INDOMITABLE SPIRIT

JUANITA MCNEELY

BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY
WOMEN’S STUDIES RESEARCH CENTER
KNIZNICK GALLERY

JUNE 5-OCT. 8, 2014
The Women’s Studies Research Center presents a survey of works by feminist artist Juanita McNeely spanning more than 40 years. Unabashed in her vision of woman that is both sensual and macabre, McNeely portrays her monumental figures with a visceral dexterity.

McNeely moved to New York City in 1967 in the midst of the rising tide of second-wave feminism. That same year, abortion was made legal in Britain, President Johnson’s affirmative action policy expanded to cover discrimination based on sex, Valerie Solanas published her infamous “SCUM Manifesto,” and women’s liberation groups continued to spring up all over the country.

Through being an artist, McNeely had already discovered what was important to her as a woman in the late 20th century. Activism, speaking out and the awareness of her own female body have always been at the core of her practice.

*Indomitable Spirit* embodies all the energy, courage and forthrightness that it took to challenge how the world views women and their roles in society. Bold and outspoken, McNeely tackles the taboos that surround women’s bodies. She is uncompromising in depicting the universal themes of life, death, blood and childbirth, and draws in the viewer with unreserved dynamism.

—Susan Metrican, *curator*
Even during her childhood in St. Louis, Juanita McNeely knew she wanted to go to art school. In junior high, she would take notes on discussions of Shakespeare’s plays by illustrating the action and feeling with dynamic nude figures, which got her into trouble despite their lack of genitalia. Figures were already at the heart of her practice. She also knew that any obstacles would not deter her — if anything, they would spur her on.

A few years after completing graduate school at Southern Illinois University, she made her way to New York City just as feminist art was emerging. Of joining women’s exhibitions and groups, McNeely says, “I felt immediate love and at home. We women artists were no longer alone.” Her subject matter led her to participate in the Fight Censorship Group, founded in 1973 by Anita Steckel, which also included artists Judith Bernstein, Louise Bourgeois, Martha Edelheit, Eunice Golden, Joan Semmel, Anne Sharpe and Hannah Wilke. These artists created a new language of the body in erotic, personal or sexual artwork from a point of view other than through men’s eyes. The group spoke out through lectures, the media, including radio and television broadcasts, and joint exhibitions. McNeely still lives in New York City with her husband, the sculptor, writer and set designer Jeremy Lebensohn.

McNeely has had 24 solo exhibitions, the most recent in New York City at the Mitchell Algus Gallery in Chelsea. This spring, her work was on display in Painters of Modern Life at the Box Gallery in Los Angeles. She has exhibited at the Queens Museum, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague, among other venues. McNeely has received numerous awards, including the National Academy Museum’s Ellin P. Speyer Prize and honors from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, the Gottlieb Foundation and the New York State Council on the Arts. She is also on the Honor Roll of Women Artists of the Second Wave Feminist Revolution, 1966-1980.

Her work is part of the collection of the Saint Louis Art Museum, the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts and the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City, among others. It has been reviewed in the New York Times, ARTnews, Arts Magazine, Art in America and The Nation, with featured articles in New York Magazine and the Woman’s Art Journal. The latter also included a biographical account in the Fall/Winter 2011 issue, one of many citations in feminist scholarship. Her work can be seen permanently in the two primary archives of feminist artists in this country: the Brooklyn Museum’s Feminist Art Base, an online archive, and the virtual exhibition “40 Years of Women Artists” of Rutgers University’s Institute for Women and Art.

“If you lined up all my work, you would have my life. My work has always been from the standpoint of a woman: dealing with life, birth, sexuality, abortion, fear of death and the tremble of life.” —Juanita McNeely

ABOUT THE ARTIST
BY SHARON FINNEGAN, PARSONS THE NEW SCHOOL FOR DESIGN
The female body — reclining, splayed, crouching — is the principal subject of Juanita McNeely’s art. Often the nude women she depicts are self-portraits in which she documents the events of her life, including illness, pain, bouts of anger and moments of serenity. McNeely, born in 1936, is a force to be reckoned with among contemporary artists; her will to paint has survived many traumatic experiences. In recent years, she has put aside her teaching of art, travels abroad, participation in activist groups and other activities that kept her in touch with her feminist artist allies. By sheer force of will, McNeely continues to paint her large, bold and highly colored compositions. Even confined to a wheelchair, McNeely finds the energy to create her oversized images of women, sometimes struggling, always exuberant.

Growing up in St. Louis, McNeely spent time at the St. Louis Art Museum and was profoundly influenced by works she saw there by Paul Gauguin, Henri Matisse and the German Expressionists. She first studied art at Washington University in St. Louis, where she received encouragement along with a serious grounding in art. More important, she felt she was taken seriously as an artist. The human figure was and has remained McNeely’s most constant subject, despite veering away early on from using a model to draw instead from her own imagination.

