

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

## The Boston Globe

At MassArt, a painter's feminist homage and a DJ's sonic installation invite the public in

By Cate McQuaid | April 6, 2023

*Born decades apart in Boston, both May Stevens and Jace Clayton grew up in the area and make art with an activist edge*



May Stevens's "Alice in the Garden," 1988. Acrylic on canvas. © May Stevens. Courtesy of the estate of the artist and RYAN LEE Gallery, New York. MEL TAING/RYAN LEE GALLERY, NEW YORK

Activist artists come in all stripes, and two are now on view at MassArt Art Museum. Feminist artist May Stevens's large-hearted paintings make a fiery contrast to Jace Clayton's clever sonic installation art, which invites the community in to play. Born decades apart in Boston, the artists both grew up in the area. The shows were organized by the museum's artistic director Lisa Tung with curatorial fellow Michaela Blanc.

"May Stevens: My Mothers" spotlights monumental paintings from the 1980s Stevens made of her own mother, Alice Dick Stevens, and Marxist revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919), whom the artist considered her "spiritual mother." Stevens, who died in 2019 at 95, was a founding member of the art activist group the Guerrilla Girls, who are coming to speak at MassArt on April 26.

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM



May Stevens's "Forming the Fifth International," 1985. Acrylic on canvas. © May Stevens. Courtesy of the estate of the artist and RYAN LEE Gallery, New York. MEL TAING/RYAN LEE GALLERY, NEW YORK

A double portrait of Stevens's two mothers, "Forming the Fifth International," takes center stage. One is "an isolated Massachusetts housewife who did not finish elementary school," writes critic and associate editor at *Art in America* magazine Emily Watlington in the show's brochure. The other is an activist and social philosopher who critiqued capitalism, imperialist power structures, and the exploitation of workers.

Luxemburg is in black and white, as if lifted from an old photograph, looking directly at the viewer. The elderly Alice, painted in color, shares the lush green painting field with Luxemburg. She doesn't meet our gaze. Stevens puts the two on equal footing, making a woman largely forgotten to history as monumental as one whose ideas reverberate a century after her death — an equation Luxemburg would no doubt approve of.

Stevens depicts Alice often two, three, or four times in one work. Many images are set outside her mother's Framingham nursing home. Alice lived a hard life; her son, Stevens's younger brother Stacey, died of pneumonia as a teenager, and Alice was later committed to a state mental hospital. The painter portrayed

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

her father, Alice's husband, Ralph, a pipefitter, as a phallic-headed symbol of patriarchy in her "Big Daddy" series. (There's one small silkscreen here — cartoonish and in sync with Philip Guston's figures also made starting in the late 1960s.)

At the time of these portraits, Alice suffered from dementia — a fate Stevens, who died of Alzheimer's, also met. It's stunning to see the older woman, disconnected and not meeting our eyes but still insistently present, tenderly painted in suffragette white. The painter gives particular attention to her mother's hands, symbols of tender touch and hard work. As a cognitively impaired older woman, Alice was a member of a forsaken class. Presenting her again and again on a large scale grants her the honor society did not.



May Stevens's "Fore River," 1983. Acrylic on canvas. © May Stevens. Courtesy of the estate of the artist and RYAN LEE Gallery, New York. MEL TAING/RYAN LEE GALLERY, NEW YORK

The show concludes with "Fore River," in which two portraits of Alice bracket a shimmery image that emerged from studies of Berlin's Landwehr Canal, where Rosa Luxemburg's body was tossed after her assassination. Stevens often wove together unlikely pieces of history. Fore River is a Weymouth estuary; her father worked at the Fore River Shipyard. This painting's composition invites us in;

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

Alice's open hands echo the open waterway. But the history is dark for these mothers. Open yourself up to the river of life, and get thrown in.

Stevens used her expressive paintings to critique societal power structures; Clayton is a social practice artist. His playful interactive work brings people — and musical cultures — together. The artist, who started out as a DJ as an undergraduate at Harvard in the 1990s, uses algorithms to take apart and reconstruct familiar sounds, moving them through space.



May Stevens's "Fore River," 1983. Acrylic on canvas. © May Stevens. Courtesy of the estate of the artist and RYAN LEE Gallery, New York. MEL TAING/RYAN LEE GALLERY, NEW YORK

His exhibition, "They Are Part," revolves around a visually minimal, sonically rich installation. "40 Part Part" features black speakers on wooden stands in a circle, a direct quotation of Janet Cardiff's 2001 "The Forty Part Motet." Cardiff used the speakers to separate out the voices of the Salisbury Cathedral Choir singing a 16th-century Thomas Tallis piece. Viewers could wander the installation as if surrounded by the choir itself, listening from different vantage points.

Clayton's update invites visitors to play audio stored on their own devices, which he scrambles algorithmically. That twist — my own soundtrack driving the art

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

— makes the experience viscerally personal. The sound unfolds, or chitters and stutters, bouncing and chasing itself around the circle. For me, hearing Clayton’s riff on “Pachelbel’s Canon” was at once upsetting and enticing; it was like a familiar picture breaking up kaleidoscopically. Then, an audio of a conversation I’d had with friends took on rhythm and consonance that turned it into music.

The artist uses digital means to examine and shake up cultural tropes. He crafted “Sufi Plug Ins” after realizing that computer programs generally use Western musical scales and tones. The software is on instruments available for playing, including synthesizers tuned to Arabic scales. Play, listen, and learn.

Continuing the community engagement, Clayton composes music based on the repertoires of local music groups, and stages concerts. On April 20, the Boston Community Choir will perform their own program of gospel music, and a piece Clayton has written for them.

Clayton and Stevens have little in common, but both apply their ingenuity and craft to inviting the unseen in and making the world more welcoming. In the free museum of a public art school, that’s especially apt.

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

## Art in America

### May Stevens, Ardent Feminist and Founding Guerrilla Girls Member, Insisted That All Painting Is Political

By Emily Watlington | April 14, 2021



May Stevens: Soho Women Artists, 1977-78, acrylic on canvas, 78 by 144 inches.  
© May Stevens. Collection National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC.. Image courtesy Estate of May Stevens and Ryan Lee Gallery, New York.

In 1967 May Stevens began work on her “Big Daddy” series, a group of paintings made after failed attempts to educate her working-class, politically conservative father, whom she saw as a pro-war, racist, and misogynistic bigot. She suspected that he aired his intolerant views only in the privacy of his own home. But the artist had more personal reasons to resent her father: when her younger brother died of pneumonia at 15, he was unsupportive of his grieving wife, who was later committed to a state mental hospital. This gave Stevens the basis to use her father as a symbol of the American patriarchy, and exemplifies her lifelong commitment to melding the personal with the political.

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

The “Big Daddy” paintings, which she continued to produce through 1976, are flat, with blue backgrounds, and depict a disgusting white man with a phallic-shaped head amid American flags and military and police uniforms (a nod to his support of the Vietnam war). When Big Daddy Paper Doll (1970), a painting showing her male protagonist with all his outfits, was on view at Ryan Lee in 2017 and visible from the High Line, Holland Cotter of the New York Times called it “the most interesting, no-nonsense piece of political art I’ve seen in Chelsea this year.”

Stevens once wrote that her father “never imagined that lifting me out of his class would produce in me an allegiance to his class that he did not feel ... the books and the art that raise you from one class to another are indeed capable of providing a better life—and also a means of critiquing that life.” She dedicated her life to using art for political critique, and in fact saw all art as political. Every work, she wrote in *Heresies*, a feminist journal, in 1979, “can be placed somewhere along a political spectrum.” She believed work that did not make its politics plain silently gave consent to the status quo.



View of Big Daddy Paper Doll on view in the 2017 exhibition “May Stevens: Alice in the Garden” at Ryan Lee Gallery, New York and visible from the High Line.

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

An American artist who worked in series of several years' length, many of them devoted to political figures, Stevens often depicted historic and current events through a feminist, Marxist, or anti-racist lens, at the same time probing the politics of her family and peers. Her style often changed rather drastically over the seventy years she was active—"consistency is something I gave up long ago," she said in a 1978 lecture at the College Art Association's annual conference. But no matter the look, "the politics are obvious," as Lucy R. Lippard put it in the catalogue for Stevens's current retrospective at SITE Santa Fe, which Lippard curated with Brandee Caoba, Stevens's former studio assistant and an independent curator. (Lippard met Stevens in 1968, and they formed a lifelong bond over politics, feminism, and art. Stevens even followed Lippard to New Mexico, where the artist was based until her death in 2019.)



May Stevens in her SoHo studio with *The Artist's Studio (After Courbet)*, 1974.  
Photo Joyce Ravid. Courtesy Ryan Lee Gallery, New York.

Stevens was born to a working-class family outside Boston, graduated from the Massachusetts College of Art and Design in 1946, and taught at the School of Visual Arts in New York for 35 years. She was a founding member of the Guerrilla Girls, a feminist art collective whose anonymous members wear gorilla masks as they advocate for gender parity in the art world.

Stevens's first solo exhibition, at Roko Gallery in New York in 1964, evinced early on her firm belief that politics and painting were one and the same. The

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

series she debuted, titled “Freedom Riders,” depicted civil rights activists who, two years earlier, had ridden buses into segregated Southern states to protest their failure to enforce the Supreme Court ruling that deemed segregated buses unconstitutional. Later, they rode down to help register Black voters. Borrowing compositional cues from Honoré Daumier’s Third Class Railway Carriage (1864), Stevens’s painting Freedom Riders (1963) shows several blurry faces in black, white, and gray. (In 2005, the image became a U.S. postage stamp.)

Stevens was not herself a Freedom Rider; she based her images on those from newspapers and television. But that didn’t mean Stevens didn’t get involved in other ways. She had attended, and been deeply moved by, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech in Washington, D.C., with her husband, Lithuanian painter Rudolf Baranik. Baranik wrote an introduction to the show’s catalogue praising the Freedom Rider’s efforts, and King himself signed the statement (many have mistakenly attributed the catalogue essay to the Reverend).



May Stevens: Artemisia Gentileschi,  
1974, oil on canvas, 108 by 63 inches.  
© May Stevens. Courtesy Estate of May  
Stevens and Ryan Lee Gallery, New York.

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

For Stevens, art and activism went hand-in-hand, and she was one of few white artists to confront the civil rights movement head-on. In 1976, after the Vietnam War ended and Stevens completed her “Big Daddy” series, she painted a nine-foot, full-body, all-blue portrait of Artemisia Gentileschi, a female Baroque painter. She had been inspired by Linda Nochlin’s 1971 essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?,” which praised Gentileschi’s work. At the time, Gentileschi was not well-known, and Stevens made sure Gentileschi’s contributions to the discipline would not be forgotten. Stevens’s portrait hung in abstract painter Ilise Greenstein’s Sister Chapel at the Rowan University Art Gallery in New Jersey from 1974 to 1978. The installation featured eleven women painters’ nine-foot portraits of their role models—Alice Neel, for example, painted activist Bella Abzug—standing in a circle.

The Gentileschi work was part of Stevens’s series paying homage to the contributions of women. The paintings are monumental in scale and ambition, history paintings for a new era. *SoHo Women Artists* (1978), which is nearly 12 feet wide, depicts artists Harmony Hammond, Joyce Kozloff, Marty Pottenger, Louise Bourgeois, Sarah Charlesworth, and Miriam Schapiro, alongside Lippard and Signora d’Apolito, who owned a SoHo bakery that the downtown women frequented. Stevens’s Gentileschi painting is visible in the blue background, and Bourgeois—wearing one of her own pieces—stands out among the cluster of figures. One year earlier, many of these women convened in Stevens’s loft to paste up the first issue of the influential journal *Heresies*, which ran until 1993.



May Stevens: Rosa Luxemburg Attends the Second International, 1987, acrylic on canvas, 79 by 127 ¼ inches. © May Stevens. Courtesy Estate of May Stevens and Ryan Lee Gallery, New York.

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

From 1976 to 1990, Stevens dedicated her history paintings to Rosa Luxemburg (1871–1919), the Polish-born Marxist philosopher and activist, and returned to her Xerox-like style. In the ten-and-a-half-foot-wide *Rosa Luxemburg Attends the Second International* (1987), some two dozen white men in suits gaze at the viewer, placing the viewer in Luxemburg's shoes, portraying her alienation: she was often the only woman in the room. The title alludes to the Second International Congress in Stuttgart, at which Luxemburg bravely demanded that Socialist parties around the world take a staunch anti-war stance.

