



SHARON SHAPIRO SOCIAL FABRIC



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Sharon Shapiro: *Social Fabric*

Curated by Kristen Chiacchia

Second Street Gallery, Charlottesville, Virginia

June 4 - July 23, 2021

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Front and back cover: *Falling in Line*, 2020, Oil, acrylic and collage on panel, 50 x 40 inches, detail.

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SOCIAL FABRIC | Karen Goodchild

The first hint of the works' immediacy is the titles: Home to Roost, Locking Horns, The Great Divide—all dramatic phrases Shapiro heard listening to news reports after the storming of the Capitol. While visual cues take us back to the South in the seventies, the time and place of Shapiro's childhood, the poetic juxtapositions, the space or lack of space, the direct glances or proxy viewers, bring the present into this past in a way that forces viewers to confront their life-long collusion with America's history.

Anthem, a large oil painting, incorporates all these strategies. Based on a Slim Aarons' photograph of the pool at Villa Artemis in Palm Beach, the image offers dazzling color, all the pleasure of exquisite technique, and seemingly overt symbols. I asked Shapiro what the viewer's work here is: "I like paintings to have breathing room, a flat plane, a place for traction. I'm asking the onlooker to begin constructing relationships or meaning...figurative paintings appear frozen, but they have lives that extend before and beyond ours. There was the past when they were created, the present when the viewer looks at them, and the future that holds the question 'what do they do when the viewer walks away?'. The work is in dialogue with time." Here, the crystalline world of the wealthiest 1970s white America is shown as building itself against the past, a western heroizing of Greco-Roman Antiquity. Shapiro allows bars of sky blue, aquamarine, lime green, and turquoise to fill much of the work. The villa's titular deity, Artemis, hovers in dark bronze, elevated in a round temple, in the center top. But Shapiro interrupts this cool expanse, placing another figure in the foreground, a figure who grasps our attention with her piercing gaze. Because of this gaze and the naturalistic color and modeling that animate her form, as well as the hectic swirls of the primary-colored flag that shroud her, she is the most alive part of this frozen image. However, she alone does not cast a shadow, and, unlike the gray-scale figure of the white boy next to her, her feet fail to firmly plant on the pool decking. What world does she exist in? What time? No one who has lived through the last few years can fail to read her as a foil to the looming neoclassical monument set above her.

Few of us have lived in a setting as rarified as Villa Artemis, but if we are white, our world has been privileged in ways that many of us are just now reckoning with. In Holiday Inn, three girls around the same age, models that Shapiro stages in many of these works, line up across the center of the work: Black, white, white. They are bound together by the American flag, behind which the three stand. The symbolism is complex, with every positive element reflecting meaning in a dark mirror. The girls' youth and femininity might link them in the viewer's mind with innocence, and indeed the girls have doubles in three guiltless lambs below them, yet both the white lambs and the white girls enact a dyad of exclusion, rejecting the Black other. Lambs and girls float over a swimming pool, whose message of recreation or purifying immersion is erased when considering the tortured racial history of pools in America. The girls are in the spring of their lives, a fact underscored by the work's bursting flowers. But even the cherry blossoms, ghostly photo transfers from Shapiro's photography which glues all the parts of the fractured work together, can easily be read as cotton bolls. Alongside the neoclassical architectural elements, these unanchored details force us to see the Old South haunting the new, an idea enhanced by the lack of stable composition, up or down, backward or forward in depth. With no clear space, time dissolves. When I asked her if by blurring compositional boundaries, she was reclaiming history or offering transformation in her works in a hopeful way, she said: "Transformation, yes. I don't think I have the right to reclamation. These works are my way of owning the separation that I have not only observed my entire life but also taken part in and benefited from."

Shapiro's works have become much more complex over time, moving from single figures to the multi-figure, elaborately situated





works encountered in Social Fabric. Of this shift, Shapiro says: “Now the figures live within more of a setting (in most instances) that is loaded with signifiers swimming pools, flags, lambs, chandeliers--- that convey meaning and imply a history that we are complicit in creating, a history dividing citizens by gender, race, and class.” Encountering a single piece, Shapiro suggests, “is like reading a poem. It should give the viewer enough that they consider it after they’ve stood in front of it. Seeing an entire exhibition is more challenging. It asks the viewer to make connections between individual works and choices of medium and maybe even ask “why this size for this image” “why collage instead of paint?” etc. and go deeper into the mind of the maker.”

