Art in America

Critical Eye: Mimi Gross in Her World
By Dan Nadel, January 27, 2017

Mimi Gross, At the Five Spot, 1958-1959, oil on crayon on paper, 13 3/4 x 10 3/4 in.

FOR THE PAST four decades, Mimi Gross has lived and worked in a broad, art-filled loft just below Canal Street in Manhattan. Visitors are greeted by an enormous and exuberant painted sculpture—Gross calls it a "2½-D" work—in which the artist portrays her friends from the heyday of New York's downtown bohemia in the poses and setting of Delacroix's Women of Algiers in their Apartment (1834). It is, like so many things Gross does, a deft blending of history, observational portraiture, and ingenious craft.

The walls of her studio are covered with artwork by old comrades and family friends, a cast that includes both giants of American art and under-recognized figures: Rudy Burckhardt, Yvonne Jacquette, Saul Steinberg, Karl Wirsum, Sarah Canright. Mixed in are pieces by her ex-husband, Red Grooms, and her father, Chaim Gross.

In her bright white workspace on the day I visited in late summer were several works in progress, including sets and costumes for Antipodes, the latest in more than a dozen collaborations she has undertaken with choreographer Douglas Dunn, and a 170-foot-long painting of clouds commissioned by the University of Kentucky Medical Center. Less spectacular but perhaps more enticing were flat files stacked to the ceiling along one wall of the studio.

Each drawer holds its own delights. Some feature preparatory drawings from Gross's pioneering films, such as Tappy Toes (1969–70), a hilarious and surreal homage to Busby Berkeley. Others contain piles of photographs taken in Provincetown, Massachusetts, in the 1950s. Most revealing are drawings made between 1958 and '65, a period bookended by Gross's first forays as a mature artist and her marriage to Grooms, with whom she would collaborate for a decade. These works constitute a portrait of an artist discovering her process and interests. At the same time, they offer rare insights into a transformative moment in American art.

Executed in oil pastel (still one of her favorite mediums) on white toothy sheets and in sketchbooks, Gross's drawings from this time are casual and clear, employing expressive figuration and coloration built upon the lessons of modernism but unbound by its strictures. On one luminous sheet is a depiction of the Five Spot Café in downtown New York, from 1958 or '59. The stage, an angular polygon rendered in ocean blue, holds a hunched drummer, a dynamic saxophonist, and a brown viscous slab that could only be a piano. The performers are encircled by orange, and audience members sit around three bright yellow tables. Another drawing from the same period portrays Gross's friend Barbara Erdman at the Horn & Hardart automat, at the time a popular Chelsea meeting spot. Erdman is set against a field of pink, the yellow of her coat rhyming with that of the table, while two businessmen chat in the background. Gross told me that she is guided by a "fanaticism for Titian," which is to say, she builds compositions from planes of color. No matter how casual, her pictures almost always feature rock-solid axial structures.

Reminiscing about the '50s, Gross told me that she was "so young, too tender, too delicate. Almost innocent. But sophisticated." Looking back on work produced nearly sixty years ago, this combination can be the stuff of regret, but it's a fine sensibility for an artist intent on using drawing, painting, and sculpture to record the sights and scenes around her. At a time of renewed interest in an era that was formative for Gross—explored in books like Judith Stein's biography of dealer Richard Bellamy, Eye of the Sixties (2016), and the exhibition "Inventing Downtown: Artist-Run Galleries in New York City, 1952–1965," now at New York University's Grey Art Gallery—it's worth looking back at an artist who witnessed much and made vital work, but received very little recognition, due in part to the all-too-common combination of art world trends and sexism.

MIMI GROSS GREW up on 105th Street in Harlem, a precocious child of Chaim Gross and his wife, Renee. Beginning in the 1920s and '30s—the early years of American modernism—the couple were friends and colleagues with a wide array of artists both avant-garde and realist—Marsden Hartley, John Graham, Adolph Gottlieb, Raphael Soyer, Reginald Marsh, and many others.

By the time Mimi was born in 1940, her father was an established artist, and her family divided time between New York and Provincetown, which was well into its years as a retreat for artists, with Hans Hofmann firmly entrenched as mandarin-in-chief. Gross attended the High School of Music and Art (now LaGuardia High School) in Manhattan, graduated in 1957, and entered Bard College that autumn. The wide scope of her experiences allows us a look at how porous our art historical borders really are. She is an artist who traverses the second half of the twen-

tieth century with an ease that is hard to imagine today, when distinctions between artists and movements have been rigidly codified.

The personal relationships she forged produced a web connecting legendary figures in American art. For example, during a stint in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she spent a semester away from college working as a speed typist, Gross ran into Johnny Shahn, the son of artist Ben Shahn (an old friend of her father's). When Gross told Johnny she didn't have a bathtub, he insisted she go to his friend Henry's apartment for a shower. This was Henry Geldzahler, still an undergraduate at Harvard, who would later make his name as a curator. A week later Gross went to see Laurence Olivier perform in The Entertainer. Sitting next to her was Geldzahler, who became a lifelong friend, and, in those pre-Stonewall years, her fiancé for a while.

