

Nancy Spero, New York studio 1987  
(Opposite page) Detail from installation  
at Josh Baer Gallery, 1987





# NANCY SPERO

Interviewed by Tamar Garb

**Why did you move away from the gestural marks of the early black paintings?**

I was upset at painting, that's why I gave up working on canvas in the first place. In analysing what goes on in the art galleries and in the art world, I decided that for the most part – there are of course exceptions – painting is a pretty narcissistic kind of activity. I feel printing and re-printing of images is a less narcissistic, a less personalized way of working. It is also less Western: that is, less to do with the Western notion of self-expression, the hand of the artist and the traces of the paint on the canvas being seen to be so meaningful. So it's like a rebellion, in a way, a certain kind of non-conformity to what I see as mainstream stuff.

**Do you think neo-expressionists are**

**trying to re-inscribe the notion of the artist as heroic figure?**

I feel that the idea of the gesture as self expression is really very conventional.



Yes, heroism of the gesture has replaced the old idea of the "hero" of history painting. The artist, through the gesture, is hero. It's another transformation of the self portraiture that goes on endlessly in art. From Rembrandt – even before – until Max Beckmann's very stern and authoritarian self portraits with his arms folded across his chest. It seems appropriate to me to regard this as a male genre. I think of history painting as a monument to a moment or a meeting in which there is usually male action.

**How do you feel about women who take on the heroic mode – for example, Susan Rothenberg?**

I know Susan. We have had discussions. I will preface my answer by saying that she is a supporter of the black paintings, but we have had discussions without





coming to conclusions. I don't think she's seen any other work I've done after the black paintings. I don't even know if she knows some of the paper works that followed, like the *War* series and the *Codex Artaud*. But I think the recent work would be meaningless to her. When I still used to see her, she asked me repeatedly why I didn't start painting again and I said that I couldn't. So there was no real meeting ground. She is very clever and smart and she talks about painting knowledgeably, but her analysis of her position as a woman in the art world does not correspond to my analysis of my position.

Perhaps circumstances have helped Susan to attain her position of being able to express herself in the heroic mode because she was fêted from very early on. At a relatively early age she was recognized for her horses, and when one has success (I'm seeing it myself a little bit lately) one is buoyed by it. There's elation. I think with her it must have given her a lot of self-confidence. For all artists who are in the public eye – not just Susan – there's a nervousness underneath it all about what will be the next step. Susan started in the heroic mode and has continued with the acknowledgement of the art world. There aren't many women artists that have this kind of acceptance and encouragement.

***Do you get the feeling that the mainstream arena is where it's all happening and that by distancing yourself from the mainstream you are missing the action?***

I'm missing the action in that I have always felt way outside of the mainstream – practically over the edge – but being out of it has been one of my prides. Anger gave impetus to the work. That, and literally sticking out my tongue at all of this, at all of the heroes, the so-called authorities. I still feel that way. But then if I'm

missing what's going on over there, they're missing a helluva lot over here.

***In fact not all the current heroic/history painting is the same. In the case of Kiefer, whose works very definitely fit within the heroic mode, there is also an element of self-critique...***

What Kiefer does is interesting, but it's very romantic. To me it's impenetrable, because I'm not sure about what he's saying: it's so ambiguous. I always think that art must contain ambiguities;

tical prisoners. I am not addressing the famous, but women. These works are completely antithetical to, say, a monument in stone or a nineteenth-century history painting. Mine are history paintings, too, but I'm out there on the other side.

***When you work with these "applied" marks, and with these empty expanses – that is, leaving gesturalism behind altogether – is this to do with the obliteration of self from the heroic?***



