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Susan Kaprov: Conversations on Art, Technology and The Space Age

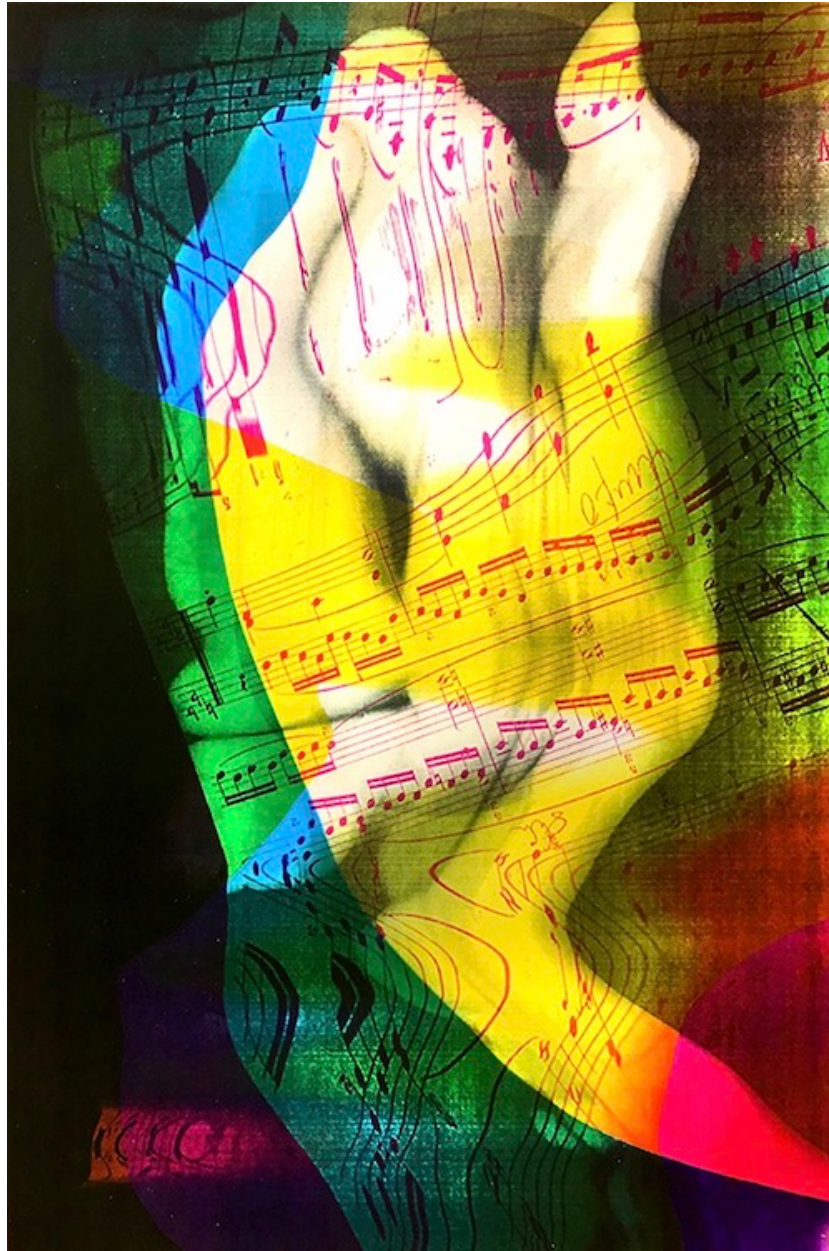
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MARCH 1, 2023 BY JILL CONNER

