

MARION GREENSTONE

Pop Art 1960 / 1970

Preface

Although there are many outstanding women artists in the contemporary art world who are widely acclaimed to be on a par with men, we should not forget that this was not always so and that it is the result of a long, arduous journey. Until just a few decades ago, women artists were relegated to the margins of official art history and only recently, in certain cases, has the central point of their lives and work been recognized. By following their tracks, perhaps, the gaps can be filled in and research space opened up to bring to the foreground some important figures. This should not be taken merely as a gender claim - though that would be legitimate - but as a factor that has influenced the history of contemporary movements. This means that for a more complete reading of these large contemporary movements we must consign these missing parts to the history. An example of this situation can be seen even in the relatively recent current of Pop Art. The exhibition "Seductive Subversion: Women Pop Artists 1958 - 1968," which opened at the Brooklyn Museum in November 2010, initiated an in-depth study of this period and aroused great interest. Since then it has become more and more important to continue this study, as is obvious in the exhibition "L'argento" of the work of the Italian artist Giosetta Fioroni, curated by Claire Gilman for the Drawing Center of New York and, since October 26, 2013, in Italy at the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea in Rome.

Marion Greenstone

One of these artists to rediscover is Marion Greenstone (New York 1925 - 2005) whose work has made a significant contribution to contemporary art, in particular to Pop Art. She was a woman of great sensibility and energy, fully qualified and integrated into the New York artistic and cultural environment of her time. This has been ascertained by letters in her archive and recounted by her sister Cora and the artist and professor Archie Rand. Her acquaintances and closest friendships date back to the years at Cooper Union (from which she received a diploma in 1954) and Pratt Institute where she taught. Many of her friends and colleagues were outstanding artists: Paul Thek (1933 - 1988), Eva Hesse (1936 - 1970), Peter Hujar (1934 - 1987), Ray Johnson (1927 - 1993), R.B. Kitaj (1932 - 2007), Joseph Raffael (1933) and Wolf Kahn (1927). A touching letter from Paul Thek, for example, reveals their mutual respect and friendship. She was described as "serious" and "reserved" and led an ostensibly conventional life in her Park Slope house and studio in Brooklyn; but she had also lived and worked in Italy

(1954 - 1956), Venezuela (1957), Los Angeles (1959 - 1960) and Canada (1958 - 1962). She traveled widely and many of her works on paper are impressions of the places she visited. From the facts of her biography it is clear that her existence was dedicated entirely to art and everything revolved around that.

Marion Isaacson Greenstone was born in Brooklyn in 1925. The family lived in Beacon, New York during the 1930s but then returned to New York City where, during World War II, Marion attended high school and college. Cora was born in 1929 and, since Marion's death in New York in 2005, has been actively involved with her work and the principal source of information about the artist.

At the age of 21, after earning a degree in English and experience in teaching, Marion realized that her true aspiration had always been another one, to be an artist. She called it "my secret desire." Given her educational and family background, it was a difficult and courageous choice. Art represented an area of freedom for her, but it was hard to conquer on both the exterior and interior levels. Her husband, an executive in the business world, always encouraged and facilitated her work. As Cora recounts, he accompanied or followed her on work or study trips abroad and he solved all her technical problems. He stretched canvases and even built the supports for her asymmetrical works.

Marion was not just an artist of pop art. Her first works were impressionist and reveal a desire to relate to other cultures and continents like Africa, South America and Europe. A Fulbright scholarship permitted her to live in Italy from 1954 to 1956 and to travel in Europe, so that in France she could study the work of René Magritte and Jean Fautrier, explore their innovative significance, and metabolize it in her experience and awareness as an artist. All this merged with her American education. Three outstanding teachers gave her an artistic imprinting: Norman Lewis, the African-American abstract impressionist; Julian Levi, a supporter of the transition from surrealism to abstraction, women artists and photography; and Vaclav Vytlacil a modernist and iconoclast, also teacher of Twombly, Rosenquist, Rauschenberg, Tony Smith and Louise Bourgeois.

From the works and writings she left, we know that Marion Greenstone was an artist who worked doggedly without interruption for about fifty years, stylistically covering three periods: abstract expressionism (1955 - 1960), where her interest was to keep the context after removing the content; pop art (1961-1970), the central moment of her work; and hyperrealism (1970 - 2005), where she returned to a more intimate abstract style.