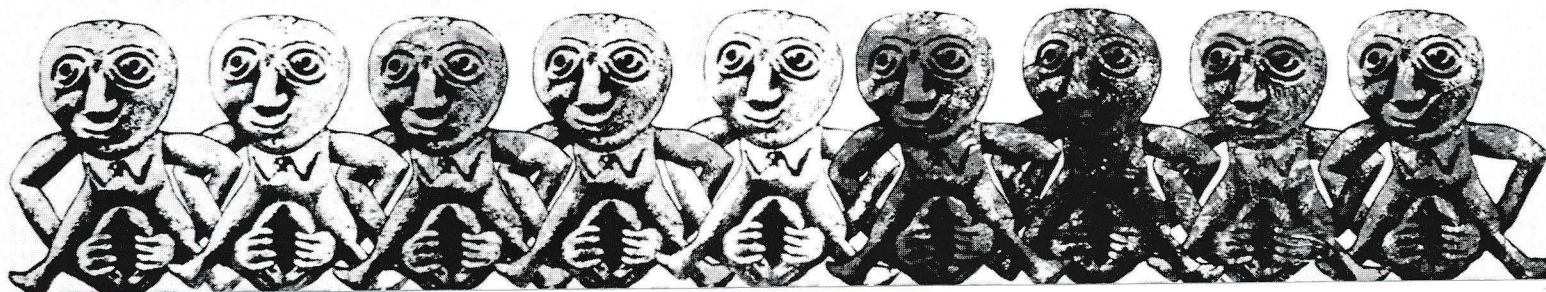
(Frieze) **Chorus Line 1985**  
(Above) **Detail of Sky Goddess 1985**

but on the other hand, seeing a lot of this type of work, I realize that it is a certain kind of history painting, but it's like a combination of real history with a romanticism on top of it. I'm not sure if this isn't just a grand, male, over-personalized gesture. So on the one hand it's ok and it's interesting to me, but I kind of turn it off, too, because of the enormous scale and the self-importance that artists and the art world have accorded it. I feel that what I'm doing in, for instance, *Torture of Women*, is creating an ephemeral monument to unknown women poli-

Yes, definitely. It's a dispersal of the heroic, of the artist's narcissism, ego if you will. And in a way it's a negation of a male ego that would be presumptuous enough to say that a particular emotion is a world-class statement. I am bored and appalled by such things. It's subversive, or intended to be so.

***Do you worry about the specific details of the historical situations of the particular peoples that you represent? For example, do you worry about how a Vietnamese woman would approach your work?***

I do worry about whom I represent and







how I represent them. I think I was first aware of it in the *War* series, when I was thinking about helicopters and what the Vietnamese would think of helicopters – these attacking monsters. Then I worried about Artaud, and how he would hate what I was doing with his writing. But in working with the texts I felt I had to distance myself, that this had to be a working relationship, so I wrote on one of the pieces: “Artaud I couldn’t have borne to know you

not want other women to consider this work as a model, or definitive statement. I intend the work to be open-ended, in movement. As to the response of Vietnamese women, I have no idea what it might be. I respond to Vietnam as an American who rejects what the American government has done to the Vietnamese people.

*Well Artaud is dead now, but Winnie Mandela is alive and one of your figures is a symbol for her.*

*do you speak for me?”*

No. The art world audience is restricted. I don’t know any Vietnamese, and no black women have addressed me in that way.

I don’t claim to speak for them – I incorporate images of women from the contemporary – Asian – Black – White – ancient goddesses, prehistoric, etc.: a simultaneity of images.

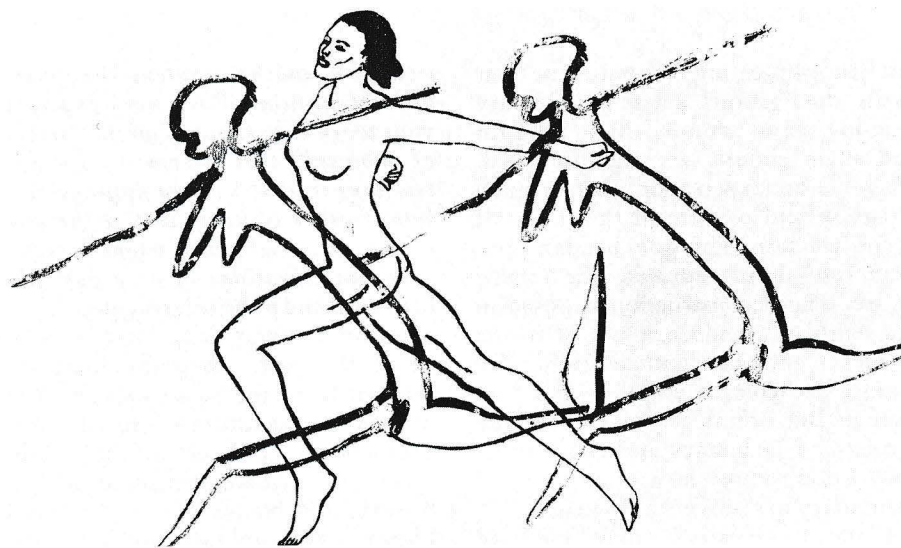
*In your work there are images of specific histories of women’s struggles through different times, and then there is this concept of the “feminine” which seems to traverse it all. What constitutes the “feminine.” Is it endurance? Does that concept change in your work? It seems there is a change from the angry person sticking her tongue out in the Artaud series to the wonderful celebratory carnival of the recent work.*

I am the angry person sticking out her tongue. I chose to use Artaud because he is the angry person sticking out his tongue. Sticking out one’s tongue is an act of defiance and refers to the silencing of women, the castrating of women’s tongues. Women speak but we are not heard. Our language, our messages, our art, for the most part, carry little power or authority into the world.

