



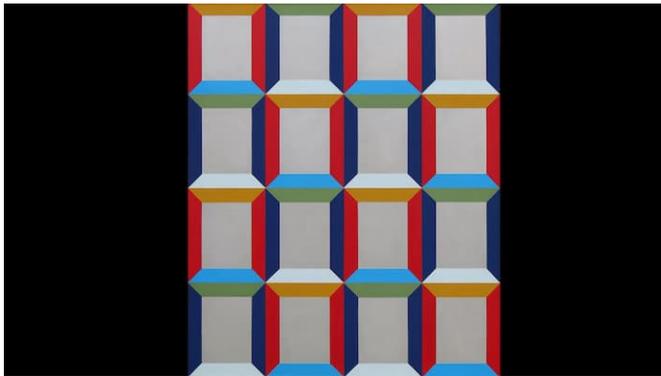
## Miriam Schapiro, A Visionary, National Academy Museum, New York — ‘Belated homage to a feminist icon’

This compact but comprehensive show pays tribute to a neglected artist

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Miriam Schapiro's 'Silver Windows' (1967). Collection of Beau R. Ott © Collection of Beau R. Ott

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by: **Ariella Budick**

When the icon of feminist art Miriam Schapiro died last June at 91, she had never had a retrospective in New York, the city where she grew up and launched her career. Now the National Academy Museum is paying her belated homage with *Miriam Schapiro, A Visionary*, a compact yet comprehensive survey that confronts both the calibre of her work and the shame of its neglect.

Schapiro was an artist who relished conflict. Explosiveness and constraint battled, to gorgeous effect, through her long career. As an Abstract Expressionist in the 1950s, she wallowed in sensual hues, letting her brush roam the canvas and dispense ebullient swaths of azure, lavender and mauve. The exuberant “Fanfare” (1958) heralds a life-long zest for colour, laid down in thick patches and paler pools.

The anti-emotional backlash that gripped the art world in the early 1960s made its mark on Schapiro’s style, too. Hard-edged line clamped down on free-flowing brushstroke. Relentless repetition and architectonic grids expressed a spirit of discipline. The views in “Silver Windows” (1967) are closed off, with opaque silver paint obstructing psychological and physical escape. “Cage” (1969) is even more explicitly confining: constructed with the aid of a computer, it layers the same cubic form in multiple iterations that connect, forming a maze of rooms without exit. Some artists experienced

minimalism as liberation; Schapiro seemed trapped in its serene geometries.

Yet just around that time, she experienced a breakthrough, one that took the outward form of hard-edged abstraction but opened up a new path towards personal and political empowerment. Looking at “Big Ox” now, it’s hard to understand the impact it had on its creator in 1967. Acid orange, purple and pink put on a gaudy show, and the interlocked letters O and X, massive against a silver background, recall the foil wallpaper that brought a soupçon of psychedelia to suburban dens. For Schapiro, though, the image was transformative: it represented the female body, shrugging off its patriarchal yoke. “The O was actually a hexagon with a pink labial interior whose geometry masked its sexual meaning,” a text panel quotes her as saying. “In painting this image I behaved unconsciously, like all women artists mentored by men. The piece was so powerful to me that when I was finished, I turned it to the wall for six months until I dared approach it again.”



*Miriam Schapiro's 'Big Ox' (1967). Estate of Miriam Schapiro/Eric Firestone Gallery © Estate of Miriam Schapiro/Eric Firestone Gallery*

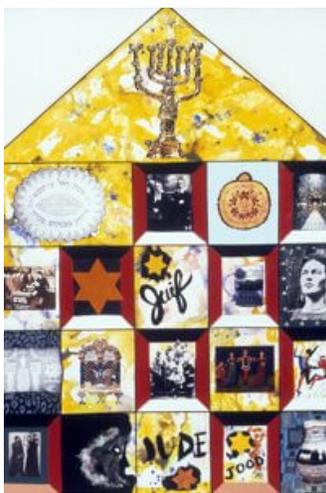
Ironically, this violent epiphany arrived the same year that Schapiro followed her husband, Paul Brach, to California, where he helped found new art departments, first at the University of San Diego and then at the California Institute of the Arts in Los Angeles. For Schapiro, the cross-country move incited a burst of creativity so volcanic it amounted to self-reinvention. At CalArts, she and Judy Chicago created a feminist art programme and, in 1971, took over a decrepit Hollywood mansion and turned it into “Womanhouse”. For that project, they corralled 21 students and a handful of local artists into creating a collective installation on the theme of the American home — how it

imprisoned women and locked away their hopes. In its first month, “Womanhouse” received 10,000 visitors.

The National Academy retrospective includes a bewitching piece that she made with Sherry Brody: a doll’s house that, Schapiro wrote, fused “the beauty, charm and supposed safety and comfort of the home with the unnameable terrors existing within its walls”. Menace shadows each room. The nursery looks cosy enough — except for the tusked monster in the baby’s bassinet and the enormous spider skulking about the floor. A snake coils in the parlour while a wild bear prowls the garden. Only the upstairs art studio feels relatively safe, if you don’t count the preening male model, nude except for his cowboy boots. The doll’s house pried Schapiro loose from the abstract geometries of “Big Ox”, but the way it fits decorative fabrics into the grid-like architecture reiterates the relentless tension between excess and restraint.

After “Womanhouse” Schapiro began thrusting so-called women’s work into the hyper-masculine domain of high art. Decoration became her rallying cry. In defiance of attempts to relegate crafts to second-class status, she invented “femmeage”, affixing fragments of paper and fabric to her paintings’ surfaces. Brightly coloured collages such as “Lady Gengi’s Maze” (1972) paid tribute to women throughout the centuries who, for lack of any alternative, poured their creativity into household ornaments. Here, she invokes the radiant Cubism of Juan Gris, whose riotous still-lives blended fabric and pattern into sensual geometries.

She also looked to the quilt, a colourful grid that avoids a central subject, offering the roving eye no obvious place to land. Her “femmeages” were democratic. Every part played an equal role, allowing no space for sexist hierarchies. A geometric framework that explodes into colour, the quilt amalgamates cool and warm (literally, since its function is to regulate the body’s temperature). The critic Linda Nochlin dubbed Schapiro’s achievement “a patchwork liberation”.



*'My History' (1997). Collection of Eleanor Flomenhaft © Collection of Eleanor Flomenhaft*

In her late paintings Schapiro started rooting around in her Jewish identity. Born in Toronto, she was the only child of Russian immigrants, her mother a dedicated Zionist. In “My History” (1997) she once again turns to the house as a matrix for life, framing shards of memory in separate chambers. It’s like an advent calendar crowned by a menorah. The words *Juif*, *Jood* and *Jude* appear next to the six-pointed Star of David, evoking the patches that Jews had to wear under the Nazis. But even in the midst of this personal excavation, old political convictions resurface. Intermingled among the symbols are photos of Alice B. Toklas, Gertrude Stein and Frida Kahlo — a pantheon of tough-minded female survivors whose company Schapiro surely aspired to join.

*To May 8, [nationalacademy.org](http://nationalacademy.org)*

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