

# Art in America

MAY 2006



Nancy Spero

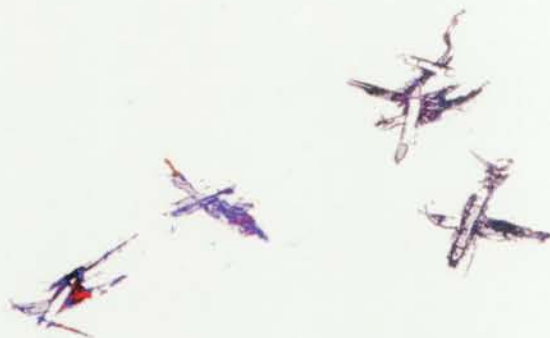
Francesco Clemente

Wenda Gu

John Szarkowski

Willie Cole

Lower East Side



\$5.00 USA  
\$7.00 CAN £3.50 UK

# Spero's Cry

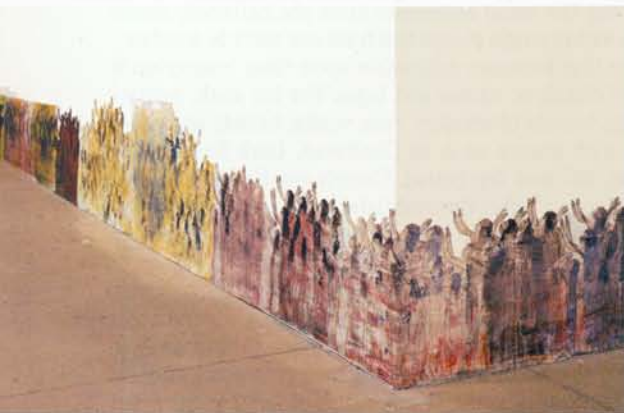
*In two recent exhibitions, one of which featured a large-scale printed-paper frieze, Nancy Spero grappled with the legacy of the Vietnam War, ancient iconography and personal loss.*

**BY THOMAS MCEVILLEY**

**T**his has been a great art season for those who love Nancy Spero's work: over the winter she had two major bodies of work up in New York at the same time. One, at the Drawing Center, was a wall-printed installation inspired by and, in part, cannibalized from her classic 1966-70 "War" series. It appeared in "Persistent Vestiges: Drawing from the American-Vietnam War," a four-person show that also featured Martha Rosler, Dinh Q. Lê and Binh Danh.

The Spero works on the two big facing walls at the Drawing Center revisited the Vietnam War. Screaming figures were condensed into tight images. Helicopters crept around the walls at ceiling level, seeking their prey among art viewers. In one corner, a flock of seven or eight of them flurried around an airplane. Elsewhere, a ghostly helicopter of transparent blue dropped grenade-shaped bombs bearing more screaming figures. These two long wall pieces, each 13 by 48 feet, were dated 2005 but recapitulated selected motifs from the "War" series and subsequent Spero images of torture victims based on Amnesty International case histories.

To create her wall pieces, Spero begins by photocopying images from books, usually about ancient art or archeology. She enlarges the images and alters them by drawing on them and cutting them out from their original context. These altered images become the basis for either stencils or printing plates. Ink, and sometimes other mediums, is then applied to the stencils and plates, which are hand-pressed to the receiving surface. For printing on paper, Spero uses soft zinc plates; for printing directly on the wall surface, she uses flexible plates made of latex polymer.



*Three views of Nancy Spero's Cri du Coeur, 2005, handprinting on paper, dimensions variable; at Galerie Lelong, New York. Photos, from left to right, Jason Mandella, David Reynolds, Stephanie Joson. All photos this spread courtesy Galerie Lelong.*







**At the Drawing Center, helicopters dropped bombs bearing screaming figures and morphed into a malignant crop-destroying natural force.**



"Persistent Vestiges" continued across the street in the Drawing Center's auxiliary space, the Drawing Room, where three gouache-and-ink-on-paper works from Spero's original "War" series hung alongside works by six Vietnamese artists that were made on the frontlines of the conflict.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps it was the war's jungle setting, but in both spaces nature and greenness were invoked repeatedly. In Spero's *The Bug, Helicopter, Victim* (1966), for instance, the helicopter morphs into an analogue of a malignant, crop-destroying natural force. This image, like nearly all the work in "Persistent Vestiges," is, unfortunately, as timely now as it was when it was made.

