Rachel Harrison & Carol Rama:
ART WILL NOT REDEEM US

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN SARAH LEHRER-GRAIWER AND CATHERINE TAFT

In response to *Rachel Harrison & Carol Rama* at Fergus McCaffrey St. Barth, February 2021

Allyson Spellacy: Welcome both of you and thank you for your good insight here on Rachel Harrison and Carol Rama. To begin, Sarah and Catherine how do you two know one another?

Catherine Taft: I believe the connection is our education at Art Center College of Design, where we both did our masters.

Sarah Lehrer-Grawier: Exactly. And then boiling it down more to the point it's Bruce Hainley, who was the heart and soul of that Art Center program, and who I just saw recently in this crazy Covid year.

CT: Bruce really inspired and taught me how to think and write, and how to revisit a lot of figures where there is so much work still to be done – on people like Carol Rama and certainly Rachel Harrison, as the inheritor of her legacy.

SLG: Our shared education, though not experienced together at the same time, was really formative to the way that I think about these artists and certainly Rama. I've been an enthusiastic viewer of Rachel Harrison for a long time, but I certainly haven't written on her the way I have on Carol Rama.

AS: You were both in LA during *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* at the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles; what were your responses to that exhibition in 2007?

CT: *WACK!* was an incredible survey of feminist art curated by Connie Butler at MOCA – in many ways a long overdue show, Connie was working on it for years. She had a monumental task making up lost time for a lot of art history that should have been addressed sooner.

SLG: Yes – over a hundred artists, an international group – so many people who were new names to me and to so many viewers, it was

a really important breakthrough show that cracked open the egg on artists working during, around, through feminism – extremely exciting, super compelling. A lot of the work that I've been involved in does feel like it's in the wake of that show, and what Connie was able to set in motion.

AS: Do you think there has been progress in how institutions and galleries present "art made under the influence of feminism"?

Carol Rama portrait © PEPE fotografia; Courtesy PEPE fotografia

CT: It's interesting to see now the way museums are responding to the need to do feminist type programming and to make up for big gaps in their collection not only with women artists but with artists of color and other underrepresented groups. While this is necessary work, I'm sometimes skeptical of their motives

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SLG: Since *WACK!*, a number of the artists that I've worked with, crudely demographically speaking, have been older women artists near the end of their career and one worry is that when it becomes a pattern it starts to acquire the potential of a trend. Whereas part of what contributes to their distinctiveness is that these artists did not participate in the market or have the receptions or careers that their male counterparts did.

CT: It does seem like Rama shifted her modes of working rather frequently in response to her audiences or a perceived censorship of what she was doing. Do you see that as her trying to maintain a career in an environment that was maybe misogynistic or certainly sexist? She did have the challenge of working alongside male peers and having to prove herself.

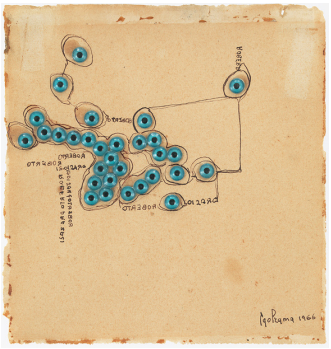
SLG: She doesn't identify being a woman as a major obstacle, which was common in her generation, even though, clearly, that is why things played out differently for her than her peers. She was fiercely independent in her lifestyle, fashion style, and in the work she produced. She thrived by going against the grain, doing what was not expected or condoned, or even appropriate in her work.

AS: Sarah, you have written about Rama's

Carol Rama, *Dorina*, 1942. Pencil and watercolor on paper, 2 3/4 x 9 inches (7 x 23 cm)
© Archivio Carol Rama, Torino. Private Collection

abstraction and return to representation in the late 1970s, when the figurative works were well received. Could you elaborate on the change in public opinion?

SLG: The difficult imagery that she showed in 1945 was immediately censored. It was figurative and drew partly on her experiences in the psychiatric ward and asylum where her mother had spent time, depictions of characters with their tongues out and in various states of dress or undress and tied down to beds, in wheelchairs, disfigured and dismembered – difficult imagery. Soon after, she transitioned away from figuration and into abstraction.



