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Miriam Schapiro's Feminist Artwork Finds New Life in 2022

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With reproductive rights severely under attack in the U.S., and women's bodies yet again a battleground, feminist artist Miriam Schapiro's groundbreaking work becomes urgently relevant, again.

By the late 1960s, the women's liberation movement was gaining traction throughout the United States, giving rise to the women's health movement at the end of the decade. At the moment when activists urged women to take control of their reproductive health—often beginning with handheld mirrors, flashlights, and speculums—women's art of the period similarly focused on the female reproductive system.



"Big Ox," 1967.

Several artists who would come to define the women's art movement in the 1970s were already experimenting with vaginal iconography by the mid-'60s. Judy Chicago's vulvar-painted car hoods and anatomical ceramics appropriate the minimalist idiom; Hannah Wilke's labial porcelain, terra cotta, and painted and glazed ceramic sculptures force the viewer's to confront female anatomy; and Barbara T. Smith's yonic drawings, sculptures, and Xerox works demonstrate her early interest in gender and sexuality, themes that she explored in experimental performances. At the same time, Miriam Schapiro approached this radical symbolism through an equally radical technology, using early computers to create a series of paintings between 1967 and 1971. Schapiro reflected on her earliest engagement with this imagery: "For once in the history of art, it was not the penis that was praised, not the ubiquitous phallic symbol, it was a woman's hymn to her body. At last, one could acclaim that component of the female anatomy." and glazed ceramic sculptures force the viewer's to confront female anatomy; and Barbara T. Smith's yonic drawings, sculptures, and Xerox works demonstrate her early interest in gender and sexuality, themes that she explored in experimental performances. At the same time, Miriam Schapiro approached this radical symbolism through an equally radical technology, using early

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Schapiro is broadly recognized as a leader of the women's art movement. Before she engaged with feminist ideas, Schapiro trained at the University of Iowa, where she met her husband, the painter Paul Brach. The artists moved to New York in 1952 and participated in the burgeoning downtown art scene, where Schapiro established herself as a serious painter, despite the barriers to women's participation in art. Integrating themes of femininity into her sensuous abstractions, Schapiro regularly showed at prestigious venues, including Tanager Gallery, the Museum of Modern Art, and André Emmerich Gallery, where, in 1958, she was the first woman to have a solo exhibition. Schapiro was acutely aware that despite her relative success, she was always seen as an artist's wife and 'woman artist,' a reality that altered the course of her career when she moved to California in 1967 so that Brach could serve as the chair of the newly formed art department faculty at the University of California San Diego.

Though she wasn't initially offered a job, Brach convinced the university to appoint Schapiro as a lecturer. In the male-dominated department, Schapiro had no colleagues with whom she could share her growing interest in the women's movement. As a result, Schapiro retreated into her studio until she discovered collaborators of an altogether new kind: The scientific community. Exposed not only to the cool West Coast formalism of the '60s but the cutting-edge technologies of the moment, Schapiro experimented with style and technique. On and off the UC San Diego campus, she'd engage with engineers at the forefront of computer science in applied physics, atomic energy, and art, all while the women's movement gained traction and feminists lauded the possibilities of liberatory technologies.

Schapiro, meanwhile, was coming to embrace the freedoms that new technologies offered. Beginning in 1967, the artist used computers outfitted with custom software to develop a group of exuberant abstractions painted in a spectrum of sunset pinks, desert yellows, and ocean metallics. She had multiple collaborators, including Jef Raskin, who is widely credited as the visionary behind Apple's Macintosh computer; Jack Mance, an art student; and David Nalibof, a physicist who worked at General Atomic in La Jolla. While these men may not have fully understood the ideas underlying Schapiro's work—and the artist chose not to discuss the true meaning of her work with them—she remained committed to her female symbolism. Though her exact method varied over time, Schapiro always began with a simple hand-drawn shape related to vaginal iconography. The drawing would then be translated into numbers representing points on a grid that a custom computer software would rotate through space, printing out 50 views of the artist's original drawing. These new images represented radically altered versions of the original shape, which often became unrecognizable due to extreme foreshortening or drastic rotation. In some cases, Schapiro manipulated the drawings—flipping, duplicating, and combining them to create new and more complex configurations. Once she selected her shape, Schapiro planned the composition and then used an opaque projector to enlarge the image onto her canvas, traced the shape with a pencil, taped off the contours, and spray painted. Finally, with gusto, she removed the tape.

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Even following this basic formula, Schapiro's work presents a seemingly infinite variety of techniques and color choices. In "Big Ox," Schapiro noted her "pale pinks to describe the sensuous passageway from which life emerged, and a brilliant orange to describe the pride and assertion of a female body." In a piece like "Keyhole," Schapiro renders her shape, a play on the reclining nude trope, in stunning three-dimensionality. The subtle gradation of the form creates the illusion of an object in space, while the mottled blue-white background becomes a sky. "Western Garden," on the other hand, becomes a meditation on its very making. The thin layers of green, yellow, and gold spray paint leave the artist's quiet pencil lines visible, giving the impression that the image is coming into existence as we watch. If the figure in "Keyhole" represents a self-assured, mammoth, libidinal body, the three gossamer shapes of "Western Garden" seem to be in the process of becoming.

Schapiro shares the flexibility of her images with the viewer. In many of her works, especially those in which she relies on contours without filling in her shapes, she presents optical illusions that are open to perceptual play and shifting interpretation. In "Mylar Series," the viewer negotiates whether she is entering an impossible space or confronting a thing, maybe even a body. A drawing in tape with reflective mylar as its ground, the work implicates the audience: Viewing this work from a certain proximity without entering the composition yourself is impossible. In effect, the drawing forces its viewers to confront their participation in the work. In the context of feminism, this participation mimics women reclaiming their minds, bodies, and ultimately social position from the patriarchy.

Through the women's health movement, women similarly became stakeholders in their own anatomy, getting to know their own bodies and determining their own fate. They not only took ownership of their personal sexual health and reproduction but broadened women's participation in gynecological care. Groups like The Janes, the clandestine abortion network that provided thousands of safe, free abortions to women in the late 1960s and early 1970s (pre-Roe v. Wade), championed a system of healthcare that was 'by women, for women,' urging grassroots participation.

While second-wave feminism has been maligned as essentialist, Schapiro's computer work brings forward the anti-biological determinism within the movement. As Schapiro created these paintings, Shulamith Firestone published her foundational *Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970), which calls for women to exercise control over their reproductive functioning. Famously, Firestone demands "the freeing of women from the tyranny of reproduction by every means possible..." According to the author, technology, including a full spectrum of reproductive technologies such as birth control, abortion, and in-vitro fertilization, is necessary for meaningful social change. While Firestone's text skews toward techno-optimism and biological essentialism (in assuming that changing biology might cure social ills), Schapiro's works invite a more richly open-ended embrace of technologies.

Over the course of the 1970s, Schapiro became famous for various feminist collaborations. In 1971, she established the Feminist Art Program with Judy Chicago at CalArts. They partnered with their students to stage *Womanhouse*, an installation centered around domestic labor and women's devalued work. In the following years, Schapiro developed her practice of feminist collage (termed 'female' in an article co-authored by Schapiro and Melissa Meyer), integrating textile crafts produced by other women. In

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her early computer works, Schapiro offers yet another model of feminist collaboration. She works with technologies to produce a utopian vision of what might be if women had complete control of their own bodies, while inviting the spectator to join her in determining meaning. With pregnant peoples' freedom severely limited in the U.S. today, Schapiro's works remind us that it is not only the availability of reproductive technologies that are essential but the ability to choose how and when to use them.

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