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Feminist Art, Lyrical Composition and 1960s Paintings

Miriam Schapiro, Conrad Marca-Relli and Larry Bell in this week's Fine Art



Miriam Schapiro's 'Flying Carpet' (1972) PHOTO: THE ESTATE OF MIRIAM SCHAPIRO AND ERIC FIRESTONE GALLERY

By **PETER PLAGENS**

Feb. 26, 2016 4:57 p.m. ET

Miriam Schapiro, the California Years: 1967-1975

Eric Firestone

4 Great Jones St.

(917) 324-3386

Through March 6

Miriam Schapiro (1923-2015) was a genuine hero of feminist art and—since feminist art, especially the Southern California branch of it, was so influential in the greater movement—feminism itself. Giving up a hard-earned foothold in the macho New York art world of the late 1950s and early '60s, she moved in 1967 with her husband, the artist Paul Brach, to the Golden State, where he had a

university teaching job waiting. But she had to re-establish herself in a new context.

In 1971 Ms. Schapiro co-founded the Feminist Art Program at CalArts with Judy Chicago, and in 1972 the two organized the bellwether Womanhouse project (an entire house in Hollywood taken over with agitprop art installations). Thirty years as a working artist later, she received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the College Art Association.

This survey of Ms. Schapiro's intense eight years in California finds her work roughly divided into two parts. The first comprises large-scale, geometric semi-abstract paintings that announce, "I can do what the big boys do"; the forms look 3-D, and the most well known of them—such as "Keyhole" (1971)—contain what might be called "gendered" negative spaces. The second consists of defiantly girly art densely made with collaged fabric and craftlike materials that say, in effect, that the stuff of traditional women's work can also carry artistic clout. Ms. Schapiro supplies enough of that for us to forgive her part in coining the term "femmage," but in the end her admirable art isn't quite as consequential as was her long service to a just cause.



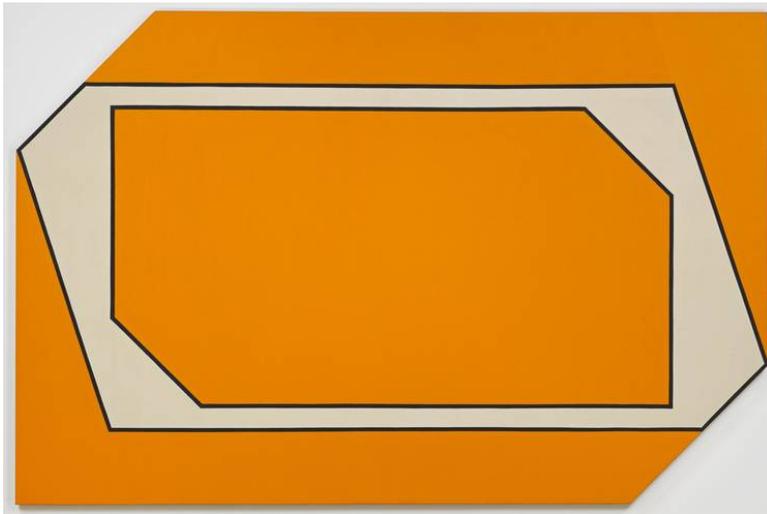
'Untitled' by Conrad Marca-Relli (c. 1949-50) PHOTO: HOLLIS TAGGART GALLERIES

Conrad Marca-Relli:
Reconsidered
 Hollis Taggart
 521 W. 26th St.
 (212) 628-4000
 Through March 5
 "The architecture of a single figure" is the felicitous phrase that curator William Agee used in his catalog essay for a 1967 Whitney

Museum retrospective of Conrad Marca-Relli (1913-2000). It goes a long way toward explaining both the artist's virtues (a consistent, crisp trademark style that's always pleasant to look at) and drawbacks (his art is a little too consistent from about 1953 on, sometimes devolving into the visual equivalent of easy-listening music).

Indeed the best work among the 18 collages and paintings on view is a big, untitled painting from about 1949-50, which boasts a lyrical composition worthy of Arshile Gorky and color that Hans Hofmann might have envied. To be fair, however, “Sleeping Figure (J-L-16-66),” from 1966, runs a very close second. That raucously disciplined collage-painting—made in the absolute groove of a style that the artist fell into in Mexico in 1953 when he’d run out of paint and was forced to slap onto the picture plane whatever material he had at hand—is Marca-Relli in full bloom.

The trouble (minor compared with the bulk of today’s abstract painting, but more major when set against the work of Marca-Relli’s contemporaries) is that it’s all a bit pat. Rounded corners, off-white-and-black-and-beige color schemes, canvas-on-canvas, a discreet roughness in the execution, and relentless hints of that figurative “architecture”—they all cloy slightly. Marca-Relli operated, however, in a less shrill and glitzy art world than ours; back then, pictorial style was the product of belief, and not the desperation born of an overcrowded show-business environment.



Larry Bell's 'Lil' Orphan Annie' (1960) PHOTO: GENEVIEVE HANSON/LARRY BELL/HAUSER & WIRTH

**Larry
Bell:
From
the '60s**
Hauser
& Wirth
32 E.
69th St.
(212)

794-4970

Through April 9

A scan of the lengthy résumé of Larry Bell (born in 1939), who works in both Venice, Calif., and Taos, N.M., reveals a surprising scarcity of solo shows in American museums. (Mr. Bell seems to enjoy more institutional favor in Europe.) It’s probably not Hauser & Wirth’s primary purpose with this exhibition to compensate for that regrettable lack, but the show partly does the trick.

Mr. Bell, who studied under Robert Irwin (albeit when the latter was still a cautious Abstract Expressionist) at the Chouinard Art Institute (now CalArts), was a prodigy who, with his vacuum-coated glass boxes of the 1960s, bridged the gap between Minimalism and full-blown “light and space” art. He started, however, with painting, and the huge, orange “Lil’ Orphan Annie” (an axonometric projection of boxes within a box) painted when Mr. Bell was no more than 21 years old is a knockout—perhaps even more so for remaining one after 56 years.

Upstairs, on the galley’s third floor, sits a taller-than-you blue glass box within a square walled with light reddish-orange glass. It’s called “Made for Arolsen (Pink/Blue)” (1992 and remade this year), and it’s dizzyingly beautiful. These two works alone are worth a trip uptown, especially—hint—for a curator at a major American museum.

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