Carol Rama, *Untitled*, 1966
Glass eyes and ink on paper
6 1/2 x 6 1/2 inches
(16.5 x 16.5 cm)
© Archivio Carol Rama, Torino

At the time of her transition, there was also the atomic bomb, there was a lot of collective global trauma that people were processing and then more locally, there was Fascism. I think that the processing of global events with her national history were converging, leading her into different modes of working.

Carol Rama, *Movimento e immobilità de Birnam*, 1977
Steel hook, bicycle tires, rubber and cotton tape on synthetic fabric
51 1/8 x 51 1/8 inches
(130 x 130 cm)
© Archivio Carol Rama, Torino

CT: Listening to you talk about her history and in thinking about Rachel Harrison, these two artists are both not working specific to any one medium and moved between modes – both figuratively and abstractly. They are both products of their cultural moment. I was re-reading an essay by Darby English on Rachel Harrison's work and came across this amazing quote which I think speaks exactly to what you said about Rama. He writes, "Art in this idiom is unrehearsed cultural analysis, a memo to its moment, renowned to be ever changing because it actually is." I think that hits the nail on the head.

AS: After the events in Washington, D.C. on January 6, we noted a distinct shift in visitor perspective when experiencing the Harrison & Rama exhibition at the gallery in St. Barth; people responded to the intensity in the works as acts of aggression, many asking specifically if Harrison's *Before You Have To* is an anti-Republican statement (we have not asked the artist to go on the record).

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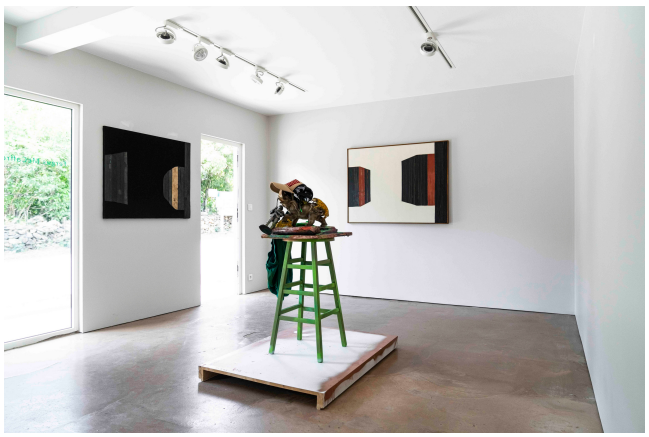
Installation image of
Rachel Harrison & Carol Rama
Fergus McCaffrey St. Barth
December 30, 2020 –
February 27, 2021

Photo by Thomas Levy

"THE PIECE BY HARRISON IS A WORK MADE IN 2018 AND CAN VERY EASILY BE READ AS A STATEMENT ABOUT AMERICAN POLITICS AT THIS MOMENT. IT WOULD BE HARD TO SAY IT'S NOT."

CT: The piece that was included in the exhibition at Fergus McCaffrey St. Barth by Harrison is a work made in 2018 and can very easily be read as a statement about American politics at this moment. It would be hard to say it's not. There's that central tableau of the elephant being attacked by tigers with the trucker hat on top, which, of course, speaks to the Trump "Make America Great Again" hats and it's on the pedestal—that kind of Duchampian stool. It talks about art, it talks about this moment, it talks about politics so directly and so efficiently in a way that I think Rama's work has done at various moments as well.



SLG: Rama was very self-consciously aligning herself with extremes and cultivating that in her work, art, and in her daily life – even talking in terms of madness. She says: "I am truly a pre-meditated lunatic. Mine is a trained folly." This is a chosen mode, not a clinical diagnosis. She's the type of figure who explores violence and destruction in her work because that is what is reflected in the world.

CT: For me, I see that reflected in Harrison's work so directly. She reflects the violence and extremism of American culture and of American stories, unapologetically. She really goes straight to the heart of the matter. Seven months prior to Trump's election she had a show of these Trump piñatas in Chelsea. She pulls things out of their normal context or out of our everyday experience and puts them in an art context, showing us that art is not going to redeem us.

