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A Dealer's Eye, and Life

‘Hooray for Hollywood!’ Recalls Holly Solomon’s Eye for Art

By ROBERTA SMITH JAN. 16, 2014



When the history of galleries in postwar New York is written, there will most likely be a chapter devoted to Holly Solomon (1934-2002), the petite and feisty blonde who was a vivid art-world presence for nearly 40 years. In the meantime, her gallery is being revisited in “Hooray for Hollywood!,” a big, sumptuous exhibition spread between adjacent Chelsea galleries, Mixed Greens and Pavel Zoubok. The show has the added advantage of offering a relatively wide-angle view of the 1970s and the ’80s, a period that recent curatorial habit — most prominently at the Museum of Modern Art — has reduced to a depressingly thin gruel of Post-Minimalism, Conceptual art and appropriation art.

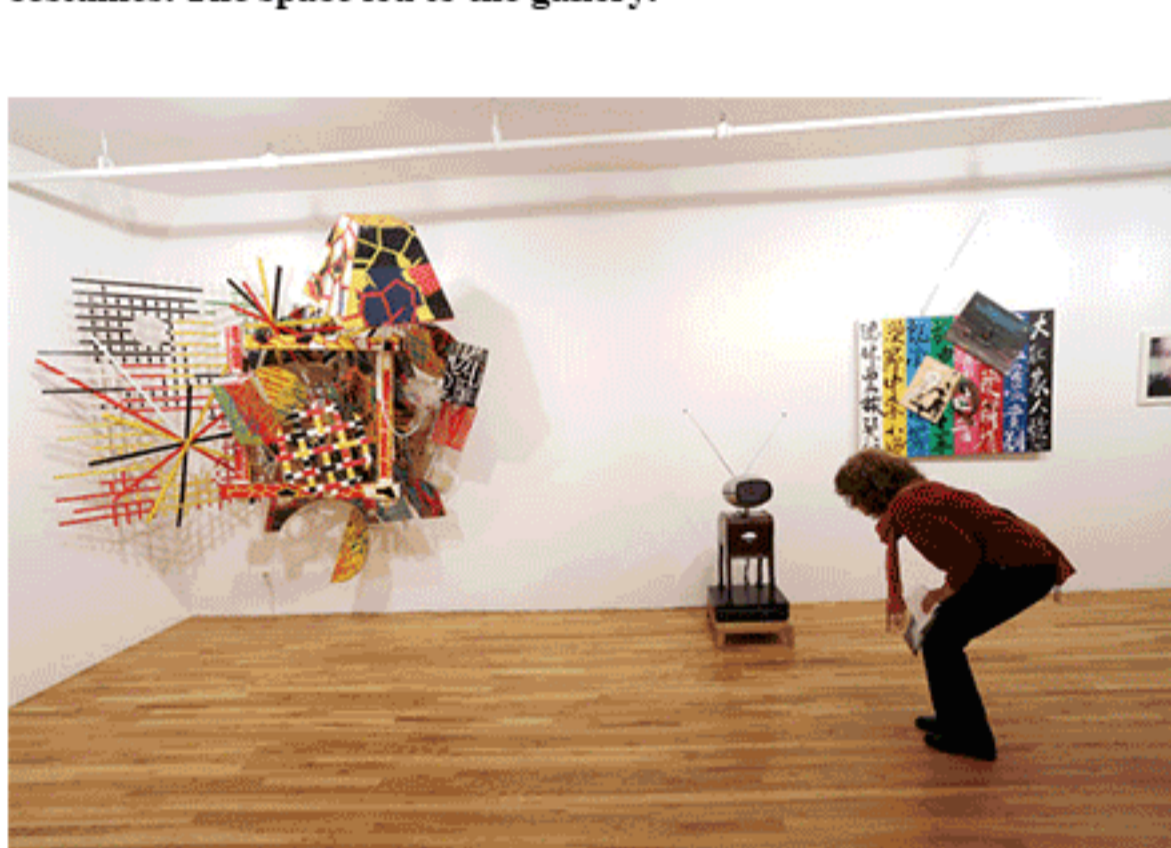
Starting in the early 1960s, Ms. Solomon went from self-anointed “Pop princess” to plugged-in collector and patron and finally to art dealer. With her husband, Horace, she opened the Holly Solomon Gallery on West Broadway in SoHo in 1975, exhibiting an eclectic mix of Post-Minimalists and younger sorts with ideas of their own. Most prominent was the irreverent upstart art movement Pattern and Decoration and related tendencies that broke with the more austere aspects of Post-Minimalism and Conceptualism.

“P and D,” as it was sometimes called, included, among others, Kim MacConnel, Robert Kushner, Robert Zakanitch, Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt, Brad Davis, Valerie Jaudon and Ned Smyth. Their often riotously patterned, unstretched paintings, sometimes functional sculpture and various environments promoted the notion — fairly shocking in the early 1970s — that art should be pleasurable, witty, visually sophisticated and maybe even usable.

But Ms. Solomon’s taste cut a broad, eclectic swath. Some of the shocks I remember from her gallery include not only the singing color and loose patterns of Mr. MacConnel’s paintings operating in the gap between Matisse and Hawaiian shirts but also the bright process-oriented abstract paintings of Mary Heilmann; chunks of buildings repurposed as sculpture by Gordon Matta-Clark; and the immersive installations of Judy Pfaff. Ms. Solomon also unsettled things with the first New York exhibition by the influential German painter Sigmar Polke in 1982.