To show a Vietnamese woman repeated many times is also an act of defiance, but one which takes on a social role predicated on real action in real places. And this is how my feminism has developed.

I still investigate woman as victim because woman is still the victim *par excellence*, but now I stress women in charge of their lives. I use sources from many cultures to indicate the potential range of such roles. Images of women from disparate cultures and times in their heterogeneous appearances dance through the most recent work.

*The way you use “femininity” is quite different from many other women artists – for example, Cindy Sherman*



Detail of *The First Language* 1985  
Hand printing and collage on paper

alive, your despair. Nancy Spero.” After I wrote this letter to Artaud I was able to get on with it.

So I used Artaud to externalize my ideas about alienation – the (woman) artist ignored – an existential stance. These works are about a state of mind that is real but the case histories in *Torture of Women* are recountings of actual events. In the *Women* series when I portrayed victimage – it was not internalized as in the *Codex Artaud* – but shown as a result of external male oppression. Now whether I portray woman as victims or protagonists, I do

When I finished that piece in 83, she didn’t have the American media prominence that she now has and at the time I was struck by her history of endurance. So when I did the piece she was a symbol of invisible endurance. She wasn’t talked about much except in relation to Nelson. It was always him – he was the hero. And she also had gone through all these trials. Now she is a hero as well. The piece is about the triumph of the women.

*Do you ever get responses from black, or Vietnamese, or Asian women living in the United States? For example, “Why*







**Vietnamese Woman 1985**  
Hand printing and collage on paper

or Barbara Kruger. For me the most interesting tension in your work is in the way you harness the feminine as a transcendent and celebratory quality, at the same time as you look at specific histories. It's a very productive tension between the specific historical moment and a notion of the feminine which is almost incantatory – quite different from the work of other artists who attack constructions of femininity within mass culture and advertising.

The refusal to represent the female figure, perhaps the incapacity to represent the female figure is a denial of the body. That's a big loss – a big hole! To embody is to give form. Why are women artists asked to deny the body by theorists who do not ask men to deny the body?

**How would you answer a historian, or a materialist critic, who would say that you're simplifying all these histories, that they're not the same, perhaps that you are destroying "difference"?**

I would answer that in using only images of women, I want to subvert history painting. It may be simplistic

but history painting is about men, their deeds, their actions. There is no history painting about women. Male thought and male actions are the universal. There is an expectation that women artists should operate in the mode of deconstruction. This goes hand in hand with refusals to represent the female figure. The deconstruction is posed in the semblance and/or re-use of media imagery and conceptualization. We almost do have to simplify and leap over it. But I think we have to use the means and languages and tools available. I don't know how else to do it. I want to try to re-invent a language.

I try to create a new kind of hieroglyph to subvert old meanings and open up the possibility for new ones.

My most important concern is that in the work, "woman" is not "the other," she's the activator. I am bringing these things forth as a kind of proposal. It's a kind of utopian ideal. The problem with so much self-conscious feminist work that uses media stereotyping, is that of complicity.

**Yes, everything is open to appropri-**

**tion into another context that might alter its meaning. But what I find about your work is that out of all the "images of women" these seem to be most resistant to that kind of appropriation into another context. But at the same time I can see why they might be seen as over-simplifications of very particular historical and political struggles.**

Yes, but in a way these images are not about the past. They use images of women from the past to speak of the present and the future – with, of course, a lot left out. And perhaps these empty spaces are what we could consider "real history," the blanks I've left out. Look, I know I've simplified things, but then artists do this. We're privileged in this way. And I like to take advantage of that. It's like a child stomping her foot and saying: "I'm going to do it, regardless of what the adults might say about it." The artist stomping her foot, and saying "I'm going to do it regardless."

**Tamar Garb is an art critic, based in London.**



**Vietnamese Woman Irradiated 1985**  
Hand printing and collage on paper