

# SPERO'S



**LEFT** Portrait of the artist with her mounds of “paper dolls.”  
**OPPOSITE** Spero’s 1968 drawing *F111*, a powerful example from her “War Series.”

# HEROES

Often using mere paper as a medium and a powerful pictorial vocabulary of her own invention, Nancy Spero spins tales of ferocious, heroic women

**BY PHOEBE HOBAN**

Nancy Spero isn't usually one to toot her own horn. But that's exactly what she did when she made a grand entrance into the opening of a show of her "Black Paintings," titled "Un Coup de Dent," at New York's Galerie Lelong this past January. The 82-year-old artist, dressed in a fitted black blouse and a borrowed black beret, arrived at the gallery steering her "Porsche," a black three-wheeled device equipped with an old-fashioned horn. Spero beeped loudly as she crossed the threshold of the gallery and was immediately greeted by a wave of applause, as her fans held her hostage at the gallery's entrance. "I'm having a great time. It's wonderful. I'm seeing a lot of old friends," she said, beaming.

It's difficult to think of the slight, spritelike Spero as a grande dame of the art world. But apart from Louise Bourgeois, few living female artists have carved out a similarly singular niche. Both are trenchant woman warriors who have invented powerful pictorial vocabularies that are simultaneously idiosyncratic and universal. If Bourgeois is Spider Woman, a provocative weaver of monumental webs, Spero is the High Priestess of Hieroglyphics whose lifework is the visual equivalent of an epic poem. Bourgeois has mostly made her mark with objects that forcefully occupy space, but Spero has chosen a more ephemeral path, often using mere paper to create mythic scrolls, collages, and "Maypoles," that explore her ongoing quest, the eternal feminine.

Spero's reputation has grown exponentially in the past several years. Last year she had two big shows in Europe—at Anthony Reynolds Gallery in London, where one of her Maypoles burst through the ceiling ("Isn't that great? This pristine place!" she exclaims), and at the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, where she had a large retrospective that traveled to Madrid and Seville. "She is a major 20th-century artist," says curator and Fordham University professor of art history Jo Anna Isaak, who has organized several Spero shows. "I think that she is now assuming her proper role and getting her critical due." Or as the artist puts it, "I didn't have a catalogue until I was 51. I now have entered the art world. I can call the shots. Not all the time. But a lot. It's amazing it took so long."

Spero sits at the long kitchen table in the double studio she shared for over 30 years with her late husband, Leon Golub, who died in 2004. Hanging over the table is a huge Andres

Serrano photograph showing Golub posed in blood-stained cardinal's garb. "It's a great photo," Spero says, "and Leon's here at the head of the table, and I just love it."

The studio, in the kitchen half of the loft, is crammed with worktables piled high with what look like heaps of paper dolls—it's like a paper-doll morgue, with multitudinous cutouts of leaping, swimming, dancing, stripping, birthing, dying, screaming, mournful, joyful women. "They are manipulated and

they are played with, and because they are paper, I call them paper dolls," says Spero. "Isn't that what a little girl would do with paper dolls? So it's totally with some irony and amusement that I call them paper dolls." But Spero insists that the "irony of paper dolls" is not a feminist statement in and of itself.

"I'm really omnivorous," says Spero. "Nevertheless I come around to what I call my stars, figures which I use over and over. One of them is this athletic figure; she's nude, naked, running forward. And another one has been Sheela," she says, gesturing at a ferocious figure with an open vagina. "It's a powerful Celtic fertility figure. I find it humorous. I don't have a clue how it really is intended, but I just find it full of energy and humor, just lively."

