THE EAST HAMPTON STAR
SHINES FOR ALL

Miriam Schapiro Reconsidered at Firestone

Miriam Schapiro's "Doll's House," an oil-on-canvas painting from 1959, is part of an exhibition of her work in the Eric Firestone Gallery in Manhattan.

By Jennifer Landes

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There is no doubt Miriam Schapiro has received more attention and accolades in recent years than she had in the later period of her life. However, the urge to pigeonhole her into strictly feminist art movements, which many have, misses entire aspects of her creative output and her prescient and revolutionary approaches to new technology and art making.

At a panel discussion on April 26, conducted by Zoom from the Eric Firestone Gallery in downtown Manhattan, artists and art historians attempted to define her contributions in a more holistic sense and ask the important question of why she hasn't received her full due.

Lisa Wainwright, one of the speakers, was one of the first to bring up the question of why, knocking down "the obvious explanation, that she's a woman." Pointing to one example in the current Schapiro exhibition at Firestone in New York City, "Lady Gengi's Maze," she asked, "How can it be that that painting is not in a museum?"

The talk was moderated by William J. Simmons, a writer based in Los Angeles and author of "Queer Formalism: The Return." Judith Brodsky, Carrie Moyer, and Komal Shah joined Ms. Wainwright as speakers. Three of them have backgrounds in academia, among other achievements. Ms. Shah is what might be called an activist collector, seeking to bring to the fore female and other underrepresented artists from the past and present. Ms. Brodsky is the executor of the Schapiro estate and an artist. Ms. Moyer is co-director of the M.F.A. program in studio art at Hunter College.

Mr. Firestone has been one of Schapiro's staunchest advocates. He has been instrumental in working with her estate to exhibit her art and support institutions like New York's National Academy and the Museum of Arts and Design, which have shown her work and attempted their own re-examinations during the years after her death in 2015.

His latest exhibition, "Miriam Schapiro: The Andre Emmerich Years, Paintings From 1957–76," focuses on how Emmerich's support of her evolving style through his gallery encouraged her development.

That question of why, although stated explicitly near the end of the discussion, was implicit throughout it. Ms. Brodsky, who has been just as strong an advocate of the artist, said she didn't have a definitive answer, but posited that her work might still be too disturbing to art world conventions. She suggested that more writing needed to be done "that places her in the mainstream rather than thinking just in terms of her work being within a feminist niche."

Ms. Moyer said modernism's prominent place in Western aesthetics might be to blame in the market's discomfort with her feminist work, which she said was "anxiety-making with the way she treats decoration."

Having raised these questions since he began exhibiting Schapiro's art in 2016, Mr. Firestone interjected that key to the issue was that the artist had many series, but would make very few works in each one. "So there was never a really large body of work that exists with any of these paintings."

"Lady Gengi's Maze" is radical, he said, in its mix of her computer work and the introduction of fabric from what would become known as her feminist collages, or femmage series. It also has references to Asian art and historical miniature paintings. At this point, she had produced only a handful of the computer works, but was about to make a radical departure. He concluded that "a lot of it has to do with a lack of familiarity out there in the market." She moved in and out of styles too quickly.

Schapiro was a fixture along with her husband, Paul Brach, in the East Hampton art scene before and after they moved to California from 1967 to 1975, when Brach accepted a teaching job at the University of California at San Diego. Although she was already moving away from Abstract Expressionism through minimalist strategies and geometric abstraction in the years before, the move marked an era of real experimentation and development.

By the time Schapiro arrived in California, she had begun to break down the formalism of the New York School, incorporating references to real objects and illusionistic space. She had begun experimenting with geometric elements, as in her "Shrine" series, and using a central vertical band as a key compositional device. She then began incorporating geometric patterns with illusionistic depth, as in "Empire: Sixteen Windows," from 1965.

Always interested in examining femininity, her first months there were spent in her studio contemplating the issues raised by the women's movement. Then, according to the gallery, she began using computer software to make geometric abstractions that referenced women's bodies and landscapes. The computer helped design the image, which she then projected onto a canvas. Pencil lines and tape created the hard edges that were then filled in with spray paint.

Early paintings became what is known as the "Ox" series, in which the shapes of an O and an X were conjoined to make a powerful new hexagonal shape that also loosely implied "a pink labial interior, whose geometry masked its sexual meaning," the artist once said. Through this process, she explored other forms and shapes as well, and intermixed sparer, much more minimalist and linear compositions, sometimes experimenting with new materials like Mylar as a support for a composition expressed in thin tape.

By the early 1970s she was working with Judy Chicago in Santa Clarita at the California Institute of the Arts, known informally as CalArts, to found its feminist art program and put together the groundbreaking "Womanhouse" exhibition and installation. The show focused on domestic labor and its lack of value, since women were the ones doing it. It was at the same time that Schapiro began using fabric in her work.

Ms. Wainwright, a Robert Rauschenberg scholar, suggested during the talk that for Rauschenberg as well as Schapiro, using fabric was a way out of Abstract Expressionism and on to new art movements. According to the galley, the first work that used fabric "frightened her -- likely due to its overt femininity." The show has an important early example from this period, "Curtains," a pretty work in fabric and acrylic.

Despite the hesitation of major museums to acquire some of these pivotal but less familiar works from her career, the artist continues to be widely exhibited. In addition to the Firestone show, which closes on May 13, her Abstract Expressionist work is in a group exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in London and in a Pattern and Decoration show at the Asheville Museum of Art in North Carolina.