Paraphrasing the English philosopher and language scholar Aldo Gargani, one can speak of Marion Greenstone as an artist for whom there is no world to describe, but an existence to critique. Her works show gradual passages in language and style that occur slightly ahead of the explosion of the three different art movements, and they correspond to socio-political changes and an accompanying "short circuit" in the contemporary world. Indeed, one of the characteristics of all western art is that it proceeds by avant-gardes, whose aim is to refute or supersede the current esthetic language. In brief, her commitment was to formulate an ad hoc language

so she could represent an animated metaphor capable of activating new vocabularies. This is why all her works always maintain a high level of energy and originality. Her means and end seem to come together. The affective aspect of thought includes emotion and empathy.

The Period of Pop Art (1960 -1970)

Although relegated to the background because traditionally the monopoly in this sector had always been dominated by male artists like Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein, Greenstone's work is particularly interesting because it brings to the fore a different approach. Male Pop Art had rejected introspection and instinct and concentrated on visual stimuli of the consumer society. Marion goes even further, analyzing and deconstructing the same language of advertising. Therein lies her originality that produces a series of intersections among bodies, living organisms, dream images and advertising images. In these works she casts light on subliminal advertising messages connected to basic human drives and desires such as food, sexuality, tools and technological development and even plastic surgery. What emerges is a great parade of symbols that inhabit the masculine world. Parachutists, skiers and laborers appear alongside mouths half open to receive a stream of water. And then there is lipstick being applied to lips, bananas, pears, large pointed nails, and maps, diagrams, cities seen from above, syringes, raw meat and cooked foods, electrical sockets, suitcases, balls of yarn, feet that become hands, elegantly set tables, record players, bottles, nails being polished, and also eyes and hoses. Her images in bright contrasting colors seem to demand something indispensable. Progress and modernity continue to ignore the other half of the world, the feminine point of view, but she has already acquired a new awareness, which now becomes image. This brings us to the brutal, captivating connection between objects and subjects, between things and living beings. Every one of her works appears to be assembled like a fluid chain, incredibly like that of DNA. It seems the artist's intent is to reveal the genetic code of society observed from above and seen as highly contradictory despite its inexorable development. In several works there are spheres, bubbles, plates or floating eggs, which re-enforce the sensation of witnessing a swarm of images traveling in a horizontal plane where there is no gravity.

This continual comparison between past and present involves the realm of personal feelings. Greenstone's world shows a certain tendency toward the surreal, and her language shifts away from the unequivocal, glossy model of advertising messages. In fact, her pop works originate from grafting collage onto painting. On the same surface, one technique follows the other, and they form sequences of images that seem to spring up on their own and then go on to where needed, so that they create reliefs and asymmetrical extensions of the support. She finds the edges of the canvas limiting. In an interview at the McIntosh Memorial Art Gallery (The University of Western Ontario) in 1964 she says: "(this group of works) completed during the past few months grew out of an increasing dissatisfaction with the limitations of the rectangle. For many years I have felt hemmed in by the edges of the canvas and it seemed that many of my works had a life beyond the perimeters." This applies not only to the shape

of her works but also has precise symbolic significance. At that moment woman, who had always been represented as a "mythical being" object of glances and model for male artists, is transformed into the one who observes and represents a different, freer world. From her place and point of view, the work takes on unusual shapes and adaptable borders, as if to assert that it's legitimate to depart from the usual practices and follow one's own intuition. In the 1966 work entitled "Homage to Magritte," she depicts herself as a woman with blue skin and a large reddish area extending from an eye to an arm. Perhaps it is an abrasion, since all the other images depict skin or membranes in different ways: two hands unrolling adhesive tape, a half-peeled banana, a roll of dollars, a long tape of a diagram, a sort of old photograph objective, and paint rollers. In the center of the work, as if seen in an opening, appear the tops of trees that create a contrast between the natural and artificial. As in Magritte, the work becomes a compromise between organic elements and mechanical ones within a dreamlike story. She is again very close to Magritte, who in turn was influenced by the De Chirico brothers, in her habitual mingling of collage and painting, as if to confirm the concept that the technical means do not count for themselves but are always subordinate to the narration and setting. Apropos of this, Greenstone is always very skillful in creating a shock effect with her "scenarios," which are achieved by shifting, linking and semantic intersections.

Characteristics of her personality and life as an artist can be noted in a photograph taken in her studio in 1969, probably by George Mott. It shows a determined, liberated woman in a large bright room where nothing seems out of place, seated before one of her works. She appears serene, but pensive, her legs crossed and her chin resting on her hand. She looks posed, but not in the usual sense of the word. She seems to want to show herself to an imaginary public as simple but solemn, as creator and guardian of her work. That is how we perceive her today - intellectually vivacious and contemporary - as is obvious in the work exhibited in this show.

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