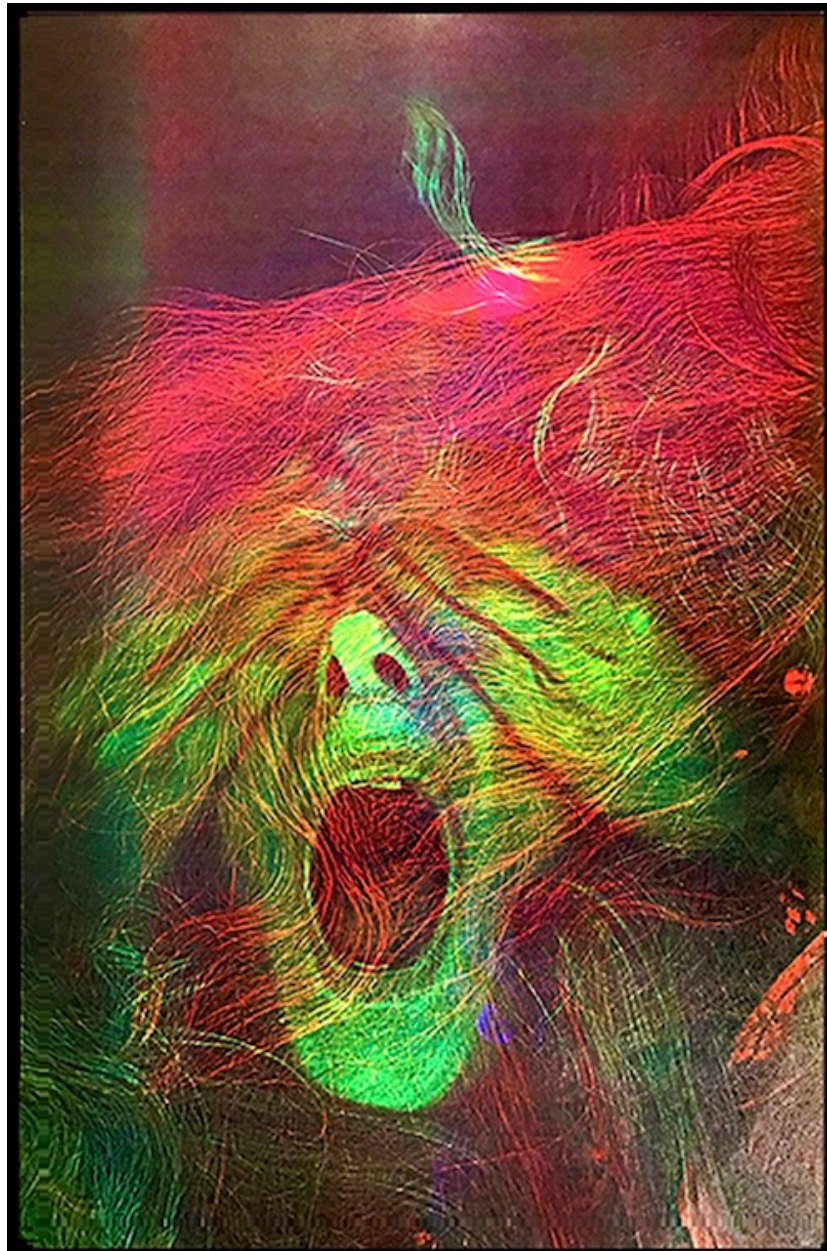
by Jill Conner

In some respects Susan Kaprov's art has remained elusive, until now. Her experimental photomontages are included in the permanent collections of museums such as the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Brooklyn Museum of Art. Susan Kaprov was born in 1949 and grew up in New York City when the verve of women's liberation and the haze of the sexual revolution continued to circulate. Shortly before finishing high school, *The Feminine Mystique*, by Betty Friedan, and *The Group*, by Mary McCarthy, both appeared in 1963, and Elizabeth Hardwick had co-founded The New York Review of Books while The New York Times remained on a 4-month strike. When Susan Kaprov received a Bachelor of Science degree from the City University of New York in 1970, Kate Millet's groundbreaking book, *Sexual Politics*, was published. A new realism was flourishing throughout contemporary art at this time.

After two MacDowell residencies in 1971 and 1973, Kaprov began preliminary work on her first series of unique prints. In 1975 the artist began making experimental photomontages with a Xerox 6500 Color Copier, titled *Self Portraits*, which transformed the machine's inherent properties of photomontage to invent new attributes that were multi-layered, random, and unpredictable. These prints were soon made available at the Rosa Esman Gallery and the Marian Goodman Gallery. Each of these images consisted of a predominantly black background that reflected [the artist's dream-like visage](#): closed eyes, bountiful wave-like hair, hands, and found objects. While the human body remained a source of viable subject matter, Kaprov's cutting-edge compositions appeared both ambiguous and erotically charged.