Many of the elements of the show’s significant works are evident in Shapiro’s small collages, chronological monsters birthed from the 1960s and 70s magazine images, and the artist’s photography. Born Free and Split Level construct meaning through the same formal elements as the larger works: color vs. black and white, glances towards and away, architecture that encloses or excludes, as well as through Shapiro’s familiar vocabulary of symbols. Shapiro describes the collages as sketches of a sort, where she begins to work out ideas that surface again in the works on paper, and that perhaps distill to her oil paintings: “With the large works on paper I start with a simple small-scale collage that becomes more complex as I go along. Even though I’ve never weaved or quilted, that is what the process makes me think about patterns and layers. I like to place simple areas/passages next to more detailed areas because I’m interested in compression and expansion as states of being that we go through daily. Experimentation is part of my process, whether it’s painting, drawing, or collaging. It’s play.”

Unlike Shapiro’s collages or large works on paper, the almost lifesize painting *Falling in Line* may at first appear a simple composition. At first glance, the viewer is offered a vision of three young women, coiffed and perky, drum majorettes marching with their batons. Although they appear unified in their activity, they are woven into a timeless void, a tangerine and hot pink abstraction. Shapiro says, “we all are multiple people that are put together, right?” and that is what we see here in the first and last girl. The lead girl is Black, and two-thirds of her face is collaged from a 1969 *Life* magazine cover of model Naomi Sims titled “Black Models Take Center Stage.” Her left eye and socket reappear on the last girl, who is seemingly white. The girls share costume, activity, and even features, and yet the Black girl’s baton creates a vertical bisecting the canvas, marking her half apart. Shapiro’s past is in this line: “I grew up in a town that was almost completely segregated. The Black community grew up on one side of the railroad tracks, the white community on the other. We were in school together and played sports together, so I thought things were better than they were. But we weren’t taught anything about the enormity of the oppression and the scale, nothing about Emmett Till, for example, nothing about the Tulsa race riots.... It was still this glorified “lost cause” bullshit and southern belle prom gowns with hoop skirts. I took it in and believed all of the lies on some level. Why didn’t we question these things, and why didn’t we bear witness if we just looked around?”

Discussing *Falling in Line*, Shapiro talked about her sense of herself as an artist: “I am now comfortable with being a Southern Painter. It’s only in the last several years that I’ve come to terms with the fact that almost my entire life has been spent in West Virginia, Virginia, or Georgia...I tell stories with my work ...and I embrace the use of artifice, which is part and parcel of being Southern. [Storytelling] is how things are learned in the South...and I think fictionalizing is part of our every day too, the whole Southern gentility and Southern manners and politeness, the veneers that we paste over everything. [That] artifice can be fascinating in and of itself. [It forces us to] embody multiple people in one person...It allows us to access things in our imagination that we maybe wouldn’t be able to otherwise.” In Shapiro’s art, artifice is a double-edged sword. It holds up a mirror to polite fictions that stopped our reckoning with racial trauma. But it also allows us, as Shapiro suggests, to re-embody our past selves, learning difficult lessons. If we look around, at *Social Fabric*, at the past and the present painfully together, can we move into a different future?

Karen Goodchild is an art historian who teaches at Wofford College in South Carolina.





