Art Reviews Weekend

Forever Young: The Rapturous Art of Edith Schloss

by Thomas Micchelli
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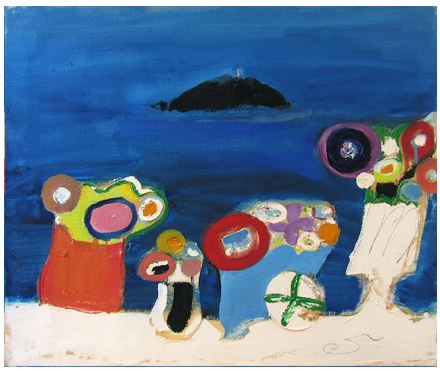
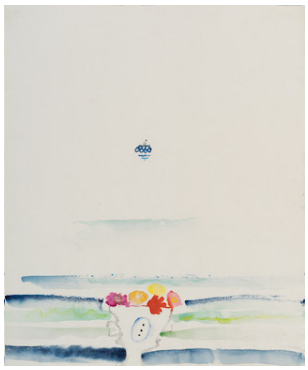


Edith Schloss, "Untitled (Isola del Tino)" (1966), oil on canvas, 19.7 x 23.6 inches (all images courtesy Norte Maar and Sundaram Tagore Gallery, New York)

A new exhibition at the Sundaram Tagore Gallery focuses on the life and art of Edith Schloss, the consummate insider/outsider of the New York School. One of the few female members of the Club — the historic, testosterone-fueled den of the Abstract Expressionists — Schloss knew everyone who was anyone during the 20-year cultural ferment in postwar New York. And then, in 1962, she left for a three-week visit to Rome and stayed there until her death at 92 in 2011.

Schloss was born in 1919 in Offenbach, Germany. Her family escaped to England after Kristallnacht, and she eventually found her way to New York, where she studied at the Art Students League while working at menial jobs to support herself. Within a year or two she had become part of the circle revolving around the painter and writer Fairfield Porter, the painters Elaine and William de Kooning, the poet and critic Edwin Denby and the filmmaker and painter Rudy Burckhardt.

The exhibition at Sundaram Tagore, ***EDITH SCHLOSS: STILL LIFE, MYTHS AND MOUNTAINS, A RETROSPECTIVE***, curated by Jason Andrew, who also compiled and edited a compact chronology of the artist's life, takes an inclusive approach to the sweep of Schloss's oeuvre and milieu, exhibiting more than fifty oil paintings, watercolors and assemblages dating from 1947 to 2011, as well as dozens of works by her friends and associates. There is also a generous selection of letters, postcards, photos and other archival materials on view.



Edith Schloss, "Untitled (Isola del Tino)" (1970), watercolor on paper, 21.75 x 18.2 inches

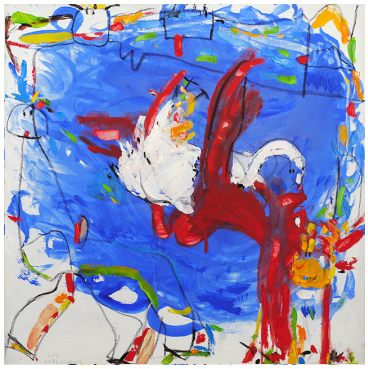
Although it may be largely unfamiliar to a generation of New York viewers, Andrew's chronology makes it clear that Schoss's art is anything but an unknown quantity. She showed internationally throughout her lifetime, although the last solo she had in New York was at the Ingber Gallery in 1989. An exhibition devoted to her work and that of the composer Alvin Curran opened at La Casa delle Letterature in Rome the day after she died.

Like many in her circle, Schloss did not limit herself to a single pursuit. A prolific writer, she worked as an art critic from 1969 until 1986 for the *International Herald Tribune*, where she gave Jean-Michel Basquiat his first mention in print. She contributed to *Art News*, *The Nation*, *Ms. Magazine*, *Wanted in Rome* and other publications, and she was the author of several books, including *Songs of la Serra*, which featured her poetry and drawings. The collaborations she did with Alvin Curran included sound/painting installations and designs for stage sets and album covers.

Nostalgia, as Abbie Hoffman said, is a mild form of depression, and the installation at Sundaram Tagore does its best to erase the inevitable nostalgia clinging to the era of Schloss's youth with the brightly burning immediacy of her art, even as it underscores the sense of community that infused the postwar New York art world with its unique verve.

Upon entering the gallery, Schloss's early paintings are arranged salon-style on the left, with works by artists who influenced her, including Porter, Willem de Kooning, Jack Tworkov and Burckhardt, who became her husband (their son is the filmmaker Jacob Burckhardt), on the right.

What's intriguing about the wall of influences is how little bearing they have on how Schloss's mature works actually look. What they do have in common is the intention to make painting new, strange and urgent, to cross the rigor of classicism with the rat-a-tat of Bebop. If painting as a practice is viewed with far more skepticism

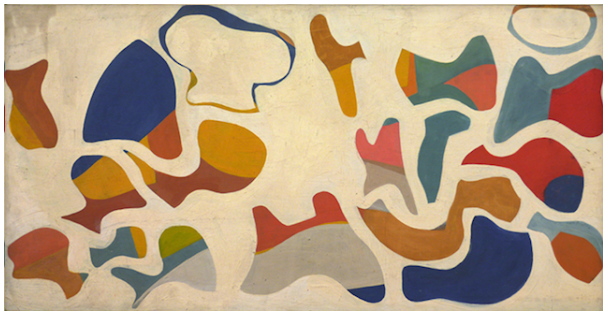


Edith Schloss, "First Leda" (2011), oil with charcoal on canvas, 23.6 x 23.6 inches

today, the sense of conversation evoked by the works on this wall — and in a smaller room off the main gallery, which is also filled with the art of Schloss's friends and acquaintances — rings eerily familiar.

