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Shirley Gorelick Foundation/Eric Firestone Gallery

Shirley Gorelick: *Tess Three Times*, 1981–1982

Both Sides Now

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When Shirley Gorelick was in high school in the late 1930s, she took art classes on weekends and in the summers from the sculptor Chaim Gross and painters Moses and Raphael Soyer at the Education Alliance in New York City. Still early in the search for her own visual style, she was already quietly rebellious. She recalled in 1968 that “the painting class didn’t interest me. It was too crowded and I couldn’t see. And I felt I had to be right up front to see.” But Gorelick did pursue painting, landing in the late 1960s as a masterful painter of large-scale, realist figures. In these portraits, which she made through the early 1980s, that imperative to be right up front takes the form of a close attention to her subjects and the exchange that occurs between them and the viewer. Larger than life-size, the figures crowd into our space, so near that sometimes their bodies are truncated by the edges of the canvas.

“Family,” a new exhibition curated by Max Warsh at Eric Firestone Gallery in New York, gives an overdue look at Gorelick’s intimate and psychologically penetrating portraits of the five families who mattered most to her. These were people who did not then typically find themselves the subjects of art: middle-aged women, disabled people, mixed-race families, and older couples. David Ourlicht, one of

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Gorelick's subjects and the son of Libby Dickerson, the model to whom Gorelick returned most often, said of his mother's involvement, "The personal relationship came first." The two women shared progressive politics, he said. "It was equal rights, women's rights, gay rights, civil rights."

Gorelick proceeded from friendships made first while in college and, later, as a working artist. In a short documentary on view in the exhibition, Jessica Bell Brown, a curator at the Baltimore Museum of Art, notes "the tenderness of Gorelick's brush," her empathetic rendering of people and the environments that hold them. *Family II* (1973) depicts Libby, her husband, Boris, and their teenage children, Laurie and David. The children sit on the floor in front of their parents, who lean forward so that the four figures create a tight, overlapping unit. Gorelick has placed them slightly off-center, toward the lower left corner of the canvas, which gathers and enfolds them.

Other disciplines guided her approach to painting. Gorelick studied photography and industrial design at Brooklyn College, and completed a master's degree in psychology at Columbia Teachers College. She arrived at realist portraiture after a long immersion in abstraction. Looking for an aesthetic vocabulary that felt right, she delved into different styles, exploring Cubism by way of Picasso and Braque and making biomorphic abstract sculpture under the tutelage of Aaron Goodelman. She made her first trip to Provincetown around 1946 and began attending Hans Hofmann's critiques the next year; through his instruction she honed her use of color and went from being a nonobjective painter to what she called a "full-fledged cubist." Focusing on architecture, she explored the relationship between geometric forms and the space around them, and the way color can describe volume and light. At the Cumberland Center for Continuing Education in Great Neck, Long Island, where she moved with her husband in 1956, she took classes with several New York School artists, among them Larry Rivers, Grace Hartigan, Helen Frankenthaler, and, most notably for Gorelick, Betty Holliday.

Holliday made figurative paintings using the gestural idiom of Abstract Expressionism, and under her influence Gorelick introduced figures into her own work. Gorelick's approach involved observing natural forms such as rocks and plants as well as bodies, and "abstract[ing] the rhythms that I found pertinent to that object," she explained. In some of her paintings from this period, such as *Large Nude as Landscape* (1960) and *Yellow Nude Reclining (Yellow Nude as Landscape)* (1960), bodies reside ambiguously in their surroundings, never wholly separate from them. Holliday was interested in maintaining the primacy of abstraction in her figurative paintings, but Gorelick diverged from her example because she wanted to include more detail, including faces, feet, and hands. "They began to have a weight of their own," Gorelick said of her figures, "which could not include the environment."

That process of "abstracting the rhythms" also aptly describes Gorelick's practice of repeating figures in a single portrait—a reinterpretation, of sorts, of the cubist notion of the fragmented figure, and a way of showing a person's complexity and wholeness. In *Three Sisters II (Westchester Gauguin)* (1974–1976), each of the three Rakower sisters, who lived across the Long Island Sound in New Rochelle, is depicted

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twice—in the nude, and draped in a patterned robe that clashes with the dense, uniform backdrop of pachysandra. In this suburban idyll, the effect of the doubling is to make literal the mansidedness of female adolescence.

Gorelick worked partly from photographs, and several of the paintings in “Family” contain starkly differentiated areas of dark and light, the possible effect of a camera flash. Whatever the light source, it creates shadows behind the figures, like dark companions. In *Double Libby* (1970) Libby appears twice, standing and seated on a low bed, her legs stretched out toward the viewer; the two figures look off to different sides of the room, lost in their own thoughts. Each Libby casts a shadow on the white wall behind her, doubling the already doubled woman and creating new figures who are connected to their originals but also exist apart from them. In a similar fashion, Gorelick constructed her subjects’ psychological states from multiple sources—“direct visual experience, the photographic image, memorized form, and the art of the past and of the present”—into a single vision.

With their detailed, personalized backgrounds, her depictions of Lee and Gunny Benson and Tess Forrest read like Renaissance portraits, full of revelations about their subjects. *The Bensons I* (1977–1978) shows Lee and Gunny in their living room, where Gorelick’s early painting of Gunny from the mid-1940s hangs on the wall. In the commanding portrait *Tess in a Blue Dress (Dr. Tess Forrest)* (1980), Tess is ensconced in her chair as on a throne, against a wall of books that attest to her authority as a psychoanalyst, among them Victor Rosen’s *Style, Character and Language*, the words style and character aligning allusively with her arm. But Gorelick did not work on commission; in her portraiture she aimed for “a statement more ‘realized’ than the object itself.”

In 1973 Gorelick helped found Central Hall Artists Gallery, the first all-women artist-run space in Port Washington, New York, inspired by A.I.R. Gallery in Soho, and between 1975 and 1986 she had half a dozen solo shows at the feminist SOHO20 Gallery in New York City. Yet there is scant information on her career: one thorough monograph of her work by the art historian Andrew D. Hottle; an interview and three linear feet of correspondence, clippings, and other papers housed at the Smithsonian’s Archives of American Art; a binder’s worth of laudatory reviews. She made her last paintings—a series of hyper-detailed panoramas of the Gorges du Verdon in southeastern France—in the early 1990s, before she was waylaid by cancer. She died in 2000. “Family” marks the first solo show of her work in New York in thirty-six years.

“I have so many ways to say something that I feel one painting generally doesn’t say enough,” Gorelick said in 1979. In *Tess Three Times* (1981–1982), Tess sits on a couch beside two other versions of herself, each in the same pink and fuchsia outfit but striking a different expression and pose: arms crossed; relaxed, smiling; quizzical, intent. The portrait is both a study of personality and mannerism and a testament to Gorelick’s close reading of the interplay between private states of being.

“Shirley Gorelick: Family” is at **Eric Firestone Gallery** in New York City through July 29.