



March 28, 2009

GOTHAM ART & THEATER

by Elisabeth Kley

Carolee Schneemann blasted her way through social taboos in the 1960s with her pioneering nude performances and self-portrait film having sex (*Fuses*, 1967), but she insists that she has always been a painter. Proof can be found in "Painting, What It Became," an exhibition curated by Maura Reilly at P.P.O.W., Feb. 1-Mar. 28, 2009. The show includes paintings and painting constructions made between 1957 and 1965, as well as documentary photographs, performance videos and films dating from 1963 to the present.

With their energetic flurries of brushstrokes now yellowed and dull, Schneemann's relentlessly material paintings, often featuring rags, photographs and bits of debris, bring de Kooning, Rauschenberg and her close friend Joseph Cornell to mind. They also grew out of Cézanne and Cubism, but Schneeman went on to expand her sense of fluttering life right out of her canvases and into the world. In *Body Collage* (1967), a notable performance preserved on film and presented at P.P.O.W., she covered her naked body with wallpaper paste and rolled in a pile of shredded white printer's paper, as if enveloping herself with animated strokes of paint.

Fur Wheel (1962), among the most interesting pieces on view, is a spinning fur-covered lampshade decorated with crushed beer cans -- a painting that acts out its own confined performance. A larger work festooned with tattered revolving umbrellas and slashes of red and blue paint, *Untitled (Four Fur Cutting Boards)* (1963), looms in the gallery like the aftermath of a thunderstorm.

Transformed by the camera into a black-and-white set for a 20th century Eden, both of these paintings appear behind Schneeman's nude body (sometimes colored with paint or covered with plastic and snakes) in the Icelandic artist Erro's documentary photographs of her *Eye Body: Thirty-Six Transformative Actions for Camera* (1963).

The famous *Meat Joy* (1964), an idyllic orgy of cavorting men and women dressed in bathing suits, can also be seen. Men drag women across the floor, paint the women's faces, and pour more paint on the floor. A "serving maid" appears with platters of sausages and chicken carcasses that are draped over the bodies. In a sexual metaphor foreshadowing Sarah Lucas' sculptures, raw fish are placed between the women's legs.

A concurrent exhibition at Carolina Nitsch Project Room (through Apr. 11) features performance photos from the 1970s, when Schneemann's feminism sharpened. The notorious *Interior Scroll* (1975) can be seen in a group of photographs along with *Scroll Box – The Cave* (1995), an actual snakelike length of typewritten text that Schneemann, in performance, pulled out of her vagina and read. Her words describe a discussion with a structural filmmaker who abhors subjectivity in art. He concludes that he had always thought of her as a dancer -- a comment that for

Schneemann encapsulates years of condescension and isolation by men who expected her to work like one of the boys. The photos are priced from \$5,000 to \$75,000.

But Schneemann's art has always grown out of her female core. The surprisingly elegant *Bloodwork Diary* (1972), for example, is a series of menstrual blood splashes on pieces of tissue placed in a grid and pasted over silver paper. *Parts of a Body House Book* (1974-76) includes an amusing graph that turns the table on men, rating her sexual encounters in terms of organ size, length of time, sadism and fear (among other criteria), while in *Aggression for Couples* (1972), another grid of photographs documents a pantomimed tussle between Schneemann and an unnamed man.

Schneemann's most recent work, *Infinity Kisses – The Movie* (2008), is on view at P.P.O.W. The film animates a series of photographed kisses between the artist and her cat. Cat lovers will adore this touching exchange of affection, although no doubt the implied pun of love between artist and pussy is fully intentional.

It's telling that Schneemann now feels she must turn to the animal world for sensual interactions to transform into art. "Inundated as we are with Abu Ghraib and those torture images, am I ever going to create a pile of pleased naked bodies again?" she asked in a 2005 *Brooklyn Rail* interview. "I don't think so! That aspect of physical, visual pleasure is displaced from my culture forever, it's gone, it's not coming back." Prices at P.P.O.W. range from \$6,000 for an *Eye Body* photograph to \$400,000.