Andrew, who included a painting by Schloss in his sprawling 2012 survey, ***To Be a Lady: Forty-Five Women in the Arts***, has been a galvanizing force of the Bushwick scene through his organization Norte Maar, and from the evidence here, he sees no appreciable difference between one art community and another — one contemporary and the other historic, each dedicated in its own way to the impractical, the improbable and the unattainable.

But perhaps the connections between then and now wouldn't be so pronounced if not for the pertinence of Schloss's paintings, which, in their seven-decade span, are as much a part of the 21st century as they are of Abstract Expressionism's Golden Age.

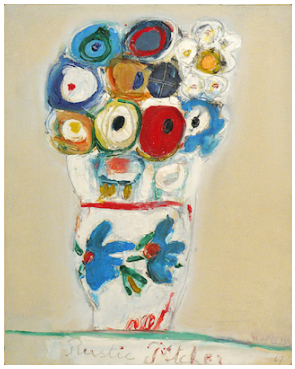


Edith Schloss, "Games" (1947), oil on panel, 11.9 x 22.5 inches

Never wedded to a single approach, Schloss's paintings proceed from an entrancing combination of observation, imagination and material experimentation. There is a try-anything spirit effervescing from them, a spirit first manifested in the early 1950s when she turned to assemblage — a striking departure from her early watercolors and oils, which, aside from one remarkable abstraction, "Games" (1947), and a painting of the young Jacob grabbing a hard-boiled egg from a well-laid breakfast table ("Egg Eater," 1950), depict whimsically rendered landscapes and still lifes.

Although there are only three examples here, assemblage became a major undertaking that landed Schloss in *The Art of Assemblage*, an exhibition of 250 works by 130 artists that opened in October 1961 at New York's Museum of Modern Art and traveled to the Dallas Museum for Contemporary Arts and the San Francisco Museum of Art.

The hard materiality of assemblage (one of the pieces on display, made around 1953, is subtitled "Homage to Joseph Cornell," whom she and Burckhardt visited at his Utopia Parkway home in Flushing, Queens) may have endowed Schloss's later paintings — beginning with the breakthrough works she made after she settled in Rome — with a newfound sense of the physical. These uncommonly alive paintings, freewheeling in design and exploding with color, delight in the disparities among the hard and viscous textures of paint, the specificity of the scrawled line, and the cool, smooth field of an empty, or nearly empty, canvas.



Edith Schloss, "Rustic Pitcher" (1967), oil on canvas; 19.6 x 15.75 inches

The simplicity of a piece such as "Rustic Pitcher" (1967) is exceptionally compelling, even in an exhibition filled with casually spare pictures (which allow for a packed installation that never feels crowded). A monolithic fusion of vase and flowers, with the latter stacked in a grid of enamel-hard, multicolored circles, is centered on a blank canvas. The teeming positive shapes boldly set against the vacant negative space releases a palpable tension between unity and incoherence — a paradox of seamless disjunction.

Two paintings, one from 1966 and one from 1970, dealing with the same subject — the Isola del Tino, a chunk of rock capped by an historic lighthouse poking out of the Ligurian Sea — speak to the way Schloss reset the dial with each new work. The earlier picture, in oil on canvas, features a solid blue field bordered along the bottom by four loopy vases of flowers emerging from a swath of sand-colored paint. The island is represented by strokes of black forming a gentle hillock in the middle of the blue field, with a fleck of white denoting the lighthouse.

The second painting, a watercolor, is nearly blank. The island is indicated by a cluster of seven tiny blue circles near the dead center of an empty expanse, with the lighthouse springing up like the stem of an apple. There is a single vase of flowers in the middle of the sheet's bottom edge, with strokes of blue, green and gray fanning out on either side, presumably the waves rolling onto the beach.

The "Isola" from 1966, in contrast to much of the work in the show, fits together like a jigsaw puzzle, with shapes that feel locked in place.

The 1970 watercolor, meanwhile, is minimal to the point of dissolution. The struggle between definition and amorphousness grows more marked with each successive year, and as the artist ages, the paintings only get wilder.

In the last twenty years of her life, Schloss turned to mythology as a subject, not as a sign of aesthetic retreat (see Pablo Picasso and Giorgio de Chirico), but as an explosion of unbridled libido, dominated by swatches and splats of high-key, often contrasting color, with untethered lines and strokes floating across fields of blue, green and orange.

A painting like "Eos: Elio + Helios (via Umbria)" (2001) is a riot of green and orange brushwork, with blots of white, black, violet, red and yellow scattered like confetti. The last of her works in the show, "First Leda" (2011), depicts a phallic-necked swan mounting a blood-red form, evidently Leda, as it disintegrates against a circular blue field, with graffiti-like male and female figures drawn in charcoal at the left and top edges.

Edith Schloss, "Eos: Elio + Helios (via Umbria)" (2001), oil on canvas, 23.6 x 31.5 inches

These paintings give off a heat commensurate with the inspired abandon of their creation. Modest in scale, they trade Abstract Expressionism's existential struggles for an unadulterated rapture in the presence of daily life and the legacies of culture. Taken together, they embody the elusive gift bequeathed by the postwar generation to the rest of us — freedom.

EDITH SCHLOSS: STILL LIFE, MYTHS AND MOUNTAINS, A RETROSPECTIVE *continues at Sundaram Tagore Gallery (547 West 27th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through March 28.*