

Meliksetian MB Briggs

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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Aura Rosenberg's Seriously Playful Art of Collaboration

It takes two venues to contain diverse work from 50 years, connecting sexuality, childhood and her relationships with famous friends embedded in her art.



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Aura Rosenberg's first major survey, "[What Is Psychedelic](#)," fills the Mishkin Gallery of Baruch College in Manhattan and spreads across Pioneer Works in Red Hook, Brooklyn. It takes this much space to draw a thread through 50 years of her [art](#): witty mash-ups of classicism, op-art, photography, abstract painting, appropriation and — especially — freewheeling collaborations with fellow artists, including Laurie Simmons, Louise Lawler, John Baldessari and Mike Kelley.

"I hear you've been talking to my friends," Rosenberg teased at her Pioneer Works opening, looking every bit the wry New York artist in a black blazer, black pants and white sneakers. It was true. I'd been on the phone with them all week — friends who are also her gallerists, bandmates, family, collaborators all.

"Everybody knows Aura," Alaina Claire Feldman, the show's curator and director of the Mishkin Gallery, said. (In fact, Rosenberg was a witness at Feldman's marriage.) "But not everybody has seen the depth of her work." Until now. The exhibition includes stoner paintings from the 1970s, an R-rated ceramic tile made with the artist [Mary Heilmann](#) in the '80s; a sun-gold photo portrait from 1996 of Louise Lawler's son, Felix, made up by his mother like a wistful clown; chunks of marble decoupage with monochrome pornography, from 2019. "It looks like a

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group show,” Feldman acknowledged, but “behind every artwork, there’s 40 or 50 more in the series.”



Aura Rosenberg, “Louise Lawler/Felix (from Who Am I? Where Am I? What Am I?),” 1996. Credit...via Aura Rosenberg

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Rosenberg was born in 1949 in New York City. She grew up in Washington Heights, a neighborhood nicknamed Frankfurt on the Hudson for its German-Jewish community. “My parents were separated,” she told me. “My mother liked to paint, but my father was the glamour figure.” Her father had fled the Nazis in ’39; he set up shop as a designer furniture-maker, and would take Rosenberg to meet clients like Mark Rothko. “I’m sitting in a chair that he made,” she said. “It’s the only comfortable piece of furniture in our house.”

As an undergraduate at the City College of New York, and later Sarah Lawrence College, Rosenberg painted in a German expressionist style. “I just lucked out,” she said, because the person teaching her survey course in art history was Marcia Tucker, founding curator of the New Museum, who nudged her toward the fledgling [Whitney Independent Study Program](#) in 1970. Rosenberg tells the story of her artistic breakthrough, or breakdown: Richard Artschwager, a visiting artist, indicated one of Rosenberg’s washy canvases and asked aloud why anyone would make such a thing. “The room started spinning,” she remembers, “because until then all my instruction had been more like, ‘Put a little more red down here.’ But this was questioning the very basis of what I was doing.”

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She kept asking that question of herself. In 1973, while earning an M.A. at Hunter College, she painted what is now the oldest work in the survey, and its namesake: pinwheels of flower-power purple and red pigment built up around the phrase, “What Is Psychedelic,” lettered in rough, teal-stained canvas.



Aura Rosenberg, “The Dialectical Porn Rock,” 1989-1993. A photo from the project, where the artist glued magazine images of pornography to found stones in Berlin, is on view at Pioneer Works. Credit...via Aura Rosenberg

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Rosenberg met her husband, the artist John Miller, at Hallwalls, a gallery in Buffalo, N.Y., run by the [Pictures Generation](#) power couple Cindy Sherman and Robert Longo. They didn't start dating until 1986, when they connected at a Whitney Independent Study Program alumni event at the museum. "There was a country western band playing in the courtyard," she remembers. "We danced all night together."

Their daughter, Carmen, was born in 1989. In 1991, her center of gravity shifted again when Miller accepted a fellowship in Berlin. The war remained in living memory and Rosenberg was apprehensive about moving to Germany. "But we made a lot of friends quickly," Miller said, "and we've been back every year for 30 years."

Stirred by the newly reunified city and its dark legacy, Rosenberg began a project based on "Berlin Childhood Around 1900," a memoir by the philosopher Walter Benjamin (German Jewish, like the artist), written while fleeing the Nazis. Rosenberg began taking Carmen to the places Benjamin describes and photographing them. This communion with a dead writer grew to involve his living descendants when Benjamin's granddaughter, Chantal Benjamin, saw Rosenberg's work in an exhibition. They became friends. With the Cologne-based artist Frances Scholz, they're producing a series of videos set to passages from

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Benjamin's book read by Lais Benjamin Campos, the writer's great-granddaughter.



Parts of this somber project are on view in “What is Psychedelic” but so is the irreverent sculpture “Stashbox for Benjamin,” a small pipe Rosenberg set in a niche carved into a copy of Benjamin’s book about his experiences with hashish. People who know Benjamin as a heady Frankfurt-school philosopher driven to suicide by the Nazis might not know his lively, cannabis-curious side. Rosenberg draws out both, pairing sweetness with despair.

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“The material’s not that playful,” the performance artist Michael Smith said of Rosenberg’s work, “but there’s a sense of innocence.” Smith was the first participant in one of her most intimate series, “Head Shots,” for which over 50 men agreed to have their faces photographed in the throes of sexual release (or to fake it). “I’m pretty prudish,” Smith said, “but I can mug it. And I happen to have a plastic Santa outfit.” The unsettling image of an orgasmic Kriss Kringle is at Mishkin, alongside sweaty portraits of Mike Kelley, Jim Shaw, Miller (with Rosenberg’s feet in the photo). There are men laughing and men dying of AIDS. Rosenberg charmed them all into showing their vulnerability.



