

Essay

## Cathy Josefovitz, 'Release'

Géraldine Gourbe

'At all times, I need a vision, a color, a taste, a country, a person, some image to think of.'

— **Cathy Josefovitz**

'It is easy to persecute the self.'

— **Michel Foucault**

Bob Dylan's 1971 song 'I Shall Be Released' tells the story of a man who wishes to be freed from the solar system in which he has been confined. In 'Release' (1988), Cathy Josefovitz's solo choreographic work based on Dylan's music, this feeling of liberation or expansion takes on a whole new meaning. As we watch her perform, falling, colliding and touching the ground with such fluidity, elements of a free-flowing, profound personal quest become apparent. It is through this process that Cathy Josefovitz 'casts off herself' (Michel Foucault): as she grew more passionate about the performing arts, new dance, music and somatic practices, she detached herself from a body that she considered to be heavy, cumbersome and awkward. Consisting mainly of drawings and paintings, Cathy Josefovitz's prolific oeuvre is impressively coherent and as such leaves a lasting visual impression.

This asceticism of the self, fueled by movement—no matter how subliminal<sup>1</sup>—lends a vibrant unity to the works presented at Hauser & Wirth, which were realized between 1974 and 2014. This ensemble is filled with figures, often female, reclining, dreaming and longing for new spaces and mental landscapes. Created in the mid-1970s, after studying theatre design in Strasbourg and attending the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, her gouaches on paper represent alter egos, transpositions of the artist's fantasies or fictional characters she would have liked to emulate. Dreaming, the luxurious prelude to self-abandonment, is a strong motif of desire borrowed from surrealist cinema—Salvador Dali and Luis Buñuel—but reinterpreted by a female gaze. These figures form a portrait gallery that plays with the codes of 20th-century European painting. The figurative paintings of 1974 are reminiscent of the female nudes by the masters Henri Matisse and Paul Gauguin, or the Berlin artists of the New Objectivity movement—but this doesn't prevent Cathy Josefovitz from approaching them from a different angle. While in certain instances we might find a harlequin à la Pablo Picasso, stripe motifs à la Gauguin or nervously sketched nudes à la Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, in Cathy Josefovitz's work, however, the checkered or diamond patterns take on a more obsessive tone, as if they have become the main protagonists. The silhouettes of her Matisse-style nudes echo the undulations of the swimmers in 'La Piscine,' a late work by the great master.

In a style situated somewhere between naturalism and caricature—as seen in the exaggerated flesh tones of the lovers' mouths as they draw close to each other, the nipples on their dark breasts, their bulging eyes, the differences in scale between limbs—Cathy Josefovitz portrayed weirdos, racialized people, outsiders, couples of women and animals, bears, cats and dogs, all with a certain ambiguity. This gallery of portraits on kraft paper, which she began in the mid-1970s, reached its peak between 1985 and 1988. This intrusion into the intimate lives of others even led the artist to delve into the world of pregnant women. In 1978, following workshops with Alec Rubin, the founder of primal theater, Cathy Josefovitz decided to undertake an apprenticeship with a gynecologist. She was fascinated by the transformation of bodies during pregnancy and childbirth, and came away with the desire—even at this young age—to speak out against obstetric violence.

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Cathy Josefowitz then spent around 20 years concentrating on contact improvisation and somatic practices, as well as feminist, lesbian and eco-feminist activism. She created social art in a variety of forms: flyers, silkscreen prints, agitprop, rock concerts and choreography. During her formative years at Dartington College in the 1980s, she took part in the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camps<sup>2</sup>. Together with four fellow students, the artist went on to form an all-female band that were renowned in the alternative activist scene of southwest England during a period of intense protest activity in Britain.

It was only natural that her figures, portraits and intimate depictions disappeared at the end of the 1990s with her 'Prayers' series (1999–2001): what more could be said or done after all this intense activism and involvement in different communities? The sense of a physical presence and a certain trembling sensuality, however, are not completely eradicated here; the shawl she depicted, laid directly on the floor, lends her canvases a more introspective approach to the body and mind. Cathy Josefowitz turned from radical activism to spirituality, even if a whole series from the early 1990s featuring 'some men or women' sitting in Matisse-style armchairs suggests that the motif of dreams as way of encountering our hidden interiority had been there all along.

Bolstered by this journey towards self-knowledge, Cathy Josefowitz started painting bodies on a large scale. With a certain simplicity, she returned to the roundness of the human form. The immaculate whiteness of the nudes in her 'Venus' works exalts their contours more than their background or context, as if the great masters were no longer models to emulate but ghosts of a bygone era and a diminished fascination.

Cathy Josefowitz's solo exhibition holds the keys to these pictorial revisitations, but also an opportunity to let go: release.

<sup>1</sup>Cathy Josefowitz read the work of Mabel Elsworth Todd (1880–1956), a somatic movement therapist, and was a student of Steve Paxton and Mary Fulkerson at Dartington College, UK. She discovered contact improvisation when she saw Steve Paxton and Lisa Nelson dance in 1978. Steve Paxton is an expert in martial arts and controlled falling techniques. Under Mary Fulkerson, she trained in Anatomical Release Technique (ART), a holistic method that focuses on the reciprocal influence of mind and body in the creation of movement.

<sup>2</sup>A peace movement in Greenham organized by Women for Life on Earth during which women chained themselves together in protest against the local storage of cruise missiles.

This essay was written in response to the works on view in the exhibition 'Cathy Josefowitz. Release' at Hauser & Wirth Zurich, Limmatstrasse (1 February – 17 May 2024).

### **About Géraldine Gourbe**

Géraldine Gourbe is a philosopher, critic and art curator. She has taught philosophy of art at ENSAD, the University of Metz, Sciences Po Paris and the Beaux-arts of Marseille and Annecy. In 2018 she curated an exhibition at the Villa Arson in 2018 around the work of Judy Chicago and West Coast in the 1960s, entitled 'Los Angeles, the cool years.' Since 2015, she has been working on a counter-reading of the history of ideas and art in France from 1947 to 1989 in partnership with the art historian Florence Ostende. Her research led to the curating of the first edition of the Dunkerque Giganticism Art and Design Triennial. She co-curated with Héléne Guenin the exhibition at the Musée d'Art Moderne et d'Art Contemporain de Nice 'She Bam Pow POP Wizz: les amazones du Pop' (May – September 2020). She has published a collective book on the alternative scene in Los Angeles, 'In the Canyon, Revise the Canon, utopian knowledge, radical pedagogy, and artist run spaces in Southern California,' Shelter Press, Rennes, and a monograph on the artist Judy Chicago, 'To Sustain the Vision,' Shelter Press, Rennes & Villa Arson, Nice (March 2020).

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