Stevens chose a similar composition for *The Murderers of Rosa Luxemburg* (1986), which recalls Luxemburg's 1919 killing, along with fellow revolutionary Karl Liebknecht, by far-right German soldiers. Other paintings in the series show the canal where Luxemburg's body was tossed and streets filled with mourners. Stevens's celebration of the revolutionary follows artistic homages by Käthe Kollwitz, Max Beckmann, George Grosz, and Margarethe von Trotta, among others, and the dark swaths with pewter patinas in several of the works create reflective surfaces that prompt the viewer to consider the here and now, even when confronted with historic imagery.



May Stevens: *Rosa Luxemburg Attends the Second International*, 1987, acrylic on canvas, 79 by 127 ¼ inches.

© May Stevens. Courtesy Estate of May Stevens and Ryan Lee Gallery, New York.

In these paintings, Luxemburg is occasionally accompanied by Stevens's mother, Alice, an isolated Massachusetts housewife who did not finish elementary school. The juxtaposition speaks to the effects of class on women's rights, and

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

demonstrates as well that feminist progress is far from linear. Forming the Fifth International (1985), for example, shows Alice sitting on a chair rendered in color; Luxemburg appears on a bench in black-and-white. Though sharing the canvas and the same green background, they are painted from separate photographs, depicted as if convening across time and space. The painting's title alludes to the fifth in a series of Socialist gatherings; it has yet to take place, but adherents of the movement called for it for nearly a century.

Critic John Garvey wrote that “many of Stevens’ paintings ... are intended to provoke but, even when they do, they are almost always beautiful. Most artists who focus on shock and outrage produce little of beauty...” That was certainly the case with Conceptualists like Hans Haacke and Adrian Piper, who relied on less aestheticized means to tackle racism, sexism, and class disparities. Stevens’s paintings aren’t beautiful in a sublime sense, but they are certainly moving, and one wonders if Conceptualist work influenced her Xerox-like interpretation. She made figurative paintings at a time when it was highly unfashionable, and her work was frequently written off. When Cotter saw the Luxemburg paintings in 1994, he complained that the works were “too specifically political” (though he praised them highly in 2017).



May Stevens: But That Was In Another Country, 1990, acrylic on canvas, 84 by 135 inches. © May Stevens. Courtesy Estate of May Stevens and Ryan Lee Gallery, New York.

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

In 1994 Stevens and Baranik relocated to Taos, New Mexico, following Lippard, Harmony Hammond, and Sabra Moore—“fellow Heretics,” as Lippard called the group. Stevens was in her 70s at the time, and began painting huge, unstretched watery landscapes. Though somewhat more peaceful than her earlier political works, they’re still reminiscent of her haunting painting of Berlin’s Landwehr Canal, where Luxemburg’s body was thrown. The landscapes in her 1990–91 “Women, Words, Water” series embody the words of women writers like Virginia Woolf and Julia Kristeva. Integrated into the landscape, the quotations, inscribed with metallic paints, are largely illegible.



May Stevens Voices, 1983, acrylic on canvas, 79 by 118 inches. © May Stevens. Private Collection, promised gift to the Minneapolis Institute of Art. Image courtesy Estate of May Stevens and Ryan Lee Gallery, New York.

In the 1990s Stevens painted herself, right around the time she began to experience dementia. In a 1995 lecture at the University of Southern California, she spoke of the self-portrait of her swimming, saying, “I want to celebrate the Old body, I want to show the beauty of—and the fear and dread it generates—the female body as it ages and changes, sags, thins and thickens. This to me is a sacred body.” It is fitting that Stevens finally featured in a series of work dedicated to feminist heroes, since, for many, she was one herself. Here, Stevens is not a martyr, the way Luxemburg was, or an activist, the way her Guerrilla Girls colleagues were. Instead, she spotlighted herself in a vulnerable state not often exposed in a patriarchal society.

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

# ARTFORUM

## PASSAGES: MAY STEVENS

By Tom Burr | March 2020



*May Stevens, A Life, 1984, acrylic on canvas, 78 × 120". From the series "Ordinary/Extraordinary," 1976–84. © The Estate of May Stevens*

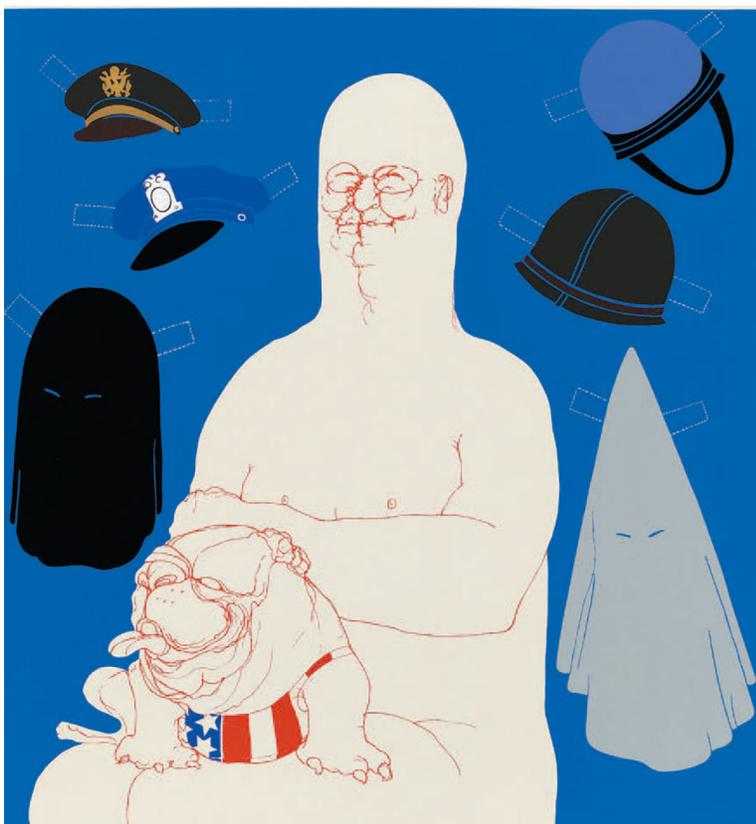
I MET MAY STEVENS in the fall of 1983, when I enrolled in her survey class, Women in the Arts, at the School of Visual Arts in New York. I had made it through the tedium of the school's conventionally designed foundation-year curriculum and into the second year of my degree program, when it was finally possible to take the many electives offered by the extraordinary instructors then teaching there. SVA was an early adopter of the adjunct-instructor model, meaning the school offered a representative sampling of the New York art world—for better and for worse. Painting was the dominant practice, and, according to many professors and their syllabi, men were the dominant practitioners. But because the program strove to be a microcosm of the increasingly market-

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

driven downtown art scene (SVA itself was, and is, a for-profit institution), other positions and trajectories were given voices in the curricula. One of those voices belonged to May Stevens, who taught both a painting studio and what would prove to be the historically significant course in which I found myself during the academic year of 1983–84.

Memory is stubborn. We immediately edit out myriad details, entire chunks of experience. Other pieces fall by the wayside with time. At its best, remembering is a collective act. To that end, when asked to write about my recollections of May, I rekindled a dialogue with Andrea Egert, née Rosenthal, a fellow student and close friend who was my intellectual and emotional companion through the mind-altering journey that was *Women in the Arts*. (Andrea is now a singer-songwriter as well as a psychotherapist; her analytic sensitivities guided the process of thinking back thirty-five years.)



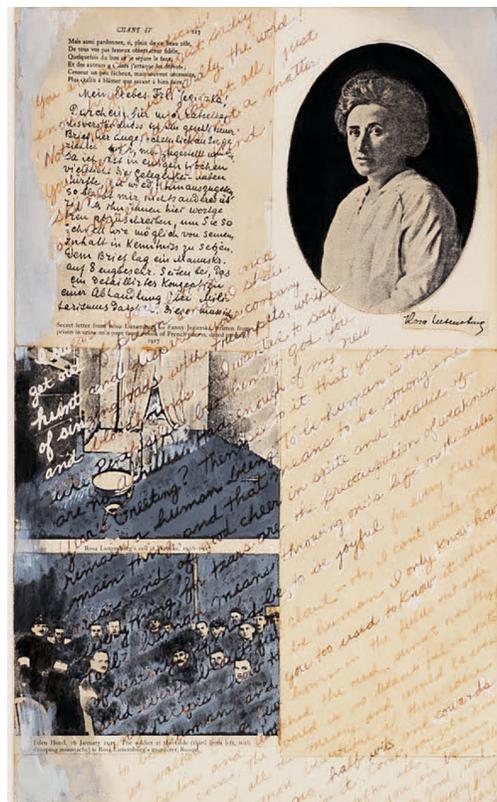
*May Stevens, Big Daddy with Hats, 1971, silk screen on paper, 26 × 25 1/4".  
From the series "Big Daddy," 1967–76. © The Estate of May Stevens.*

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

Together, Andrea and I began to excavate our individual and shared thoughts and piece together moments of that year bit by bit. May's reading list included Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), with Lucy Lippard's *From the Center* (1976) providing the course's structural spine. Over the two semesters, a staggering roster of feminist art practitioners visited: Mary Kelly, Barbara Kruger, Ana Mendieta, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Mimi Smith, Nancy Spero. I'm sure there were others as well. May wanted to pass on to her students the structure of collectivity and a resistance to isolation. She had been integral to the Carnival Knowledge collective and the Heresies collective and journal, and she discussed their formation at length and the role they played in their political moments. It was a heady time, 1983 into 1984, and a crossroads for feminist artistic positions that had emerged in the '60s and early '70s, with their grounding in Marxist thought and the interplay between gender and labor, and the more recent formations of feminist thinking and practice, which merged psychoanalysis, media representation, and direct involvement and confrontation with an awareness of the burgeoning art market. The moment seemed to demand a choice: With which feminist stance would you align yourself? May gave us the tools to parse the nodes of a more expansive and inclusive feminist art production and offered connective tissue between potentially oppositional points, something to which I remain deeply indebted.

**May gave us the tools to parse the nodes of a more expansive and inclusive feminist art production and offered connective tissue between potentially oppositional points.**



May Stevens, *Tribute to Rosa Luxemburg*, 1976, collage, photostat, acrylic, and ink on paper, 16 1/2 × 10". From the series "Ordinary/Extraordinary," 1976–84. © The Estate of May Stevens.

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

I recall very well May's attention to the class, her keen intelligence and engagement, and her candid references to her own personal and political self-transformation. The studio work she was absorbed in during that period hinged on the false dichotomy between the personal and political realms—or, as she suggested in the title of a series that spanned the '70s and '80s, the "Ordinary/Extraordinary." Sometime during our year together, she invited the class to her SoHo loft to view a group of large-scale canvases that focused on her mother, Alice. We had seen Alice before in an earlier part of the series, juxtaposed and conflated with the figure of Rosa Luxemburg, but in the works we saw that day, she was alone, as far as I can remember. Her mother's hands were central, gesticulating repetitively across the paintings; May explained to the group that her mother now had dementia. After the visit, May and I rode down in the elevator alone together. She asked me what I thought of the work I had just seen, and in a flush of youthful awkwardness, I blurted out something that seemed to fall flat, something not at all like what I wanted to say, though I'm not sure I knew what I wanted to say. Language escaped me, silence took over the elevator, and I felt her vague judgment and kindness combined. Only now can I imagine the vulnerability she probably also felt that day, exposing work rife with personal details and political implications to a group of young students; I think the awkwardness was not mine alone.

At the beginning of our recent dialogue, Andrea remarked on one of the final statements in Holland Cotter's *New York Times* obituary: "She leaves no immediate survivors." We both sensed the huge inadequacy of that idea, with the depth of isolation it suggests. Understood within the frame of May's own chosen mode of collectivity, she leaves, it's clear, a multitude of immediate survivors—so many people over several generations who have been intimately shaped and altered by her life's work and vision.

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

## ARTFORUM

May Stevens (1924 - 2019)

by Lucy Lippard | March, 2020



May Stevens in her studio, New York, 1974. Photo: Joyce Ravid. © The Estate of May Stevens.