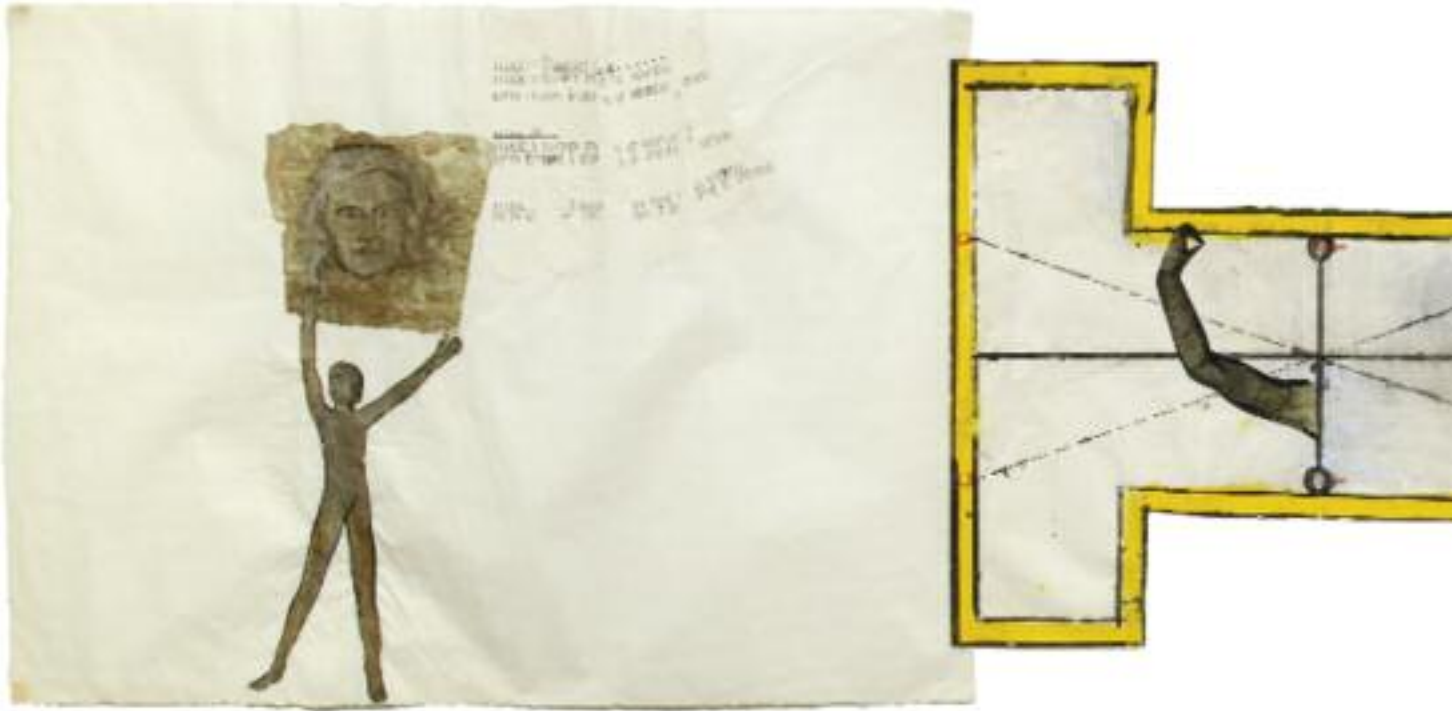
Spero's work has not only been influenced by her struggles as a mother, an artist, and a woman, but also by her 54-year relationship with Golub. In the studio adjoining hers, an enormous Golub canvas confronts a maquette of the Maypole shown in London, a version of which Spero originally created for the 2007 Venice Biennale. Typically, she has transformed a celebratory symbol into something spooky and dangerous.

Her Maypole is like a lynching tree, bearing the strange fruit of decapitated heads. Cannibalizing her own work, she used the heads of images from her past collages and prints; in fact, the Maypole image itself first appeared in her 1967 drawing *Kill Commies/Maypole*. As Spero speaks, one of the heads, stirred by a breeze, dangles near a large figure in Golub's painting. "A screaming head leaning up against Leon," says Spero. "See how similar they are in their angst? Or just kind of an attitude of defiance, of exaggerated confrontation."

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**SPERO WAS BORN** in Cleveland, Ohio. Her father sold used printing presses and, according to Spero's oldest son, Steve, had a "whimsical" sensibility. Frustrated in his original desire to become a writer, he penned long, thoughtful letters. Spero's early exposure to the pleasure—and power—of text later informed her work.

In 1927 Spero's family moved to Chicago, where she attended the Art Institute and met Golub, who was getting his master's degree there. Spero went off to Paris to study from 1949 to 1950, when she returned to Chicago and married Golub. "We lived and worked together, and it was pretty wonderful—a perpetual dialogue. The influence was mutual," she says.

Both artists were devoted to figurative work, which they produced even at the height of Abstract Expressionism. But, as Spero explains, Golub was always political. "I wasn't political then. I didn't go into art overtly as a political artist, but I didn't go into it for my youth and beauty either," she says modestly.

With her distinctive features topped off by a pixie-punkish blond bob, Spero always cut a striking figure. Says her son Steve, "She dressed in a very provocative, unusual way—very stylish, very different from the other mothers. She had these black leather boots all the way up to her hips, and she wore very tight-fitting clothes in unusual colors."

