

THEREDOOM

Carolee Schneemann: Élan Vital

'''

''' Press Release

Carolee Schneemann sums up her approach to art in her famous declaration “I’m a painter. I’m still a painter and I will die a painter.”

“Everything that I have developed has to do with extending visual principles off the canvas. All the objects, installations, film, video, performance—things that are formed. But the performative works—which are one aspect of this larger body of work—are all that the culture can hold onto. That fascination overrides the rest of the work. But it is still kind of a mind/body split. If you are going to represent physicality and carnality, we can not give you intellectual authority.” Those are the words of a young, fresh, and ferociously radical artist-provocateur, a liberating feminist, and a tacit painter.

This show aims to look at the gamut of painterly elements at work in four key video performances spanning two tumultuous, milestone decades. Sprouting from a retinal core and playing to the tune of the artist’s most intuitive essence, social mores, and succinct craft, these works form a tableau encompassing aesthetics and the political. A constant trait to watch and explore, in all four videos, remains the painterly thrust, the rhythmical ‘attack and decay’, and the blue notes expressively woven throughout those raucous performances, conjugating the “élan vital” Schneemann applies throughout.

Creator of a new alloy of mind and matter (idea-material), these video works merge the artist’s implicitly painterly ‘stream of consciousness’ practice with a volumetric approach that incorporates myth and ritual, social items, tools of the trade, and topics based on her direct ‘lived’ experiences. Her unavoidable, and indeed lustrous body presence, a constant element in her works, becomes the final transgression, opening the gates for a new, stridently gender-based mode of representation. Oceans apart but symbiotic with that of the Vienna Actionist, Günter Brus, Schneemann became the frame of her uniquely female actions.

Between 1963 and 1967, supported by the milieu of the New York downtown avant-garde, she became *the* primordial performer. In *Meat Joy* (1963-64), she choreographed performances that treated participants like interactive paint strokes, interlocking their bodies, obliterating their individuality. In *Fuses* (1964-65) she worked each and every frame of celluloid as a pure painter, using a conscious array of historical and post-modern visual recourses, such as ‘fixed’ points, pinwheel constructions found in Duchamp and Gorky’s works, chance imagery, and spatial vicissitudes akin not just to certain tenets in Abstract Expressionism—which she openly practiced—but also to many a masterpiece including El Greco’s *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz*, where the construction and layering of multiple planes in space as visual determinants precipitate the dynamics and politics of both corporeal and social space.

In the late sixties, Schneemann switched from issues of pure painting to collage and assemblage, to test and explore new spatial territories. In 1967, she enacted *Body*

*Collage*, an anti-static performance in which she strokes her body with wheat paste binder and molasses, then jumps up and down, tosses and rolls around and through a sea of soft white paper scrap, choreographing a moving corporeal collage that echoed certain DaDa/Futurist approaches. In the words of Schneemann, “My intention was not simply to collage my body (as an object), but to enact movement so that the collage image would be active, found, not predetermined or posed.”

Around the mid 1970s, the artist experienced certain dissatisfaction with the sizeable needs required in previous performances. Taking solace in the timeless, solitary laboratory of the painter, *Up To and Including Her Limits* (1976) relied on ‘pure drawing’ to unlock a new artistic field of action. Equipped with only a crayon in hand, she suspends herself at the bottom of a long bouncing rope in order to delineate, via random movement and chance, a new three-dimensional interactive territory in which body, expression, beauty, and brain are merged. “A painter who has left the canvas to activate actual space and lived time,” Carolee Schneemann uses her body as a component of her own autobiographical work.

It is widely understood by now that Carolee Schneemann, in transcending the boundaries of painting alone, helped transform how representation and gender may be addressed within artistic practice. Her legacy has set precedents for an array of formidable hard-core artists, amongst them, Ana Mendieta, Peggy Ahwesh, Hanna Wilke, Matthew Barney, and Annie Sprinkle.

Juan Puentes, Curator

Madrid June 25, 2014