

The Radiant Fearlessness of Mimi Gross

by John Yau

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The exhibition *Mimi Gross: Among Friends, 1958-1963* helps to set the record straight: Gross was a strong, confident artist when she met Red Grooms at the age of 18, and that her work continued to grow right up to their marriage in 1964.

Certain myths persist long after the truth is revealed. On August 16, 1987, *The New York Times* published the following "Correction":

An article in the Arts and Leisure section last Sunday about the Red Grooms retrospective at the Whitney Museum attributed several of the artist's large environmental works incompletely. The artist Mimi Gross collaborated on these pieces, which included "Ruckus Manhattan" and "City of Chicago."

The issue — which *The New York Times* does not fully address in its "Correction" — is that Gross should have gotten equal billing for "Ruckus Manhattan" (1975), "City of Chicago" (1968), and a number of other installations and films made during this time. However, even as I state this indisputable fact, I realize that the word "collaborated" does not tell the whole story, because the assumption is that Grooms was the author of "Ruckus Manhattan," the one who dreamed it all up, and I have come to the unavoidable conclusion that that cannot possibly be true.



Mimi Gross, "On the Subway" (1962-63), oil on canvas, 38 x 64 15/16 x 1 1/2 inches

One of the memorable things about “Ruckus Manhattan,” which opened in 1975 on the ground floor of a building in Manhattan’s financial district, was the inventive use of scale. Viewers were delighted, dazzled, and enthralled by seeing different-sized models and spatial re-imaginings of subway cars, newsstands, buses, the Brooklyn Bridge, the Staten Island Ferry, the Twin Towers, and the Apollo Theater made out of all different kinds of material — including papier-mâché, plastic, fiberglass, wood, and vinyl.

When I went to see the eye-opening exhibition, *Mimi Gross: Among Friends, 1958-1963*, at Eric Firestone (February 28–April 20, 2019), I was struck by a number of things.



Mimi Gross, “Grand Street Boys” (1963), oil on canvas, 60 x 70 1/8 inches

All of the work was made before 1964, when Gross married Grooms and began an artistic collaboration that, like the marriage, lasted until 1976. What happened is that Gross, who never got equal billing or the credit she deserved, ostensibly disappeared for more than a decade. This exhibition helps set the record straight, which is that she was a strong, confident artist when she met Grooms at the age of 18 and that her work continued to grow right up to their marriage in 1964.

The earliest works in the exhibition were done the year after Gross graduated from high school and enrolled at Bard College. By the time she was in her early 20s, it is obvious that she was a prodigy who moved comfortably between direct observation and imagination, portraiture and crowd scenes. And while you can tell her influences — German expressionism and Fauvism — the work is decidedly hers.

In late 1959, and no longer at Bard, Gross traveled to Florence, Italy, and went on to explore Europe with the sculptor Jackie Ferrara, filling sketchbooks with crayon drawings based on observation. When they were Salzburg, they learned that Oskar Kokoschka — an artist Gross revered — was running his own art school. And so it happened that in the summer of 1960, as the New York art world was becoming spellbound by the emotionally cool attitudes of Pop Art, Minimalism, and Color Field painting, Gross was studying with Kokoschka — someone the chest-thumping New York art world had long ago consigned to a small, inconsequential corner of art history.

One important thing that the exhibition *Mimi Gross: Among Friends, 1958–1963* offers is the opportunity to trace the roots of Gross’s art as well as place her work in its proper context.

Historically speaking, Gross met the slightly older Thompson (1937–1966) in the summer of 1958 in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and may have influenced him to begin using oil crayons. And yet, in Thompson’s biography, as presented by the Smithsonian American Art Museum’s website, Gross is not even mentioned.

Gross’s unjustifiable neglect is underscored by the four paintings on the wall opposite the row of oil crayon portraits, which convinced me that she has still not gotten her proper due when it comes to the well-known installations, such as “Ruckus Manhattan.”

