

Miriam Schapiro's West Coast Evolution

The Eric Firestone Loft opened on Great Jones Street on Feb. 4 with "Miriam Schapiro: The California Years, 1967 to 1975."

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Miriam Schapiro's earlier work, as seen at the Eric Firestone Loft in New York City,

looked much closer to the hard-edge abstraction of her male counterparts.

The Estate of Miriam Schapiro/Firestone Gallery

There are two recent trends of note to East End art aficionados who split their time in varying percentages between here and New York City. One is the expansion of some East Hampton gallery spaces into Manhattan; the other is the rediscovery of some native female artists long relegated to the sidelines of mainstream art history. A current show at a new loft space in NoHo is emblematic of both.

The Eric Firestone Loft opened on Great Jones Street on Feb. 4 with “Miriam Schapiro: The California Years, 1967 to 1975.” The show underlines how central and important the work of female artists of the mid to late-20th century is to the current art market and to art history in general. Considered against the backdrop of an overheated week of fairs presented in tandem with the Armory Show at the piers, the Firestone show was merely one of many galleries and booths devoted to women artists such as Charlotte Park, Hedda Sterne, and Carolee Schneemann, whose work looked strong, fresh, and vital compared to the anemic and picked-over offerings by their more famous male contemporaries. The Firestone show is a supplement to a survey of the artist (who died last year) at the National Academy Museum uptown, which is on view through May 8. The Firestone show is only on view through Saturday.

It tackles much of Ms. Schapiro’s early mature development from hard-edge abstraction and computer-aided drawing and composition to her “femme” compositions of frilly fabric, wallpaper, and other loose bits of found material.

The show’s earliest work does not differ too much from that of her male contemporaries who were painting in a similar fashion. In 1968, that began to change with her “OX” paintings. These paintings continued the hard-edged abstraction she had been working with and added to it a subtle but unmistakable reference to the female body.

Ms. Schapiro and Paul Brach originally settled in New York City and a Wainscott barn as a young married couple. She moved with her husband to San Diego when he was offered a job at the University of California. She also took a job there as a painting instructor and began to use the school’s computer lab.

Her work in these years toyed with suggesting three-dimensionality, a big no-no in the strict Formalist doctrines of the time, but kept it in check by using color to flatten the composition and suppress any illusion that the canvas was anything but flat. It appears she saw the computer as a way to achieve the same ends.

A colleague translated her simple drawings into coordinates and fed them into an early Hewlett-Packard that worked with a program to create 50 different three-dimensional viewpoints of the same drawing. She would choose a couple and use them as inspirations for compositions of new paintings.

With this effort, she seems to have synthesized into the medium of painting the use of industrial materials and a distaste for the artist's hand that sculptors had developed at that time. She wasn't the only one, but she was one of the pioneers. Her art further moved into this industrial realm with her use of Mylar as a support for her work whether she used paint or tape to re-create those computer generated designs. The painted and taped line "drawings" became blockier compositions in the following years.

These are the most striking works in the show, but the artist doesn't stop there in synthesizing new ideas into her practice. An early follower of the feminist movement in the 1960s, she worked with Judy Chicago to develop the feminist art program at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia in the 1970s.

Although she was already grappling with women's history and the female form in her work, these explorations took on a more tactile makeup in the construction of her first femmage works. These works "reconciled two aspects of my reality, my home with its social and domestic responsibilities and my studio where the fabrics of my life situated themselves on the surfaces of my canvases," the artist said in a talk at the Victor D'Amico Institute of Art in 1985.

The Firestone show includes three examples, each emblematic of the different ways she tackled assembling these works and her use of paint within them. They are gaudy and much fussier than the more minimal aesthetic that she had worked with in the preceding periods. It was clearly a personal vision informed by her own experiences as a woman, and it became a herald of the Pattern and Decoration movement.

Other New York City spaces that East Hampton art dealers have opened this year include Harper's Apartment, an Upper East Side extension of Harper's Books in East Hampton on 74th Street. Harper Levine, the owner of the enterprise, is showing Andre Ethier through April 3. Halsey McKay is sharing space with Ellie Rines on Henry Street in Chinatown and showing "Finish Him," an installation by Ian Cooper, through Sunday.



The gallery view includes "Side OX" and two of her "Mylar" series works
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An installation view including the "Femmeage" works in the gallery

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