, a form reconfigured from drawings by Schapiro fed into a computer program designed by physicist David Nalibof. Silver metallic paint acts as a mirror for the negative space not fully subsumed by the oversized glyph. As Schapiro's self-proclaimed "cunt painting," it is part of the "central core" imagery that she and Judy Chicago promoted as a symbol of female empowerment. Its inescapable force dominates the room as much as its own planar space.

Flying Carpet (1972), from Schapiro's early Pattern and Decoration paintings, echoes the concept of the "central core" and provides an entryway to investigation. A central stairway in dark gray and white is encircled by found patterned fabrics in a range of earth tones and oranges that overlap and escape black lined borders onto a pink background. This notion of breaking boundaries is an integral part of the P&D movement, which began as a rebellion against the stringent formalist rules of the 1970s. An incongruent tension overrides the claustrophobic nostalgia of the colors and fabrics.

Firestone's fresh presentation brings Schapiro's work into the 21st century. Bright and brash, the artwork shakes off the dust of history. Nonetheless, it is worth taking in what the Academy has presented. Chances are, the examples presented there will be expanded upon in the future and should be taken as a preamble to an extended conversation.

<http://www.brooklynrail.org/2016/03/artseen/miriam-schapiro>