

Carolee Schneemann: Painting, What It Became

by Valery Oisteanu

P.P.O.W. Gallery, February 21 – March 28, 2009

Painting, What It Became is a mini-retrospective of the pioneering work of Carolee Schneemann. This multimedia show was curated by Maura Reilly, founding curator of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, and is accompanied by a small color catalog.

Schneemann is a practitioner of surrealist painting-collage and belongs in the same company as Ray Johnson, Lil Picard, Wallace Berman, and Sari Dienes, just to mention some of the late native-surrealist elite. Her early works such as “Personae: JT and Three Kitch’s” (1957; oil on canvas) are figurative-expressionistic, this particular one depicting a sleeping male nude (Schneemann’s boyfriend, the late musician James Tenney) with his genitals exposed, surrounded by cats. “Three Figures, After Pontorno” (1957), a dark canvas of a standing figure, its back to the viewer, and two others crouching, is painted in a nervous Abstract Expressionism inspired by de Kooning, with a reference in the title to the 16th-century Florentine artist (and father of Mannerism), Jacopo da Pontorno.

Several of the works are filled with gestural brushstrokes, reminiscent of Joan Mitchell and Lee Krasner; among them are burnt paintings: “Animal Carnage & Kitch’s Dream” from 1960.

“Painting-collages” are autobiographical diaries that incorporate photo-portraits and stained pieces of canvas recycled from earlier paintings in swirling compositions such as “Tenebration” (1961), with its images of Brahms and Beethoven, and “One window is clear—Notes to Lou Andreas Salomé” (1965), a Rauschenberg-like mélange of images of Salomé, Rilke, and Nietzsche, with scrawled citations from them, as well as Freud and Tolstoy.

Schneemann’s assemblages are homages to Joseph Cornell, for whom she was briefly an assistant at age 19. “Gift Science” (1965) is an “altar-accumulage” with lights, mirrors, slides, birds, and miniature furniture stuffed into blue, red, and orange vertically-stacked boxes. “Meat Joy Collage” (1964, performance poster), the box-assemblage “Sphinx” (1962), with bottles and ropes, and “Fur Wheel” (1962) are all masterworks.

“Four Fur Cutting Boards” (1963) is the biggest assemblage in the show, also à la Rauschenberg’s combines, and the centerpiece of this exhibition. Used as a backdrop for Schneemann’s live performance “Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions” (1963-2004), its motorized, rotating broken umbrellas, lights, mirror shards, and other objects were all found behind in the artist’s Soho loft, where she has lived since 1962, which used to house the Papadopoulos furrier sweatshop.

British art critic Amelia Jones writes in *The Artist’s Body* (Phaidon, 2000), which she co-authored with Tracey Warr, “In the feminist/existential terms of Simone de Beauvoir, Schneemann thrusts the ‘immanent female’ subject into the domain of the ‘transcendent,’ active male. In *Eye Body* the female nude *looks back*.”

“Swing” (1975) is an artifact from a performance piece in which the artist, hanging naked from a tree surgeon’s harness, dragged colored pencils over a sheet of white paper as she swung past. The event, “Up to and Including Her Limits” is documented on six video monitors and in photographs, along with the original harness. Flat screens throughout the gallery present

Schneemann's "polymorphous eroticism"—celebrations of sensual pleasure and mental bliss—through DVD transfers of "Fuses" (1964-1966), "Meat Joy" and "Body Collage" (both 1964), and "Infinity Kisses" (2008).

Schneemann's use of her naked body and that of her boyfriend as vehicles for free expression and radical feminism in the 1950s and early 60s (one stated purpose of her work was in the service of "eroticizing a guilty society") was dismissed by many critics of the time as narcissistic, exhibitionistic, and even sex-ploitative, such as the artist soul-kissing her cats or having sex on videotape. Some call her nude actions paganism, "Dionysian displays of herself" and sexually "reckless candor." But others saw a nod toward the late Stan Brakhage, a friend and occasional collaborator (she appeared in three of his films: "Daybreak" and "White Eye," both 1957, and "Cat's Cradle," 1959), especially in her self-shot film, "Fuses" (1967), in which collaged, scratched, sprinkled, and painted frames enhance scenes of sexual penetration, fellatio, and cunnilingus.

Concurrently with this exhibition, the Carolina Nitsch Project Room is presenting *Carolee Schneemann, Performance Photographs from the '70s*, featuring black-and-white photographs, several artist's books and other original works, among them: "Blood Work Diary" (1972), five panels with menstrual blottings on tissues, and "Interior Scroll"—a poem on a long paper scroll that the artist extracted from her vagina during a landmark 1975 performance—laminated and exhibited in a Plexiglas box.

Although Carolee Schneemann has often been vilified, she envelops the viewer with love and sensuality, an abandonment into pure physical intimacy, excessive sexuality, the arrogance of pleasure, and an awareness of violent relationships.

The presentation of *Painting, What it Became* is anti-academic, nonsequential, seductively instructive, and significant for contemporary art history, placing Schneemann's paintings in a proper context. "I am a painter. I am still a painter and I will die a painter," said Schneemann in 1993. "Everything that I have developed has to do with extending visual principles off the canvas."