

REVIEWS

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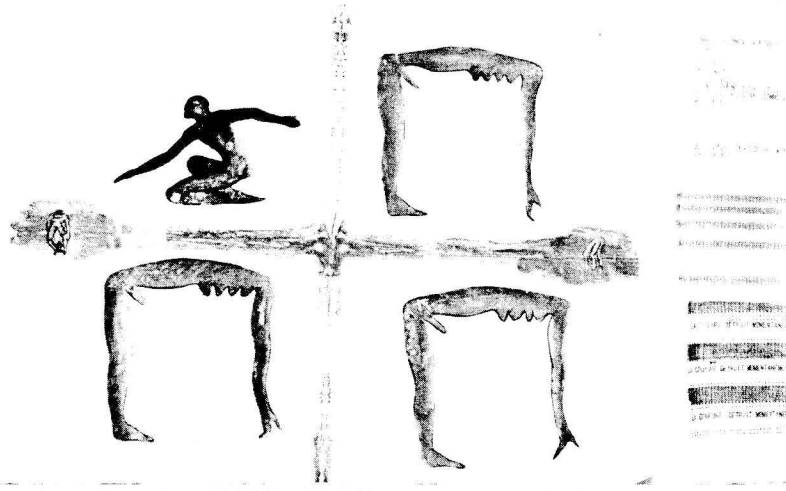
NANCY SPERO

EVERSON MUSEUM OF ART

"Nancy Spero: Works Since 1950," a traveling show curated and organized by Dominique Nahas, provides a welcome chance to see a broad selection of this artist's work together in one place. It includes semilegendary early pieces such as the "Black Paris Paintings," 1959-64 (of which there are five in the exhibition) and some of her major statements from the last two decades (*Codex Artaud*, 1971-72, *The Torture of Women*, 1976, *Notes in Time on Women*, 1976-79, and *Sky Goddess*, 1985), along with various smaller works from her activist, anti-Vietnam period (*Helicopter Eating Victims and Shitting Remains* and *Male Bomb*, both 1966, among others).

Spero's career has always had a kind of inverse relationship to the art scene around it. In the late '50s and early '60s she made deeply felt and patiently wrought paintings, expressionist in style, in which figures, emerging from a teeming, tumultuous ground like the emergence of life from the swamp, erotically display themselves to the world like the Indian *maithuna*, or icons of "loving couples"; the beauty of relationship shines dimly through even while the figures are caught in the toils of circumstance represented by the clinging ground. In one of these canvases, *At Their Word the Sick Woman*, 1957-58, the viewer sees through the darkened patinaed mists of ages the Akkadian goddess Ishtar standing stripped of her garments and ornaments, obscured in the darkness of hell, with the ancient poet's words beneath her: *At their word, the word which tortures the spirit, / The sick woman was turned into a corpse, / The corpse was hung from a stake*. The moment commemorated by the poet is presented as a primordial root of female suffering, the moment when, under a variety of social forces that can now be only partly reconstructed, images of the oppression of women became a regular part of culture. The "Black Paris Paintings," while somewhat out of the discourse when they were made, pioneered a dark, fusty style that has recently been taken up by several prominent artists, just as her references to ancient Mesopotamian myth and art (and somewhat later to Egyptian imagery) also foreshadowed things to come.

In the late '60s, Spero switched from paint and canvas to more fragile materials—first to paper collages, then to the hand-pressed prints on paper that have since been her signature medium. In



Nancy Spero, *Codex Artaud XXV (detail)*, 1972, typewriter and painted collage on paper, 2 x 16".

the transition she investigated the esthetic of figure and ground anew. Unlike the darkly clinging grounds of her Paris paintings, which threatened to consume the figures, the white Chinese paper separates itself from the figures, which lie upon it as if floating free. Her design sense, increasingly reductive in these years, balances her tiny printed figures with the serene expanses of white around them, as in the stunning vertical white space of *Codex Artaud XXX*, 1972.

*Codex Artaud* was a great turning point for Spero, for here she attained a kind of classical purity in the conjunction of words and images on ground. Large typed letters conjoined with abstract patterns made by typewriter symbols lie lyrically upon the paper among various images: tiny tortured figures with their tongues sticking out, in gold metallic paint outlined in black to separate them further from the ground; multiheaded, -footed, or -breasted snakes; goddesses with human heads emerging from their mouths; and other composite or mythological beings that query the nature of the human species. Sometimes, as in *The Torture of Women*, the once-wetted paper puckers around the figures like aureoles of radiant energy. These and other works evoke multiple associations: graffiti, illuminated manuscripts, revolutionary broadsheets, paleolithic cave paintings, and the classical frieze.

Increasingly in her collages and prints, Spero has emphasized found images of women from many of the world's cultures, although there is an occasional male figure, such as a Gandharan fasting Buddha, sometimes revised with female characteristics. Her texts, which also focus on women in society, vary from the lines of the Akkadian poem quoted above to passages from the Roman author Pliny, fragments of the Old Kingdom Egyptian liturgy of Isis and Osiris, cor-

respondence between Abigail and John Adams, bits of Nietzsche and Derrida, quotes from the poet HD, remarks by Barry Goldwater, and, most fundamentally, passages of Artaud. Some of the works deal with the repression and torture of women by men, while others, balancing the theme, portray women acting as strong independent agents of their own wills. (The latter, however, are sometimes ambiguous; for example, the Greek figure called the Dildo Dancer, in *Sheela and the Dildo Dancer*, 1987, may be an image of a prostitute.)

Spero's thoughtful cross-cultural review of the image of the female focuses on a gender identity that has been repeatedly recast and reclothed throughout history for the shifting requirements of the male gaze. At the same time, within the shifting cultural guises of woman as object, Spero finds the true subject gazing out strongly and freely. The relentless focus of her work effects this shift as if by a kind of Hegelian sublation. This strong intellectuality of Spero's oeuvre combined with its sensitive visual experimentation, its social activism alongside its delicate incorporation of linguistic elements into design, make this exhibition a kind of model of much that the esthetic of the '70s has left us of enduring value.

—Thomas McEvilley