eric firestone gallery

HYPERALLERGIC

Two Women in a Man's Art World

by John Yau
June 9, 2019

Marcia Marcus, "Self Portrait as Athena" (1973), oil and gold leaf on canvas, 58 x 36 inches, © 2019 Marcia Marcus, New York (courtesy Eric Firestone Gallery)

You are not likely to find the work of Mimi Gross and Marcia Marcus in the permanent collections of any major New York City museum. I find that both predictable and troubling.

I was reminded of the phrase, *Other Traditions* (2001), the collective title John Ashbery gave to the publication of his six Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard University, when I was looking at Marcia Marcus's grisaille portrait of "Edwin Dickinson" (1972) in the timely exhibition, *Double Portrait: Mimi Gross and Marcia Marcus*, at the Shirley Fiterman Art Center at the Borough of Manhattan Community College (May 23–July 27, 2019), curated by Lisa Panzera.

Twenty years before the publication of *Other Traditions*, Ashbery made the following observation about Dickinson in *New York* (October 13, 1980):

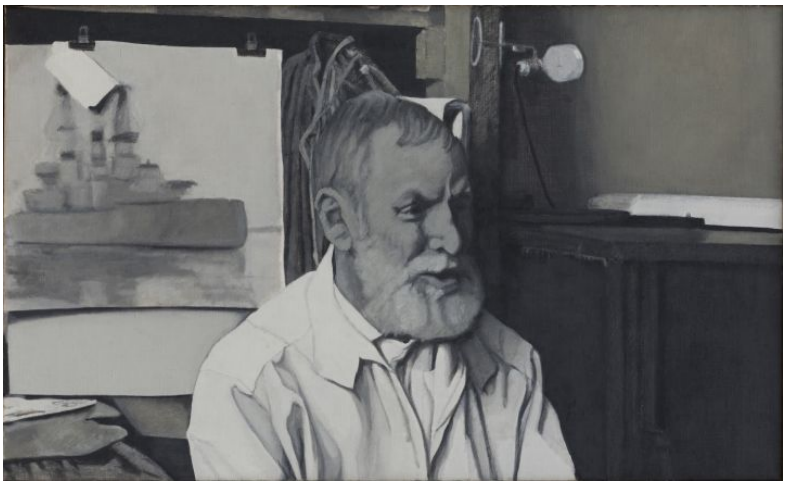
> Coming on this show fresh from Whitney's [Edward] Hopper retrospective made me wonder once again if we really know who our greatest artists are. I would be the last to deny Hopper's importance, but even in the smallest and most slapdash of these oil sketches, Dickinson seems to me a greater and more elevated painter, and all notions of "cerebralism" and "decadence" — two words critics throw around when they can't find anything bad to say about an artist — are swept away by the freshness of these pictures, in which eeriness and vivacity seem to go hand in hand, as they do in our social life.

You are not likely to find the work of Gross and Marcus on display in the area reserved for works from the "Permanent Collection" of any major New York City museum, and I find that both predictable and troubling. Ashbery was right of course: we might not "really know who our greatest artists are," but — at the same time — we don't have to look very far to know who does well in the auction houses. New records seem to be set every few months. This is one of the measures that art world institutions and their well-spoken representatives seem to routinely trot out

This combination of institutional bias and neglect is why Ashbery's title came to me. There are "other traditions" besides the handful that began to be entrenched in the late 1950s, and gained deeper roots throughout the 1960s and '70s, until the so-called death of painting took place.

The adherents to institutional traditions all believed that art existed on a continuum of progress. By contrast, many of the "other traditions" did not march forward under the banner flown in the name of paint-as-paint, which Jackson Pollock was supposed to have achieved in his drip paintings.

Marcia Marcus, "Edwin Dickinson" (1972), oil on canvas, 18 x 30 inches, © 2019 Marcia Marcus, New York (courtesy Eric Firestone Gallery)



This is why the pairing of Gross and Marcus, who were friends, in *Double Portrait* is so vital. It brings together 15 works by Gross (b. 1940) and 13 by Marcus (b. 1928) that were done between 1958 and 1983, by which time a new wave of male painters had become widely celebrated by the art world.

