

RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC
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May Stevens

Alice in the Garden

February 23 – April 8, 2017

Opening reception: February 25, 4–6PM

RYAN LEE is pleased to announce *Alice in the Garden*, an exhibition of monumental paintings by the pioneering feminist artist May Stevens. A celebrated activist committed to the civil rights, anti-war, and feminist movements, Stevens has used painting to combat social injustice and to revise women's history throughout her seventy-year career. Between 1983 and 1990, she produced several large-scale paintings on unstretched canvas depicting Alice Dick Stevens, her elderly mother, during the last years of her life.

The five-panel painting *Alice in the Garden* (1988-89) is based on Stevens's own photographs of Alice taken during visits to the nursing home in which she lived. The mural-like images confront the viewer with the massive figure of Alice—fleshy, fragile, and vulnerable. In her hands, Alice manipulates flowers—dandelions Stevens had playfully thrown at her during an afternoon visit. In the final painting of the cycle, Stevens, with her back to the viewer, pins a flower to her mother's blouse. Stevens's photos also serve as the source material for the previously unexhibited *A Life* (1984), painted during Alice's final years.

These powerful images of Alice evolved from an earlier series of paintings, entitled *Ordinary/Extraordinary* (1977-84), in which Stevens juxtaposed her biological mother with Rosa Luxemburg (1871–1919), the Polish-German Marxist revolutionary leader whom she often called her “spiritual mother.” Studying the lives of these two very different women was essential to Stevens's ongoing exploration of the range and diversity of women's experiences, including the possibilities, limitations, and contradictions that often defined them. Luxemburg and the elderly Alice appear together in the painting *Forming the Fifth International* (1985), on view in the second gallery. This scene, painted the year of Alice's death, imagines a conversation between the two women—one that, as the title suggests, might revolve around the future of the international socialist cause. Rosa and Alice, two radically different women joined across time, sit on benches and chairs in the same green field that surrounds Alice in many of Stevens's paintings.

In a conversation with art historian Dr. Patricia Hills, Stevens explained the importance of Alice as a subject: “For me I think it means I want her [Alice] to be known, even for the individual person that she is, but it also means that I want people like that not to be forgotten. For me she's not just a single person, because we all know this person. We all know her and we may become her. She's a problem. As aging is a problem, as illness is a problem, as being a woman who does not fulfill herself is a problem.”¹

Stevens, now 92, suffers from Alzheimer's disease and lives in a memory loss facility in New Mexico. The reality that the once fierce and fearless activist, the deeply sensitive and impassioned poet, artist, and teacher can no longer speak about her own life and work—especially at a time when many artists of her generation are receiving renewed or long overdue recognition—becomes even more poignant when confronted with these images of aging, illness, and loss.

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Throughout the exhibition, Stevens's large-scale mural painting *Big Daddy Paper Doll* (1968) will also be on view in RLWindow, viewable from the High Line at 26th Street. *Big Daddy* (1967-76) is Stevens's first major body of work, created during the Vietnam War and the beginnings of the feminist movement. For Stevens, *Big Daddy* represents both her father and a white male authoritarian American attitude towards culture and politics. The *Big Daddy* paintings traveled nationally and were written about by important scholars and critics of the day, including Lawrence Alloway and Lucy Lippard. RLWindow is a dedicated exhibition space featuring video, installation, and performance art designed to engage High Line visitors. Utilizing the gallery's position overlooking the High Line and its visibility to more than 5 million yearly visitors, RLWindow is a platform for innovative, experimental, and collaborative projects by international contemporary artists, including both invited and gallery-represented artists.

May Stevens was born in Quincy, MA in 1924. She studied at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design in Boston, the Art Students League in New York, and the Académie Julian in Paris before returning to New York City to live, work, and teach in 1951. In 1999, Stevens had a retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston entitled *Images of Women Near and Far 1983-1997*, the museum's first exhibition of its kind for a living woman artist. Since then she has been the subject of important solo exhibitions at Cornell University's Herbert F. Johnson Museum, Minneapolis Institute of Art, National Academy Museum in New York, National Museum of Women in the Arts, New Museum in New York, and Springfield Museum of Art in Missouri. Stevens's work is included in the collections of major museums, including the Brooklyn Museum; deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum; Metropolitan Museum of Art; Minneapolis Institute of Fine Arts; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Museum of Modern Art; National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC; New Museum of Contemporary Art; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Stevens has received numerous awards including ten MacDowell Colony residencies, Women's Caucus for Art Lifetime Achievement Award (1990), Guggenheim Fellowship in painting (1986), National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in painting (1983), Andy Warhol Foundation residency (2001), and the Distinguished Artist Award for Lifetime Achievement by the College Art Association (2001).

¹ Patricia Hills, *May Stevens* (San Francisco: Pomegranate, 2005), 45.

Forthcoming exhibitions include Gabriel Lester (April 13 – May 20), Bradley Castellanos (May 24 – June 29), and Katy Stone (May 24 – June 29). For press inquiries, please contact Bridget Casey at bridget@ryanleegallery.com or 212-397-0742.