Susan Kaprov, *The Energy of Music*, 1975. (Canon Laser photomontage).
Collection: Whitney Museum of American Art



Susan Kapor, *Green Scream*, 1975. (Canon Laser photomontage).
Collection: Whitney Museum of American Art

When these self-portraits debuted to the public in her first solo exhibition at the Vassar College Art Gallery in 1976, Peter Frank identified Susan Kaprov as one of the most successful artists in the medium at that time: “The forms created by moving the photographed objects during the process, the ability of the machine to print multiple exposures, the rich range of eerie, incandescent colors,” Frank wrote, “all have provoked Kaprov to establish a technique that is part careful manipulation, and part surrender to the natural mechanical (or, if you would, unnatural) tendencies of the apparatus”(1). A small selection of prints from this exhibition were purchased by a trustee of the Museum of Modern Art and were included in a group exhibition at the museum titled, “Print Acquisitions 1973-1976.”

In 1978, the Terry Dintenfass Gallery hosted Kaprov’s first solo exhibition in New York City where she presented a new series titled *White Light Drawings*, which were works on board produced with ink, gouache and wax. When this body of work was exhibited at the Hayden Planetarium later that year, Ellen Lubell described the cumulative characteristic of Kaprov’s art, “The subtle color she produces conveys a great spatial illusion which, combined with the black ground, creates a true source of light energy. These are colors glowing in the dark, illuminating the blackness instead of reflecting off the whiteness of general illumination”(2).

Throughout the late 1970s, Susan Kaprov was also part of the weekly soirées that were hosted at the Alloway House on West 20th Street, the home of Lawrence Alloway, the Curator of Contemporary Art for the Guggenheim Museum, and his wife Sylvia Sleight, a noted painter. Artists such as Robert Rauschenberg, John Cage, Nancy Spero and Leon Golub were regular visitors. Along with Paul Romano and John Perreault, Susan Kaprov modeled for Sylvia Sleight. Kaprov recalls, “Although the spirit of Studio 54 loomed large, like a shadow over the ongoing soirees, we were still able to discover new art forms and participate in the free exchange of ideas.” Coincidentally, Elizabeth Hardwick’s essay titled “Militant Nudes” (1971) criticized Andy Warhol and Paul Morrissey for their disregard of the human figure as seen in *Trash* (1971): “Something pitiless and pathological has seeped into youth’s love of itself, its body, its politics”(3). The derelict glamor espoused by Warhol had nothing to do with the larger art community that remained prolific despite near invisibility. “Studio 54 was a ghost,” Kaprov confirms. “There was not one art movement, as art historians would have you believe. Instead, there were parallel art movements.”



Susan Kaprov, *Precambrian Waltz*, 1996. (Color Xerox collage & photomontage on aluminum).
Commissioned by Port Authority of New York & New Jersey.

While reflecting on the early phase of her career, Susan Kaprov says, “Photomontage wasn’t new. Xerox and other copy machine as a medium of photographic innovation was new! With this advanced color copier, I was able to overlap images in unforeseen ways to create luminous transparencies and multiple exposures that spontaneously appeared. When I wasn’t creating experimental photomontages and color xeroxes, I painted using oil, raw pigments, encaustic and other materials.” The 1970s were decadent, and Susan Kaprov’s self-portraits have continued to live as emblems of the era, currently stowed away in multiple museum collections. In 1981 the Brooklyn Museum of Art acquired Kaprov’s first monumental artwork titled, “20th Century Dilemma,” a two-part installation that appeared in the museum’s Grand Lobby. In this piece, hundreds of color Xerox prints on rag-board were mounted on two aluminum panels, each measuring 10-feet high by 14-feet wide.