IN 1968, I moved to a loft in SoHo around the corner from where May Stevens and her husband, the Lithuanian-born painter Rudolf Baranik, lived with their dog, Sparta. We became friends and political allies. They were way ahead of me, having been deeply committed to the civil-rights movement and, later, active participants of the Angry Arts Week and cofounders of Artists and Writers Protest Against the War in Vietnam. Rudolf, a self-defined “socialist-formalist,” was the dedicated activist and strategist. May was involved but less active until the feminist art movement hit New York in 1970. Her “political Pop” series “Big Daddy,” 1967–76, about her beloved but bigoted father, combined the issues. And she was an enthusiastic cofounder of *Heresies: A Feminist Publication of Art and Politics*. When the first issue was going to press in early 1977, we pasted it up in her walk-up loft on Wooster Street, with Rudolf running in and out and up and down for coffee and supplies. In a later issue of *Heresies*, she wrote, “A socialist and feminist analysis of culture must be as careful as it is angry—fierce and responsible.” May went on to join the Guerrilla Girls in the mid-1980s.

In early 1977, Leon Golub and Nancy Spero gave me a biography of Rosa Luxemburg to read while I was in the hospital. I passed it on to May, and the socialist hero became her focus, leading to the 1980 artist’s book and feminist classic *Ordinary/Extraordinary*—

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM



Left: May Stevens, *Big Daddy with Hats*, 1971, silk screen on paper, 26 x 25 1/4 inches.  
Right: May Stevens, *Tribute to Rosa Luxemburg*, 1976, collage photostat, acrylic and ink on paper, 16 1/2 x 10 inches

the title of which she lent to an impressive series of works about the lives of her own mother and Rosa made over the course of the next decade. In 1984, she and Rudolf assembled a collection of American art to give to Cuba when we went to the Havana Biennial, and they helped organize the transformation of a block of West Broadway into La Verdadera Avenida de las Americas (The Real Avenue of the Americas) as part of “Artists Call Against US Intervention in Central America.”

May was a great reader, and a poet and writer with an original voice. She also taught for decades at the School of Visual Arts. Many of her students remained friends for life. She hated pretension. She was inquisitive, outspoken, and sometimes tactless—in which case, Rudolf would say, “That’s not the real May.” She was publicly tough but privately vulnerable, given the tragedies she had survived—her young brother’s death, her mother’s deteriorating mental health, her son Steven’s suicide in 1981. After, his parents wore only black or white.

**May was a great reader, and a poet and writer with an original voice.**

Having been raised next to a river near the sea, she loved swimming and water. When they visited me in Maine in the summers, Rudolf would row my little dinghy into Sagadahoc Bay, where, years later, May and I deposited some of his ashes. She also loved language, and in the '90s began painting landscapes with “seas of words” and a woman in a rowboat, inspired by an old photo of filmmaker Joan Braderman’s mother and a little Mexican folk-art piece I had

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM



May Stevens, *A Life*, 1984, acrylic on canvas, 78 x 120 inches

given her of two *calaveras* in a clay rowboat.

Around 1993, I moved to the village of Galisteo, New Mexico, where fellow Heretic Harmony Hammond was already ensconced. Another *Heresies* stalwart, Sabra Moore, settled a couple of hours away in Abiquiu, and a few years later, May and Rudolf landed in Eldorado, fifteen minutes north of Galisteo. Rudolf died during a snowstorm in 1998. They had been married for fifty years. May became an honorary member of the Galisteo Gals (Harmony Hammond, Nancy Holt, and myself), and we celebrated birthdays and holidays together for years.

Although May was vain, in her eighties she had friends photograph her in the nude. Around 2012, she began to display signs of confusion, and when she forgot the annual Christmas dinner at my house, she gave me power of attorney. She stopped making her own art as her health deteriorated. Sadly, she spent her last years in the memory ward at Kingston Residence in Santa Fe. When she died on December 9, 2019, we had been friends for more than half a century. May insisted that Violeta Parra's "*Gracias a la vida*" (Thanks to Life) be played at Rudolf's memorials. We will do the same at hers.

*Lucy R. Lippard is a cultural critic based in Galisteo, NM, and the author of twenty-five books on contemporary art, place, and local history.*

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

## The New York Times

### May Stevens, Who Turned Activism Into Art, Is Dead at 95

Holland Cotter | December 29, 2019



The artist May Stevens in her studio in SoHo in 1974. She was part of a generation of artists who saw art as an instrument of progressive politics and personal liberation. Credit Joyce Ravid/Ryan Lee Gallery

May Stevens, a painter who for more than 60 years devoted her art to political causes like the civil rights, antiwar and feminist movements, died on Dec. 9 in Santa Fe, N.M. She was 95.

The Ryan Lee gallery, which represented her in New York, said the cause was Alzheimer's disease. She died at an assisted-living and memory-loss facility.

Ms. Stevens was part of a generation of activist artists that also included her husband, Rudolf Baranik, and their close friends Leon Golub and Nancy Spero. Through the rise of Minimalism and Conceptualism, these artists adhered to an older tradition of expressive painting, and to a belief in the value of art as an instrument of progressive politics and personal liberation.

"The reason I'm an artist," she said in an interview with the art historian Patricia Hills for the 2005 book "May Stevens," "is because it's a place where you can be totally free. No one is going to prevent me from doing political work when I want to, and no one is going to make me do it if I don't want to."

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

Ms. Stevens came from a working-class family, and she understood early that class as a shaping force often went unspoken of both in art history and in the liberation movements in which she would be immersed.

“When we think back to the past and our ancestry — historically where people have come from — we always think of the knights and ladies, and not necessarily those who tilled the soil and turned the earth, which is where most of us come from,” she told Ms. Hills.



Ms. Stevens's paintings and prints titled "Freedom Riders" (1963) were inspired by the civil rights activists who traveled the segregated South registering black voters. Credit Ryan Lee Gallery

May Stevens was born in Dorchester, Mass., on June 9, 1924, and grew up in nearby Quincy, south of Boston. Her father, Ralph, worked as a pipe fitter in the Bethlehem Steel shipyards in Quincy. Her mother, Alice Dick Stevens, was a homemaker. Her younger brother, Stacey, died of pneumonia when Ms. Stevens was 17.

After graduating from the Massachusetts School of Art (now the Massachusetts College of Art and Design) in 1946, Ms. Stevens moved to New York City to study at the Art Students League. There she met Mr. Baranik, a Jewish immigrant from Lithuania; they married in 1948. The couple had one child, a son, Steven, also an artist, who died at 32 in 1981, a suicide.

Ms. Stevens's lifelong pattern of producing work in thematic series began in 1963 with a solo exhibition, at the Roko Gallery in Manhattan, of paintings and prints titled "Freedom Riders," inspired by the civil rights activists who traveled the segregated South registering black voters. Much of that work was based on images lifted from newspapers and television.

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

Her opposition to the war in Vietnam inspired her best-known body of paintings, the “Big Daddy” series. Its central image, of a grim, phallic-headed, white-skinned man, was based on an early portrait she had made of her politically conservative father, whom she described as pro-war, racist and misogynistic. Done in a crisp Pop style, his figure represents an attitude of hostility toward difference that she saw as embedded in patriarchal American culture.



Ms. Stevens's opposition to the war in Vietnam inspired her best-known body of paintings, the “Big Daddy” series. Credit Justin T. Gellerson for The New York Times

Ms. Stevens became increasingly involved in the feminist movement in the 1970s. Along with several artists and writers — including Mary Beth Edelson, Harmony Hammond, Joyce Kozloff, Lucy Lippard, Mary Miss and Miriam Schapiro — she was a founder of the Heresies Collective, which published the influential journal *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics*, to which she contributed essays.

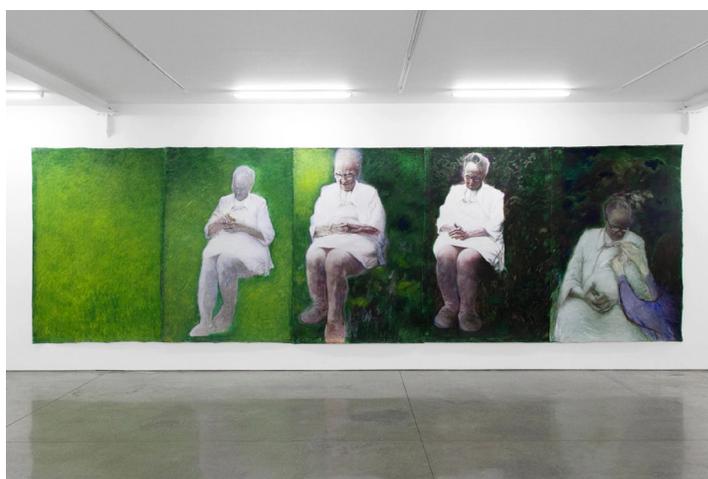
From 1976 to 1978 she produced a painting series titled “Ordinary/Extraordinary,” which paired portraits of her Irish-American mother, whose spirit she felt had been crushed by marriage, with images of the Polish-German Marxist revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg, who was killed for her social beliefs and whom Ms. Stevens referred to as her “spiritual mother.”

Ms. Stevens said that her aim in this series was to erase the idea that one woman's public struggles were of greater value than another's private ones.

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

In her interview with Ms. Hills, she said of her depictions of her mother: “For me, she’s not just a single person, because we all know this person. We all know her, and we may become her, as aging is a problem, as illness is a problem, as being a woman who does not fulfill herself is a problem.”



In “Alice in the Garden” (1988-89), Ms. Stevens depicted her elderly mother alone, afflicted with dementia and confined to a nursing home — as Ms. Stevens herself would eventually be. Credit Ryan Lee Gallery

In “Alice in the Garden,” a later five-panel painting that suggests a secular altarpiece, she depicted her elderly mother alone, afflicted with dementia and confined to a nursing home — as Ms. Stevens herself would eventually be.

Her late works, from the 1990s and early 2000s, were done after Mr. Baranik’s death in 1998. Her last major body of work consists mostly of seascapes and river scenes, with no figures but with quotations from female writers woven into the natural panorama and images of disembodied hands pouring ashes into flowing water.

In 1999, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, had a retrospective of Ms. Stevens’s work, the first it had ever devoted to a living woman artist. In 2006, she was the subject of a solo exhibition that opened at the Minneapolis Institute of Art and that traveled to the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington.

Two of her “Big Daddy” paintings are featured in the current reinstallation of the Museum of Modern Art’s permanent collection galleries. Another from the series is in the traveling exhibition “Artists Respond: American Art and the Vietnam War, 1965-1975,” organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum and on view at the Minneapolis Institute through Jan. 5. A show of her Rosa Luxemburg series recently closed at Ryan Lee.

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM



Ms. Stevens in front of one of her “Big Daddy” paintings in about 1976. Credit Dana Michener, via Ryan Lee Gallery

Before her move to New Mexico with Mr. Baranik in 1996, Ms. Stevens taught at the School of Visual Arts in New York for 35 years. In 2001, she was the recipient of the College Art Association’s Distinguished Artist Award for Lifetime Achievement.

She leaves no immediate survivors.

Ms. Stevens once said of her lifetime of art and activism: “The idea was to make your own life by taking action and going beyond ordinary existence. Just earning a living, not living a mental life, and not trying to change things was a life that was frightening to me. You become human only when you make this great struggle for realizing your life and making it count.”

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

## The New York Times

### The New MoMA Is Here. Get Ready for Change.

The expanded Museum of Modern Art reopens this month, putting Picasso and Monet next to more recent, diverse artists. Will audiences embrace its new vision?

October 3 2019

by Jason Farago



MoMA's entrance on West 53rd Street features a distinctive new awning. Diller Scofidio + Renfro also eliminated a gallery to create a double-height foyer. Credit: Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

Picasso and Braque were looking a little forlorn: unsure of their new home, unsure of their new acquaintances.

It was early September, six anxious weeks from the reopening of the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan. After three years of piecemeal renovations, the museum had shut its doors for the summer, preparing for a top-to-bottom rehang of the world's finest collection of modern and contemporary art, with about 47,000 additional square feet to play with.

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

## The Most Fragile Masterpiece

One day this summer I watched as Christophe Cherix, the chief curator of drawings and prints, and his colleague Esther Adler installed a small, staggering new acquisition that would never have had a chance in the “Art Bay.”

On a pair of tables, the curators gently flipped sheets from the “Prison Notebook” of Ibrahim el-Salahi, a Sudanese artist who, in 1975, was wrongfully implicated in an antigovernment coup. Shortly after his release from jail, Mr. el-Salahi filled a notebook with drawings of gates, nooses and his own chest crisscrossed with jail bars.

“This was, for him, maybe the most cherished possession,” Mr. Cherix said. “A very tiny sketchbook.” The museum bought it two years ago; it has never shown it before, and won’t again for a while, because of the fragility of works on paper.