Spero and Golub lived in Italy for a year before moving to Paris, where they stayed from 1959 to 1965. During that time, Spero gave birth to three sons—Steve, Philip, and Paul. "You know I worked the minute a child was born and I came home," she recalls, "but it was really a shame. Instead of enjoying this funny-looking little thing full time, I would put the little thing to bed, and when it was sleeping do my artwork. And then when the little thing got up, I would take care of it, and when the little thing went back to sleep, finally, I would go back to the studio. So I was pretty exhausted."

Spero created her enigmatic Black Paintings during that Paris

**Notes in Time on Women (detail, panel 6), 1979, chronicles the impact of war on women throughout history.**





**Codex Artaud III, 1971, is based on playwright Antonin Artaud's manifesto *The Theater of Cruelty*, portions of which Spero typed on paper and collaged into a scroll.**

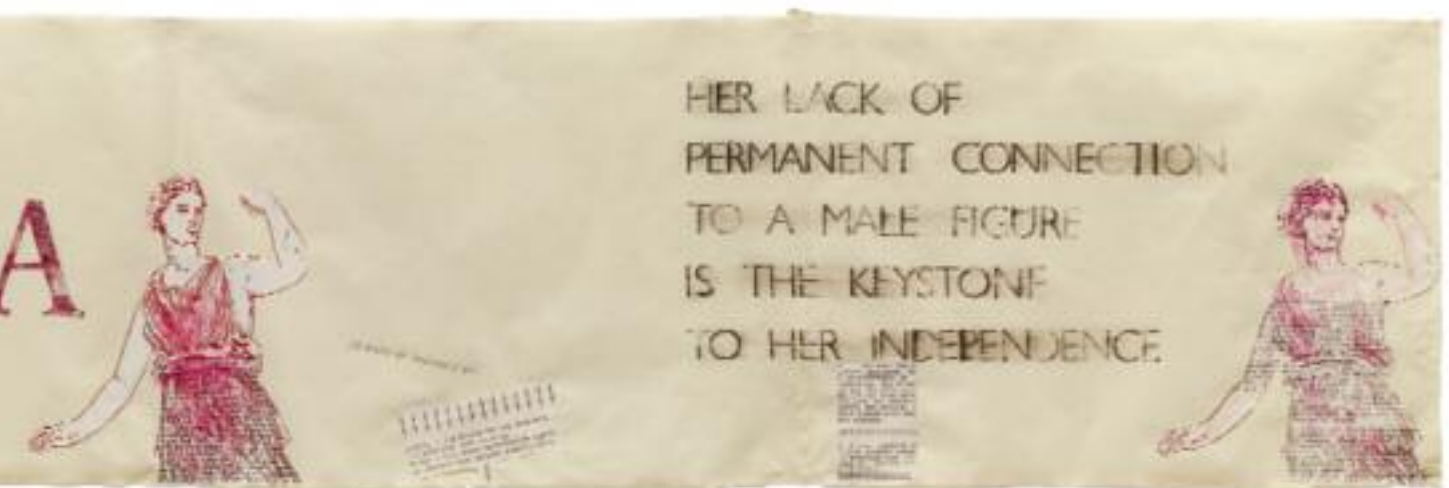
period. The looming figures, painted as if glimpsed through a torn veil or scrim, portray mothers, intercourse, and childbirth. Their disturbing palette may have derived from being painted mostly at night. In these works Spero first addressed one of her central themes: language as a voice for the disenfranchised. "It was particularly one of the Black Paintings," she explains, "in which there's a figure coming out of a kind of angel—the figure is a woman with four breasts and wings instead of arms, and it's about eight feet tall. It's a profile, so out of her mouth comes this head, this little figurine, that had to do with speech. It was like a birth of language, not of a human being."

In 1965, the height of the Vietnam War, Spero, Golub, and their sons moved back to America, settling in New York, first on the Upper West Side and then in Golub's West Village loft. Spero abandoned oil painting to work on her "War Series"—furious ink and gouache drawings on paper that articulated the obscenity of war. She sexualized its violence with images of

phallic helicopters and bombs spewing fire and blood, and she introduced the image that would epitomize her entire oeuvre: the phallicized tongue, the same tongue that gives voice to both Spero and the silent female protagonists that populate human history—and her work.

Spero's next major series, produced in the early '70s, also dealt with language. Mesmerized by the French poet and playwright Antonin Artaud, whose illnesses and addictions rendered him, in effect, an outsider artist, she turned Artaud's manifesto *The Theater of Cruelty* into her own by typing portions of it onto paper, which she then collaged into a printed repertoire of images. She glued the sheets of paper together in a long scroll, which she called the "Codex Artaud."

