MIRIAM SCHAPIRO, A LEADER OF THE FEMINIST ART MOVEMENT, DIES AT 91

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Miriam Schapiro.

VIA WIKIART

Painter, sculptor, and printmaker Miriam Schapiro, who helped spearhead the feminist art movement in the 1970s, inspiring generations of artists, died on June 20 at age 91 after a long illness. She is survived by her son, Peter von Brandenburg.

Schapiro, who sometimes went by the nickname “Mimi,” was born in Toronto, Canada in 1923. She was the only child of two Russian Jewish parents. Her father was an artist and an intellectual who was studying at the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design, in New York, when Schapiro was born. Her mother, a homemaker and a Zionist, encouraged Schapiro to take up a career in the arts. At age six, Schapiro began drawing.
During the Great Depression, the family came to Brooklyn. It was also at this time that Schapiro started taking art classes at the Museum of Modern Art, where she was able to study from nude models. In 1941, she graduated from Erasmus High School and went to the State University of Iowa—she received a BA in 1945, an MA in 1946, and an MFA in 1949. In her time there, she met Paul Brach, who became her husband in 1946. They moved to New York in 1952, and, three years later, had a son in 1955. That year also marked the beginning of Schapiro’s career as a full-time artist. (She previously had been an secretary for a rabbi.) Drawing inspiration from the Abstract Expressionists, she began exhibiting in New York. As late as 2000, Schapiro would cite that movement’s all-over compositions as a major influence on her colorful, energetic work.

When Schapiro and Brach moved to California in 1967, she became one of the first artists to use a computer to create her artwork. Working with the physicist David Nabilof, she created hard-edged abstract paintings. One such abstraction was OX (1967), a version of which is owned by the Brooklyn Museum. The painting features a hard-edged O at the crossing of an X. The result is a vaginal shape that feminist artist Judy Chicago called “central core” imagery, which she and Schapiro considered a symbol of the body.

![Miriam Schapiro, Big OX, 1967, acrylic on canvas.](image)

COURTESY FLOMENHAFT GALLERY
In the ’70s, Schapiro became one of the most important artists in a growing feminist-art scene. In collaboration with Chicago, in 1971, Schapiro co-founded the first feminist art program, at the California Institute of the Arts, in Valencia. The following year, Schapiro and Chicago co-directed *Womanhouse*, an installation in a rundown Hollywood house that involved the work of 28 female artists. (Only women were allowed to visit the installation on its first day.) Schapiro’s art could be found in the Dollhouse Room. She, along with Sherry Brody, created a dollhouse that, in Schapiro’s words, combined “the beauty, charm, and supposed safety and comfort of the home with the unnamable terrors existing with its walls.” In a statement in the brochure, she said it “echoes the feelings of a woman’s place and reminds of the magic of childhood, fantasy control over the tremors of the heart.” Some 10,000 people visited the installation in the month it was open.

“When we did *Womanhouse*, we were scared to death, because it had never been done before—such a mammoth project, you know, on an idea that had never been set forth before,” Schapiro said in a 1989 oral history. The piece has since become a landmark in feminist art history. Also during the ’70s, Schapiro began to theorize what she called “femmage,” or a type of art that collaged materials like cloth, paint, and fabric—items which had long been associated with women’s activities in the home. In her definition of femmage, Schapiro wrote that the style, which simultaneously recalls quilting and Cubism, has a “woman-life context” and that it “celebrates a private or public event.” It could also only be made by women.

“Her first major impact [on art] was to bring in women’s things—women’s treasures,” Nancy Azara, one of the founders of the New York Feminist Art Institute, told *ARTnews* in an interview. “These things had been tossed aside, and she gave them appreciation.”

Schapiro’s use of femmage launched her as one of the leading artists in the Pattern and Decoration movement, an American style that emerged in the mid-’70s and lasted through the early ’80s. A subversion of Conceptual art and Minimalism, Pattern and Decoration, or P&D, brought color back into avant-garde art. In Schapiro’s work, in particular, the P&D style can be seen in the patterns of her vibrant fabrics, which, as with her femmage works, have a feminist subtext—they refer to quilting, appliqué, and other crafts.

COURTESY FLOMENHAFT GALLERY

Schapiro committed herself to promoting art by women. In 1979, she co-founded the New York Feminist Art Institute, which held workshops and hosted lectures by women. Later, realizing that there weren’t enough women in art-history textbooks, she became a member of the College Art Association.

In the decades since P&D, Schapiro continued to include fabrics and craft techniques in her work, using it now toward reevaluating her Jewish identity and the role of women throughout American history. She received several awards for her work—an honors award from the Women’s Caucus for Art in 1988 and a lifetime achievement award from the Polk Museum of Art in 2002.

Schapiro has come to be seen as an important, if underrated, figure in the history of contemporary art. In 2007, her work was shown in the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles’s vital and widely acclaimed exhibition “WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution.” Her last solo show was in 2011, when Flomenhaft Gallery also had a mini-retrospective of her work.

Although Schapiro’s work is not widely illustrated in art-history books, she has been an influence for many contemporary artists. Deborah Kass has given Schapiro the Warhol treatment, *screenprinting her image twice over*, and Lynn Hershman Leeson interviewed Schapiro for her 2010 documentary *!Women Art Revolution*.

In an email, the artist and writer Mira Schor, who worked on *Womanhouse* while she was still a student at CalArts, said Schapiro’s legacy can be felt today. “Her work established many of the tropes of feminist and feminist inspired art that are familiar
to us today, the use of clothing and lace, and also she was a founding member of the Pattern and Decoration movement that was part of the pluralism of style characteristic of the ’70s,” Schor wrote. “Permissions stemming from both of these movements’ aesthetics and politics continue to influence artists today, even if they don’t know it. Through her work and her teaching she influenced the work and changed the lives of women artists all over the world who heard her lecture and saw her work.”

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