In two paintings, "Subway" (1962) and "On the Subway" (1962–63), Gross re-imagines the spatial dimensions of the subway's narrow, enclosed space without calling attention to it. It is as if the subway car accommodated its girth to its passengers so that no one would feel claustrophobic. Compositionally, the passengers seated and standing on the far side are aligned along the top of the painting, while the passengers closest to us are shown as a series of heads, mostly in profile, along the bottom edge. Our viewpoint seems to take us outside the subway, floating overhead with nothing but air between the passengers and us.

That is not all that Gross does in these masterful paintings, which she completed when she was in her early 20s. In "On the Subway," she has vertically bisected the subway car's horizontal rectangle and choreographed the space with color. The bisected middle consists of two vertical rows of figures, each on one side of the divide. At the bottom of the double-stacked rows, two heads are rendered in profile, facing in opposite directions. The man facing left wears a black hat, which connects diagonally to a similarly colored hat on a man on just the other side of the divide, sitting beside the woman facing in the opposite direction.

Beyond this cluster of figures seated in the foreground, and standing in the subway's wide aisle, is a bald-headed man in a blue jacket, facing away, and a woman in maroon dress, facing forward, whose light brown hair is partially covered by a matching maroon hat. The man facing away is on the left of the divide, while the woman facing us is on the right. By pointing these two figures in opposite directions, Gross pulls viewers deeper into the painting's carefully tilted space while simultaneously keeping them out.

At the top of this double vertical row, and on the left side of the divide, a woman in a dusky rose coat cradles a baby wrapped in blue. From the way that she is posed with the man seated beside to her, they appear to be a married couple. On the other side of the painting's midpoint, and next to the mother and infant, Gross depicts a man in a blue suit, reading a newspaper. His body is angled slightly away from the woman, subtly underscoring the psychological distance that can exist between strangers in close proximity.

Paradoxically, the mother in the rose coat and the unconnected man in the blue suit form the painting's compositional spine, the top of which is defined by the pink subway pole running between them. Finally, echoing the diagonal connection of the black hats, the bald man's blue suit diagonally echoes the blue suit of the man reading the newspaper, who is seated above him and to the right.

The rhythms and echoes embedded within this accomplished painting inevitably led me to conclude that Gross potentially had a lot to do with how the interior and exterior spaces of "City of Chicago" and "Ruckus Manhattan" were constructed. They were artists who – in this fruitful period of their relationship – informed and inspired each other, a fact that has yet to be fully recognized.

The other thing I want to stress is that these thoughts came to me before I had seen even half of the work in the exhibition. That's indicative of how much Gross's paintings and crayon drawings — done while she was living in New York — gave me to think about, reflect upon, and delight in. Along with the work I have already described, there are two group portraits — "Grand Street Boys" and "Grand Street Girls" (both 1963) — that are as ambitious and accomplished as any group portrait done in New York at the time. What also becomes apparent is that Gross never developed a cool, signature style — as did many figurative artists from an older generation (Fairfield Porter, Alex Katz and Philip Pearlstein come to mind).

In 1961, while in Italy, Gross, Grooms, and three friends bought a horse and cart and traveled from

town to town in Northern Italy performing vaudeville routines, inspired by Federico Fellini's *La Strada* (1954), starring Anthony Quinn and Giulietta Masina as an itinerant two-person circus act. A small section of the cart, which Gross decoratively painted, is included in the show. Correspondingly, one of the many high points of the exhibition is a row of individually framed oil crayon drawings that have been removed from a sketchbook dating from this time. The subjects include friends, people she observed, early Renaissance art, and the Italian landscape. The colors run from bubble-gum pink to moody oranges, to dense, rich greens, to violets and blues: Italy and Italian art colored by an Expressionist palette. The results are unique.

What comes through in all of the work is Gross's seamless merging of painting mastery with curiosity, friendship, tenderness, and humor — deep pools of feeling. She is not interested in production or style, making something that aligns with the art world's tastes.

What also comes through is Gross's willingness to take on the problems posed by painting big, such as a crowd scene, and her adventurousness, as in riding across Italy in a horse-drawn cart, entertaining crowds to support the journey. A radiant fearlessness shines through everything Gross does.



Mimi Gross, "Bob Thompson" (1959), oil crayon on paper,  
13 15/16 x 11 inches