Spero's lexicon of classical images became an armature upon which she could build. "The classical is so ostensibly timeless and beautiful and serene, you can't see all the craft around it; you just see the surface thing," she says. "And so I disrupt





that." Printmaking provided a flexible means for doing so. "Each one is quite individual. And I can make another and another and another."

Although Spero's work can be beautiful, that is not its primary goal. "A lot of my work has explosions of anger and violence," she says. "I want my work to be telling and strong, but not in a masculine sense. Strong," she continues, "in that it has a certain message—and it can be a strong message." Says artist Kiki Smith, "Nancy's work is radical. For people of my generation, she and Leon were role models as artists. There are very few people who represent their social beliefs in their work and lives, and they are two people who embody that."

Spero's feminism has extended well beyond her art. She was a member of the Art Workers' Coalition and Women Artists in Revolution (WAR), and she picketed the Whitney Museum,

**OPPOSITE** This version of Spero's *Maypole/ Take No Prisoners*, 2007, with hand-printed aluminum heads, appeared at the 2007 Venice Biennale.

**RIGHT** A section of the 160-foot-long scroll *Cri du Coeur*, 2005, at Galerie Lelong.



among other institutions, for failing to represent women. She was also a founding member of the Artists in Residence gallery (A.I.R.), started in 1972. It was the first art cooperative to show only women. "We were very firm that this was not a man-hating group of women artists," Spero says, "but I was frustrated. I couldn't get my voice out; it was like I was being pushed down." A.I.R. gave her a more secure foundation. "I saw you have to have a base in which to be planted so you can go out and see what's going on and kind of confront the art world with a little bit more assurance," she says.

**BY THE MID '70s**, Spero had decided to use only women in her work, portraying them as heroic—not as repressed and victimized. She is a feminist artist, she says, in the way she depicts women's plight. "I am thinking about the women's condition, showing victimage or celebratory sexuality in an exaggerated way." She embarked on several series that dealt explicitly with torture—a recurrent Golub subject. The first, called "Torture in Chile" (1974), and the next, "Torture of Women" (1976), combine oral testimony by South American women taken from Amnesty International documents with Spero's trademark female figures.

Her most extensive scrolls are *Notes in Time on Women* (1976–79) and *The First Language* (1979–81). In the 210-foot-long *Notes in Time on Women*, she chronicles the impact of war on women throughout history. For the 190-foot-long *The First*

*Language*, Spero made a radical decision and excised text from her work, relying solely on her own hand-printed and collaged characters. Says Smith, "Nancy's work as a precedent really enables me: it gives me and other artists space to construct a narrative, to construct meaning using disparate images."

In the '80s, she began printing her hieroglyphs directly on the walls, floors, and ceilings of museums and galleries, including *The Birth of Venus* (1989), a frieze installed at the Schirn Kuntshalle in Frankfurt. In 1999 Spero created a mosaic frieze celebrating the performing arts for the 66th Street–Lincoln Center subway station in New York.

One work that did not involve deleting text is the powerful *Masha Bruskina* (1995), an image taken from a photograph found in a Gestapo soldier's pocket. It shows a young Jewish woman bound, gagged, and naked except for her stockings and

shoes. Spero had used it in several earlier installations, including *Ballad of Marie Sanders, the Jew's Whore* (1991), upon which is printed Bertolt Brecht's poem of the same name. In its potent blurring of victimization, pornography, and tragedy, it is a quintessential Spero work. Observes curator Susan Harris: "I think Nancy has developed a new scale and a new language and a new relevance for narrative art. She exploded the notion of scale by bringing the wall into play."

Spero's work, which sells for between \$10,000 and \$600,000, has always combined fragility with steely strength. Her art in the wake of Golub's death was no exception. In 2005 she unfurled a 160-foot-long paper frieze along the base of the walls at Galerie Lelong. The dark figures in the frieze, with their slender, long-fingered hands, were based on an Egyptian wall painting found in the tomb of Ramose, a high-ranking scribe and artisan during the reign of Ramses II. The piece, *Cri du Coeur*, speaks volumes about Spero's resilient cycle of celebration and mourning—for herself and for the war- and catastrophe-fraught world we live in. "It's the extreme that draws me," she says.

Spero is the last person to leave the gallery the night of her Lelong opening. But, like her favorite "running" figure, she just keeps moving forward. She already has a new project in mind for her next show, although superstition prevents her from talking about it yet. But it will definitely incorporate images of severed heads. And this time, she hints, they will occupy a whole new dimension. ■