

HANNAH HOFFMAN

Rosemary Mayer, *Noon Has No Shadows*
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The Presences of Rosemary Mayer

In 1978, Rosemary Mayer (1943–2014) made a handwritten list of generic and proper nouns that ranged from “bathtubs, “prisms,” “my mother,” and “Bernini,” to “Novocaine,” “dinners, “ “Simone de Beauvoir,” “birds,” and “sex.”¹ The eclecticism of this list, titled *Everything that’s influenced my work/me*, opens a window onto the idiosyncratic mind of an artist whose life’s work was premised on forging connections, both loose and strong, across times and distances that were often so far-flung that they test the sanctity of connection itself. Across an artistic practice spanning elaborate sculptures frequently made from draped fabric, ephemeral installations, conceptual propositions, and writing and drawings that explicated and mediated her works, Mayer sought to surface the links between those living in her present orbit and figures from the ancient past. In so doing, she posited the very notion of contemporaneity as a formal and conceptual problem to be worked through, bringing her catalogue of references from varied cultures and histories to bear on what it meant to be an *artist*: someone alive and attuned to the world.

As the watercolors, drawings for performances and installations, and sculptures gathered across these two Los Angeles locations attest, Mayer sought out resonances across time and place: in historical figures such as the sixteenth-century Italian Mannerist painter Jacopo Pontormo (1494–1557); the ceramics of ancient Greece and China; and the lives and memories of the flesh-and-blood people who populated her fragment of the universe. In her life and in her work, Mayer looked to establish *presence*: how ghosts of the past could be conjured and made proximate and how people could be celebrated in all of their quotidian, exquisite glories. This was intrinsic to how she looked at the world. In a 1976 interview, Mayer articulated this as a concern within the feminist politics of her time, recounting an experience she had had in a women artists’ group:

We had a long talk about whether we thought space was empty or full. The room was divided between women who saw it as empty and were terrified by the space and

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those on my side who thought the space was full of presences. That thought connects to my work, that those presences are everywhere.²

Such presences manifest in the folds and weaves of the diaphanous, billowing fabric present in Mayer's sculptures and drawings from the early 1970s, evincing her interest in Mannerist painting from sixteenth-century Italy. Rosso Fiorentino's 1521 *Volterra Deposition* inspired Mayer's own 1974 work *Portae*, which was constructed from a yellow, red, and green painted wood frame and aluminum supports, and woven through with fiberglass and thin, iridescent aluminum screening—an “improbable trellis supporting blooming whorls of color and light,” as she noted in a 1976 essay about her work.³ “*Portae* means gate, a way in. These you circle around.”⁴ And indeed, these historical forms allowed Mayer to grant presence to figures from the past with whom she felt particular kinship, like Pontormo, whose diaries she translated in 1975–76 and published in 1982. Mayer's interest in Pontormo was more than art historical: she felt connected to the artist and how he lived during the uncertain wake of Renaissance's achievements. Mayer, living and working in New York in the aftermath of Minimalism, felt that she too was in a time of uncertainty, “where everything was up to everybody, and everything was different for everybody.”⁵

The work Mayer produced toward the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s reflect this panoply of difference and allude to an equally wide range of references, which increasingly drew far closer to home and hinted at the memories and personal tragedies of her own life. Rosemary and her sister Bernadette lost both of their parents when they were teenagers—their father Theodore passed away from a heart attack when Rosemary was fourteen, followed by their mother's death from breast cancer two years later. From her father, Mayer learned carpentry and gardening, and because he worked for a time as an upholsterer, her childhood home was frequently strewn with bolts of fabric, adding to the visual repertoire she would comb through for sculptures. She commemorated him alongside her mother and her close friend, the artist Ree Morton (born Helen), in an ephemeral installation made with balloons, *Some Days in April*, erected in upstate New York in 1978. A private ritual conducted on the property of a friend, the piece's affective power draws from Mayer's insistence on honoring the people who, by coincidence, passed away in the same month at different intervals and were connected by the fact of

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Mayer would continue in the ensuing years to commemorate figures from the past and celebrate the present in other temporary monuments connected to local sites. These included 1979's *Snow People*, a series of life-sized sculptures made from snow that honored historical figures from the town of Lenox, Massachusetts, where her sister Bernadette was then living. Later on, building from her research on ceremonial tents used for public celebrations, Mayer produced the one-night-only performance *Moon Tent* on October 3, 1982, at the home of art historian Robert Hobbs in upstate New York.⁶ The performance's visual component entailed wrapping the pavilion atop Hobbs's house in transparent glassine paper. To round out the evening, Mayer and her guests celebrated with food and drink inspired by lunar celebrations across the world—from those in China and in the Chinese diaspora nearby Mayer in downtown New York to the harvest moon festivals in the West. Each of Mayer's temporary monuments were documented through drawings, which also functioned as vehicles to imagine and propose new works that would remain unrealized. The drawing *Moon Tent for Autumn Moon* (1982), full of raucous colors and energetic inscriptions, includes invitations to others to participate and even make their own forms, so long as they have the time and can "stay up late." As Mayer understood, presence—even momentary presence—could be collectively shared and live on long after you'd separated from the people you'd spent the night with. Presence, in other words, was something created, but had a life of its own.

Flowers are a major motif across Mayer's oeuvre. An artist with a distinctive green thumb, who grew avocados from pits and exotic carnivorous flora from mail-order seeds in her Tribeca loft, Mayer was drawn to plants as much for their beauty as for the diversity in their forms: "forms beyond comprehension in their variety," each flower an ever-yielding resource of "complex transitory shapes, curving out and overlapping," as she wrote in 1976.⁷ She often turned to flowers in between projects as a way to figure out what to do next, resulting in a series of watercolors from 1983 which pair bright, resplendent flora with haunting, often ominous phrases: "ICY DARK BROKE," "PAIN," "NO MORE MONEY," "AS SAFE AS HOUSES." The boldness of the phrases and the carefully painted flowers highlight Mayer's interest in joining word and image, a core aspect of the artist's practice. Here, bringing together "plain desperate words and beautiful objects," as she described this series,

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extends Mayer's interest in objects and ideas that sit between the permanent and the ephemeral, the universal and the particular.