While attending graduate school at Southern Illinois University, McNeely widened her horizons when she worked on a “Happening” with Allan Kaprow. During a brief stint at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, she discovered how much she loved teaching, but her heart was set on New York. In 1967, she moved and made a permanent home there, eventually settling down to live and work in the East Village.

The year is important, as it coincided with a time when women were joining forces to convince galleries and museums that their art was worthy of exhibiting, and McNeely was not shy about raising her voice. She befriended other feminists and participated in groups such as Women Artists in Revolution (W.A.R.), the Figurative Alliance and the Fight Censorship Group, which was formed to find greater acceptance for nude and erotic images made by women from a woman’s point of view.

The life experiences of women have been central to McNeely’s art. In addition to her paintings and prints — which often consist of large, multipanel series — she has created painted ceramics and elegant all-white figurative studies in cut paper. Her work is not for the faint of heart and can be difficult to look at and absorb. At times, her paintings have focused on taboo subjects, including sexual encounters, menstruation, childbirth, illness, desperation and death. The critic Lawrence Alloway, reviewing her work in The Nation in April 1978, described it brilliantly. He wrote, “Juanita McNeely pursues an iconography in which she expresses the autonomy of fear and pain in creatures caught in extreme situations. She paints the human body like a stranded starfish dying in the sun.”

The first of McNeely’s many encounters with serious illness and pain came during her first year of college. Since then, they have come with a terrible frequency. It may come as no surprise then that McNeely’s expressionistic images come close in spirit to those of Frida Kahlo, who, through her paintings, shared her suffering that resulted from polio and then from a serious streetcar accident at the age of 15.

For Juanita McNeely, there is a primitive, almost savage aspect to her distorted images of women. Full of emotion and an unbridled energy, her subjects can appear as frightened or tormented animals, but beyond the pain, the artist suggests the triumph of the human spirit. McNeely herself has survived cancer, spinal injuries, accidents and other medical trauma. Even so, with her 2009 Free Figure Series: Life, the artist persists in making her monumental paintings despite any physical impediments. These images are not easy to digest, but they are genuine. Her paintings examine the most difficult experiences of a woman’s life, but Survival is Juanita McNeely’s ultimate message.

“Many times, life’s forces are more powerful than we are, and yet we can face them if we have a standing ground that is our own, that we’ve set for ourselves. And from that standing ground we can accept whatever happens to us in our lives.” —JUANITA MCNEELY
Window Shadow: Reflections
1974-75
oil on linen
84" x 72"

Bird's Perch
(Almost a Woman)
2011-12
oil on linen
52" x 42"
“My imagery actually comes out of what’s happening to me in my life. When someone said, ‘You can no longer paint large,’ which is how I think and work, there was no way I was ever going to accept that as a reality. After being told that I could not do anything but small paintings physically from then on, I actually did a 13-panel painting that was 6 feet tall and 52 feet long that surrounded my whole studio.” —JUANITA MCNEELY
Beaded In  
2011  
oil on linen  
48 x 40" 

Woman and Dog  
2011  
oil on linen  
36" x 36"
“It was about our work being censored, but it was about all work being censored, the idea that there were things you couldn’t do as a woman, visually, whether performance, sculpture, painting, whatever, and that men did it all the time, but they did it with their point of view.”

—JUANITA MCNEELY
Beth
1970
watercolor on lithograph
27” x 23”

Nothing
2008-11
oil on linen
50” x 40”
**Umbrella & Scarves**
underglaze on clay
17” h., 45” dia.

**Behind the Screen?**
underglaze on clay
19” h., 45” dia.

**Black Umbrellas?**
underglaze on clay
22” h., 9 1/2” dia.
Delicate Balance
1970
oil on linen
84” x 60”

Chameleon
1976
oil on linen
70” x 70”
The Women’s Studies Research Center at Brandeis University is an innovative, interdisciplinary research facility of scholars, students and faculty who study gender issues and women’s lives.

Founded in 2001 by Shulamit Reinharz, PhD’77, the Jacob Potofsky Chair of Sociology, the WSRC is the home of:

- The Scholars Program, a program comprising 85 scholars studying gender issues in an interdisciplinary environment
- The Student-Scholar Partnership Program, which pairs undergraduate Brandeis University students with WSRC scholars for semester-long research assistantships
- The Arts Program, which oversees the Kniznick Gallery, a unique exhibition space devoted to artwork by or about women, as well as the permanent art collection and scholarly art projects at the WSRC
- The Hadassah-Brandeis Institute, a research institute that develops fresh ways of thinking about Jews and gender

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Special thanks to the previous curator Michele L’Houeux for initiating the exhibition and to Sharyn Finnegan for co-organizing the exhibition.

brandeis.edu/WSRC

PHOTOS: Jean Vong Photography

COVER IMAGE: Walking (detail), 1980-2011, oil on linen, 84" x 72"

INSIDE COVER PHOTO: Juanita McNeely, Adams Street Studio, New York, June 1967