

NANCY SPERO

Woman as Protagonist

February 23 – March 25, 2023

Opening Thursday, February 23, 2023, 6:00pm – 8:00pm



Nancy Spero, *Relay*, 2000.

Galerie Lelong & Co., New York, is pleased to announce a solo exhibition by Nancy Spero dedicated to works created between the mid-1990s and the early 2000s, the final two decades of the artist's life. Throughout a career spanning over five decades, the New York-based artist Nancy Spero (b. 1926 – d. 2009) foregrounded women's experiences, challenging systems of authority and subverting aesthetic conventions in the process. Frustrated with the pervasive silencing of women's voices in society, Spero was an activist who devoted herself to the advancement of women in the arts through

hosting and participating in discussion groups, many held in her SoHo loft. Beginning in 1976, Spero made women the sole subject of her work to elevate their status from "other" to protagonist. In celebration of Spero's unapologetic advocacy for the presence of women in the arts, the exhibition will coincide with Women's History Month.

A selection of works on paper demonstrative of Spero's signature styles of collage and printing will be featured. These works are populated by female figures originating from diverse cultures spanning time and space; women with origins in pre-history, classical antiquity, and modernity are seen alongside one another. Nancy Spero began amassing the collection of plates she used to handprint these figures in the 1980s and they swiftly became a core component of her practice. Early examples of these printed works show Spero printing colorful figures directly onto white paper. By the 1990s, Spero's printing practice had evolved to include bold, colorful backgrounds. Hues ranging from vibrant and bright to dark and muted take on a variety of forms, from multi-colored checkerboards to monochrome strokes, adding a rhythmic quality to the narratives Spero's "stock company" present. In Spero's own words, "these collages of handprinted figures are superimposed in fast rhythms to increase the tempo of actions of women in narrative/history."

In the largest work on paper in the exhibition, *Relay* (2000), Spero arranges the sweeping narrative in a series of smaller vignettes. Figures appear repeatedly against an ever-changing background; variations in color and pattern alter the viewer's perspective and create a sense of dimensionality within the work. The size and spatiality of *Relay* reflect Spero's unique approach to her signature medium, paper. Spero observed that painting was "too conventional, too establishment" and relished the freedom she found in the ephemeral quality of paper.

The works on paper will be complemented by a sculptural work, *Sheela-Na-Gig at Home* (2000). This work places the Celtic goddess, who is symbolic of female fertility and is a common figure in Spero's works, in a distinctly modern context: on a clothing line amongst contemporary women's undergarments. The conceptual basis of this work first appeared in a 1995 performance in which the

artist pins images of Sheela-Na-Gig and various women's undergarments to a clothesline while remarking "A woman's work is never done. This is the ancient Celtic goddess Sheela-Na-Gig. I also have to hang my laundry up, too; I don't have a dryer. Well, I have to do the dishes now." This performance was accompanied by directives for a recreation of the work, calling upon "women who wish to invigorate the feminine demiurge in the home and to expel male presences" to join Spero in the act of pinning Sheela-Na-Gig's likeness to a clothesline. The work creates space for a critique of the expectations placed upon women in the domestic sphere and a rebellion against these notions.

Works by Nancy Spero are currently on view at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C. in the exhibition *Put it This Way: (Re)Visions of the Hirshhorn Collection* and at the Tate Modern, London alongside the work of her husband, Leon Golub, in a focused presentation within the *Artist and Society* collection display. Spero's mosaic installation, *Artemis, Acrobats, Divas and Dancers* (2001), is on permanent display at the 66th Street-Lincoln Center Subway Station in New York.

About the Artist

In a groundbreaking career surpassing 50 years of practice and encompassing many significant visual and cultural movements including Conceptual Art, Post-Modernism, and Feminism, Nancy Spero made the female experience central to her art and challenged aesthetic and political conventions. Spero's lexicon was derived from an immersion in the history of images, notably from Egypt, classical antiquity, pre-history, and contemporary news media. She combined, fractured, and repurposed found imagery and adopted text to comment on contemporary and historical events such as the monstrosities of the Vietnam War, extermination of Jews during the Holocaust, and torture of women in Chile. With raw intensity, Spero executed works on paper and installations that persist as unapologetic statements against the pervasive abuse of power, Western privilege, and male dominance.

Spero's work is held in over 50 prominent public collections worldwide including the Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois; Centre Pompidou, France; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Spain; Museum of Modern Art, New York; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Tate Gallery, England; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Massachusetts; and Dallas Museum of Art, Texas. Major monographic exhibitions of Spero's work have been shown at renowned museums including MoMA PS1, Long Island City, New York; Museo Rufino Tamayo, Mexico; Centre Pompidou, France; Serpentine Galleries, England; Museo d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, and Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, Spain. Between 2019 and 2021, a major retrospective exhibition travelled to the Museum Folkwang, Essen, Germany; Nordic Watercolour Museum, Skärhamn, Sweden; Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk; and the Lillehammer Art Museum, Lillehammer, Norway. Spero's installation *Maypole: Take No Prisoners* was presented in 2007 at the 52nd Venice Biennale, and later at MoMA PS1 as part of the retrospective exhibition *Paper Mirror* (2019). Upcoming presentations of Spero's work include the group exhibition *Americans in Paris: Artists Working in Postwar France, 1946 - 1962*, which will open at Grey Art Gallery, New York University, New York in February 2024.

Spero was born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1926. She died in New York City in 2009.

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HIGHLIGHTS



Nancy Spero

Relay, 2000

Handprinting and printed collage on paper

Panel 1 of 4, framed: 14 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 86 $\frac{1}{4}$ in (35.9 x 219.1 cm)

Panel 2 of 4, framed: 14 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 81 $\frac{7}{8}$ in (35.9 x 208 cm)

Panel 3 of 4, framed: 14 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 98 $\frac{1}{4}$ in (35.9 x 249.6 cm)

Panel 4 of 4, framed: 14 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 85 $\frac{3}{8}$ in (36.5 x 216.9 cm)



Nancy Spero

Sheela-Na-Gig at Home, 2000

Handprinting on paper, underwear, free-standing clothesline, clothespins

Variable dimensions



Nancy Spero

Liberty, 1997

Handprinting and printed collage on paper

73 x 19 $\frac{3}{4}$ in (185.4 x 50.2 cm)



Nancy Spero

Untitled (La Renomee and Egyptians), 1998

Silkscreen with collage

30 x 22 in (76.2 x 55.9 cm)

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