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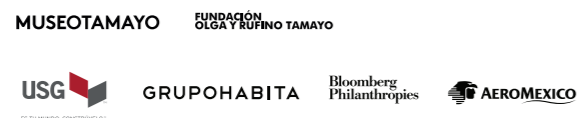
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The Goddess Nir II, 1990.

NANCY SPERO: PAPER MIRROR

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MUSEOTAMAYO

In 1966, Nancy Spero concluded that the language of painting was “too conventional, too establishment,” and decided that from then on she would work exclusively on paper—vulnerable, insignificant paper meant to be pinned to the wall. Having recently returned to the United States after a number of years in Europe, Spero was deeply disturbed by the atrocities the US military was committing in Vietnam, and over the next four years, she created her first significant works on paper, the scores of gouache-and-ink pictures that make up her War Series. As she later described them to curator Barbara Flynn, these works express “the obscenity of war” via imagery of “angry screaming heads in clouds of bombs [that] spew and vomit poison onto the victims below. Phallic tongues emerge from human heads at the tips of the penile extensions of the bomb or helicopter blades. Making these extreme images, I worried that [my] children might be embarrassed with the content of my art . . .”

For Spero, who died in 2009 at the age of eighty-three, choices of material, form, method, and subject matter were always political. Born in Cleveland, Ohio in 1926, Spero graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1949. Before settling with their three sons in New York in 1964, she and her husband, the painter Leon Golub (1922–2004), lived in Paris, where she created her first mature works, the Black Paintings, 1959–1965: figurative compositions that seem to brood over existential questions of selfhood and otherness, several depicting sexual partners who appear remote and estranged from each other. She received little recognition for these powerful paintings.

Throughout the 1950s and '60s, Spero experienced intense isolation, discontent, and anger because of the invisibility accorded a female artist making figurative, aggressive work. Moreover, the lion's share of child-rearing duties fell to her, leaving little time for artmaking. But Spero was resolute: “I never stopped working and always late at night, proving if only to myself that I was an artist,” she wrote years later. Her fury over being persona non grata in the art world mounted. She had no audience to speak of beyond Golub; no opportunity to exhibit her work except at “a few anti-war shows and benefits.”

Feeling like an outsider, in 1969 Spero began an intense four-year engagement with that brilliant outcast, the French poet Antonin Artaud. “He lashed out at everything, that is just what appealed to me,” she said in an interview with Flynn. On discovering Artaud's writing, she immediately began to incorporate it into her practice, transcribing his texts into notebooks so that his words would pass bodily through her. The first fully-realized works that emerged from these explorations were the Artaud Paintings, 1969–70, which juxtapose text fragments redolent of the writer's “desperation, humor, misogyny, and violent language” with painted images of androgynous figures, disembodied heads, and phallic tongues. Spero later reflected that her identification with Artaud had to do with her awareness of being silenced: “The anger in the Artaud Paintings came from feeling that I didn't have a voice, an arena in which



Nancy Spero in her 71st Street Studio with *Codex Artaud II* (above) and *Codex Artaud I* (below) behind her on the wall, New York, 1973. Photo: Susan Weiley



Nancy Spero in her studio, 1974. Photo: Joyce Ravid

to conduct a dialogue; that I didn't have an identity,” she told Flynn. “That's exactly why I choose to use Artaud's writing, because he screams and yells and rants and raves about his tongue being cut off, castrated.” Joining herself to Artaud, Spero activated his words to articulate her own experience—women's experience—of negation. She found that she “could take a stance in forcing a ‘collaboration’” with the notorious writer, and experienced an intense psychological connection with him in spite of sensing what she would describe (to curator Catherine de Zegher) as “his disapproval.”

Upon completing the Artaud Paintings, Spero made an even more decisive break with painterly convention: Having already abandoned the canvas support, she exploded the spatial parameters that governed portraits, landscapes, and modernist abstraction alike. She gathered a mixture of papers from around her studio and glued them into a scroll-like formation, which evolved into *Codex Artaud*, 1971–72. An immense series, *Codex Artaud* spanned thirty-four paper panels 51 cm by up to 3-meter long (and tall) that combined typewritten snippets of Artaud's writing with collaged and painted images: severed heads with extended tongues; snakes with human visages; strange animal forms and human fragments. Alluding to Egyptian hieroglyphics, papyrus scrolls, tomb paintings, and books, *Codex Artaud* was the formal and methodological model for Spero's future work.

Beyond the studio, Spero was fighting alienation in other ways. In search of community and collective political agency, in 1969, she joined Women Artists in Revolution (WAR) that fought for women's rights in the art world. Soon she was active in the Ad Hoc Women Artists' Committee, which for months picketed the Whitney Museum, protesting the extreme gender disparity in its exhibitions and collections, and which started the Women's Art Registry to disseminate information about art made by women.

A paradigm shift was under way. In 1972 six women, including Spero, founded the first independent women's art venue in the US, A.I.R. Gallery. A.I.R. transformed Spero's social landscape: In addition to having a place in which to exhibit her work consistently, she became an active participant in the discourse of art, and she found the dialogue and constituency she so desperately needed. Spero exhibited *Codex Artaud* at A.I.R. in 1973—her first New York gallery show—and mounted five solo exhibitions there over the following decade.