Now the notebook anchors an entire gallery, called “War Within, War Without,” orbiting around themes of violence and internal exile around the 1970s. Half the works here, including a gouache by the feminist artist May Stevens and a self-portrait by the African-American shape-shifter David Hammons, were acquired in the past four years. All these new pieces, said Mr. Cherix, typify “a generation trying to redefine what art can be in a moment when art is not heroic anymore.”

Sarah Suzuki, a drawings curator overseeing the museum’s reopening, observed that, before, “it might have been hard to see how — I don’t know, Polish posters — could fit into the unidirectional narrative. And this actually opens it up. It’s like, you know what? Let’s do those Polish posters! Let’s not be so wrapped up in where it fits into our big scheme.”

The abbreviated runs in these galleries have encouraged curators to delve into areas MoMA often neglected, including prewar folk art and art from 1940s Harlem.

Rest assured, MoMA’s most renowned objects — Monet’s “Water Lilies,” Picasso’s “Demoiselles” — will surely not disappear.

“I like to say we’re not in the business of breaking hearts,” said Ms. Suzuki, who did a year’s worth of shifts at the museum’s information desk, learning which artworks the public wanted to see. (The most requested is Warhol’s “Campbell’s Soup Cans,” from 1962, though more imperative than any artwork is the location of the bathrooms.)

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

## HARD CRACKERS

Chronicles of Everyday Life



### **The Ordinary/Extraordinary May Stevens**

by John Garvey

August 23, 2018

May Stevens was born in 1924 and, at the age of 94, lives in New Mexico. She has been, for most of her life, an artist. For the last seven decades, she's been a political artist. I don't know if she still creates art for public viewing. I hope so but that may be an unfair expectation.

As far as I can remember, I had never heard of May Stevens before a couple of months ago. I wish that I had. In this essay, I hope to explore Stevens' life and work and the potential that it provides for us to think differently about art and its relationship to politics.[i]

May Stevens is no ordinary artist. The distinction I want to emphasize is not one based on her imagination or skill. Stevens has more than her share of both imagination and skill. But, if truth be known, so do many other artists who remain ordinary—by which I mean that they remain within the bounds of what artists are supposed to do. Nor do I mean to suggest that she is a scandalous artist—one who wants to shock and outrage. There are many of Stevens' paintings that are intended to provoke but, even when they do, they are almost always beautiful. Most artists who focus on shock and outrage produce little of beauty and, in their own ways, remain quite ordinary.

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

## Growing Up

But, now let me turn the tables on myself. My best guess is that Stevens herself would all but insist on her claim to be ordinary—by which, among other things, she would want to claim her place among all of the other ordinary people of the world. Stevens grew up in Quincy, Massachusetts just south of Boston. Her father worked as a pipefitter at the Bethlehem Steel Shipyard while her mother stayed at home to care for May and her younger brother. She loved spending time near the water:

*As children in the summer, we spent all day, every day, at a little beach a block from my home. It wasn't an elegant sandy beach. It was pebbly. But you got used to that. There were broken down piers where small boats would be repaired, and many of those piers were falling apart. I'd go out on the pier, where you shouldn't go because the timber whanging into the water. It was really kind of risky.*

*Unlike today, grade school children were on their own. There were no lifeguards, and we taught each other to swim. There were two rafts for children in close and two rafts further out for adults. Neighborhood people came and swam there. They would bring big towels and lie on the beach. I would go up on the sidewalk and lie down without a towel. I would bake in the sun, stand up all covered with grime from the sidewalk, and go back in the water. All day long I did that.*

Her brother, one year younger, had not been well for most of his childhood and he died when May was 16. Not surprisingly, his death turned the family upside down. It appears that her mother never really recovered—whatever recovered might mean in such a situation.

## Paris

May had always been good in art at school. So she enrolled in and graduated from the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston in 1947 and, after moving to New York, met and soon married another artist, Rudolf Baranik.<sup>[ii]</sup> They remained married until he died in 1998. After their marriage, they almost immediately went to Paris where he studied under the GI Bill. He had the opportunity to pursue formal training but she did not; nonetheless, she also painted and had some opportunities to present her work. In one case, one of her shows was praised but one painting in it was criticized. Years later, Stevens recalled her response:

*The review I remember best was in the New York Herald Tribune International edition. The reviewer, Peter Karegeannes, said that it was a fine show but there was one painting which was scarred or marred by its title. That painting was called *The Martinsville Seven*, and represented seven black men who had been accused of rape in the American South.*

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

*[iii] It was a small horizontal painting, simplified and semiabstract. They were wearing white T-shirts and blue jeans, and they were just lined up—seven black men. I don't know where it is now. My reaction was: nobody tells me what to paint. The reason I'm an artist is because it's a place where you can be totally free. No one is going to prevent me from doing political work when I want to, and no one is going to make me do it, if I don't want to. I am free in this one area of my life. I'm totally free. That's why I'm here. I can be myself and do what I want to do.*

*(Unfortunately, I have not been able to find a digital copy of the Martinsville Seven painting to include in this essay).*

In the art criticism of the time,<sup>[iv]</sup> politics had been banned from art and de-politicized art, good or bad, was in vogue. It's clear that Stevens refused to bend to the prevailing winds.

## Teaching in New York

In 1951, May and Rudolf returned to New York and she became a public high school art teacher for the next nine years. At the beginning, when she taught at Long Island City High School in Queens, she had her hands full. She sought out other teachers for help:

The best person I spoke to was Lucille, who was a black woman who taught science. She was a very sensible person, not flamboyant, but smart. I told her, "I'm scared of the kids. I don't know what to do. I don't feel I have control." Then I told her about my life, how I'd come back from Paris where I'd been for three years. How I had a child born in France and had exhibitions at the Salon des Jeunes Peintres, the Salon d'Automne, and the Salon des Femmes Peintres.<sup>[v]</sup> When I finished, she said, "You know what you have to do? Tell the students who you are." Wasn't that brilliant? So I went into the classroom, and I told them. And it made a difference. I became a real person to them rather than just an ineffectual teacher.

Later, she taught for more than thirty years at the School of Visual Arts, a college in Manhattan.

## Civil Rights

From early on, Stevens was an active supporter of the Civil Rights and black liberation movements. In 1963, she produced a series of paintings titled Freedom Riders (for which Martin Luther King, Jr. signed the catalog introduction prepared by Baranik). It read:

*The men and women who rode the freedom buses through Alabama, who walked in*

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

*Montgomery, who knelt in prayer in Albany, who hold hands (sic) and sing We Shall Overcome Some Day in the face of hostile mobs—their acts cry out for songs to be sung about them and pictures to be painted of them.*



*Freedom Riders, 1963*

In a way that would become characteristic of her work over time, she intentionally echoed the topics and approaches of earlier artists:

*I always thought that Freedom Riders had a particularly strong composition. It reminded me of Daumier's Third Class Railway Carriage, where you see people on the inside of a bus or carriage, set against brightly lit rectangles of windows.*



*Daumier, Third Class Railway Carriage, 1864.*

A couple of years later, after going to the viewing of the murdered Malcolm X in Harlem, she did a painting of his head.

# RYAN LEE

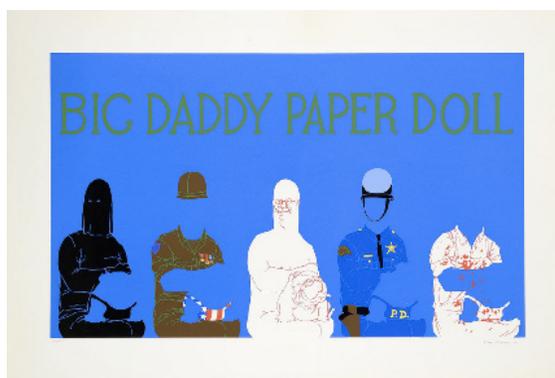
RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM



*Malcolm X, 1968*

In 1971, she contributed to a book in memory of those who died during the Attica Prison Rebellion.[vii]

In 1967, Stevens was a founding member of Artists and Writers Protest Against the War in Vietnam. In her own painting, she found a distinctive way of painting against the war but doing much more than just that. She turned her attention to the reactions she had towards her father as a way of understanding and working through the intense political divisions within families and communities over the war. Between 1967 and 1976, she painted what became the “Big Daddy” series that examined the unquestioning support that all too many Americans gave to the US government as it murdered millions of Vietnamese and did all but everything it could to destroy their country. At times, it appears that she had nothing but contempt for her father’s views.



*Big Daddy Paper Doll, 1970*

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

But at other times, she pulled back a bit and tried to understand him:

*He wanted to be proud. He worked hard (sloughed off only to the extent that it was conventional, permitted, in fact required, by his co-workers) for his wages and used them for his own comfort and ours, to enhance his own standing in the community and ours. His sending me to college was the same of kind of decision that rising in class was worth spending money on. He didn't expect, of course, that college would make me dress badly (jeans and shirts and long hair) even years after I graduated. Nor behave badly either (radical politics, peace marches, signing petitions and other intemperate behavior). He never imagined that lifting me out of his class would produce in me an allegiance to his class that he did not feel. He had swallowed the dream. But it's more than a dream because the books and the art that raise you from one class to another, to bourgeois life, are indeed capable of providing a better life—and also the means of critiquing that life. (p. 17)*

To the best of my knowledge, she never did a painting that might illuminate that view of her father.

## Women's Liberation

Somewhat to Stevens' surprise but at the same time to her all but immediate recognition, the women's liberation movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s and, more specifically, the women's movement in art burst into her life. She became an early partisan and explained why in "What Kind of Socialist-Feminist Artist Am I?":

*To the women's movement I would like to bring, as to art, the subtlest perceptions. To political action, I would like to bring, as to art, a precise and delicate imagination.*

*The personal is political only if you make it so. The connections have to be drawn. Feminism without socialism can create only utopian pockets. And the lifespan of a collective is approximately two years.*

*Socialism without feminism is still patriarchy. But more smug. Try to imagine a classless society run by men.*

Once again, however, she faced the demands of some that women's art had to be a certain kind of art. A couple of women artists had developed a theory that: "women's work, if it was truly women's work, has round or oval forms in it, which had been suppressed in the male art world.

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

But I'm thinking, I don't like round forms necessarily. Although Big Daddy was very voluptuous, I'm not going to do round forms. I don't do abstractions. I was furious and I thought, I don't want these women, putting me in a bind, telling me what to do. Men were telling us what to do. Are women also going to tell us what to do?"

In 1977, Stevens was a member of the group that began publishing *Heresies*—a women's magazine dedicated to the development of women's art in the context of women's liberation. In 1980, she published an essay, "Taking Art to the Revolution," in Issue #9 of *Heresies*. She began with these words:

***ART AS PROPAGANDA** All art can be placed somewhere along a political spectrum supporting one set of class interests or another, actively or passively, at the very least supporting existing conditions by ignoring other possibilities, silence giving consent.*

***ART AS NOT PROPAGANDA** The meaning of art cannot be reduced to propaganda; it deals with many other things in addition to those revealed by class and sociological analysis. Both definitions are true; they are not opposites, but ways of measuring different properties.*

In 1981, Stevens' life and that of her husband was broken by their son's suicide at the age of thirty-two. They memorialized his life by creating a book of his photographs.

A bit later on, Stevens began work on what has become her most well known series—"Ordinary/Extraordinary" that was mentioned above. The series includes paintings of the German revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg, paintings of Stevens' mother and paintings of the two of them placed together—in spite of the great differences between them of time, place and life experiences. She began working on the series at the end of the 1970s and continued to work on them for more than a decade.

Once May became familiar with Luxemburg, she had become somewhat consumed by her:

*I first learned about Rosa Luxemburg from two friends who were talking about her all the time—Lucy Lippard and Alan Wallach, an art historian. Lucy gave me a biography of Rosa Luxemburg to read, probably because I expressed some interest and regretted my lack of knowledge. I fell immediately in love with Rosa and everything I could read on her. I read J.P. Nettl's biography and all the other biographies I could find, but I did not read *The Accumulation of Capital*. [viii] I read her letters and became really enamored.*

Among the things that impressed Stevens about Luxemburg was her determination to take a place—often as the only woman—at the highest levels of the socialist movement of the time.

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM



*Rosa Luxemburg Attends the Second International, 1987*



*Forming the Fifth International, 1985*

Lest there be any confusion, there has been no Fifth International. For Stevens, a synthesis of the experiences and perspectives of the great German revolutionary and the quite isolated elderly homemaker from Boston might provide the basis for just such a new political project.