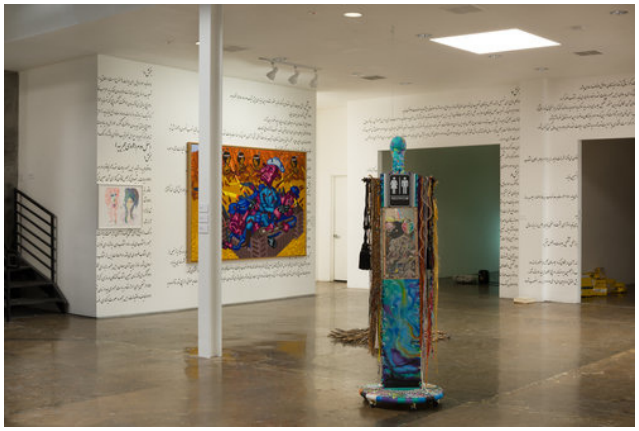
Rachel Harrison, *Before You Have To*, 2018
Wood, cement, polystyrene, acrylic, enamel, glass, figurines, plastic putty knife, mesh shorts, hat, log, and stool
47 x 47 x 33 inches (119.4 x 119.4 x 83.8 cm)
© Rachel Harrison; courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York
Photo: Tim Nighswander/IMAGING4ART

Some people want art to be apolitical and it never is. It's literally just as much of a target as any of us are. I mean to say, literally, her art is a target.

Rachel Harrison, Installation view, *More News: A Situation*, Greene Naftali, New York, 2016
© Rachel Harrison; courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York

AS: Could you elaborate?

CT: In 2017, I included a work of Harrison's in a group exhibition, *Reconstitution*, that I co-curated with Hamza Walker at LAXART. It was a re-staging of a show by Group Material called *Constitution*, which was mounted in 1987, at Temple University Art Gallery. For that original show they had written the words of the Constitution around the walls of the gallery and then staged this group of over 40 artists dealing with identity politics – a motley 80s culture war type show. At LAXART, we re-staged a version,



Installation image of *Reconstitution* at LAXART, Los Angeles, April 23 – May 27, 2017; courtesy LAXART

after Trump was elected, in the wake of his Muslim ban, and wrote the words of the Constitution around our gallery walls in Farsi, and showed 40 some artists, most of them first generation Americans.

Rachel Harrison, *Untitled*, 2011
© Rachel Harrison; courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York

The work we exhibited by Rachel Harrison, a drawing of Amy Winehouse, was damaged at the Wexner Center for the Arts in 2015. It was literally shot with a gun, when an ex-employee came to the museum and started taking aim at the art that was on-view – spray painting, defacing – and then, sadly, this man took his own life in the gallery. Harrison chose to continue to exhibit the work with the bullet holes in it. Her sculpture *Valid Like Salad* (2012) was also damaged during the incident and includes a reproduction of a drawing of Al Pacino as Scarface, so she's already dealing with subjects who have a kind of tragedy or violence to their stories.

Rachel Harrison, *Valid Like Salad*, 2012
© Rachel Harrison; courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York

For me Harrison's work really builds on those levels of inscription, which I find very American, but certainly Rama, in postwar Italy, is dealing with a similar confluence of political realities.

Rachel Harrison, *Valid Like Salad* (detail), 2012
© Rachel Harrison; courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York

SLG: I agree: Art will not redeem us! And it is a target, and it is a product of the moment and it reflects what is going on around it, and it is this form of critique that art practices. For Rama, so many things happened in the interim from 1945 to 1980 when Lea Vergine re-presented Rama's works in an important exhibition—the feminist revolution, the consciousness raising that happened through that, wars, the civil rights movement in America and punk. In a Dada tradition, her work embodies a lot and can be seen as a way of dealing with violence throughout history and in current events. At the same time, her work can be seen as a way of advancing potential and possibility by pushing at these limits that are constructed.

"SOME PEOPLE GO SHOPPING TO EASE THEIR ANXIETIES, I PREFER TO REMAIN SHUT UP AT HOME IN THE DARK." -CAROL RAMA

CT: I'm glad you went to the Dada space with Carol Rama because I think it's so clear with Rachel Harrison that she's making this kind of Dada work and certainly everything that goes with that cultural context which we are living through again. Fascism has returned, alive and well, in a way we haven't seen in decades, though it has always been there, and we are living through it again now. I think Harrison is making work reflecting on this entire moment, the past four years, the transition from Obama to Trump, which was so abrupt and disorienting.

