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by Hilarie M. Sheets

Challenging Boundaries With Her Naked Body



The artist Carolee Schneemann, at home outside New Paltz, N.Y. Credit Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

After decades without much institutional support or a strong market for her work, the tide is finally turning for Ms. Schneemann, 77, at a moment of growing interest in female artists of her generation. Last year the Museum of Modern Art acquired her 1962 painted construction with moving parts, “Four Fur Cutting Boards,” an environment she then activated with her nude body in the photographs “Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions for Camera” (1963). That series set an auction record for the artist of \$185,000 at Christie’s last year, although her work has sold privately for up to \$900,000.

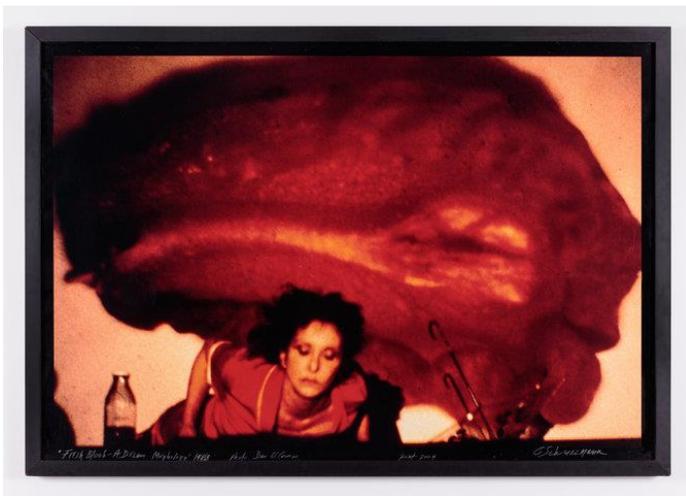
“That was the first time I felt I could position my body as an extension of painting and sculpture,” Ms. Schneemann said recently of “Eye Body,” sitting in her 1750 stone house and studio near New Paltz, N.Y.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/30/arts/design/carolee-schneemann-challenges-boundaries-with-her-naked-body.html>

“I was reacting against Pop Art, with its slick mechanistic polish of the female form, and against masculine eroticism, which I felt was prurient and suppressive to what our lived experience could bring forward.”

As an art student at Bard College in the late 1950s, she was suspended for painting herself with her legs open, while it was standard for female students to model naked for male peers. The essential question her work posed early on was, Can a naked woman be both image and image-maker?

Stuart Comer, MoMA’s chief curator of media and performance art, who steered the acquisition of “Four Fur Cutting Boards,” called the piece “a watershed moment” in Ms. Schneemann’s career and for the Happenings movement, for feminism, and for a shift in understanding the relationship of performance and painting. “To say that Carolee was a visionary is an understatement,” he said. “She is crucial to the way so many artists are working now.”



The artist Carolee Schneemann, at home outside New Paltz, N.Y. Credit Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

Yet at the time, pieces such as “Meat Joy” or “Interior Scroll” (1975), in which Ms. Schneemann read a monologue she pulled from her vagina while striking modeling poses, were widely trivialized and branded as pornographic. She said that she was vilified by many first-wave feminists for “playing into male fantasies,” which she said was the most hurtful part of the backlash.

Marilyn Minter, an artist a decade younger who explores sex and desire in her own work, said Ms. Schneemann’s early performances “were the first time I’d ever seen a young woman artist using sexuality and making a picture of what it looks like.”

She remembers other feminists dismissing Ms. Schneemann’s actions because of her “killer body.” “They called it narcissism,” Ms. Minter said. “Today it would be called slut-shaming. I wish I had had the language to defend her, but it registered that this is someone who’s really making a giant move.”

Today, young and vocal feminists in the media, including the “Girls” creator Lena Dunham, follow in Ms. Schneemann’s wake with bold narratives about their own bodies. Ms. Dunham, who has experienced backlash for disrobing on air, recently posted on social media: “I live for the nude rabble rousing of Carolee Schneemann.”

A spoof ad on the end page of the Artist's Institute magazine shows the Icelandic performance artist Ragnar Kjartansson naked, reading a mock-up of the issue. Mr. Kjartansson, 40, said he was first inspired by Ms. Schneemann in art school. "All this art history of the representation of the female body, then there comes a woman who just owns it," he said, referring to Ms. Schneemann as "Aphrodite herself." He said that he sought her out in New Paltz in 2007. They have been close friends ever since.

He describes Ms. Schneemann's "Infinity Kisses" (1981-87), in which she filmed deep morning kisses with her cat close-up with a hand-held camera, as "the only art piece that has really shocked me." The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art bought the piece in 1993, the first museum acquisition of her work.

"She still is doing some of the most disturbing physical images around," he said.

The Galerie Lelong show includes two immersive film installations in which she collaged images of political violence, a thread in her work since her films from the 1960s exploring the atrocities of Vietnam. At P.P.O.W. the installations focus on Ms. Schneemann's experience with illness.

"Known/Unknown: Plague Column" (1995-96) investigates cancer from a cellular level to a metaphoric one, made as Ms. Schneemann was using alternative therapies to treat breast cancer and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. (She had no health insurance at the time, and treatment was made possible via a Pollock-Krasner Foundation grant, she said.) For an artist who has bared all for decades, it is a strikingly intimate work that has rarely been shown.

"It's a very hard work for me to bring forward because I'm superstitious," she said. "Now it should be helpful in the conversation of cancer and health that so many of us are going through." She has been cancer-free for years, but moves slowly since falling and breaking her hip on the way to the podium to give a lecture at New York University in 2014. (She asked for a chair and proceeded with the lecture and question-and-answer session before going to the emergency room.)

Also on view at P.P.O.W. is "Fresh Blood: A Dream Morphology" (1981-87), a filmed performance in which the artist ruminates on menstruation, another taboo subject, in ways both investigatory and humorous. "It's a work that used to bring women to tears," Ms. Schneemann said. "It was enlivening aspects of our physiological experience that had been despised and invisible."

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