Stevens observed that even more deeply than being political, she considered herself as being interested in the historical:

*That's very much my thinking about my own work, and about what I see as history and the progress of ideas. I tend not to be a rejecter but someone who wants to reconcile, to take from the past that which is useful. I want not keep the past in the storeroom because it may become interesting. However, I am sometimes overcome with the idea of*

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

*historical clutter and really want to throw a lot of things out. But those things can be useful in the future, because something there can be reinterpreted.*

*My use of the term “history painting” stems directly from Gustave Courbet and his *A Burial at Ornans*, in which the entire village comes together to celebrate, I was told, the death of Courbet’s grandfather. Instead of honoring an emperor or some member of the aristocracy, this huge gathering of people celebrates the death of a peasant. [ix] When we think back to the past and our ancestry—historically where people have come from—we always think of the knights and ladies, and not necessarily those who tilled the soil and turned the earth, which is where most of us come from. But that we drop out from our consciousness.*

Stevens doesn’t stop at that argument. She goes on to talk about what she describes as a “dialectical process”:

*One of the things that interests me a great deal is simply the idea of time—the approaches to time and the uses of time. You spoke about my showing Alice, my mother, and Rosa Luxemburg at different periods in their lives, and I think one of the most interesting things that I’ve tried to work with is crossing time—by using women of different times and finding their commonalities. There is a dialectical process—throwing things out but keeping things—sorting, rejecting and not rejecting. It’s important to do both in some way, and not necessarily in a fixed position, but in a shifting position with time. ... This applies also to my different series and their sequence, with their omissions, inclusions, juxtapositions, and their empty spaces.*

There is much more that can and should be said about May Stevens but I’ll stop here and end with her words about why she worked in series:

*I start with an idea and I always find that there’s more to say about it. I have this thought or this theme and I work on it. And then when I finish I think, oh, but look, you can see it from this side. You can see it from another angle. ... I want to really plumb the depths. I want to get to know my subject, make people, invite people, even force people to get involved, to participate, and to put it together themselves. I love that. Often, I think of my work as cinematic. There’s a narrative which goes on and on and changes and you discover more and more the more time you spend with it.... I want my paintings to haunt you so that you carry them away with you. They raise questions you want to think about, to ponder.*

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

## The New York Times

### What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week

March 24, 2017



#### MAY STEVENS

*Through April 8. Ryan Lee Gallery, 515 West 26th Street, Manhattan; 212-397-0742, ryanleegallery.com.*

May Stevens, born outside Boston in 1924, put art and politics together early. For her civil-rights-themed 1964 exhibition, “Freedom Riders,” the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote a catalog essay. A painting series she began later that decade featuring a bullet-headed figure called Big Daddy targeted the Vietnam War. In the 1970s, the artist, a pioneering feminist, produced mural-size pictures that placed the figure of her mother, Alice Stevens (1895-1985), in the company of the historic antiwar activist Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919), as if the two very different women, whom she regarded as heroes, were contemporaries.

In Ms. Stevens’s exhibition at Ryan Lee in Chelsea, Alice Stevens is the subject of five large paintings from the mid-to-late 1980s. By the time the paintings got underway, their subject was in her late 80s and living in a nursing home. Dressed in white, her body is bulky and heavy, but she seems to float in a grass-green field, and cups flowers in her lap. In one painting, a hand — the artist’s — reaches from outside the frame and pins a flower to the old woman’s blouse. An otherworldly location is suggested in a picture done the year Alice Stevens died. In it, she and Luxemburg sit side by side, only momentarily distracted from deep conversation.

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

As a coda to this meditative but piercing show, the gallery has installed a 1968 painting by Ms. Stevens called “Big Daddy Paper Doll” in a display window that faces out to the street and the nearby High Line. The image, of a nude white scowling man sitting as erect as a raised thumb and surrounded by his ready-to-wear wardrobe as soldier, executioner and butcher, is as sardonic as the Alice portraits are tender. It’s the most interesting, no-nonsense piece of political art I’ve seen in Chelsea this year.

HOLLAND COTTER

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

# HYPERALLERGIC

GALLERIES

Painting the Power of Patriarchy

by Tiernan Morgan on August 13, 2014



Sandwiched between two other concurrent exhibitions at RYAN LEE, May Stevens: Fight the Power, a one-room exhibit consisting of a mere five pieces, packs a mighty punch. The works, all of which were executed during the Civil Rights era, remain highly arresting, despite some minor signs of physical aging.

Stevens, a civil rights campaigner and feminist activist, was one of 20 cofounders of Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics (1977–92), whose other members included Miriam Shapiro, Joan Snyder, and Lucy Lippard. There has been much speculation that Stevens was, or continues to be, a member of the Guerrilla Girls, though she has never definitively responded to the rumors. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote an introductory essay for Freedom Riders (1963), one of the artist's early exhibitions, and in 1965 Stevens attended the funeral of Malcolm X, a drawing of whom is included in the exhibition.

The four other works on display are from Stevens's Big Daddy series (1967–76). Based on a portrait of the artist's father, the recurring character represents the backward, bigoted, and militaristic patriarchy of America. Pudgy and short-sighted, Big Daddy could be your racist father, a coercive police officer, or the man who voted to deploy your son to Vietnam. Big Daddy's bulldog, whose tongue protrudes lasciviously from his jaw, serves to visually accentuate the character's belligerent qualities.

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

Big Daddy's compressed, bulbous features recalls the grotesqueness of a George Grosz caricature combined with the nervous line of a Ralph Steadman drawing. The comparison is fair, since, like the work of those artists, the apparent simplicity of Stevens's series serves as proof that her visual nuances are highly effective. It's often tempting to dismiss political pop because it looks so easy, but to do so is to deny that caricature and propaganda demand a great deal of skill, in particular the need for a highly distilled and succinct visual language. Big Daddy is simultaneously a symbol of terrible injustice and a projection for the viewer's anger. Yet he is also a pathetic, tragic, and perhaps even sympathetic figure. That he can be all these things is a testament to Stevens's pictorial techniques, some obvious, others more subtle.

The largest work in the show, "Big Daddy Paper Doll" (1968), combines the color palette of the US flag with black and military green. The character sits naked at the center, surrounded by the uniforms of his various guises: an executioner, a soldier, a police officer, and a butcher. All of these roles provide Big Daddy with an outlet for terror and violence. In the case of the army and police uniforms, Big Daddy's pallid, fleshy complexion emphasizes the distinction between the quality of the man and the uniform he wears. He defiles what they ought to stand for. Stevens has consciously lined up the uniforms on a gradient, so that Big Daddy's most extreme manifestations lurk at the far sides of the canvas. The character's machismo is indicated by his penile and bullet shaped head. Small details such as the presence of blood splattered on and around the butcher costume lend the work an unnerving, underlying violence.

Stevens humorously undermines Big Daddy by subjecting him to a game of dress-up. In another work from the series (which was displayed as part of the Whitney Museum's Sinister Pop exhibition in 2012), Stevens adds paper-doll tabs to the uniforms, infantilizing the character by turning him into a toy. Flatness is an important feature throughout the series since it functions as a visual shorthand for the insubstantial and shallow. In "Big Daddy Three Times" (1970), Stevens has collaged three busts of Big Daddy, transforming him into a modern day cerberus. The character's flat presentation counters his foreboding presence. The implication is that Big Daddy is a paper tiger. A straw man to be overcome.

Though Fight the Power is a tiny exhibit, the display of a few additional works on paper sufficiently hints at the the artist's broader experimentation within the series. A single image of Big Daddy wasn't enough for Stevens; instead, she subjected him to a number of different scenarios while continually varying his form. In "Big Daddy Beach scene" (1970), the character sits naked in front of a simple composition of red and blue stripes. Another work, "Fireplug Fountain Monument" (c. 1970), resembles a chess piece, with Big Daddy's bulldog perched in triumphant stupor at its apex.

I don't believe that Stevens produced these variations for the sake of it. That the artist spent just under a decade working on the series is indication that the specter of Big Daddy, and all that he represents, required a great deal of emotional processing. Stevens's use of her father as a model lends the work an additional resonance. The artist's approach could be described as Arendtian, since the series presents bigotry as something that can be both familial and banal. For Stevens, the complacency of bigotry, as evinced through Big Daddy's smile, is one of its most disturbing qualities.

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

Hung opposite “Big Daddy Paper Doll” is Stevens’s 1968 death portrait of Malcolm X. The gallery’s press release states that the work was composed from memory, three years after Stevens attended the activist’s funeral. The drawing is so austere that it’s difficult to identify X without the aid of a title. Unlike the images of Big Daddy, X has been stripped of any identifiable context, thereby emphasizing his humanity. The visual approach is wholly appropriate, since the activist rejected the symbols of power (uniforms, medals, badges, etc) that Big Daddy relies on for validation.

While the drawing itself is not that remarkable, its scratched lines denote a great deal of anguish and pain. There are some excellent deft touches, such as a faint smudge between X’s lips which delineates the shape of his teeth. The nebulosity of the portrait, particularly around the forehead, imbues the work with the quality of a dream, like a memory that is visceral, though not quite concrete. The drawing’s warped paper lends the illusion that X’s head is resting on a pillow. This, combined with the gallery’s strip lighting, imbues the display with a funerary air. The effect is intensified by the work’s solitary presence on a single wall. It’s difficult to imagine a better arrangement of the show’s five works.

It appears that the New York art world has been historically reexamining Stevens’s work. Along with Sinister Pop, a work from the “Big Daddy” series was recently on display at the Brooklyn Museum’s Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties exhibition. Last year, Stevens featured in Rabble-Rousers: Art, Dissent, and Social Commentary at the Heckscher Museum of Art. Though it may be a tiny exhibition, Fight the Power affirms that Stevens is a talent deserving of renewed critical attention. You leave wishing that you could’ve seen more.

May Stevens: Fight the Power continues at RYAN LEE (515 West 26th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through August 22.

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

## HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

### Meet May Stevens, A Feminist Civil Rights Activist You Should Know

The Huffington Post | By Priscilla Frank

Posted: 08/14/2014 8:57am EDT | Updated: 08/14/2014 8:59 pm EDT



May Stevens always believed that art and activism went hand in hand.

From a young age, growing up in Quincy, Massachusetts, Stevens was exposed to the dearth of opportunities presented to the women around her, no matter how ambitious or talented they were. She went on to challenge this reality through her artwork, becoming a founding member of “Heresies, A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics” in 1976.

Although Stevens is often referenced for her role in the first generation of female activist artists, she was a major artistic force in the burgeoning Civil Rights movement as well. Stevens critiqued patriarchal power, unnecessary violence and the nation’s racism in her fearless depictions, her artwork finding itself alongside the most crucial moments in American history.

This lesser-known phase in Stevens’ artistic career is the focus of “May Stevens: Fight the Power,” an exhibition currently running at Ryan Lee Gallery in New York. The show features Stevens’ “Big Daddy” series, which, made from 1967–1976, presents a pop art stab at the Vietnam War, rendered in eye-catching red, white and blue.

As the Brooklyn Museum explains, Big Daddy “takes on aspects of both the personal and the political.” His bald head and stature are based on a portrait of Stevens’ patriotic -- and allegedly racist -- father. His image also bears a striking resemblance to Theodore Roosevelt. In her darkly funny depictions, Stevens renders Big Daddy with a bullet-shaped head and phallic-shaped body, emphasizing images of violence and patriarchy.

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

In “Big Daddy Paper Doll,” Stevens transforms her father into a paper doll, stripping him of his clothing and authority, turning him into more than a defenseless plaything. Crafting potential costumes including executioner, decorated soldier, policeman, or butcher, Stevens turns macho and often deadly masculine roles into the equivalent of dress-up ensembles, frivolous and ephemeral.

The exhibition also features “Malcolm X,” a death portrait of the famous activist, drawn from memory three years after she attended his funeral. The notorious advocate is rendered softly in ink on paper, his face resting tranquilly on the blank page. The image, which Ryan Lee Gallery describes as “intimate” and “abstracted,” is far from the usual projection of the human rights leader, donning his signature glasses and engaged in action.

As demonstrated so clearly with Big Daddy’s resemblance to Teddy Roosevelt, Stevens’ work proves that the personal and the political are never too far apart. Her flattened canvases conjure images simultaneously enraging and comical, inciting action while maintaining a bright sense of humor. Stevens, who was the first living female artist to have a retrospective at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston in 1999, turns 90 years old on June 9. Her artistic contributions to the Feminist and Civil Rights movements will go down in history... in piercing patriotic colors and flattened phallic figures.