The summer of 1958 found Gross back in Provincetown, where she became friends with Bob Thompson, an African-American painter to whom she remained close for the rest of his short life. Gross and Thompson, as well as other late 1950s figurative painters like Lester Johnson and Jan Müller, melded Expressionist approaches to composition with a Fauvist sense of color and form.[pq]Gross told me that she is guided by a "fanaticism for Titian," which is to say, she builds compositions from planes of color.[/pq]Artists in this Provincetown micro-scene combined feverish hues with allover depictions of spaces populated by bodies that seem to drape on and collapse into each other. Thompson and Müller worked with mythic themes, however, while Gross pursued close observation of the present.

Thompson and Gross had a mutual friend in fellow artist Jay Milder, who introduced Gross to Red Grooms at an opening at the Phoenix Gallery cooperative. The two hit it off, and in 1958, shortly after Milder and Grooms founded the City Gallery in the latter's loft on Twenty-fourth Street, Gross had the first exhibition of her work there. Returning to Bard in the fall of 1958 was a comedown from the full-tilt art worlds of Provincetown and New York, but Gross completed another year there before leaving for Florence, Italy, in late 1959.

In Europe, she filled sketchbooks with observations from the intermittent hitchhiking trips she took with the sculptor Jackie Ferrara. On one of these excursions, the duo landed in Salzburg, where they discovered that Oskar Kokoschka, one of the artists Gross admired most, was not only alive (by 1960 the world had jumped so far forward that he may as well have been Titian) but running his own school, the International Summer Academy of Fine Arts in Hohensalzburg Fortress, perched above the city. Gross spent the summer of 1960 studying with the old master, who called her "New York"—a slap at the city and the new art center that had rendered him nearly anonymous.

Grooms arrived in Florence in August of 1960, shortly after Gross's return from Austria. He'd left New York in the wake of two years of organizing Happenings and a successful solo exhibition at the Reuben Gallery. After nearly a year together in Italy, Spain, and North Africa, Gross and Grooms, along with three other friends, set out in the summer of 1961 on a tour of Northern Italy by horse-drawn carriage, stopping in villages to perform a shadow puppet show, dubbed Il Piccolo Circo d'Ombre di Firenze. Along the way they created vibrant artworks that served as props and sets for the show, which combined Italian commedia dell'arte performance traditions with their own New York absurdism. Because the horse, Ruckus, moved slowly on the old roads, Gross had plenty of time in which to understand and record the landscape around her in dozens of drawings that render the hills and towns of Northern Italy as undulating bands of electric color dotted with precisely constructed trees and the occasional cottage.

When Gross returned from Europe at the end of 1961 she called Geldzahler, who had become a precocious curator. "I went over to his house, and he looked at my sketchbook and was a little critical," Gross said. "He told me to come to the Green Gallery, and there he was sitting in the back with Dick Bellamy, who we knew from Provincetown." Gross had missed two crucial years in the art world. She was twenty-one, and the milieu from which she came was about to vanish from galleries and cultural fashion as the coolness of Pop settled in. Nevertheless, with some encouragement from Geldzahler, Gross persevered.

In 1962 she produced a series of portraits, including one of her friend and favorite student of Kokoschka's, Evelyn "Gwinnie" Gwinner, who is framed against a window, her auburn hair topped by a swooping green hat, her eyes expressing uncertainty. The facial expression of Gwinnie's husband seems more self-satisfied underneath a thick red beard. Gross's old friend Renee Watkins is confident, awake to the space in front of her, backed by a deep aquamarine. Elevator Ladies (1965), one of many group portraits of women made over the decades, is a horizontal band of ten faces, each a singular arrangement of thickly colored, distinct features signaling a different social class and age. They face front, unmasked, as if begging a question.

In 1964 Gross married Grooms and embarked on a full collaboration that lasted, like the marriage, until 1976. They produced installation works, including City of Chicago (1967–68), Discount Store (1970–71), and Ruckus Manhattan (1975–76), as well as a dozen films. Gross's solo work continued (and continues). Both flat and in "2½-D," it has often focused on land- and cloudscapes, most strikingly those seen at night. The first of these works, completed the year of her marriage, were in the same flat file drawer as her earlier drawings. They are haunting. Trees become almost monstrous as the sun recedes behind them, and the earth heaves underneath the stars. These works signal some new observation—a fascination not just with people and their bustle, but a larger world of adulthood.

*CURRENTLY ON VIEW Douglas Dunn + Dancers perform Antipodes, with sets and costumes by Mimi Gross, Danspace Project, New York, Feb. 2–4.*

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