



Carolee Schneemann

The Secret Garden

1956



Carolee Schneemann

Three Figures after Pontormo

1957



Carolee Schneemann

Darker Companion

1962

CAROLEE THE PAINTER

by Charlie Finch

The most comprehensive exhibition of Carolee Schneemann's work and career is on view through July 25 at the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art at SUNY New Paltz. The show's title "Within and Beyond the Premises" shrewdly points to a new perspective on Carolee's praxis, for the "premises" are painting and the picture plane expanded outward. As Carolee remarked in 1993, "I'm a painter. I'm still a painter and I will die a painter. Everything that I have developed has to do with extending visual principles off the canvas."

The show begins with a never before exhibited series of works on paper, "Partitions," studies for a 1963 performance featuring figures hidden in offlighted casements, done for the Feigen/Herbert Gallery, but never realized. Right off, these gouaches reveal, right down to Schneemann's authoritative signature, a faith in the power of the figure as a dynamic force, reminiscent of Roualt and Soutine. Indeed, Schneemann never relaxes into pure abstraction. *The Secret Garden* (1956) and 1957's *Three Figures after Pontormo* bring roiling nudes out of lava pool. They nod to El Greco and, like all of Schneemann's two-dimensional work eerily prefigure the paintings of Cecily Brown. *Summer 1 (Honey Suckle)* from 1959 is so exactly like Brown's style that it is quite uncanny!

Frustrated as a woman to get her painting recognized, Carolee alighted on the idea of turning the brush into her own body, and, for this, Rauschenberg's experiments in three dimensions showed the way. First, she toyed with boxes, such as *Darker Companion* from 1962, burning wood, bringing in dark umbers and overlaying images on top of each other. This muddy esthetic, grounded in dirt and deterioration, became the perfect, inconvenient article of artistic clothing for the celebrated Schneemanns to come, such as *Meat Joy*, *Viet Flakes* and *Mortal Coils*.

Carolee has commented that what she characterizes as this "crude" esthetic grew out of necessity, from having little institutional and financial support and depending on found materials, but more so, her decision to wallow and transcend the mud from which we come and to which we



Carolee Schneemann

Meat Joy

1964



Carolee Schneemann

Viet Flakes

1965



Carolee Schneemann

Mortal Coils

1995

return, is also used to offset the incredible physically fit artistic tool she remains to this day. The brush is muddied but the brush is clean.

What I think has been especially off-putting to many about Carolee's work is its violence. To my mind, only the musician and composer John Cale (author of *Vintage Violence*) is as adept at harnessing violence into "tame" creations. *Meat Joy* remains to this day almost impossible to watch. How can you derive inspiration from a slaughterhouse? Similarly, Schneemann's *Hand/Heart for Ana Mendieta* (1986), a series of C-Prints, in which Carolee spreads images of hearts in blood and syrup in the snow and also draws a pair of hands seizing a heart in desperation is just about unbearable to behold in its ventricular visceralness.

Finally, there is *Terminal Velocity*, inspired by the famous picture of the man who assumed an elegant jackknife position as he fell to his death from the Twin Towers on 9/11. If you were there, you can probably still hear the brutal thumping of the bodies, over and over again, on the ground. Carolee takes us back to that terrifying day, capturing the falling in a series of squares against the friezes of the tower walls.

As in all her work, she is saying, "This is you, this is me, this is what life looks like. I have isolated its chaos and move on to the next cracked, brown vessel on the shelf. If you choose to call it art, nothing can stop you."

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