

Mastery Exposed

BY KIM LEVIN

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NANCY SPERO: WORKS SINCE 1950. The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 583 Broadway, Part I through June 11, Part II June 14 through July 9.

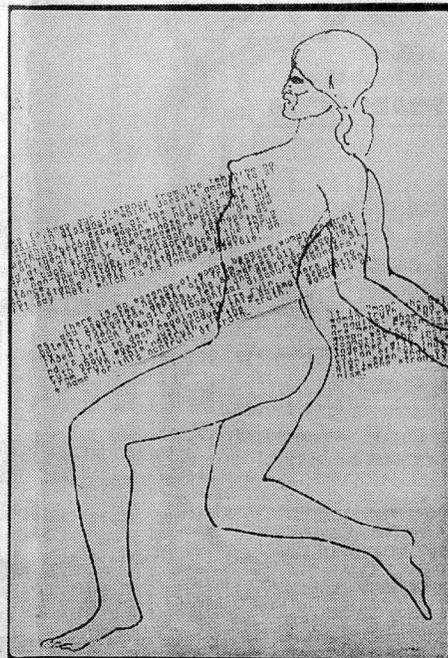
For a long time Nancy Spero's work has been resistant, admirable, and postmodern in an earlier sense of that word, as well as slightly unsatisfying—if not frustrating—visually. There's something bleak about her extended paper scrolls with their sparse stamped and pasted imagery, something dry about the insistent figures and fragmentary texts. The stuttering repetitions, abrupt shifts of scale, isolated figures, and expanses of blank space are marginalized and withholding. Spero's work defies ingrained formal assumptions. This isn't a flaw but a strategic move: her work has long been about finding an image and a voice for the subjugated, the female, the victim.

In the '50s and early '60s her figurative black paintings abjured both Abstract Expressionist painterliness and Pop clarity. When she started to work on paper, she ignored—or violated—all the axioms of the dominant styles. Peripheral and estranged, her art refused to acknowledge the rectangle or deal with the pressing formalist issues of center and edge. But then, Spero's delicate, angry, and economical art was out to make us realize that these very expectations are subtly but irrevocably politicized: they've been shaped by the dominant culture, the male establishment. Women's history, on the other hand, is fragmentary.

The monumental is phallic, as Spero has pointed out. The heroic (artist as well as work) is a masculine ideal; the archetypal creator of "man-made" things is male. Spero's repeated fixed images and borrowed texts deny centrality as well as spontaneity. They defy the heroics of inspiration. The method—hand-printing with zinc letterpress plates and printer's wood-type alphabets—abstains, nearly, from the authorial. Open-ended and awk-

wardly choreographed, her art rebels against patriarchal history. Her forms—which echo Greek vase-painting, Egyptian tomb-painting, prehistoric cave-painting, Ming landscape scrolls, the Bayeux tapestries, Maoist wall-posters—chronicle the marginal status of women during a long history of male supremacy. Declining to play by the male rules of the game, Spero's work exposes the hidden agendas of power in art as well as in life. The fact that it can still manage to thwart our expectations with its rejection of mastery is part of its strength.

There he is on one side of the studio painting these enormous monster men and on the other side of the studio I'm printing and drawing these athletic women. It's complementary in a sense. Not just being involved in the women's movement but in what was going on in the other side of the studio."



Between them, Nancy Spero and Leon Golub (her husband) have the theme of power and torture pretty much tied up. While Golub paints giants, thugs, and bestial sphinxes, Spero draws the female body and psyche from mythic archetypes and current events. His protagonists are male persecutors. In her fierce, fragile

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work, woman—Artemis, Pandora, Kali, Amazon warrior, Surrealist poet Mina Loy, a Chilean survivor of political torture—is the protagonist, even as victim. Spero reclaims from myth, literature, and current events a history of women, victimized and victorious. The texts—intermittent utterances on empty fields—recount hideous atrocities and male fears and fantasies. The figures, never objectified objects of the male gaze, are dildo dancers, fertility goddesses, spread-eagled Celtic trolls. They stride and stumble across the extended surfaces and attenuated blank space. Rows of cutout heads form a silent chorus of Canopic ciphers. A headless body borne along on extra legs is an ominous tarot.

And contrary to what a wall label says, the blank spaces, for me at least, don't offer respite from Spero's histories of "abusive misogynistic power": there's as much anguish and urgency in the naked white spaces as there is in the indelible images and speechless texts. They're like missing chunks of unspeakable information, blank areas in an archeological reconstruction of fragments, signifying lost facts and missing parts.

Organized by the Everson Museum in Syracuse and already seen in Saskatchewan, Illinois, Massachusetts, and Ontario, this exhibition has come to New York last. With one long seven-panel piece (*Rebirth of Venus*) hung high up like a frieze under the New Museum's clerestory windows, and an occasional strav fig-

ure crayoned onto floor and wall (or perched on a ledge), the installation is highly effective. *Notes in Time on Women* (1976-79), which Spero described to me as "these athletic women running through the misogynist history," is layered across the long wall. *Torture of Women* (1974-76) has a room of its own. Because the New Museum doesn't have enough space to mount the whole show at once, Part II will substitute some of the "Artaud Paintings" (1969-70) and the "War Series" (1966-70) for those few of the "Codex Artaud" 's (1971-72) 32 scrolls, with their recurrent imagery of phallic tongues, that are in Part I. "I did use Artaud as a mediator for my thoughts. I was speaking about the silenced woman—the woman's tongue that is castrated—who cannot speak, and that woman was me. If art does not have a dialogue of sorts there is no base of identity."

Read the texts. They're from Pliny and *Cosmo*, Lévi-Strauss and Amnesty International. They give voice to everyone from H.D.'s Helen of Troy to Sojourner Truth and the mother of Steven Biko's child. "Artaud was the artist railing against society. It was a personal thing. This is not caused by personal angst. I'm talking about empowerment, really."

In the '80s, Spero's work has become more celebratory, "as if it's saying my voice is heard," she remarks. She had appropriated images and texts, worked with ideas of mechanical reproduction and feminist theory, before Benjamin or Kristeva were fashionable, and her constant concerns now intersect with newer work. Her references to Artaud have been joined by Schnabel's, her depictions of mouths that spew tiny heads by Clemente's, her stick figures by Penck's, her alienated females by Applebroog's, her printed cutouts by Taaffe's. Now, in the past year, Spero's work "has jumped off the paper onto the wall," like Borofsky's. In her recent work there are no more words.