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Miriam Schapiro's Collaboration Series: "Mother Russia"

essays by Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Judith Stein

Steinbaum Krauss Gallery, 1994

Arching across the large fan-shaped painting, *Mother Russia* (1994), were two words—*kooperatsiia* (cooperation) and *poezdka* (journey)—which might be interpreted as the two main themes of Miriam Schapiro's September-October 1994 exhibit at the Steinbaum Krauss Gallery. Schapiro calls these works collaborations—between the artist and her Russian heritage, between Schapiro and Russian women artists of the early-20th century, and between the paintings and the public.

The exhibition catalogue, simply titled *Miriam Schapiro*, the name printed in both Russian and English, contains two informative essays. The first, Thalia Gouma-Peterson's "Collaboration and Personal Identity in Miriam Schapiro's Art," places the artist's work in historical context and discusses each painting in the exhibition. Her essay might be read as an extended answer to a question posed by Schapiro in 1970: "Where is the mirror in the world to reveal who I am?" (3) The second essay, Judith Stein's "Presenting the Past," also analyzes many of the paintings but focuses more on the larger question of how artists represent history. Schapiro, Stein suggests, might be a "visionary historian" whose attempts to discover artistic ancestors lead her ever deeper into her own creativity. (23)

How do contemporary artists enter into dialogue with artists of the past? Some, like Sherrie Levine, practice blank parody; others use techniques of pastiche, the random cannibalization of past styles. Still others, and I count Miriam Schapiro among them, enter into geniune dialogue with works of the past. Her paintings recover women's art for others to see, thus making it accessible in new ways. As Linda Hutcheon has observed, parody's *para* means not only counter or against but also near and beside. Parody is a form of critical awareness and love of history whereby old forms are given new meaning.[1] As a form of Postmodernist parody, Schapiro's art continues to educate the artist and her public.

Mother Russia demonstrates these values most completely. The painting references Schapiro's own past work (fans, homage to earlier women artists). As Gouma-Peterson makes clear in her essay, however, this is the only one of Schapiro's fans with a historical narrative content and images of human beings. Its ecstatic materiality is completely integrated with content and form, as in many of the artist's earlier works that used "femmage" and pattern and decoration. And perhaps most significantly, it establishes a relationship with eleven major women artists of the early-20th-century Russian avant-garde.

The period from about 1890 to 1930 was a time of tremendous upheaval and artistic creativity in Russia. Through her Neoprimitivist and Rayonist paintings, Natalia Goncharova helped bring attention to indigenous Russian traditions, especially icons and the cheap, popular *lubok* prints. Liubov Popova's Cubofuturist and Constructivist paintings led her finally to reject the fine art traditions as outmoded and useless. Olga Rozanova attempted a new synthesis of word and image with collages and illustrations for transrational poetry. Popova, Varvara Stepanova, and Alexandra Exter were among the first artists to work as designers in the Russian textile industry. Stepanova was committed to social and political issues, even working as a magazine designer in order to promote literacy. Exter threw herself into teaching after the revolution and participated in early forms of performance art. Many of these artists were active in the theater. Vera Mukhina was a gifted sculptor, whose heroic *Worker and Collective Farmworker* became the logo for the state film studio in Russia. Sonia Delaunay is well known; others, such as Antonina Sofranova, Nadezhda Udaltsova, Anna Golubkina, and Nina Simonovich-Efimova, less so. Although Vera Ermolaeva, Maria Ender, Elena Guro, Nina Kogan, and Kseniya Boguslavskaya are not included in the exhibition, their presence is nevertheless invoked by Schapiro's act of cooperation and collaboration. In *Mother Russia* the faces and images of these women artists bring the past to life.

The exhibition also evokes the related theme of *poezdka*, the journey. These paintings are a continuation of Schapiro's feminist journey, which for many years has included retrieving the past and educating others about those women artists who have come before. That journey is reflected in her continued use of the fan motif, begun in the 1970s; in the reclamation of a geometric abstract vocabulary in *Yard Sale* (1993) and *Russian Matrix* (1994; Fig. 1); and in the Collaboration Series itself, developed most fully in her Frida and Me Series (1988-93), but which had its origins in Schapiro's late-1970s research on women artists such as Cassatt, Vigée-Lebrun, and Morisot.

Fig. 1. Miriam Schapiro, *Russian Matrix* (1994), silkscreen on fabric and acrylic on canvas, 60" x 50". Catherine S. Muther Collecton. Photo: Noel Row. Courtesy Steinbaum Krauss Gallery.

The large (82" x 90") *Yard Sale* consists of four colorful garments hanging on a line strung between two black-and-white columns. Embracing the scene are two richly textured trees that form an arc. The painting is a study in opposites: the speckled and splattered background contrasts with the stark geometry of the columns and two of the costumes. The two dresses hanging on the right are painted in geometric forms that allude to Stepanova and Delaunay, while the two on the left (one of which refers to Kahlo) use fabric, metallic paint, and ribbon to create a tactile presence. The youthful enthusiasm of Stepanova's famous design for a "sports costume" sharply contrasts with the shapely mature figures of Delaunay's full-length dress. Hanging between the rigid patriarchal columns, the dresses embody life.

