

eric firestone gallery

ARTFORUM

PRINT DECEMBER 2022

Nina Yankowitz

ERIC FIRESTONE GALLERY | NEW YORK

Toward the end of the 1960s and into the early '70s, Nina Yankowitz was engaged with core questions about the nature of painting. Then an undergraduate student at New York's School of Visual Arts—at a time when two- and three-dimensional objects inhabited distinctly separate realms—she voiced a seditious desire to upend the binary: “I want to do both,” she told the head of SVA, according to her 2018 oral history interview for the Archives of American Art. In 1969, at age twenty-three, she had her first full-scale solo show at Manhattan's Kornblee Gallery (during a period when gallery representation for women was exceedingly rare), where she showed her series of “Draped Paintings,” 1967–72, ten of which were on view in her exhibition here. Freed from the stretcher and large in scale (two of them are more than ten feet high), the reconfigured works were imposing but not overpowering. Using sailboat canvas as her ground, she engaged both surface and space with a playful spirit of experimentation. She applied spray paint with varying degrees of saturation to make colorful abstractions; she then attached the works to the wall with staples, arranging them to accentuate their voluminous folds. In their most elegant iterations, such as the sunrise-hued *Goldie Lox*, 1968, which modulates from a sparingly pigmented left edge to a warmly saturated right, they married subtleties of color and form. Two pieces from Yankowitz's series of “Pleated Paintings,” 1970–72, also on view here, showed yet another way in which she pushed her experiments with three-dimensional form, adopting highly textured commercial pleating as an additional compositional tool. *Pleated Diptych*, 1972, revealed the complex compositions made possible by the combination of the folded substrate and spray, although its overall impact seemed more constrained than in the draped paintings.



Nina Yankowitz, *Sagging Spiro*, 1969, sprayed acrylic on canvas, 10' 5" x 5' 1".

In engaging the formal potential of the canvas itself, Yankowitz's works are closely related to contemporaneous pieces by some of her peers, including Harmony Hammond's accumulations of painted fabric strips from her “Presences” series, 1971–72, and Rosemary Mayer's airy draped fabric sculptures. All three artists unapologetically took up space in the gallery, their actions in this regard reflecting the urgency and priorities of the women's movement. Yet, of the three, Yankowitz in these years made art that had the most to do with paint, and with exploring what it could do, what effects it could produce. Take *Sagging Spiro*, 1969, whose title pokes fun at the limp physiognomy of Richard Nixon's vice president, Spiro T. Agnew, and which combined various saturations of spray paint—some of which produced threadlike drips—all in a cool palette that oscillated between sundry shades of purple and blue. It also incorporated the best use of tape for geometric effect. While related works featured taped-off boxes that disrupted compositional resolution, here—lightly sprayed over, rather than left completely raw—the technique added a quieter depth, complementing the effects of the piece's hues and folds.

EAST HAMPTON

4 NEWTOWN LANE
EAST HAMPTON, NY 11937
631.604.2386

EFG@ERICFIRESTONEGALLERY.COM

NEW YORK CITY

40 GREAT JONES STREET
NEW YORK, NY 10012
646.998.3727

EFG@ERICFIRESTONEGALLERY.COM

ERICFIRESTONEGALLERY.COM

eric firestone gallery

Yankowitz's early engagement with the conversation around what painting was and what it could be has turned out, in retrospect, to seem anomalous in a career that later moved into the realm of public art and installation, frequently centering on feminist activism and climate change. The shift paralleled her growing involvement with the women's movement (she was a founding member of the Heresies Collective in 1976). Those activities seem to have precipitated a decades-long questioning of whether one's artmaking should reflect one's politics. Yankowitz's 1997 co-chairing of a panel at the College Art Association conference in New York seemed in part a reckoning with this question of her own legacy. "It could be argued," read the CAA's call for papers, "that the efforts of [women artists in the 1960s and '70s], although they operated outside organized politicizing, helped advance the cause of women in important ways—perhaps even more than collective activity. . . . Did the artwork of these women, more than was acknowledged at the time, lay the groundwork for later feminist theories and organizational clout?" No matter how Yankowitz sees her early works today, the record shows that her interest in the intrinsic potential of form and medium flagged as her activism grew. At a time when it's clear that abstraction and politics were never mutually exclusive after all, I wish we could know how Yankowitz's art might have developed had she not felt obliged to choose between the two.

— Margaret Ewing

EAST HAMPTON

4 NEWTOWN LANE
EAST HAMPTON, NY 11937
631.604.2386
EFG@ERICFIRESTONEGALLERY.COM

NEW YORK CITY

40 GREAT JONES STREET
NEW YORK, NY 10012
646.998.3727
EFG@ERICFIRESTONEGALLERY.COM

ERICFIRESTONEGALLERY.COM