The one exception to the exhibition's time frame, Gross's painting, "Genny's Anatomy Class: After Rembrandt's 'Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp'" (2009-2012), is telling in its insertion of women into a composition based on a famous 17th-century group portrait whose figures are all men. This is a rewriting of a phallocentric history with a cheeky insouciance, and both Gross and Marcus are masters at it. They re-envision the world in paint, gouache, and graphite.

Mimi Gross, "Fourteenth Street" (1958-1959), oil on canvas, 60 x 47 inches, The Renee & Chaim Gross Foundation, © 2019 Mimi Gross / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, photo by Jason Mandell

There are three further points I want to make before I focus on single works. First, Gross was 18 and Marcus was 30 in 1958, the start date for the exhibition. Second, by including work that Gross completed between 1963 and 2012, *Double Portrait* gives viewers a taste of what she was up to after the time period covered in the revelatory exhibition, *Mimi*

Gross: Among Friends, 1958–1963, at Eric Firestone (February 28–April 20, 2019), which I reviewed. Third, it adds to our understanding of Marcus, whose exhibition *Marcia Marcus. Role Play: Paintings 1958-1973* at Eric Firestone (October 12 – December 2, 2017), I also reviewed. Beyond that, the pairing of these friends reveals their shared interest in portraiture, costumes, role-playing, and an imaginative engagement with art history. *Double Portrait: Mimi Gross and Marcia Marcus* helps fill out a too little known piece of art history.

As I have previously written about Gross, it is clear that "she was a strong, confident artist […] at the age of 18," someone who went her own way regardless of what was starting to gain traction in 1958-59 (Pop Art, Minimalism, and Color Field painting). In 1960, she spent the summer in Salzburg, Austria, studying at a school run by Oskar Kokoschka. German Expressionism and Fauvism were early influences, and it is clear that by the time she arrived in Salzburg, she was already familiar with different Expressionist painters. This is evidenced by her painting "14th Street" (1958-59), an early, ambitious, and youthful work that puts a very personal spin on Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's Berlin street paintings and Jan Müller's flattened space and crudely painted figures.

Mimi Gross, "Gertrude Stein and the Secretaries" (1974), oil crayon and gouache, 44 x 33 inches, © 2019 Mimi Gross / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, photo by Jason Mandella (courtesy Eric Firestone Gallery)

The strongest inspiration is likely to have come from Müller, who lived in Provincetown – where both Gross and Marcus spent time – and died in 1958 at the age of 36. The rapidly changing perspective of Gross's

figures as they walk down a street that runs horizontally along the painting's top edge and down its right side — locking in a vertical rectangle that fills the left half of the composition — is exuberant and offbeat, at once sophisticated and naïve.

The rectangle formed by the street's inverted L is a sideways shop window, whose inexplicably upended position puts the figures depicted inside the rectangle at a parallel level to the painting's top and bottom edges. Meanwhile, the one full-length figure on the street, in the foreground, a woman in a red dress and red shoes whose toes are touching the painting's bottom edge, is turning left, at what's going on in the store. Gross's geometric underpinning conveys the topsy-turvy mayhem of Manhattan's 14th Street.

Not yet 20, she pushes the expressionism of Kirchner and Müller into fresh territory.

The other thing that struck me about Gross's work is that she has never developed a signature style and that her works on paper constitute a major accomplishment that has yet to be institutionally recognized. In addition to her expressionist-inspired oil pastel portraits of the early 1960s, Gross has made other significant bodies of work where drawing is the defining process. Two marvelous examples are included in this exhibition: the sweetly funny "Gertrude Stein and the Secretaries" (1974, oil crayon and gouache, 44 x 33 inches) and the monumental, "After Delacroix's 'Women of Algiers,'" (1979-80, charcoal and chalk pastel on paper, 12 feet x 9 feet, 6 inches). In the latter case, if you think about how many artists have been confident enough to make a figure drawing on a sheet of paper as large as one that Gross filled, you get a strong sense of her ferocious ambition.