This was followed by a public art installation at the Port Authority Technical Center, titled “Precambrian Waltz” (1987). The prints for this piece involved a layered process that loosely referenced the construction of the Twin Towers by incorporating archival photographs montaged within areas of pure color. Then came the Space Age. In 1988, for *Florida Today*, Brian Bixler highlighted Kaprov’s work titled “Flight Out of Time,” which was included in a group exhibition at the Kennedy Space Center titled *The Artist and The Space Shuttle*. By 1989 Kaprov had moved on to produce public art installations for a number of prominent organizations. The vestige of Second Wave Feminism was slipping away, taking the realism of the 1970s with it. In March 1999, Oklahoma’s International Photography Hall of Fame and Museum presented Susan Kaprov’s work in a historic exhibition titled *Out of Obscura*. Curator Lori Oden presented over 40 photo-based works by women artists from the 19th and 20th centuries.

In 2003, Kaprov unveiled “[Urban Helix](#),” an 8-foot tall by 55-foot wide installation of fired enamel on glass, commissioned by the Polytechnic Institute of University of New York University at Brooklyn’s MetroTech Center. Kaprov states, “This work merges graphic design, photography and painting.” After seeing this installation in person, art critic John Perreault wrote, “The theme of fractals and other scientific images totally fits the situation and the space. It’s a breathtaking piece”(4). While her most recent public art project can be found along the bus stops in Las Vegas, Kaprov has continued creating two new photomontage and mixed-media series titled, “The Dense City,” (2018) and “Gardens & Galaxies,” (2016-2022): “My new work encompasses climate change and the evolution of the anonymous, densely-populated, global and urban environment.” Both of these themes take a renewed look at the traditional genres of landscape and still-life.



Susan Kaprov, *The Dense City: Eternal Night*, 2018. (Oil, wax pencil, graphite, ink, archival pigment print)



Susan Kaprov, *The Dense City: Magenta Sky*, 2018. (Oil, wax pencil, graphite, ink, archival pigment print)

The prints within both series transform representations of earth-bound flora along with iconic views of imaginary, eerily-glowing cities that are all embedded within extreme, vibrant contrasts. The city in particular becomes an unknown, otherworldly environment. “Each of these prints is completely unique,” states Kaprov. “I use wax pencil, oil stick and ink to further accentuate different details. In time, we see that everything changes.” “The Dense City,” and “Gardens & Galaxies,” were first exhibited at Artists Studios Projects in 2021 followed by a gallery exhibition titled “Color Play,” that appeared at Garvey Simon Projects.

As an undergraduate student, Susan Kaprov studied biology, environmental science and art history: “Abstract Expressionism was a movement that I had no affiliation with.” Lawrence Alloway described Susan Kaprov as, “a thematic and conceptual explorer who uses her studio as a ‘laboratory,’ and her work as a series of ‘research projects,’ where self-imposed ideas are explored in great depth”(5). John Cage, moreover, was a long-time friend who encouraged Kaprov’s natural inclination toward experimentation and randomness, “Being curious is part of my job. I try to embrace life with its unsettling ambiguities and uncertainties while experiencing through art the grandeur of universal connectedness.” When looking back at the saturation of pluralism and the rapid evolution of the art market, art historians face layers of challenges. Many narratives, however, remain uncovered — such as the art of Susan Kaprov.



Susan Kaprov, *Gardens & Galaxies: Swarm*, 2020. (Oil, wax pencil, graphite, ink, archival pigment print).
This essay is based upon a series of conversations between the author and artist.

Endnotes:

- 1.) Peter Frank, "Susan Kaprov," *Womanart Journal*, Fall 1976, 28-29.
- 2.) Ellen Lubell, "Susan Kaprov at the Brooklyn Museum," *Art in America*, December 1981, 146.
- 3.) Elizabeth Hardwick, "Militant Nudes," *The Collected Essays of Elizabeth Hardwick*, *The New York Review of Books*, 2018, 244.
- 4.) John Perreault, "Susan Kaprov: Captivating the Public Sphere," *NY Arts Magazine*, Vol. 8, No. 11/12, 2003.
- 5.) Susan Kaprov, private journal.