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Carolee Schneemann: Body Politics, review: an exhilarating, unflinching odyssey into art's avant garde

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by Alastair Sooke, Chief Art Critic



Carolee Schneemann, "Meat Joy" (6–18 November 1964). Judson Dance Theater, Judson Memorial Church, New York. Photograph by Robert McElroy. Courtesy of the Carolee Schneemann Foundation and Galerie Lelong & Co., Hales Gallery, and P.P.O.W, New York and © Carolee Schneemann Foundation / ARS, New York and DACS, London 2022. Photograph © 2022 Estate of Robert R. McElr

Anyone with a sensitive disposition should stop reading now, because the Barbican's latest exhibition – the first British retrospective for the American performance artist and painter Carolee Schneemann, who died in 2019 and is often described as a feminist "icon" – is a proper marmalade-dropper.

How so? Well, let us briefly consider a couple of moments from the show. First, a blacked-out gallery upstairs, with folding seating like a seedy Soho cinema and, at the threshold, a 16+ rating. Inside, the Barbican is screening Schneemann's explicit silent film *Fuses* (1964-67), which intercuts lyrical views of the upstate New York landscape with short clips of her and her partner at the time having very intense sex.

The second moment, which, for my money, is far more startling than a spot of plain old how's-your-father, occurs a little later, in a section downstairs called "Vulvic Space". Here, documentation evokes a performance from 1975 called *Interior Scroll*, during which Schneemann, standing naked on a table in East Hampton, pulled a long, concertinaed piece of paper from her vagina before reading it aloud.

Two years later, she repeated the trick in Colorado. And now both smudged and battered "scrolls", twin umbilical cords of poetry preserved within Plexiglas like the relics of a saint, are on display in London, not far from another work showcasing pieces of tissue paper blotted with Schneemann's menstrual blood.

None of this, I concede, may sound like the sort of thing you'd like to encounter on your day off. But don't be deterred. Because *Carolee Schneemann: Body Politics* is a surprisingly exhilarating odyssey into the outer reaches of the avant garde.

The story of her life reads like a parody of a rule-breaking modern artist's biography. Born in Pennsylvania in 1939, she was booted out of college for painting her own naked body, which her teachers considered evidence of "moral turpitude" - an early sign that her own flesh would become a central artistic preoccupation.

By the early Sixties, she was entangled within the wilder fringes of New York's underground art scene, attending packed, sweaty loft parties and happenings in Greenwich Village, and producing self-consciously slapdash painting constructions in the manner of Robert Rauschenberg's Combines.

Her quantum leap came in 1963, when, to challenge the "male gaze", she decided to interact while naked with her artistic works-in-progress - becoming, simultaneously, image and maker. In a series of black-and-white photographs documenting the morbid poses she adopted, she appears strikingly attractive, like a glamorous yet earthy heroine of Italian cinema. Serpents slither across her torso, lending her the aura of a Minoan snake goddess.

From here, it was a small step to the "kinetic theatre" for which she remains best known, such as 1964's *Meat Joy*. (You've got to hand it to her for that title alone.) A group of semi-nude dancers cavort with buckets of paint and raw chickens in a sweaty, orgiastic mass, as if ecstatically enacting a mysterious fertility ritual from pagan antiquity. Always, Schneemann had the male-dominated art world - which she mocked as the "Art Stud Club" - in her convention-defying, taboo-shredding sights; even *Fuses*, which, I'd argue, isn't pornographic, unapologetically offers a woman's take on intimacy and erotic pleasure.

At the time, we learn, some of Schneemann's feminist peers carped that her work was "narcissistic" - and it's interesting to consider the counterfactual question of whether she would have foregrounded her own body had she not been so attractive. (And before you accuse me of sexism, consider the testimony of her friend, the American poet Eileen Myles, who writes in the catalogue that Schneemann "was gorgeous. And it's an important part of the art. As all one's powers are.") Does this reduce the radicalness of what she did? Perhaps. But nobody could doubt her courage and commitment, or the scorching, explosive nature of her talent.

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