Having “had enough of Artaud” by then, Spero told Margit Rowell “I wanted to enter the repressed and violent world of subjected women. This was in line with both my career and personality becoming more externalized and working with other women, actively making decisions and activist actions.” Spero experimented with letterpress in a sequence of graphically bold works using war slogans, medieval terminology, and vernacular language—“body count,” “explicit explanation,” “search and destroy,” “normal love.” Her *Licit Exp and Hours of the Night* series collage sexually explicit figures and poetic fragments. She assembled her first sequence of tall vertical panels into a large-scale hanging, “a manuscript spread flat on the wall,” *The Hours of the Night*, 1974.

Spero's decision, made in 1974, that women would be the subject of all her future works was a natural outgrowth of her feminist activities. “I decided to view women and men by representing women,” she said “not just to reverse history, but to see what it means to view the world through the depiction of women.” She immersed into research into mythologies and histories of the torture and subjugation of women, resulting in scroll environments, including the 38-meter *Torture of Women*, 1974–76, drawn heavily from Amnesty International Reports of eye-witness accounts of state-sanctioned torture, and the 60-meter, text-heavy, collaged compendium of references to woman as protagonist made over a three-year period, *Notes in Time on Women*, 1979.



Body Count, 1974. Photo: Christopher Burke Studio

Sky Goddess and Snakes, 1985



Soon after, Spero dispensed with textual elements, turning to “the language of gesture and movement.”

In 1975, a chance remark by the proprietor of a print shop inspired Spero to begin transferring her painted figures to zinc plates that permitted her to reproduce, repeat, and recycle images freely and infinitely. In the ensuing years she frequently spoke of “cannibalizing” her work, a methodological byproduct of the printing technique she adopted. “I was like a director of a stock company and these characters would appear, disappear, and reappear,” she told Benjamin Buchloh in 2008. “They would come in and take their roles with other characters, and then some would subsume other roles.” In a discussion with critic Alessandra Mammì, she elaborated:

The repetition inherent in the printing process echoes the irrepressible presence of women in history I seek to capture by combining and recombining images of women from very different historical periods and cultural contexts. Yet my intervention is not neutral history, is not fixed, it's mutable, open to interpretation, it keeps on living by accumulating new meanings. Now this is a very subversive idea, because it means history can be changed, power relations reversed . . .

Mechanical reproduction, in other words, gave birth to Spero's dynamic collaboration with history. From that point on, she increasingly de-emphasized text in her work in favor of imagery; she raided diverse cultures, historical periods, and disciplines—mythology, folklore, art history, literature, and media—for representations of women as tragic and triumphant, degraded and powerful, victimized and liberated.

Through the '70s and early '80s, Spero exhibited her work not only at A.I.R. but at other nonprofit spaces, women's spaces, and university galleries. Then, in the mid-1980s, in the context of pluralism and attention to politicized practices, her work garnered acknowledgment from more prominent institutions and galleries. In 1987, traveling retrospectives originated at London's ICA and the Everson Museum in Syracuse, New York.

Shortly after that, Spero began using cast rubber for printing directly on walls, creating site-specific installations for a variety of museums and art institutions. As her methods evolved, so did her subject matter: Far from lingering in a state of victimage, much of her work of the '80s and '90s expresses exuberance and sexual audacity and the delight of movement and liberation. Female figures walk, crawl, dance, run,



Sky Goddess, 1985. Installation view: Glyptothek am Königsplatz, Munich, 1991

and jump across her compositional space. “The new work has this buoyant look which worries me sometimes,” the artist confided to Nicole Jolicoeur and Nell Tanhaaf in 1985. Although Spero continued to challenge sadism towards women and the brutality of war her whole life, explicit depictions of violence are rare in her later work, which progressively portrayed women as liberated agents of their own narratives.

Spero's installation *Maypole: Take No Prisoners*, created for the 2007 Venice Biennale, fuses the “festive and the frightening.” Severed heads handprinted on aluminum are attached to satin ribbons and chains that hang from a tall pole. The heads are “cannibalized” from the War Series painting, *Kill Commies/Maypole*, 1967, which features an American flag atop a pole from which heads dangle. Speaking about the Venice installation, Spero lamented, “It's the same, it's no different . . . I did the War Series about Vietnam and now here we are again in the Iraq debacle, watching the same damn thing . . . I find it really so unbearable.”

By then, she had acquired a stature that precluded her ever being silenced again. Spero continued, as always, to pull no punches. The political commitments that animated her work throughout her career are overtly reflected in her content and choice of subject, of course, but they are also subtly embedded in the se-

quence of production shifts she instigated, which coalesced into a cogent politics of form integral to the indelible work she created. Spero's six decades of extraordinary art chart her complex path to emancipation via existential inquiry, formal innovation, communal conviction, and aesthetic ecstasy.

Nancy Spero: Paper Mirror encompasses approximately one hundred works from throughout Spero's career, which together map the radical and organic transformations that punctuate her practice. The exhibition includes elements from the Black Paintings; the War Series; Artaud Paintings and *Codex Artaud*; *Licit Exp and Hours of the Night*; and numerous works from the 1980s, '90s, and 2000s populated by a transhistorical and cross-cultural cast of characters, culminating in the Tamayo's central atrium with *Maypole: Take No Prisoners*.

Paper Mirror takes its installation cues from Spero's compositional and spatial modes. The exhibition architecture reflects her figurative journey, beginning in picture galleries, opening into high ceiling elongated spaces, and expanding further. A fitting stage where Nancy Spero's artful language proclaims its roots and ideals: Woman as protagonist, continuing presence, and infinite independence, remaking the world.

Guest Curator: Julie Ault

This text has been adapted and expanded from “Voice Recognition: Julie Ault on Nancy Spero,” in *Artforum*, February 2010.