"FASCISM HAS RETURNED, ALIVE AND WELL, IN A WAY WE HAVEN'T SEEN IN DECADES, THOUGH IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN THERE, AND WE ARE LIVING THROUGH IT AGAIN NOW."

I was curious about the titles of Rama's works that were on view at the gallery from the 70s, the *Arsenale* works. Do you find those works to have that militaristic thinking of an arsenal or armory, or do you think she's commenting on that?

SLG: Definitely she is. I think she's thinking about martial violence. She said, "Darkness shields me from what is happening every day. It helps me ward off negativity. It's a ploy that I reckon modifies my life a little. Some people go shopping to ease their anxieties, I prefer to remain shut up at home in the dark." It complicates a straight read of blackness as a tonality in the compositions and the associations of mass death and war and violence. She's experiencing or using darkness as a way to ward off negativity.

CT: There's an absolute "witchiness" in her

Carol Rama, *Arsenale*, 1971
Rubber and acrylic on canvas, 35 3/8 x 47 1/4 inches (90 x 120 cm)
© Archivio Carol Rama, Torino

work that is really powerful. Again, it goes back to what you're saying when those destructive or extremist views that can be a generative or productive space of creating. It's not all violence or exploitation or oppression. These can be generative spaces also.

AS: So then, what is madness, what is decorum?

CT: In thinking about the sculpture in the exhibition, Harrison's *Before You Have To*, is the message on the hat. It's a kind of warning. I find it saying a lot about toxic masculinity and the kind of gym shorts slung over the top, it's clear who the message is to. In my opinion. When you ask "What is decorum?" I would answer with another question, "What is democracy?" Is decorum wrapped up in ideas of democracy right now? And is that even working? Or did it ever work? Did we ever understand our political structures to be decorous? What's so interesting about these artists is how they push against that and really reveal that it has never quite been possible. We are living through uncomfortable realities.

WHEN YOU ASK "WHAT IS DECORUM?" I WOULD ANSWER WITH ANOTHER QUESTION, "WHAT IS DEMOCRACY?"

AS: Sarah, Catherine, could you speak about what each of you are working on currently?

SLG: I'm writing an essay on Dianna Molzan for a book that she's been working on for a while. Later today I'm going over to her studio to see a group of works that she's wrapping up to ship for a show that's happening soon in New York, so that's exciting. I sporadically publish books under the press, Pep Talk, and am beginning to put together a small publication of work by Jonathan Richman.

CT: I'm working on a survey exhibition of art and eco-feminism. Looking at four plus decades of women artists, and women identifying and also male artists, working in an eco-feminist, activist mode, thinking about the environment and how that's really changed, coming out of the anti-nuclear movement of the early 80s. I'm also curating a show with Josh Kline, dealing with some environmental kind of sci-fi themes, which we hope to show at LAXART this winter. And I'm trying to get back to Los Angeles!

AS: Thank you both, we wish you luck. ■

Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer is an art writer and curator in Los Angeles. She is the author of *Lee Lozano: Dropout Piece* (Afterall Books, 2014) and catalogue essays on artists including Judy Chicago, Stephen Kaltenbach, Luchita Hurtado, Channa Horwitz, Suellen Rocca, and Carol Rama. She is the editor of *Pep Talk* publications and runs The Finley Gallery, a non-commercial alternative art space.

Catherine Taft is the curator and deputy director of LAXART, a non-profit exhibition space in Los Angeles. As assistant curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, she co-organized *America is Hard to See* (2015), and at the Getty Research Institute, helped produce *Pacific Standard Time: Crosscurrents in L.A. Painting and Sculpture, 1950–1970* (2011) and *California Video* (2008). Her essays have appeared in such publications as Artforum, Art Review, and Modern Painters.

Allyson Spellacy is a partner at Fergus McCaffrey Gallery New York, Tokyo, St. Barth.