

RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC
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May Stevens

Rosa Luxemburg, Paintings and Works on Paper, 1976 - 1991

October 17 - December 21, 2019

Opening Reception: Thursday, October 17, 6-8pm

RYAN LEE is pleased to announce May Stevens: *Rosa Luxemburg, Paintings and Works on Paper, 1976–1991*, an exhibition that illuminates Stevens' long engagement with the political activist Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919). Over a period dating from the late seventies to the early nineties, Stevens (1924-2019), a celebrated artist, writer, teacher, feminist activist, and founding member of *Heresies*, produced over seventy works exploring the life and death of Luxemburg. The exhibition revisits a selection from this powerful body of work—presenting several works on paper for the first time—on the 100th anniversary of Luxemburg's death.

Luxemburg was a Polish-German Marxist philosopher, prolific writer, and activist whose legacy includes co-founding the German Communist Party. Stevens first became interested in Luxemburg in the late 1970s through her close friends Lucy Lippard and Alan Wallach, and she quickly grew fascinated by Luxemburg's strength and intelligence. Over a period of nearly twenty years Stevens produced several series of works—some thirty collages, thirteen drawings, a handful of prints, and approximately fourteen paintings—that endeavor to untangle Luxemburg's identity, accomplishments, and her murder at the hands of the German state. Stevens' imagery draws on reproductions of Luxemburg taken from newspaper coverage of her assassination, and is often overlaid with quotations from Luxemburg's own writing.

Stevens' first images of Luxemburg, *Tribute to Rosa Luxemburg* (1976) and *Untitled* (Original Rosa/Alice Collage) (1976) were produced for the inaugural issue of the pioneering feminist journal *Heresies* in 1977 and will be on view in this exhibition. The untitled collage became the first work in a series that juxtaposed Alice Stevens—Stevens' biological mother—with Luxemburg who Stevens often referred to as her spiritual mother. In these collages, Stevens combines family photographs and newspaper clippings that she manipulated through repeated photocopying, weaving them into compositions layered with handwritten text. Stevens continued to trace the lives of Rosa and Alice for nearly a decade, elucidating their incongruities and ultimately producing Stevens's first and only artist's book, *Ordinary/Extraordinary* (1980). The project, as Stevens explained it, was “an artist's book examining and documenting the mark of a political woman and marking the life of a woman whose life would otherwise be unmarked.”

In 1988, New York's New Museum mounted *One Plus or Minus One*, a project consisting of two 11 by 18-foot photostat-murals that Stevens created based on her own monumental paintings of Luxemburg's life—*The Murderers of Rosa Luxemburg* (1986) and *Rosa Luxemburg Attends the Second International* (1987). Stevens often thought of these ambitious history paintings as movie-like, or as she said, possessing the “cinematic quality of stopped time.” In works such as *Voices* and *Demonstration* (both 1983), the immensity of the canvas and somber palette intensify the gravitas of their subject—Luxemburg's funeral procession—freezing in time a ghostly rendering of the massive crowds that turned out to accompany her casket through the streets of Berlin. These paintings, along with previously unexhibited studies for *One Plus or Minus One*, will be included in the upcoming exhibition. Also on view for the first time will be Stevens' *Bridge* series, three darkly expressionist canvases that depict the bridge over Berlin's Landwehr

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canal, the body of water into which Luxemburg was thrown after her execution. Two of the three canvases include the following text in German: “I was, I am, I will be.” This powerful message links Stevens with the legendary figure of Luxemburg in the spirit of feminist activism, in the reclamation of history, and in the persistent quest for equality and humanity for all.

May Stevens (1924-2019) was a feminist activist artist who came to prominence during the 1960s. Born in Quincy, MA, Stevens studied at the Massachusetts College of Art, the Art Students League, and the Academie Julian in Paris. She later taught at the School of Visual Arts, NY from 1961-1996. She was a founding member of *Heresies*, A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics (1976).

In 1999, Stevens had a major 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 female artist. She has had important solo exhibitions at the Springfield Museum of Art, MO; the Minneapolis Institute of Art, MO; the National Museum of Women in the Arts, NY; the New Museum, NY; and Cornell University’s Herbert F. Johnson Museum, Ithaca, NY. Stevens’s work has been acquired by major museums, including the Brooklyn Museum, NY; deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, Lincoln, MA; Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY; Minneapolis Institute of Fine Arts, MO; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA; Museum of Modern Art, NY; National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC; New Museum of Contemporary Art, NY; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, CA; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, NY.

She has received numerous awards including 10 MacDowell Colony residencies, a 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). Major publications include *May Stevens*, a monograph by Patricia Hills with introduction by Phyllis Rose (2005); *May Stevens Catalog for Big Daddy Series* with essay by Lawrence Alloway on the occasion of her solo show at Cornell University’s Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art (1973); Lucy R. Lippard’s essay, “May Stevens’ Big Daddies,” which appeared in *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women’s Art* (1976); *May Stevens. Ordinary/Extraordinary: A Summation, 1977-1984*, edited by Patricia Hills with essays by Donald Kuspit, Lucy Lippard, Moira Roth, and Lisa Tickner (1984); and *May Stevens: Images of Women Near and Far* published in conjunction with her retrospective at Museum of Fine Arts Boston (1999).

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