Meanwhile, Galerie Lelong presented Spero's *Cri du Coeur*, a new, 160-foot-long printed-paper frieze (maximum height, 26 inches) that wrapped around the base of the gallery's walls. The frieze, which was printed in sections in Spero's New York studio, repeated again and again a group of mourning women taken from an ancient New Kingdom Egyptian wall painting. As they moved along the bottom of the wall in two large gallery rooms in ever darkening tonality, the effect was like a descent into the underworld.

The images reproduce motifs from the tomb of the scribe Ramose, who lived in the village of Deir al-Medinah in the 13th century B.C., working on the projects of the masterbuilder Ramses II. Deir was a village established for the families of workers engaged in constructing the underground tombs in the Valley of the Kings east of Luxor on the upper Nile. Ramose was a member of the scribal class. Although not a noble, he was one of the more prosperous in this community of artisans, and could afford the kind of elaborate burial usually reserved for nobility. He was known in his time for an elegant sweeping handwriting. When he died after 38 years of scribal work, a chorus of women—priestesses and women of the family and the household—lamented his departure. As rendered in his tomb, the women's hands were raised fluttering in the air, long fingers separated carefully—a detail that Spero carries over in her adaptation.

The source of this mourning-women image is a reminder that Egyptian

iconography has been a recurring presence in Spero's work. Early on, she was influenced by Egyptian hieroglyphs and has previously used Pharaonic tomb imagery. Her ties to Egypt were strengthened in 1998, when she represented the U.S. at that year's Cairo Biennale.

*Cri du Coeur* relates to Spero's earlier paper friezes or scrolls—but with a couple of major differences. First, they used to be high on the wall: *The Sacred and the Profane* at the Josh Baer Gallery, New York, in 1986, for instance, ran just below the ceiling. In *Azur*, a work shown at Lelong in 2002, three friezes ran in parallel bands more or less equidistant between floor and ceiling.

Also different is the dark palette. Spero's earlier wall works tended to be light and bright. *The Sacred and the Profane* was done mostly on white paper with pastel shades of yellow, pink and blue paint; *Azur* featured bold patterns and colors. The new frieze, printed with oil-based ink, goes from dark to darker. As the palette shifts by stages toward black, Spero also adds a medium to the ink that increases the viscosity, resulting in a tough, gritty surface.

Commentators have said of the present work that it's about Afghanistan, Iraq, Hurricane Katrina. Such responses are understandable, especially since Spero is an artist who has long empathized in her work with the sorrows of history. But *Cri du Coeur* also surely refers to something much closer at hand for the artist: the death in August 2004 of painter Leon Golub, her husband of 53 years and her partner in a great artistic dialogue. This is the loss that can be sensed behind the dark, low-lying frieze of maidens and priestesses relentlessly lamenting the loss of the scribe Ramose. □

1. These artists were Nguyen Cong Do, Nguyen Thu, Nguyen Van Da, Quang Tho, Truong Hien and Vu Giang Huong.

*Nancy Spero's Cri du Coeur was seen at Galerie Lelong, New York [Oct. 24-Dec. 3, 2005]. "Persistent Vestiges: Drawing from the American-Vietnam War" was on view at the Drawing Center, New York [Main Gallery, Nov. 5, 2005-Feb. 11, 2006; Drawing Room, Nov. 5-Dec. 21, 2005].*

Author: Thomas McEvilley's latest book is *The Triumph of Anti-Art: Conceptual and Performance Art in the Formation of Post Modernism* (McPherson & Company).