*“May Stevens: Fight the Power” will run until August 22, 2014 at RYAN LEE in New York.*

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

## The New York Times

### Leaving Polarization at the Door

By RANDY KENNEDY

September 26, 2012



In the show "We the People," from left, a figure by Robert Heinecken and work by May Stevens (behind), Hannah Wilke, David Wojnarowicz, Larry Clark (on floor), Deborah Kass and Shirin Neshat. Credit Lauren DeCicca for The New York Times

Robert Rauschenberg, who died four years ago after a career as big-spirited and optimistic as any in postwar art, was not considered first and foremost a politically motivated artist.

But he was deeply involved in the civil rights movement, in environmentalism and in artists' rights. And in 1987, testifying before the Senate to oppose Robert H. Bork's nomination to the Supreme Court, he warned in the headline-grabbing terms of a candidate on the stump about the danger of a weakened First Amendment.

Invoking the closing of the Bauhaus only months after Hitler became chancellor of Germany in 1933, he said cultural repression was always the first, easiest and most effective means of political control. "It's a subtle move," he said, gesticulating to underscore his words, "to destroy a society."

Last week in a warehouse at 455 West 19th Street in Chelsea owned by the foundation he formed

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

many years before his death, a political convention of sorts was taking shape that Rauschenberg undoubtedly would have loved to attend, miniature flag in hand. There were blue staters and red staters, the young and the old, 1 percenters and paycheck-to-paycheckers, straight and gay people, cowboys and Indians. Bella Abzug was there, not far from the Village People. President Obama was there, too, in sunglasses, exuding celebrity. And high on a wall across from him was an immense cardboard cutout saving space for Mitt Romney, who was expected to arrive at the last minute.

All of these delegates — in painted, sculptural, photographic, print or video form — had temporarily set aside their differences and gotten together for the show “We the People,” the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation’s debut as a New York exhibiting institution and its attempt to inject a little of contemporary art’s voice into a presidential election cycle in which it has been largely absent.

The show, which opens on Wednesday and runs through Nov. 9, immediately sets out two of the foundation’s aims: to focus mostly on work beyond that of its namesake (the exhibition includes a single Rauschenberg work, a 1970 screen print) and to establish itself as a kind of socially engaged cultural presence that Rauschenberg thought artists could, or should, be.

“Bob wasn’t all that interested in just his own voice,” said Christy MacLear, the foundation’s director. “He was a big believer in the overall strength of artists as a community.”

Many of the artists marshaled for the inaugural show, living and dead, are not often considered part of the same community. (A few haven’t been heard from in quite a while.) And they are rarely even seen hanging in the same vicinity. But the idea of the show’s organizers, the curator Alison Gingeras and the artist Jonathan Horowitz, was to populate the space’s 2,700 square feet with works that would both embody and confound the way politicians and pollsters have micro-sliced the American electorate over the last several decades.

And so it is that a LeRoy Neiman serigraph of a Revolutionary War minuteman with his rifle resting heroically on his shoulder — Mr. Neiman’s martial response to Sept. 11 — keeps company with a 1997 John Currin fantasia of two ample-bosomed women lounging in pastoral ease. And that a Norman Rockwell war bonds poster, with the message “Save Free Speech,” is juxtaposed with a 1946 Ben Shahn painting of a man ambiguously holding his large hand over his mouth, borrowed from the Museum of Modern Art.

“When was the last time somebody got to install a big Botero with a gilded frame on the same wall as a Cady Noland?” Ms. Gingeras said. She looked toward a Fernando Botero family painting that telegraphed both prosperity and immigration and that hung alongside a work on rough-edged aluminum by Ms. Noland that is based on a blurred photograph of the Symbionese Liberation Army and Patty Hearst. “We followed these threads that ended up being a lot of fun,” Ms. Gingeras added.

If the show feels a bit like a Social Realist tent revival with undertones of “Schoolhouse Rock!,” a dash of ’90s identity politics and enough figurative sculpture to populate a cocktail party (by George Segal, Duane Hanson, Alex Katz, Robert Heinecken, Rirkrit Tiravanija), that is what its

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

curators had in mind, more or less.

“We discovered our shared fetish for Social Realism, for the kind of work it feels like you don’t see around very much,” said Mr. Horowitz, whose own work often takes on political issues in politically ambiguous ways. He said the first vision for the show when he and Ms. Gingeras began batting ideas around several months ago was for it to have an almost diorama quality.

In a natural-history-museum sense?

“In a cover-of-‘Sgt.-Pepper’s’ sense,” Ms. Gingeras said.

Bella Abzug (a large portrait by Alice Neel), Mr. Obama (a tiny portrait by Elizabeth Peyton) and the Village People (a photograph by Alvin Baltrop) would soon be joined by the show’s largest work, a photo-realistic portrait of Mr. Romney, more than 8 feet tall and 14 feet wide, that the artist Richard Phillips was making specifically for the show, racing to finish it in time. Unlike a well-known portrait that Mr. Phillips made of George W. Bush soon after his first presidential election, which showed him grinning sheepishly, his face flanked by bright-pink slabs of color borrowed from a Donna Karan lingerie ad, this image of Mr. Romney will play it mostly straight, monumentalizing a photograph of the candidate from The Associated Press.

“It’s not the biggest piece I’ve ever done — that goes to Deepak Chopra,” Mr. Phillips said. But he added that he thought size, in this case, was especially important for a painting of a presidential candidate in the last weeks of a divisive election.

“What realism has, and what painting has in particular, is the power of slowing down all of these images that are bombarding us to a full stop, so we can look and think,” he said.

Politically, the exhibition is probably not the kind that would sit comfortably in, say, Alice Walton’s Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Ark. (Nicole Eisenman’s “Dysfunctional Family,” showing Dad hitting the bong and Mom exposing her crotch, might nix it from the outset.) But the curators said the show would be a failure — and most likely a disappointment in Rauschenberg’s eyes as well — if it were read as a sanctimonious affirmation of blue-state, art-world liberalism.

“There are a lot of tentacles here, running between and among the works, and a lot of contradictions,” Ms. Gingeras said. “What we wanted was for everyone — for our moms — to be able to go see it and experience it in a profound way.”

# RYAN LEE

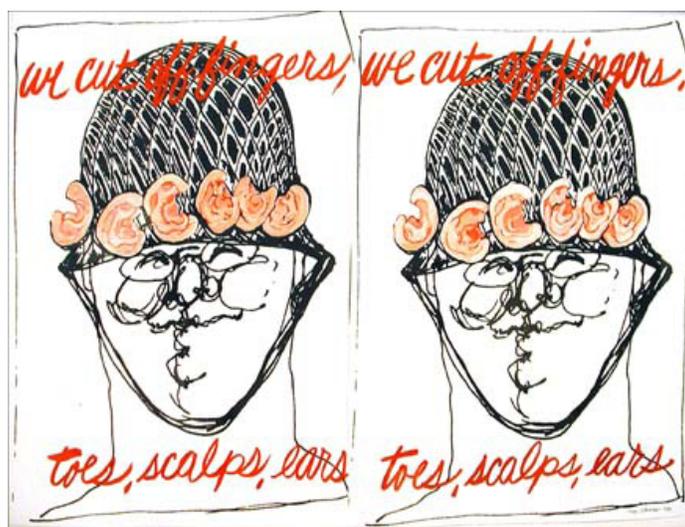
RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

## BlackBook

BBook.com

### The Best of Chelsea Gallery Roundup

By Rohin Guha  
August 22, 2008



Amble between 10th and 11th avenues within a five-block radius on either side of 25th Street in New York City, and you'll find that the only places open are garages and gyro-peddling delis. That's not to say that every exhibition of art is closed off to the general public. It's just that -- a little like

its couture cousin Fashion Week -- the brink of a new art season is imminent (September 14, to be precise). The lion's share of galleries are gearing up for one of the most pivotal times of year for the art world and are busy dusting off installations and prepping paintings. But should you find yourself just north of the Gansevoort and hankering for a little brain candy, here are a few galleries that'll greet you with Crest white-stripped smiles and open arms.

"May Stevens: Paintings & Works on Paper, 1968 to 1976" @ Mary Ryan Gallery: If you're looking to eschew high-concept art, check out this retrospective of May Stevens' paintings and sketches featuring a very disgruntled man as its subject, cast in a variety of mundane and bizarre scenarios.

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM



JULY 31-AUGUST 6, 2008

Art | Listings

---

## Mary Ryan Gallery

---

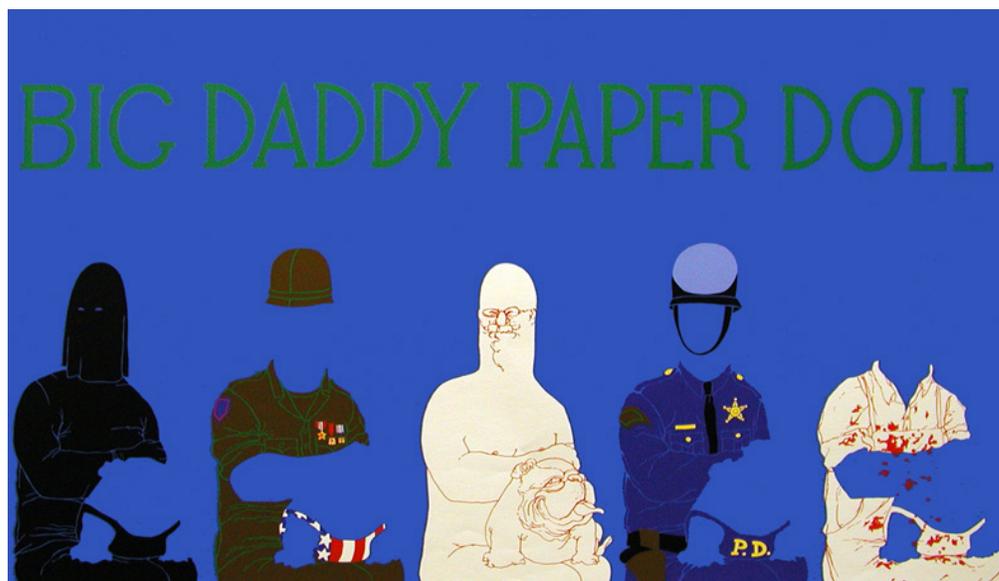
527 W 26th St between Ninth and  
Tenth Aves (212-397-0669). Tue-Fri  
10am-6pm

May Stevens, "Paintings and Works on Paper, 1968 to 1976." Watch the artist's fictive character, Big Daddy, evolve in her works during a particularly prolific period of her career. Through Aug 15.

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

## BLOUINARTINFO



### New York Summer Solo Shows

By Jillian Steinhauer

Published: July 29, 2008

May Stevens: "Big Daddy, Paintings and Works on Paper, 1968–1976" at Mary Ryan Gallery, through August 15

For a quick history lesson, stop by Mary Ryan Gallery, where a group of May Stevens's "Big Daddy" works is on view. A stout, smug, bald character who often carries around a bulldog, Big Daddy was inspired by a portrait of the artist's father and is, in her words, "a person who stopped thinking when he was 20 and hadn't opened his mind to anything since." Though a bit dated in their acutely Vietnam-era, anti-establishment sentiment, many of the works stand out for their imitation of pop Americana.

In "Big Daddy Paper Doll" (1970), at left, the overly obvious parallels between Daddy as a blood-splattered butcher and as a U.S. army officer are countered by the creative presentation of the outfits in the style of children's cut-out paper dolls. Stevens gives us the choice of Daddy's guise, thereby making the viewer complicit in the propagation of an excessively violent, militaristic American authority.

Courtesy the artist and Mary Ryan Gallery

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

## Art in America

### Art in America

September 2007

#### REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

---

#### May Stevens at Mary Ryan

In continuing her exploration of landscape begun over a decade ago, May Stevens here created an environment in which water scenes became sites of memory as well as representations of place. The centerpiece of her exhibition, which included paintings on paper and on large, unstretched canvases, was *ashes rock snow water* (2006), a Whistlerian nocturne writ large. In this ethereal allover abstraction accented with fragments of amber and mica, a monumental close-up of a swirling river is rendered in iridescent blue and purple and overlaid with wordless abstract hand-writing in silver metallic ink. This shimmering, phosphorescent surface provides a luminous and tangible counterpoint to the painting's darkness and apparent depth. Stevens painted softly gesturing hands at its right and left edges, which seem to bridge worldly and otherworldly concerns. The hands inevitably evoke Last Judgment symbolism, although their

placement reverses tradition: two generous, upward-facing hands that seem to be tossing ashes into the water are located at the right, and a single downturned hand is positioned at the left.