She Flies Through the Air with the Greatest of Ease (1994) simultaneously reflects Schapiro's affection for Marc Chagall and her feminist appropriation of male power. The central female figure, a representation of Stepanova, flies through the swirling light, carrying a bouquet of brilliantly colored flowers, each exquisitely rendered in paint and fabric. The large star on her football-like jersey is emblazoned with an "S," suggesting Stepanova's own name (or Schapiro's), sports, or superwoman! As she reach-

es across a traditionally costumed Russian man, who is seated to her left, his legs akimbo, she points to his genitals, the source of patriarchal power. His raised eyebrows, surprised expression, static pose, and even the voile/veiled background testify to his impotence. She overpowers him. The painting is serious, yet immensely funny.

Early in her career, Schapiro was known for her hard-edge formalist paintings; *Russian Matrix* draws on the 16-part grid of *Sixteen Windows* from 1965. But whereas in *Sixteen Windows* the form was the content, here the grid has become a series of frames that highlight images of 14 women artists, including Schapiro herself. (Popova and Delaunay appear twice.) Her use of black and red in this painting, as in others, refers to revolutionary Russia. Schapiro's collaborative journey expresses a keen sense of devotion to the women of the past and present who have made and continue to make her work possible.

NOTES

1. Linda Hutcheon, "Theorizing the Postmodern," in Charles Jencks, ed., *The Post-Modern Reader* (London: Academy Editions, 1992), 87.

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Mimi Smith: Steel Wool Politics

essay by Judith Tannenbaum

Philadelphia Institute of Contemporary Art, 1994

"Steel Wool Politics," the title of the Mimi Smith (b. 1942) retrospective at Philadelphia's Institute of Contemporary Art, inevitably conjures up the image of one of Smith's best known works, *Steel Wool Peignoir* (1966; Fig. 1). Made 30 years ago, the garment is constructed of sheer pink nylon and eggshell lace edged with thick furry bands of steel wool. The frothy wire looks dainty and rich enough to ornament an elegant boudoir garment, but steel wool discourages intimacy as it suggests an inappropriate "feminine" context: not the fantasy bedroom but the work-a-day kitchen.

The steel itself may reference metal sculpture being made contemporaneously by male artists,[1] but it more obviously evokes the abrasive life of an American housewife in the sixties: the hard-won appearance of order and ease contrasted with the reality of Easy-Off Oven Cleaner. Characteristically, *Peignoir* surprises us with witty juxtapositions and demands a political response; it also achieves a formal effect that is satisfying on its own.

Fig. 1. Mimi Smith, *Steel Wool Peignoir* (1966), steel wool, nylon, lace, wood hanger, 59" x 26" x 8".

Smith has been consistently concerned with the impact of political issues on personal lives. As curator and ICA Associate Director Judith Tannenbaum says in her thoughtful catalogue essay,

> ***not only do Smith's objects—clothing, books, clocks, television screens and computer images—comment on everyday activities but they are made out of the "stuff" of ordinary life—fabric, thread, ribbon, tape measures, bath mats, tablecloths, steel wool, plastic wrap, candy, painter masks—as well as more traditional art materials such as pencil on paper and paint on canvas.*** (5)

Drawing in part on personal conversations with the artist, Tannenbaum links Smith's choice of materials and subject matter to events both public and private in her life. After graduating from Massachusetts College of Art in 1963, Smith did graduate work at Rutgers, where she studied with Fluxus artist Robert Watts as well as with Robert Morris. Her M.F.A. exhibition was *The Wedding*, an installation centered on an elaborate assemblage plastic wedding gown. Her graduate thesis was entitled *Clothes as a Form*. She went on to produce a series of clothing works, including *Recycle Coat* (recreated for the ICA exhibition), made from the brightly printed plastic wrappers of toilet paper and other household products, *Peignoir*, and other couture commentaries on women's roles and sexual politics. "Although her objects are carefully crafted, Smith used plastic, rubber, and other materials that deteriorate and discolor to address issues of vulnerability and impermanence," Tannenbaum notes. (6)

When she moved to Cleveland with her mathematician husband and two young children in 1972 and found herself cut off from a familiar artistic community, Smith made an obsessive series of full-scale drawings of furniture and household appliances, using tape measures and painstakingly knotted thread. Handwritten texts based on broadcast news soon replaced the knotted thread. Although the emphasis on process remained the same, the concern with national and international politics became more explicit. For example, a television set from 1983 is delineated with phrases like, "This is a test. This is only a test...." Tannenbaum observes: "The methodical repetition and neutrality of Smith's appropriated written texts, which become synonymous with the shape and image of the television screen, represent another perfect match of form and content." Sometimes adding audiotape, "Smith makes us see—and hear—the contrast between the droning background 'white noise' of the newscaster's expressionless words...and their all-too-often sinister or bizarre messages." (7, 9)

Addressing the issues of survival and ecology in a broader context, Smith turned to the house (the container of the earlier subjects) as a metaphor for the individual. The mostly paper *House with Clouds* (1980) is suspended under clouds of pollution and broadcasts chaotic audio warnings of pesticides, pollution, and nuclear near-disasters. The Three Mile Island reactor crisis was a source for some drawings and audio material. The *House*'s multiple messages are taken from actual news reports, but the dangers described are so numerous that they degenerate into a paralyzing cacophony.

During the mid-eighties, back in New York City, Smith turned to the computer, utilizing operating messages like "fatal error" and "press escape" in a series of mordant two-dimensional works. Now working with clothing again, Smith has expanded her "wardrobe" to include new and sometimes more complex levels of social observation. *To Die For* (1991), a dress in two tones of camouflage with a dainty lace collar, recognizes a world at war on many levels. Her candy