Aura Rosenberg, "Head Shots," 1993-2017. The artist was capturing the visible expression of sexual desire --the moment of orgasm on camera. Whether they were giving her a real expression or a sublime fakery, before a witness, is anyone's guess.

Credit...via Aura Rosenberg

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“She’s not objectifying these men,” says the critic and curator Bob Nickas, a friend since the mid-80s. “That’s where community comes in. Think of the artists who agreed to participate in that project: Tony Oursler, Hunter Reynolds, [John Baldessari](#) — it shows how important collaboration is to her work.”

That same spirit is crucial to “[Who Am I? What Am I? Where Am I?](#),” a series of portraits of children costumed by other artists. The idea formed in the photo booth that Rosenberg ran at her daughter’s school fairs. She found children’s faces to be beautiful surfaces for painting. “Could I force people to take face painting seriously by doing it with serious artists?” she wondered. “It would be an opportunity for children, who love to experiment with identity. And for artists to play — which is harder than it sounds.”

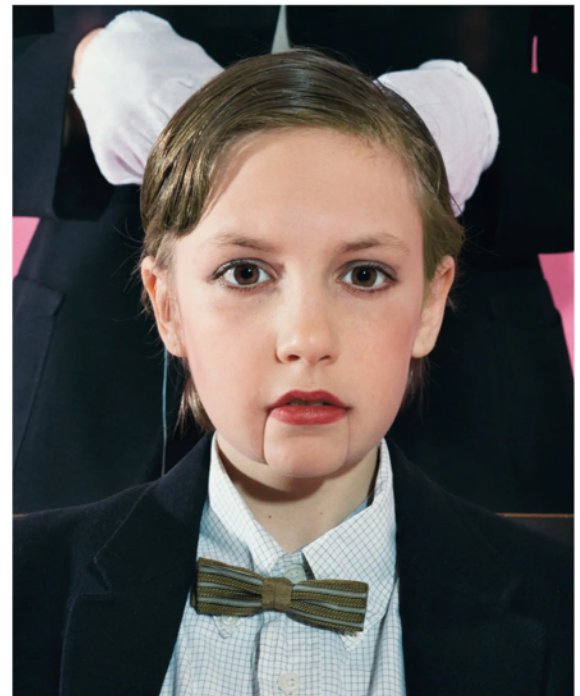
The face painting project has drawn the most flak from critics, who charged that the portraits exploited children and exposed them to mature themes. Models beg to differ. The actor and writer Lena Dunham, daughter of the artists Laurie Simmons and Carroll Dunham, calls the day she dressed up as a ventriloquist dummy for Rosenberg’s camera the best day of her life. She writes in the exhibition’s catalog that Rosenberg “turns children, both so unaware and so hyper-attuned, into both props and creators, objects and fully formed creatures.” Carmen Rosenberg-Miller, the artist’s daughter, posed for the first portrait with

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temporary tattoos of butterflies and teardrops applied by Kiki Smith. (With a Ph.D. in art history, Rosenberg-Miller is now teaching a seminar at Princeton about [artists and their models.](#))



Aura Rosenberg was the photographer; Kiki Smith the artist who painted the face of Rosenberg's daughter Carmen, from "Who Am I? What Am I? Where Am I?," 1996-98. Credit...via Aura Rosenberg



Aura Rosenberg, Laurie Simmons/Lena from "Who Am I? What Am I? Where Am I?," 1996-98. Lena Dunham, painted by her mother as a ventriloquist dummy for Rosenberg's camera, called it the best day of her life. Credit...via Aura Rosenberg

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“I remember having a lot of fun on the photographs with Dan Graham,” she recalled. “Dan was so playful, and his work thinks so much about children and childhood.”

Sometimes, the game got dark — like the time Mike Kelley made her up as a goth prom queen. When Rosenberg-Miller looked in the mirror, she said, she didn’t recognize herself. “It felt like my identity had been completely erased.”

Her mother, speaking in her spare SoHo studio — where hunks of stone from a previous project, with magazine pages of pornography decoupage to them, were scattered on the hardwood floor — explained, “In that moment, I really had to decide if I was the photographer or if I was the mom. The photographer won out.”

Rosenberg said she thought about titling her survey something descriptive and stately, like “Five Decades.” But the more time you spend tracing the relationships embedded in her work, the more all-encompassing the ambiguous, plaintive declaration “What Is Psychedelic” becomes.

“When I was 22 and making that painting,” the artist said, “I was thinking more about an optical experience that would be comparable to getting high.” Now, she

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thinks of psychedelia as a way meaning emerges from the world. “It’s a process that artists go through when they’re making their work,” she said, “when you start to see connections that you hadn’t planned on. Those connections happen between works, but they also happen between the actual material of your life. You start to see your life in an expanded way.”



Aura Rosenberg in Red Hook, near Pioneer Works. Credit...Tonje Thilesen for The New York Times

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What Is Psychedelic: Aura Rosenberg

Through June 11 at [Pioneer Works](#), 159 Pioneer Street, Brooklyn; 718-596-3001,
[pioneerworks.org](#).

Through June 9 at Mishkin Gallery at Baruch College, 135 East 22nd Street,
Manhattan; 646-660-6653.