Stevens adopted shifting perspectives suggesting psychological dimensions: extreme close-up, distant scenic detachment and a stance poised in between, as if on a shoreline. *Martha's Vineyard, MA* (2007), a picturesque view of cliffs and a sandy shore, portrays the pulling of the tide against a prominent rock, a distant view of turbulent waters similar to those depicted in *ashes rock snow water*, which faced it in the gallery. Stevens renders a serene pool and floating plant life in *Charles River, Boston, MA* (2007) using a realist style reminiscent of Monet: patterns of surface and light contrast with a darker plumbing of what lies below.

Three paintings on paper, *Earth, Splash and Tide* (all 2007), expanded the water image into pure abstraction—color gradations offset with gold or by textures that seem cumulatively to enhance a sense of proximity to the viewer. The varied modernist traditions Stevens invokes in her landscapes bring with them an elusive sense of human consciousness, although—apart from the hands—the human figure is excluded. Stevens's stirring meditation on the ebb and flow of tides generates a nuanced emotional experience, a sense of rushing in and out—a metaphor, perhaps, for the slow process of reconciling life and loss.

—Susan Rosenberg



May Stevens: *ashes rock snow water*, 2006, acrylic and mixed mediums on unstretched canvas, 68 by 169 inches; at Mary Ryan. (Review on p. 159.)

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM



INTERNATIONAL EDITION  
**THE ART NEWSPAPER**

THE ART NEWSPAPER, No. 134, MARCH 2003

Features 29

New York

## Like music or nature or the sea

*May Stevens was a leading figure in the feminist movement and remains a committed political artist but her latest paintings of water are deeply personal evocations of the places where she scattered her husband's ashes*

ARTIST  
INTERVIEW

ADRIAN  
DANNATT

May Stevens, born in 1924, is a painter whose technical skills and sense of composition, sheer visual or tactile pleasure are nonpareil. She is also a long-time and still committed political artist, an idealist in the very best sense of the word: one whose idealism overrides even that contemporary cynicism which so cunningly masquerades as "common sense." She studied at the revered Académie Julien in Paris immediately after World War II, exhibiting in such now legendary venues as Galerie Huit, the Salon de Jeunes Peintres and Salon d'Automne, classic grounding for any traditional long-suffering postwar artist's wife or muse. But as a 30-year resident of SoHo, who taught at the School of Visual Arts for even longer, Stevens was also one of the groundbreaking leaders of the feminist movement within Manhattan, coming out of the Civil Rights movement and anti-war activism: Martin Luther King,



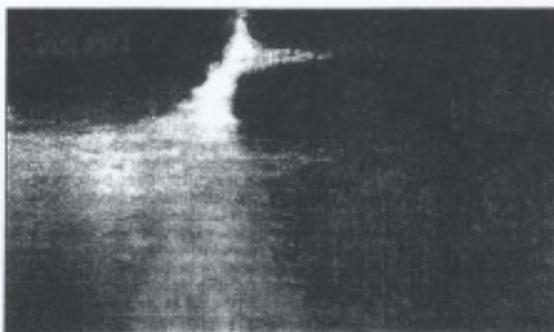
May Stevens and "Oxbow", Napa River, Napa, California. Acrylic on canvas, 2002

tive "Heresies" and she went on to paint a series of large-scale portraits of this nature. Thus, though none of them would ever admit it, being long sworn to anonymity, one may be certain in assuming that Stevens, along with Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger and Lippard was one of the original "Guerrilla girls", plastering New York with posters and leaflets denouncing the underrepresentation of women artists. Stevens has been involved with numerous other political organizations, not least the Inland & River Cultural Project and became well known for her series

stood, to reach out to people, to use every opportunity to make our message known. The words I use now on my canvases are not legible, but, if you want to know what the words are, there are printed texts available in the gallery. I have even used tapes with some of my paintings in which the words are read out loud. You can find out what has infused these works with the spirit I hope they have. For example, the first bodies of water I painted were places I had visited with my husband, the painter Rudolf Baranik. I had put his ashes into those rivers. I went with

of my concerns at the moment and out of my living experience, there's definitely an autobiographical development. For example, I did the "Big daddy" paintings, which were works attacking the American administration, during the Vietnam war. TAN: As a feminist art activist living in Santa Fe you must feel a great sense of validation to see the number of important female artists who have emerged in the last two decades? MS: Absolutely. I attended an event in Santa Fe where I felt obliged to read out my political position, to explain that

the world a better place for women to live in. I worked with other people to change things and we did it. Not that it's over, there's a lot more work to do. TAN: Could one trace a trajectory from this radical activism to far more poetic and personal work? MS: My work was always personal; my feminism is totally personal, it grew out of my life experience and my understanding that I was going to have a hard time to make my mark as a woman and my fierce desire to be treated equally with men. When I was working with



over our lives, but I was never without a broader political perspective, because I came out of the anti-war movement. Today the feminist movement has moved on.

TAN: But do you think this particular war has been won in the art world?

MS: No, it has not yet been won. Because women are not the equal of men: women artists are not paid the same prices, the majority of women artists do not get the same attention or the same representation in major collections, the same number of museum shows, the same basic respect. There's been a lot of improvement, but there is still a long way to go.

TAN: Do you feel the production of stars in the art world is still very male?

MS: But haven't all artists always needed to be recognized and celebrated? It seems to me that the purpose of recognition is that your art should be seen.

A very smart feminist friend of mine once said that success is being understood. What I want is to put out those paintings that come from my deepest part, my truest nature, and make it as powerful and accessible as possible without compromise. I want my paintings to effect

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

He wrote the catalogue essay for her "Freedom riders" series in 1962 and five years later her "Big daddy" caricature-Pop paintings were lambasting the macho Americanism of the Vietnam war. In 1976 Stevens was one of the founding members of the legendary women's collec-

## Biography

**Born:** 1924 Boston **Education:** 1980-89 Bunting Institute, Radcliffe College, Cambridge 1960 MFA Equivalency, New York City Board of Education 1948 Art Students League, New York Académie Julian, Paris, France 1946 BFA, Massachusetts College of Art, Boston **Lives:** Santa Fe, New Mexico **Currently showing:** Mary Ryan Gallery, until 22 March **Selected Solo Shows:** 2004 University of Arizona Museum of Art, Tucson, Arizona 2001 Headlands Center for the Arts, Sausalito, California, "Rivers and other bodies of water", Mary Ryan Gallery, New York (began in 2003) 1999 Images of women: near and far, Museum of Fine Arts, MA, retrospective 1998 "Tic-tac-toe", Low-Mills Contemporary, Santa Fe, New Mexico 1997 "Big daddy: 1960-1975, selected paintings, drawings and prints", Mary Ryan Gallery, New York 1996 "Ordinary extraordinary, tic-tac-toe, her books, selected paintings and drawings", Mary Ryan Gallery, New York, "Sea of words and related works", University Art Museum, University of New Mexico Albuquerque 1994 "Existential/Political Radical Barack and May Stevens", East Art, New York **Selected Group Shows:** 2002-03 "In the spirit of Marie: the living legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr." travelling to Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, Detroit, Ottawa Art Museum, Wilmington, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, Brooklyn Museum of Art Museum of Art, Memphis, Mississippi Museum of Fine Art 2002-03 "1007" Haughton House Gallery, Robert and William Smith Colleges, Geneva, NY Western Gallery, Western Washington University, Bellingham, WA, Elmer J. Zarit Gallery, Wayne State University, Detroit.

"Ordinary/extraordinary" in which she contrasted her own mother with her heroine, the revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg. In 1997 Stevens moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico where she created the extremely large and extremely gorgeous canvases that make up her latest exhibition at Mary Ryan Gallery.

**The Art Newspaper:** Can you tell us anything about your latest series of paintings entitled "Deep river"? **May Stevens:** I've been dealing with water for some time. The last show was also called "Rivers and other bodies of water". The simple phrase "Deep river" comes from Virginia Woolf in a passage where she talks about how, when the present runs smoothly, you can feel the past through the even flow of the present. It's not that I'm living in the past it's just that the present is richer when you can also feel the presence of the past. This idea relates very well to the fact that I'm making transparencies and fluid kinds of representation of water where there's an immediate surface visible to you plus the sense of something underneath.

**TAN:** Though your latest work consists of luminous, if not numinous, paintings, do you think a link could be made to artists like Holzer or Barbara Kruger?

**MS:** Yes, I'm very fond of both of them. I know them both and I know their work and their use of work which relates more to advertising and journalism. I think Barbara worked for MS magazine or Mademoiselle a long time ago on billboards and posters. The three of us worked in the feminist movement. It was very, very important to us to be under-

friends, with people who knew my husband to the west coast of Ireland, to Martha's Vineyard, the coast of Maine, to the Atlantic ocean, the Charles river in Cambridge, and here to the Santa Fe river and put his ashes into the water in all these places. We would photograph the ashes on the water and these photos are the basis for the paintings. I also gave a little pouch of his ashes to a Lithuanian curator to put into the river there and she came back with photographs. These become the seed for the painting that I develop out of this information. The paintings are full of that meaning, they're full of my feeling for the water itself and for the memory of the experience.

**TAN:** But you do not intend viewers to "read" all of this in the paintings?

**MS:** Of course not, they do not need to know the genesis of these paintings. Many artists make paintings that we have no information about. But it is my belief that all of this has gone into the painting and exists there in some way. **TAN:** A lot of feminist art of the 70s is assumed to be didactic.

**MS:** I want paintings to reach out and mean something to people. The National Museum of Women in the Arts has a large painting of mine from the 70s called "SoHo women artists", where I was living at the time. The work is more than 12-feet long. I love to make very large paintings. It's based on photographs and the women of SoHo are all identified. The painting came with a diagram, which I gave to them when they bought it, which labels the women. So I've always worked this way, out of photographs, out

my friends and I stopped the Vietnam war, that we made

people like Lucy Lippard in the feminist movement it took

you like music or nature or the sea A.D.

## WAYNE THIEBAUD

### Riverscapes

Through March 19, 2003

## DANIEL LUDWIG

Paintings, Drawings, Sculpture

March 26 - May 7, 2003

Fully illustrated catalogues are available.

**Allan Stone Gallery**

113 E. 90th St., NYC 10128 Tel. 212.987.4907  
[www.allanstonegallery.com](http://www.allanstonegallery.com)

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

## The Washington Times

### Arts and Entertainment

SATURDAY, JULY 27, 2002

The Washington Times

SECTION D

ART / Joanna Shaw-Eagle



#### WOMEN

From page D1

early feminist work by May Stevens. Her enormous and very funny "Artemisia Gentileschi" is placed nearby and also appears in part of "SoHo." The frieze-like group portrait humorously shows women artists and feminists of 1970s New York in a format historically used by men, such as Raphael with "School of Athens."

Ms. Stevens paints her pals...

"SoHo Women Artists" (above) by May Stevens is an acrylic on canvas. "Guerrilla Girls, Does a Woman Have to be Naked to Get Into the Met?" (below right) and "Aunt Bessie & Aunt Edith" by Faith Ringgold (below left) are among the exhibits in "Feminism and Art: Selections from the Permanent Collection" on display at the National Museum of Women in the Arts.

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

## Feminist artists deliver message



Exhibit traces struggle of women for recognition in male-dominated realm



**H**eavens to Betsy. The National Museum of Women in the Arts has selected what it considers the best art by feminist artists and put together "Feminism and Art: Selections from the Permanent Collection." Do we need more on feminist art when so much has been done? By now, we know all about such groundbreaking artists as Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro and May Stevens — whose struggles led to later successes by photographers Nan Goldin and Sally Mann, and others.

Works by these individuals and 55 others comprise this intriguing, uneven show, which was organized, in part, to introduce the big Judy Chicago retrospective opening at the museum Oct. 11.

In general, the exhibit traces expressions exploring: (1) the non-recognition of women by art gurus in the 1960s; (2) women's political radicalization in the late 1960s and 1970s; (3) intensely personal statements closely tied to female experiences; and (4) women's unique transformation of performance, video and installation art, often as collaborative projects.

