

DEREK ELLER GALLERY



Untitled, 1969, pen & ink and watercolor on paper, 14 x 10.25 inches

BARBARA NESSIM

Balancing Act: Drawings 1969-1974

November 16 – December 23, 2023

**Opening Reception: Thursday,
November 16, 6–8pm**

Derek Eller Gallery is pleased to present a solo exhibition of historic works on paper by pioneering artist Barbara Nessim. Innocent, sexy, and unapologetic, Nessim's portraits, made between 1969-1974, were depictions of enigmatic female archetypes which reflected the zeitgeist of a pivotal moment in women's history.

Barbara Nessim (b. 1939, Bronx, NY) attended Pratt, and studied with, among others, Richard Lindner, who later became a mentor and an advocate. Nessim began forging a career as a freelance illustrator in the 1960s, at a time when there were very few female illustrators in the field. Her creative

work, elegantly rendered and often metaphorical in nature, quickly stood out. Early assignments at adult magazines like *Gent*, *Nugget*, and *Escapade* permitted Nessim to make her work with minimal constraints. As time passed, her visual vocabulary expanded, more women became art directors, and Nessim's conceptual illustrations were sought out by numerous publications. *Ms. Magazine*, launched in 1971 by Nessim's friend and roommate Gloria Steinem, was one such outlet. Nessim explains, "Many of the subjects that were being addressed in magazines, including those dealing with the condition of women and women's lives in general, seem to harmonize with my style and subject matter."

This synchronicity between Nessim's practice and contemporaneous magazine content underscores the seamlessness between her fine art and much of her commercial work. Thus, it is not unexpected that as she began to develop drawings in her sketchbooks, her subjects sometimes made appearances in literary publications. For example, a 1973 article by Anthony Burgess about censorship in *The New York Times Magazine* was accompanied by one of her nubile, confrontational *WomanGirls*, genitalia and breasts scribbled out with graphite.

Following precedents like Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec, Nessim often portrayed dancers, whom she referred to as "a symbol of ultimate grace, the quintessential female." Her nearly naked

WomanGirls are objects of the gaze, presented in a theatrical setting, often with flowing ribbon-like props and the hint of a stage. They are adorned with bejeweled belts and hip jewelry, which calls attention to their often exposed, hairless genitalia. Some of them have separated hands from arms, accentuating their defenselessness and lack of control. At the same time, they balance on brightly colored, laced up toe shoes, perhaps a reference to how women are capable of making difficult day-to-day tasks seem easy. They are simultaneously virtuous and capable of danger. Their heads are upright, expression unashamed, gazing back.

Nessim broke barriers and succeeded in living an autonomous professional life. She was determined to make a living through her artwork without sacrificing her creative passions. She explains, "I strived for independence and my own identity. I only see this clearly now in retrospect." On that note, it is entirely plausible to recognize Nessim's women from 1969-74 as harbingers for a new era in gender equality. Not surprisingly, when the Equal Rights Amendment was up for ratification by Congress in 1982, Nessim was one of several women illustrators commissioned by *TIME*. As she began working on her submission, the ERA failed to pass in three states. Her final cover illustration pictured the head of a woman, the top half black and the bottom half white, with her eyes closed and head bowed, bifurcated by a staircase. A smaller full figure of a woman was placed at the bottom of the staircase looking up, determined to rise again.

Barbara Nessim has exhibited at numerous institutions worldwide, including the Louvre, The Whitney Museum, The Cooper Hewitt Museum, The Smithsonian Institute and The Norman Rockwell Museum. She has been included in recent group exhibitions at galleries such as Galerie Rodolphe Janssen, Brussels, Belgium, and Karma, New York, NY. Her work has appeared on the covers of *Time*, *Rolling Stone*, and *The New York Times Magazine* among others. Honors include the Pratt Lifetime Achievement Award (2015) and induction into the Society of Illustrators Hall of Fame (2020). Notable solo exhibitions include London's Victoria & Albert Museum (2013) and Bard Graduate Center Gallery (2015). Additionally, LA County Museum of Art (LACMA) is to acquire three of Nessim's early digital artworks for their permanent collection and will be exhibited in *Retrospective of Female Digital Art Pioneers* in December 2024. This will be Nessim's first exhibition at the gallery.

Derek Eller Gallery is located at 300 Broome Street between Eldridge Street and Forsyth Street. Hours are Tuesday - Saturday, 11am to 6pm, and by appointment. For further information please contact the gallery at 212.206.6411 or visit www.derekeller.com.