"Gertrude Stein and the Secretaries" is jam-packed with patterns and areas of solid color across the background and in the clothes worn by 12 women of varying sizes, seated or standing. A large red Smith Corona manual typewriter can be seen behind them, taking up much of the drawing's upper half. Perceptually, the typewriter is either resting on a blue and white rug or it is part of the blue and white wallpaper. The jump in scale is underscored by the large two standing figures on either side. The figure on the far right is Stein, with short gray hair and wearing a vest, as she often does in photographs. The black-haired woman on the left is Alice B. Toklas.

Both she and Gertrude tower over the women seated in front of them, suggesting the existence of two different worlds, with Stein and Toklas in a distant realm and the seated women in a more contemporary milieu.

By using a thin band to edge her forms, to outline a woman's hair or shoes, for example, Gross infuses the drawing with a visual electricity. Given that one of her related drawings is titled "Laurie and Richard in Provincetown" (1969), it seemed to me that Gross was likely inspired by the "Provincetown Print," a white-line woodcut developed by a group of artists living in Provincetown, Massachusetts, during the early part of the 20th century. The early American Modernist, Blanche Lazell (1878 – 1956), is well-known for her white-line prints.

Mimi Gross, "After Delacroix's 'Women of Algiers,' " (1979-80), charcoal and chalk pastel on paper, 12 feet x 9 feet and 6 inches, © 2019 Mimi Gross / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, photo by Jason Mandella (courtesy Eric Firestone Gallery)

Eugene Delacroix did two versions of "The Women of Algiers," 15 years apart, in 1834 and 1849. Many Impressionist painters were inspired by them, and in 1954, Pablo Picasso did a series of 15 paintings and many drawings using one version of Delacroix's imagery as a starting point. Knowing all of this, Gross both transforms the painting into a drawing and doubles the scale. She is trying to remain faithful to Delacroix's figures while simultaneously making them her own. The drawing is looser than the painting and Gross makes some parts more finished than others. Delacroix's darkened interior becomes one filled with light.

In Gross's "Gertrude Stein and the Secretaries" and "Laurie and Richard in Provincetown," she extended and transformed the possibilities of the "Provincetown Print," while in her monumental "After Delacroix's 'Women of Algiers,'" she takes on Delacroix's use of expressive brushstrokes and opulent color. In a second version, the assemblage, "Dark Air: After Delacroix's 'Women of Algiers'" (1980-81), she reimagines the scene, just as she did with Rembrandt's "Anatomy Lesson," so that the harem women have now become young women hanging out and having fun.

Marcus's exploration of the relationship between role-playing and portraiture underscores her attempt to probe the limits of a woman's fantasy life. If a young boy could pretend to be a brave general, what could a young girl imagine herself to be? Long before Cindy Sherman came on the scene, Marcus was using photography and costume as aids in her conceptually driven self-portraits. This is something she might have gotten from Dickinson, who did a number of self-portraits in which he is dressed in a Civil War uniform of a Union soldier – something he never felt compelled to justify.

Marcia Marcus, "Self-Portrait at Masada" (1978), oil on canvas, 52 x 70 inches, © 2019 Marcia Marcus, New York (courtesy Eric Firestone Gallery)

Marcus also did not feel the need to justify her interest. The simple fact is that she did portraits of herself dressed up and standing in front of classical ruins, as she does in "Self-Portrait as Athena" (1973) and "Self-Portrait at Masada" (1978). Realism and artifice become indistinguishable. She tended

to paint her figures with thinly applied layers of diluted paint, often using photographs as a source, in muted colors.

In “Self-Portrait as Athena,” she is standing in profile, wearing a pink chiffon dress, with a Greek battle helmet balanced on her head. Her right hand is on her hip as she stares at the viewer, stern and defiant. Behind her, in the distance, the roofless remains of an acropolis sit on the hill. There is no simple answer to what Marcus might be after in this and related paintings — and that, I think, is the point. She wants to open up a place for speculating about the relationship between self-image, fantasy, and history.

This is something that Marcus and Gross share – painting as a vehicle of the imagination. It is a stance that runs counter to other, better-known figurative artists, such as Philip Pearlstein, Alex Katz, and Fairfield Porter. I would argue that what Marcus and Gross attained is equal to their male counterparts, and in that regard is an integral part of art history.