Of course, the areas merge. For example, while visitors experience the 1970s sprayed acrylic-and-fabric work of Ms. Chicago and the intricate cloth creations of Ms. Schapiro, they simultaneously hear the sounds of Laura Cottingham's 1998 video "Not for Sale: Feminism and Art in the U.S.A. during the 1970s."

The exhibit's frightening 7-foot-tall "Superwoman" (Kiki Kogelnik, 1973) pre-

dicted women would make it and they have.

Any "message" show will have its drawbacks and vary in quality. Some of the artists and works may seem dated. Also, the notion of "feminism," like any societal movement, is given a variety of interpretations. Although many of the earlier feminist battles have been won, there are still many more male artists to show at the National Gallery of Art than women. Messages aside, the exhibit is so filled with excellent art that it can be enjoyed just for the expression and quality of the pieces themselves. However, it badly needs informative labels describing the artists and works. Who are the artists and what is the art? Any museum should provide this information.

The museum shows the pioneers first, as is appropriate. Ms. Chicago and Ms. Schapiro initiated the women's art movement by introducing a feminist art program at the California Institute of Arts where both taught. They initiated conferences, published journals and documents, estab-

lished a cooperative women's gallery and produced group works. Ms. Schapiro went back to experiences from her childhood to make "The Dollhouse" with Los Angeles artist Sherry Brody. It was one of the first installations demonstrating an openly female point of view. Unfortunately, the museum does not own it, so it is not in the show. She and Ms. Chicago initiated the collaborative art/performance space "Womanhouse," converting an abandoned house, and made it a strong feminist statement.

Such art led to Ms. Chicago's "The Dinner Party," her most famous mixed media work created from 1974 to 1979 with the help of hundreds of volunteers. The museum shows an especially handsome inked image, the delicate "Study for Emily Dickinson Plate" (1979), along with the artist's earlier, colorfully-sprayed acrylic canvases.

The museum also displays "SoHo Women Artists" (1977-1978), an important

see WOMEN, page D5

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

## WOMEN

From page D1

early feminist work by May Stevens. Her enormous and very fine "Artemisia Gentileschi" is placed nearby and also appears in part of "SoHo." The frieze-like group portrait humorously shows women artists and feminists of 1970s New York in a format historically used by men, such as Raphael with his "School of Athens."

Ms. Stevens paints her pals and neighbors. She begins with Signora D'Apolito, owner of a bakery, at left.

Continuing to the right are two men from the Italian community; May Stevens herself; Harmony Hammond; Joyce Kozloff sitting on the pavement with her son Nikolas; Marty Pottenger; the well-known and still-living artist Louise Bourgeois wearing one of her sculptures; Miriam Schapiro; the critic Lucy Lippard; and Sarah Charlesworth, who recently showed at the museum. Ms. Stevens pictures an earlier, friendlier time in New York City when artists formed communities and today's cutthroat competition did not exist.

Many of the best works are by artists who render their personal

experiences. Hollis Sigler is one. She began by obsessively painting the rooms of her home and the household objects in it. Then, doctors twice diagnosed her with breast cancer and she created the intensely moving series, "Breast Cancer Journal: Walking with the Ghosts of My Grandmothers." The exhibit's intensely emotional "To Kiss the Spirits: Now, This Is What It Is Really Like" (1993) appears to show her spirit climbing to the heavens. She died last year.

Another artist who plays out her interior life is sculptor Petah Coyne, who recently showed at the Corcoran Gallery of Art. She drips wax over intricate wire structures that form the inner core of her work. Some of her pieces can be viewed as floating, weightless images reminiscent of wedding cakes and fancy dresses. These, like the exhibit's "Untitled #781," are filled with life and joy. Others, like some shown at the Corcoran, are massive, masculine and death-like.

Women artists like quilt maker Faith Ringgold and photographer Carrie Mae Weems combine expressions of their identities as women and as blacks. Ms. Ringgold, who showed at the Baltimore Museum of Art three years ago, tells mesmerizing stories of her ancestors in handsomely stitched cloth "canvases." Ms. Weems constructs tableau environments for her "Untitled (Kitchen Table Series)" (1990-1991) that show black women in their dull, domestic environments.

"The Film Room" featuring Ms. Cottingham's "Not for Sale" also holds collaged images of women by Canadian artist Shonagh Adelman. Donated by Washington collector Anthony Podesta, a generous supporter of the museum, they add another dimension to the filmmaker's acid pronouncements. Guerrilla Girls' "Untitled" (from the series "Guerrilla Girls Talk Back: The First Five Years, 1985-1990") on the opposite wall punctuate the radical humor of the gallery.

The battle of the sexes is not over as the exhibit amply demonstrates. There is much more to be done. In the meantime, the show gives a good measure of what women artists have accomplished.



A Petah Coyne work, "Untitled #781," can be seen in the "Feminism and Art" exhibit at the National Museum of Women in the Arts.

**WHAT:** "Feminism and Art: Selections from the Permanent Collection"  
**WHERE:** National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1250 New York Ave. NW

**WHEN:** Monday through Saturday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; Sunday, noon - 5 p.m., through Aug. 11

**TICKETS:** \$5 general admission; \$3 seniors and college and graduate students. Youth under 18, free.

**PHONE:** (202) 783-5000

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

## Art in America



**Katharine Lee Reid**, director of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts since 1991, was named director of the Cleveland Museum of Art.



**Kasper König** was chosen as director of the Ludwig Museum in Cologne. Since 1988, he had been rector of the Städelschule and head of Portikus, both in Frankfurt.



**Deborah Gribbon**, deputy director and chief curator of the J. Paul Getty Museum, became the museum's director and vice president of the Getty Trust.



**Alfred Pacquement** was named director of the Musée national d'art moderne at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. He had been director of the Ecole nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts since 1993.



**Rem Koolhaas**, Dutch architect and theorist who is designing the Guggenheim Las Vegas, won the \$100,000 Pritzker Prize, given by the Hyatt Foundation.



**Niki de St. Phalle**, sculptor of whimsical figurative works, received a \$140,000 Praemium Imperiale Award from the Japan Art Association.



**Ellsworth Kelly**, veteran painter known for his colorful shaped canvases, was given a \$140,000 Praemium Imperiale Award by the Japan Art Association.



**Cindy Sherman**, author of imaginative self-portraits, won the International Award in Photography, worth about \$57,700, given by Sweden's Hasselblad Foundation.



**Paul Warwick Thompson**, director since 1992 of the Design Museum in London, was named director of New York's Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum.



**Peter Halley**, artist, critic and publisher of *Index*, won the Mather Award for art journalism from the College Art Association.



**May Stevens**, figurative painter, was given a distinguished artist award for lifetime achievement by the College Art Association.



**Lawrence Rinder** was appointed curator of contemporary art at the Whitney Museum. He was founding director of the CCAC Institute at the California College of Arts and Crafts.



**Gary Garrels**, a curator at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art since 1993, was selected as chief curator of drawings and curator of painting and sculpture at New York's MOMA.



**Christopher Phillips**, senior editor at *Art in America*, left the magazine after 11 years to become curator at the International Center of Photography in New York.



**Paul Pfeiffer**, video artist, received the inaugural Bucksbaum Award, worth \$100,000, given by the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.



**Wolfgang Tillmans**, photographer, was awarded the 2000 Turner Prize by the Tate Britain in London. The prize is worth approximately \$30,000.

People  
IN  
REVIEW

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

## The New York Times

Review/Art; Joint Show: May Stevens and Rudolf Baranik

By HOLLAND COTTER

Published: February 18, 1994

May Stevens and Rudolf Baranik have been married for more than 40 years. During that time each has produced a significant body of paintings and has been involved in political activism. Ms. Stevens, who is also a poet, was a founder of the influential feminist journal *Heresies*. Mr. Baranik is known for his theoretical writing and for work he produced in response to the Vietnam War.

Their joint show at Exit Art, titled "Existential-Political," has more than mere anecdotal logic, though. Seen together, their paintings ask -- and answer with only partial success -- some of the famously tough-nut questions about political art itself. Do strong convictions necessarily make strong art? Can politics and painterly abstraction coexist?

Ms. Stevens's work is a kind of emblematic narrative painting on a large scale in a brushy expressionist style. Among its recurrent themes is the life of the Marxist revolutionary and pacifist Rosa Luxemburg, who was slain by the German military in 1919. In one of several images that Ms. Stevens adapted from archival photographs, Luxemburg stands at the center of a group portrait taken at the Second International Congress for World Socialism in 1904. The only woman, she radiates a nimbuslike white glow.

Luxemburg's face in this painting is almost featureless, as if it had been left unfinished, and her presence elsewhere is even less concrete. She is present only by implication, for example, in "The Murderers," a depiction of her assassins, and in "The Canal," a depiction of the gray water into which her body was thrown. And in a view of her funeral cortege, she appears in the form of her own messianic-sounding words, handwritten in German over and over again on the painting's dark sky: "I was, I am, I will be."

It is a stirring story. Luxemburg was an exceptional person: fiery, gentle, reckless, brave. But little of her spirit comes across in Ms. Stevens's paintings. With their drab palette and indifferently executed images, they look self-consciously workaday, as if any other approach would compromise their ideologic seriousness. (The use of gold ink to write feminist texts in "Sea of Words," from 1991, is the only concession to formal verve.) And in restating the bare bones of a familiar hagiography, they offer less a visual experience than a literary one. One respects Ms. Stevens's admiration of Luxemburg, but wishes she had done more to bring her to life.

Mr. Baranik's work also elicits admiration and reservations, but for different reasons. If Ms. Stevens's painting is too stinting and didactic, Mr. Baranik's is the opposite. Like the Abstract Expressionists whom he admires, he believes that art should address themes of mortality and loss -- realities that are universal and therefore implicitly political -- but should do so obliquely,

# RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC  
515 WEST 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
212 397 0742  
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

through abstraction rather than overt polemic. His self-description as a “formalist socialist” best describes the slippery terrain he has staked out for himself.

His 11 paintings in the show offer insights into how he has traversed it. The two earliest pieces are from a series done in the early 70’s titled “Napalm Elegies.” They are based on a single horrific image: a news photograph of a Vietnamese child whose features had been all but melted away by the corrosive wartime chemical. In one painting the face is discernible; in another it is softly mottled like the face of the moon seen through a telescope. In both images, the real-life reference is unmistakable, and the question of whether the work is in the strictest sense abstract remains unresolved.

In paintings from the 80’s, topical images drop away in favor of a more personal content, and formal elements -- variations in surface texture, carefully calibrated tonal gradations of white and black -- assume a greater role. The recurrent image is a horizontal grayish wall-like band of what looks like piled skulls, vertebrae or stones set against a black-to-charcoal ground. Mr. Baranick’s love of the moody, work-intensive painting of artists like Edvard Munch and Albert Pinkham Ryder is evident, especially in the turbulently brushed, romantic figure of a huge horse in “Sleep Well” (1986).

This image was inspired by photographs taken by the Baraniks’ son, Steven, who died in 1981, and several other of Mr. Baranick’s recent works are dedicated to his memory. One, titled “These Are the Pearls That Were His Eyes” (1985), looks like an underwater landscape of smoothly modeled rocks and coral, with strings of white and bottle-green lights shining out from the darkness. It is a mournful image and the most beautiful painting in the show. Even if one is unaware of its memorial context, its sense of tenderness and mystery come through.

The psychological warmth that makes this work stand out is missing elsewhere. Other paintings from the 80’s, while imposing, tend to look expressive without feeling especially personal, and are formally complex almost to a fault. Their wealth of painterly inflection slows down the rate at which one takes them in -- this is a good thing -- but it also sets up a distracting play of virtuosic moves that undermines the monumental gravity Mr. Baranick seems to be after. The results end up looking generic rather than universal, modernist business as usual.

If Ms. Stevens’s paintings are too specifically political, Mr. Baranick’s “existential” approach is often not specific enough. One has only to look at the work of another couple long engaged in political art, Leon Golub and Nancy Spero, to see how some really daring solutions can be drawn from this rich but contested category. At the same time, as this show indicates, Mr. Baranick and Ms. Stevens have done much to push the debate along. One can ask more of an artist, but that’s already a worthy accomplishment.

“Existential-Political: The Paintings of Rudolf Baranick and May Stevens” remains at Exit Art/The First World, 548 Broadway (near Spring Street), in SoHo through Feb. 26.

Photo: A detail of “Sleep Well,” an oil painting by Rudolf Baranick that is part of “Existential-Political,” a joint exhibition at Exit Art in SoHo. (Exit Art)