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by Cate McQuaid

A cry of loss — and love — in installation by Nancy Spero

Detail of Nancy Spero's installation "Cri du Coeur," her last giant work on paper, made after her husband's death in 2004. Spero died in 2009 at 83.

WORCESTER — Often, while looking at Nancy Spero's epic installation "Cri du Coeur" at the Worcester Art Museum, I was brought to my knees.

The hand-printed frieze, finished in the months following the death in 2004 of her husband, the painter Leon Golub, evokes grief in a funeral march of female figures, raising their arms in supplication and trudging through the inky murk of loss. It feels veritably tear-stained. Yet "Cri du Coeur" is a tough piece, strict and rigorous in its production. Art can only be an effective vessel for such fierce emotion if the work itself is unsentimental and unsparing.



Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York

Besides, it wasn't grief that had me kneeling. It was the installation: The frieze circles the gallery at floor level. It's no more than 3 feet tall, and most of the printing looks less than 18 inches high. The best way to view it is probably to crawl. Which fits, because damned if bereavement isn't a long, slow crawl.

"Cri du Coeur" is Spero's last giant work on paper. She died in 2009 at 83. Spero was an early feminist artist, and her modus operandi was to gather images of women from art books, magazines, her previous work, and elsewhere, often pictures from ancient mythology. She made them her own, drawing and painting over them before converting them to prints, and offered them up as she does here in motifs that repeat themselves along lengthy scrolls and alter along the way.

Details of Nancy Spero's installation "Cri du Coeur," which is 3 feet tall.

Her theme was women as witness to history — the forgotten souls who suffered losses when their children were killed in war or by other violent means, and the women who rose up and kept on going after suffering catastrophe. In 2004 and 2005, as Spero worked on "Cri du Coeur," her own loss may have been foremost, but this social activist artist, who made "War Series: Bombs and Helicopters" in response to the Vietnam War, must have also been fueled by war's ravages in Iraq and Afghanistan, and by the devastation of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina.

Egyptian imagery was a favorite resource for Spero. The women in this frieze come from a painted scene in the 14th century BC tomb of Ramose of Thebes. In the tomb, they raised their arms toward a sarcophagus painted above them. Here, though, they appear to be addressing the gods. The blank white page spreads over them, and above that, the gallery wall. Is that white expanse representative of the gods, or is it emptiness that they're beseeching?



Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York

Women and girls move in a cluster, arms waving, like dancers executing choreography. They move from right to left, mostly, although sometimes mourners will disrupt the procession and turn in the opposite direction. Tears streak their faces.

As the funeral march continues, dusk falls, and then night. Or perhaps it's just grief enveloping them. The figures get lost in floods of blue, and then they reappear nearly chiseled in deep burgundy. Elsewhere, Spero prints the group one on top of the next, so the women appear to shudder. The palette shifts from antique yellow to gauzy blue, to a mix of ember red and sooty black. The colors alone tell a powerful story.

Spero's repeated use of the same image captures the sense, when someone close to you has died, that time has stopped and you're suspended in an endless, harrowing present. One that is deeply imbued with the past and all that is gone — just as this work is anchored in the ancient past, and the eternal and mythic theme of the grief of women. Think of Mary in Michelangelo's Pieta. Think of Demeter's pain at the loss of Persephone. Traditionally, in Western culture, men acted and women were left to feel.

"Cri du Coeur" is also extraordinarily musical, revisiting the same pattern in different tones, with different inflections, as tension mounts along the way. Life is like that, too — we spiral through the same patterns again and again. This piece was originally a site-specific work; it circled the walls of Galerie Lelong in New York. The Worcester Art Museum gallery housing it now is larger than that one, so the sense of a complete circle, and perhaps a cycle of bereavement, is lost and the tale becomes more linear.

There's no happy ending to this. Gorgeous, threatening washes of dark ink ultimately engulf the bereaved women.



Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York

Yet, in the end, I did not leave the gallery feeling bleak and down. I found myself instead wondering about those waving arms: a gesture of lamentation, to be sure, but it so resembles a gesture of praise and thanks. We wouldn't grieve if we didn't love. Amid the shock, numbness, and sometime horror of grief lies love, and gratitude for it. Maybe "Cri du Coeur" is not simply a requiem. Maybe it's also a love song.

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