



NEUBAUER
COLLEGIUM
FOR CULTURE AND SOCIETY

Ida Applebroog: MONALISA

Oct 14, 2021 – Jan 16, 2022



Ida Applebroog, *Monalisa*, 2009. Detail. © Ida Applebroog. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Emily Poole

Ida Applebroog: MONALISA is the final chapter of *Toward Common Cause: Art & Social Change - The MacArthur Fellows Program at 40*, a multi-venue exhibition project organized by the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago in collaboration with more than two dozen institutional partners across Chicago. It is fitting that the closing chapter of this mammoth undertaking should unfold in the intimate, domestically scaled space of the Neubauer Collegium gallery and be devoted to the work of Ida Applebroog. Born Ida Applebaum in the Bronx in 1929 to immigrant parents from Poland, Applebroog is a legendary figure in the feminist revolution that rocked the art world of the 1960s and '70s. *MONALISA*,

her most emblematic work, is closely aligned with several key curatorial concerns in the Neubauer Collegium's evolving exhibition program, most notably the literalized notion of art as a "room of one's own"—both refuge and retreat.

Consisting of a suite of ink drawings dating back to the late 1960s that were unseen until their accidental discovery by the artist in 2009, *MONALISA* has become one of Applebroog's signature pieces (it was the point of departure of *Marginalia*, a major retrospective organized by the Museo Reina Sofía in Madrid in the summer of 2021). A room-sized wooden structure is covered with more than 100 digital copies of the original drawings, "portraits" of Applebroog's vagina made during a transformative phase in her life—an event that could be said to have birthed the artist we know today. While the drawings conjure a raft of art-historical associations, from Courbet to Duchamp and beyond, the architecture of their display sets the scene for a broader debate touching

upon the fault lines of gender and power, agency and privacy, personal and political. The viewer can circle the little house or peek through the cracks in its paper-made walls, but the structure as such cannot be entered.

The drawings were made over the course of a two-month period in San Diego in 1969, when Applebroog (then known as Ida Horowitz) suffered an existential crisis as a housewife and mother of four. She was keen on exploring her burgeoning artistic interests and instincts, which had acquired a strongly feminist cast during her studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago from 1965 to 1968. (The Horowitz family had moved to Chicago after Ida's husband obtained a research position at the University of Chicago.) During this time, she spent long hours taking refuge in the sole site of solitude available to her in an otherwise busy household: the bathtub. It is there that she set about meticulously drawing likenesses of her own vagina, which varied greatly in detail, veering from the anatomical precision of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*-styled textbooks to the haiku-like elegance of Matissean curves. Although the drawings languished in oblivion for a quarter-century, Applebroog emerged from this cathartic experience the artist she had long wanted to be. After moving back to her native New York in 1974, she became an active participant in a number of high-profile feminist art organizations such as Heresies and the Women's Action Coalition.

Applebroog's work has been included in numerous group exhibitions in prestigious museums around the country since the late 1970s. In 1987 she was invited to take part in Documenta 8, an experience repeated for Documenta 13 in 2012. *MONALISA* was first shown at Hauser & Wirth New York in the winter of 2010. Applebroog, who continues to live and work in downtown Manhattan to this day, was named a John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Fellow in 1998.

Ida Applebroog: MONALISA is curated by Dieter Roelstraete for the Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society. *Toward Common Cause: Art & Social Change - The MacArthur Fellows Program at 40* is curated by Abigail Winograd for the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago.

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