Stars and Stripes, 2021, Oil and aerosol on panel, 47 x 54 inches





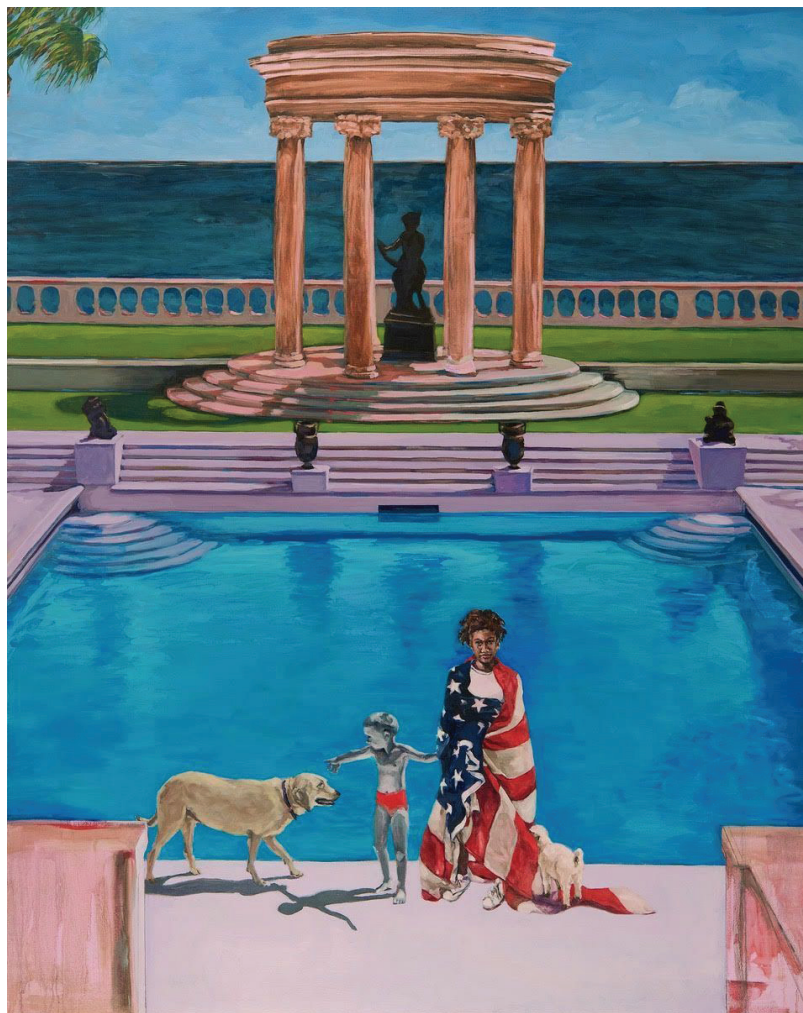
The Cleave Pageant, 2020, Oil and acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60 inches





Falling in Line, 2020, Oil, acrylic and collage on panel, 50 x 40 inches





Anthem (Once Upon a Time), 2020, Oil on panel, 50 x 40 inches, Private collection





Relic, 2020, Oil on panel, 34 x 30 inches





Holiday Inn, 2020, Graphite, colored pencil, watercolor and photo transfers on paper, 52 x 66 inches





Traveller's Rest, 2019, Watercolor, graphite and photo transfers on paper, 70 x 59 inches





Miss 1976 (Spirit), 2019, Watercolor, graphite and photo transfers on paper, 52 x 76 inches





Rolling Acres, 2021, Collage on paper, 11 x 12 inches, Private collection



Born Free, 2021, Collage on paper, 11 x 12 inches



Split Level, 2021, Collage on paper, 11 x 12 inches, Private collection



Home to Roost, 2021, Collage on paper, 11 x 12 inches





My paintings portray opposing forces, subject matter, both gentle and abrasive, fantastic and real, utopian and dystopian. Chronicling the complexities of growing up female in America, I present a contemporary viewpoint on femininity and feminism.

I utilize visual disruption to create a curiously discordant scene that breaks open the viewers' relationship to the subject juxtaposing the frivolity of fashion with the significance of pattern and color. Beauty serves as a temptation for the viewer. Upon closer inspection, cracks in the artifice reveal obscured narratives and hidden meanings. I confront the past alongside the superfluity and temporality of the current 24-hour news cycle. Inspired by personal events, local lore, and pop-cultural references, I present the viewer a world, both private and universal, in which time coalesces and collapses.

My work results from a continuing endeavor to establish a sense of place in a world where meaning shifts and memory fails. Using nostalgia to attack and revere these recollections simultaneously, I challenge the viewer to differentiate between mythology and history. I question how these roles play out in larger cultural narratives.

-Sharon Shapiro

Since 1995, Sharon Shapiro's paintings and works on paper have been exhibited in numerous venues including solo shows in Atlanta, Chicago, Boston, and Los Angeles. In 2009 the University of Central Missouri published a hardbound catalog featuring her work to accompany an exhibition examining female identity in contemporary art. Her work has been featured in three issues of New American Paintings, and as the cover image for Volume 39. Shapiro has been a resident at Jentel Artist Residency, Banner, WY; Ragdale Foundation, Lake Forest, IL; the Virginia Center for Creative Arts (VCCA), Amherst, VA; the Ucross Foundation, Sheridan, WY; and the Hambidge Center for Arts and Sciences, Rabun Gap, GA is a 2002 and 2018 recipient of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Fellowship. In 2020 she was awarded the Atelier Focus Fellowship at AIR Serenbe Institute in Georgia. Her work is included in several prominent collections throughout the United States, such as The Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia (MOCAGA), Atlanta, GA, and the Tullman Collection, Chicago, IL. Shapiro holds an MFA from the Maine College of Art (MECA) and a BFA from the Atlanta College of Art. She currently lives and works in Charlottesville, VA, and shows her work with {Poem88} Gallery in Atlanta and Garvey|Simon in New York City.

