

Art in America

Exhibition Reviews

MAY 2013



Nancy Spero:
*Picasso and
Frederick's of
Hollywood*, 1990,
handprinted collage
on paper, two parts,
each 17□ by 109□
inches; at Lelong.

NANCY SPERO

Lelong

History repeats itself, particularly when it comes to the subjugation of women. This is one of the lessons to be taken from the work of Nancy Spero, whose artistic output from 1976 onward was dedicated to the representation of female subjects. Yet the collages presented in “From Victimhood to Liberation,” the artist’s first New York solo show since her death in 2009, offers a counterview to the *her-story* of victimhood Spero strove tirelessly to bring to light throughout her career. Comprising lesser known works from the 1980s and 1990s, the exhibition celebrated women as emblems of strength and self-sufficiency even as it exposed a narrative of subjection that is no less relevant this century than it was in the last.

An emancipatory perspective on the female subject was announced from the outset by a 14-foot-long scroll-like piece hung prominently in the gallery’s front room. Depicting printed iterations of an elderly woman striding imperturbably across the paper, *Vietnamese Women* (1985) is a prime example of Spero’s ability to exploit the expressiveness of a single figure through variations in color, placement and technique. The artist adapted a grisly Vietnam war photo, drawing the image and transferring it to a zinc plate. Poised at the threshold of a less benighted future, shoulders squared, back angled forward, a cigarette clenched between her lips, Spero’s walking woman belatedly joins the similarly posed icons of resiliency found in the work of Rodin and Giacometti.

That such revisionism has been necessary not only within the matrix of modern and contemporary art but within conventional image-repertoires generally is suggested by *Picasso and Frederick’s of Hollywood* (1990), which consists of two long horizontal scrolls, one above the other. Here Spero juxtaposes representations of women culled from her so-called “stock company,” an archive of 400-plus depictions of female archetypes collected over the course of her career. The handprinted and collaged images repeated on

the blank ground include a Cubistic Picasso, a lingerie-wearing seductress, an aboriginal depiction of a woman with her legs splayed, a female figure drawn by an insane woman and a Mexican figurine of a birthing mother. They classify the predeterminations of androcentrism; in each depiction, the female figure has been reduced to an object of heterosexual fantasy, exoticized into contorted dimensions or functionalized into a figure of fertility.

The cultural subjection laid bare by this work has its counterpart in the physical violence enacted against women throughout history. Among the representations of inhumane acts appropriated in Spero’s works are a photograph belonging to a Gestapo agent of a naked woman bound and gagged, the silhouette of a young girl disappeared during Argentina’s Dirty War, and an image of the hanging of Masha Bruskina, a young Jewish partisan executed during World War II. (A catalogue accompanying the show identified the images.)

Out of the depths of degradation, however, emerge signs of endurance and hope. *Argentina* (1981) and *South Africa* (1981) each combine torn sections from various transcripts documenting those countries’ oppressive histories with the image of a crawling woman irradiated in the bombing of Hiroshima. Though the woman appears disfigured by the blast, the forward thrust of her body, mimicked by the image of a classical athlete represented mid-motion, suggests she is rising from the ashes.

In *The Underworld* (1997), a 63-by-19-inch collage, a woman raises her hands upward as she emerges from a subterranean region inhabited by serpents and the devil into a world dominated by mythical female forms. Here, finally, is a Eurydice who needs no Orpheus.

—David Markus