

RYAN LEE

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May Stevens (June 9, 1924 - December 9, 2019)



May Stevens in her Soho studio with *The Artist's Studio (After Courbet)*, 1974, photographed by Joyce Ravid

It is with great sadness that we share the news of May Stevens' passing. She died Monday morning, December 9, in Santa Fe, New Mexico at the age of 95. Stevens will be remembered for her extraordinary art legacy—especially for her monumental paintings—as well as her political activism, teaching, and her own writing. We also remember Stevens as a spirited and opinionated conversationalist, a prolific letter writer, and a devoted friend to those she held close.

Stevens was born in 1924 in Quincy, Massachusetts to a working-class family. After studying at the Massachusetts College of Art, the Arts Students League in New York, and the Académie Julian in Paris, she and her husband, artist Rudolf Baranik, settled in New York City where they became fixtures in the civil rights and anti-war movements. In 1963 Stevens exhibited her *Freedom Riders* series in her first solo exhibition at the Roko Gallery in New York City. The series was Stevens' outraged response to the increasingly violent racism facing African Americans living in the American South. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. contributed a catalogue essay.

Between 1967 and 1976 Stevens produced her *Big Daddy* series—a collection of paintings and works on paper that explored racial bigotry and opposed the Vietnam War. Her graphic pop-esque depictions of a generic, middle-aged white male wearing

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various uniforms—a butcher, policeman, a soldier, and a hangman—were originally inspired by her own father’s racist views. Stevens created this ignorant male caricature to serve as a visual metaphor for all that she felt was hypocritical and unjust in American patriarchal power dynamics. These images have recently received renewed attention, and two of Stevens’ *Big Daddy* works are currently on view in MoMA’s inaugural exhibition as well as a painting in the exhibition, *Artists Respond: American Art and the Vietnam War, 1965-1975* organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum and traveling to the Minneapolis Institute of Art.

Other well-known painting series include *Artemesia Gentileschi* (1974-79); *History Paintings* (1974-81); *Ordinary Extraordinary / Rosa Luxemburg and Alice Stevens* (1976-91); *Sea of Words* (begun in 1990); and *Rivers and Other Bodies of Water*, (begun in 2001). Stevens was an active force within the women’s movement in the 1960s and 1970s, and in 1976 she became a founding member of *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics*. While in New York she taught at the School of Visual Arts from 1961-1996, until she and Baranik relocated to Santa Fe.

Stevens’ creative process involved examining her own responses to racism, prejudice, and oppression. Accounting for her own biases, Stevens used her own personal experiences to forge connections with the most devastating social injustices of her time through. As art historian Patricia Hills explained,

Her awareness of the bigotry of her father and his co-workers shaped her deep commitment to fighting racism. Her experiences as a working-class girl gave her insight into the latent injustices of class to her mother’s generation...The time Stevens spent attending women’s ‘consciousness-raising’ session during the early 1970s deepened her awareness of sexism and of her own possibilities to grow and change the world.

Through painting, drawing, collage, printmaking, and writing Stevens worked through the contradictions of the complex reality in which she lived, producing imagery that matched the intensity of her search for expression. Her last major body of work, the *Women, Words and Water* series begun in the 1990s, contained elegiac mediations on her own confrontations with loss—the losses of her brother Stacey, her mother Alice, her son Steven, and her husband Rudolf. Stevens, however, always maintained a positive yet pragmatic outlook on life and death, and water was, for Stevens, a source of renewal. “It’s all one body of water that connects my childhood, my love of water, my swimming,” she said in 2002. “So there’s this kind of circularity, continuity, and it’s the way I feel about life and death...there’s nothing strange or weird about it. It’s completely natural.”

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Stevens always endeavored to engage thoughtfully with life's challenges, be they societal or personal. She never eschewed contradiction, instead she embraced it, in, as Hills has described, "a complex dialectic that displays contradictions and suggests resolutions through intertwining history with the present, the extraordinary with the ordinary, timelessness with the provisional." For Stevens it was the dialectic that produced meaning.

I would like to see death as not a final thing and not necessarily a fearsome thing, but something which permeates life. Life, I feel in some sense, permeates death. Cecilia Vicuña, my Chilean friend, artist and poet, made a remark in an interesting way. She said, 'Life just goes on. Life is eternal. Death is only a moment.' I suppose she means that death is a transition, death is a door, a swinging door, both ways. The challenge is to make these things meaningful in a specific way.

-May Stevens

Stevens 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 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).

Stevens' work has been included in exhibitions at the Arts Student League (2019), Smithsonian American Art Museum (2019), Detroit Institute of Arts (2019), Whitney Museum of American Art (2017), British Museum (2017), Brooklyn Museum (2017). 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. In 2005, she had important traveling solo exhibitions

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at the Springfield Museum of Art, MO; the Minneapolis Institute of Art, MN and the National Museum of Women in the Arts, NY. She was further featured in important solo exhibitions at the New Museum (1988) and Cornell University's Herbert F. Johnson Museum (1973).

Stevens' work is in numerous prominent museum collections, including the British Museum, London; Brooklyn Museum, NY; deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, Lincoln, MA; Hood Museum of Art, NH; 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.

RYAN LEE has represented May Stevens since 2013 and has mounted three solo exhibitions. Previously, Mary Ryan Gallery represented Stevens from 1994 to 2013, and produced eight solo exhibitions with the artist. "May Stevens: Rosa Luxemburg, Paintings and Collages, 1976-1991," is currently on view at RYAN LEE through December 21, 2019.