Like most collectors, Ms. Solomon learned from dealers, including Leo Castelli, whose gallery was Pop-Minimal Central, and Richard Bellamy of the Green Gallery, which gave early, important shows to Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Claes Oldenburg and Lucas Samaras. (She bought her first artworks from Bellamy: a Flavin and a Samaras.)

She was initiated into Post-Minimalism by John Gibson, whose gallery was associated with the story-art faction of Conceptualism, which she also collected. Then, from 1969 to 1972, the Solomons established a kind of private alternative space at 98 Greene Street in SoHo, where exhibitions, poetry readings and performances were held, including sendups of fashion shows by Mr. Kushner, some of whose first paintings were also costumes. The space led to the gallery.



“Hooray for Hollywood!” is haphazardly installed and has some gaps. It includes only works on paper, not paintings, by Ms. Heilmann, Mr. Zakanitch and the New Image artist Nicholas Africano. William Wegman, who had numerous show at the gallery, is represented by a portrait of Ms. Solomon (with a Wegman Weimaraner) when there should be examples of his drawings and the jokey yet softly atmospheric paintings he began making in 1985. Nonetheless, the show’s onslaught of ideas, sensibilities and mediums is invaluable.

It features the efforts of nearly 50 artists whose work Ms. Solomon exhibited or collected, as well as examples of the many portraits she commissioned from some of these artists and others. (Ms. Solomon was hardly a shrinking violet. Before she took up collecting, she had tried, without success, to be an actress.) One of her first portraits was by Andy Warhol, a nine-image work from 1966 that used photographs of Ms. Solomon vamping in a photo booth. It is not here, although several others are, including photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe of Ms. Solomon smoking elegantly in bed; a wrapped portrait by Christo; and “Holly,” by Joseph Kosuth. Made in 1968, when Mr. Kosuth was a young Turk of Conceptualism, it consists of the dictionary definition of “holly,” cut out and pasted to a piece of paper. One of the last portraits, from 1991, is by the television savant Nam June Paik (1932-2006), who reigned as the gallery’s senior provocateur.

While providing a glimpse of the pluralist nature of 1970s art, this show occasionally demonstrates how its disparate strands intersect. Exhibit A is Mr. Kushner’s “Wedding Dress,” a wryly beautiful, rarely seen costume painting from 1976 that consists of an undulant expanse of filmy-cream-colored fabric painted with attenuated fleurs-de-lis in red or violet and edged with gold tassels. It reflects Mr. Kushner’s attention to Islamic art and delivers a campy but unavoidable decorative punch while also “dematerializing the art object” — as the Post-Minimalists would say — so much so it could be carried in a shopping bag. This piece is emblematic of its moment but not trapped in it, and should be in a museum collection.

Mr. Smyth’s 1973 sculpture of a toilet completely covered with colored and gold glass mosaic is a wonderful addition to the history of assemblage. It hovers tantalizingly between functioning and decorative object (although he might reconsider the concrete pedestal he gave the piece in 1995). Another such addition is Mr. Lanigan-Schmidt’s “A Summer Before Vatican II” from 1976, an amazingly detailed chapel constructed with a winsome combination of care and casualness from painted cardboard, aluminum foil, colored cellophane and images of saints. It is at once playful and devotional, a dollhouse and a reliquary.

Some artworks favored the domestic over the decorative, presenting an inflected Americana. This is the case with George Schneeman’s tiny frescoes depicting flannel shirts (1975) and Donna Dennis’s 1976 playhouse-size re-creation of the screened porch of a summer cabin, which can evoke a distant childhood idyll. Joe Zucker’s “Chomp” (1975) depicts a voracious boll weevil in the artist’s signature combination of cotton balls and paint on canvas.

Ms. Solomon pursued her varied interests to the end. The process-oriented abstraction of Ms. Heilmann was supplemented by Ms. Pfaff’s crazed formalism, as evidenced by the exuberant “Wallabout” of 1986, a multipart wall-hung assemblage with bright, routed elements that resembles an explosion in a woodblock print shop and the paintings of Melissa Meyer. Her contribution here is “The Princesse de Clèves,” whose thickly worked surface of slippery blue and green forms builds on Arshile Gorky’s biomorphic landscapes.

From the founding Conceptualists like Douglas Huebler and Robert Barry, Ms. Solomon progressed to Laurie Anderson’s striking musical scores (which apparently used contact prints from movies) and Alexis Smith’s engaging screenplays collaged with images and small objects. And Ms. Solomon’s beloved “P and D” led her to the savvy artifice of Virgil Marti, whose 1999 show was one of the last at her gallery.

This exhibition reiterates what is so often lost: History is big, messy and made by many. It also demonstrates that our tastes are larger, and more polymorphous than most of us allow ourselves to discover. Ms. Solomon gave herself permission.

“Hooray for Hollywood!” is on view through Feb. 8 at Mixed Greens, 531 West 26th Street, Chelsea; 212-331-8888, mixedgreens.com, and Pavel Zoubok Gallery; 212-675-7490, pavelzoubok.com.

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