Valued across all cultures, flowers offer their beauty for appreciation in desperate words and beautiful objects," as she described this series, extends Mayer's interest in objects and ideas that sit between the permanent and the ephemeral, the universal and the particular. Valued across all cultures, flowers offer their beauty for appreciation in art and in verse, but for a brief burst of time—an apt metaphor for the fleeting presence of beauty and the importance of marking that presence for posterity.

Toward the mid-1980s, Mayer turned to Greek vessels for inspiration.

She presented these utilitarian containers of yore as both watercolors and sculptures. Writing in 1985 after a presentation of the vessels at Pam Adler Gallery in New York, critic Maureen Connor termed these works as containers holding "the thought, the hope, and spirit of classicism," suggesting that Mayer's invocation of the vessels—as containers for liquids as well as receptacles of the past—indexed her own education in and love for ancient Greek and Latin culture as well as her passion for preserving artistic traditions that ought to flourish in the future.⁸ In the watercolors made in 1983, Mayer deploys words to identify both the particular type of vessel and its function (as in "AMPHORA," used for storing oil or wine), but also as more enigmatic signifiers overlaid upon their forms ("loss," "loneliness," and "injury" festoon the depiction of the amphora in the same work). As with the flower watercolors, Mayer here turns to the personal to suffuse generic forms with her unique signature, lending these works the same affective imprint as her performances.

The vessel sculptures fuse Mayer's multicultural references and cannibalize her own practice. Their inspiration includes both the classical vessels of Greece and Rome and Mayer's reading of *The Marsh Arabs*, Wilfred Thesiger's 1943 account of his time spent with the nomadic Ma'dan people from northern Iraq, who made temporary dwellings, boats, and other structures out of reeds. The resourcefulness of the Ma'dan and their ability to fashion all of their survival needs from their local environment was important to Mayer, as it demonstrated that artists could turn to simple, local resources to create work. For these vessel sculptures, Mayer laid extremely thin vellum affixed with rabbit-skin glue—a fixative made from boiling the connective tissue of mammals—onto her reed frames to create a crackled, semi-transparent surface. The resulting forms are reminiscent of both lanterns and bodies, with their skin-like exteriors.

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In their use of Greek forms and dynamic play of color, light, and texture, Mayer's vessels transcend the particularity of their references toward a more universalist ethos to evoke wonder through the manipulation and transformation of sundry materials. Like her earlier fabric sculptures, and indeed the whole of her oeuvre, the vessels are distinguished by how they command their own space but also invoke past forms in small echoes that link Mayer's artistic efforts to the toil of those who came before her. Swirling through with a historical spirit and contemporary attachments—both her own and ours—these works teem with a boundless energy marshalled by singular artist attuned to the presences within and beyond the rooms she inhabited. Through her temporary monuments and ephemeral gestures, and in the tragic loss that marked her early years, Rosemary Mayer had always been thinking of evanescence, of what to hold onto when so much is destined to disappear. These experiences gifted Mayer with a sui generis way of thinking, a “wonder at the magical unfolding of amazing sight.”⁹ We share in that rare and indelible wonder and take the step into its unfolding with the knowledge that Mayer's presence is right there beside us.

- Tausif Noor

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Tausif Noor is a critic and PhD student in modern and contemporary art history at the University of California, Berkeley. He is the recipient of the 2023 Grace Dudley Award for Art Writing from the Robert B. Silvers Foundation and in 2022 was awarded an Andy Warhol Foundation/Creative Capital Arts Writers Grant for Short Form Writing. His reviews and essays can be found in the New Yorker, the New York Review of Books, the New York Times, Artforum, Aperture, and in various artist catalogues.

¹ Rosemary Mayer, “Everything That’s Influenced My Work/Me (1978),” in *Rosemary Mayer: Ways of Attaching*, ed. Eva Birkenstock, Laura McLean-Ferris, Robert Leckie, and Stephanie Weber (Munich: Lenbachhaus; Aachen: Ludwig Forum; Bristol: Spike Island; New York: Swiss Institute; Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther und Franz König, 2022), 13.

² Rosemary Mayer and Hilary Kane, “Interview with Rosemary Mayer,” *Women in the Arts II* (New York: School of Visual Arts, 1976), 17, quoted in Maureen Connor, “The Pleasure of Necessity: The Work of Rosemary Mayer,” *Woman’s Art Journal* 6, no. 2 (Fall 1985/Winter 1986): 36. ³ Rosemary Mayer, “Two Years, March 1973 to January 1975,” in *Individuals: Post-Movement Art in America*, ed. Alan Sondheim (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1977), 205.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Rosemary Mayer and Gillian Sneed, “Interview with Rosemary Mayer,” July 12, 2013, Rosemary Mayer Archive.

⁶ See Gillian Sneed, “Pleasures and Possible Celebrations: Rosemary Mayer’s Temporary Monuments, 1977–1982,” in *Temporary Monuments: Work by Rosemary Mayer, 1977–1982*, ed. Marie Warsh and Max Warsh (Chicago: Soberscove Press, 2018), 5–33.

⁷ Mayer, “Two Years,” 209.

⁸ Connor, “The Pleasure of Necessity,” 38–39.

⁹ Rosemary Mayer, “Passing Thoughts (1978),” in *Rosemary Mayer: Ways of Attaching*, 239.