Nancy Spero
Centre Pompidou, Paris
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Affixed to hour six of Nancy Spero’s twelve-part work *The Hours of the Night* (1974) is a picture of two faces looking at one another. Both are simplified and flattened; the face on the left is larger by about a half and is darkly coloured, while on the right is a complete grey head in profile. From the larger face there protrudes one of Spero’s trademark phallic tongues that perfectly fits into the semicircular open mouth of the smaller figure. Floating above in an unsteady yellow print reads the phrase, ‘normal love’. Though it represents one small moment in an extensive range of pictures and texts, for me the sharp humour, makeshift aesthetic, and provocative sexual and political content of this one image succinctly describes many of the major concerns of this exhibition, and indeed of Spero’s practice.

The exhibition is comprised of work produced by this challenging artist over the course of almost fifty years. Spero’s figurative and expressionistic picture making, which began in earnest in the 1950s, provides an alternative art historical model to the more polished and imposing works created by her male contemporaries. Although Spero’s pieces are often large scale, they are also delicate and fragile, alive with minute details that draw the viewer in. Whether it is the barely visible traced figures in the Paris Black Paintings (1956-60), the tiny disembodied heads that pepper *Codex Artaud* (1971-73), the typed accounts of torture that punctuate *Marduk* (1986), or the vibrant printed sections that conjoin to create *Azur* (2002), these details entice the viewer into a close examination of the pieces.

As this exhibition is largely chronological, with works made before the turn of the millennium grouped in one section and those made after in another, the development of the artist’s interests and intent is elucidated. Spero’s early lithographs explore the figure; they are monochrome and barely material. Her Paris Black Paintings are scumbled and muddy images, often looking at familial relationships from a deeply personal perspective. Because the images are intensely worked over, the figures that are the subject of the paintings are barely distinguishable from the heavily veiled background. Contrasting with this is the politically and visually explosive War Series (1966-1970), the bright colours and obscene images of which burst across the walls. Spero created this series of paintings in reaction to the Vietnam War, using scatological and sexual imagery as a vehicle to express her outrage. Created to shock, the series features paintings entitled *Sperm Bomb* (1966) and *Eagles / Victims / River of Blood* (1969). Her *Male Bomb* (1967) pictures a naked figure with two screaming faces, each with a blood red phallic tongue protruding. In place of his genitals are five nightmarishly enormous cocks headed by screaming tongues and helicopter blades. These aggressive images mock displays of potency by war makers, whilst always maintaining a vociferous protest against the effects of conflict; the repeated motif of horrified screaming faces and the blood red paint mark them as images of suffering and death.

Further into the exhibition are seven of the panels of Spero’s influential *Codex Artaud*. These are the first of her oeuvre to adopt the dominant, elongated form of her later work, in which paper is pasted together to create pieces that are extensive in both imagery and subject matter. *Codex Artaud* uses the furious writings of French dramaturg Antonin Artaud and his echoed voice marks the codex in terms of tone. The anger and anguish of these irascible works leap out at the viewer. However, the focus of this vitriol is unclear; we are shouted at in nonsensical capital letters and by ripped, broken and incomplete texts. Faces similar to those which populate *The Hours of the Night* are fixed to the pages. They allude to prehistoric imagery, and are explicitly sexual, but what they depict is violent and detached, with tongues penetrating the figures and text in a focused and...
muted orality. As with the rest of her oeuvre, the pieces are distinctly material; the papers that are pasted together crumple in their bonding, some are so fine that they are translucent, others are ripped and overlaid, emphasising the substance of the medium. These works are deeply affecting and engaging. Their palpable fury enlivens them and their scale means that they surround the viewer as they actively and determinedly grasp our attention.

Across four walls of the facing exhibition space is Azur (2002). Taken from sources that range from ancient mythology to the present day, this monumental work consists of two lines of individual panels pasted together to create an enormous and overwhelming montage of images. In 1974 Spero took the decision to create, after Cixous, a peinture féminine; a practice that would picture only women in an attempt to imagine a world in which ‘female’ was the default gender. Azur can be seen as the culmination of this experiment. The imagery dances around the room, escaping the viewer’s peripheral vision and engulfing us in a colourful and complex experimentation with the ways women are represented. The artist’s careful consideration of how a feminist practitioner can approach the problem of picturing the female body in art is evidenced by the variety and depth of the material involved here. Spero does not accept conventional images; instead she questions them, proposing on each panel a new way to figure women. Many of the images are part of the language that she has built over her career, with the serpentine figures that feature as far back as the War Series being included alongside more recent icons. Certain images are poignant, such as the that of the partisan Masha Bruskina waiting to be executed by the Nazis, some are jubilant like those of Roman athletes running across the page, others are problematic: the relatively recent image of a woman naked and tied to a chair. By combining them, Spero asks the viewer to consider the implications of the individual panels, but with a distinct tone from her earlier works. This has been described by Christopher Lyon, in his monograph on the artist, in terms of her experiment with peinture féminine. This, he claims, is the artist both playing with possibilities and also envisaging a new world. The sequential arrangement of the exhibition space highlights how the palpable fury of Spero’s early work subsides over time; the choleric tone is replaced by a sneaking and subversive brightness.

Spero’s importance has been increasingly recognised over the last decade, and this exhibition gives the visitor a good sense of her oeuvre; its substance, wit and intelligence. Her play with the materiality of artworks creates beautifully delicate artefacts that are scarred with often violent or explicit imagery. The visual language of the ugly and the carnal, which she builds over her career, challenges aesthetic expectations and conventions of picturing women. Most striking of all for a practice so orientated towards the political, however, is the vivaciousness of her works. Spero espouses humour and empathy; her tone is closer to a wry, albeit at times derisive, smile than a furrowed brow. The pieces are intense, active and playful, demanding through their vast size and political charge that the viewer engages with them both visually and conceptually. They manage the impressive feat of being both vociferous social statements, and also fascinating to the eye. Delicate, material and intricate, they resist didacticism, creating a type of social praxis that can, perhaps, only exist within the confines of art.

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