

## **Cooperative Consciousness, A.I.R. Artists at Kochi**

As the pioneer women's cooperative gallery in the United States, for forty-five years A.I.R. (Artists in Residence, Inc.) has pursued a crucial mission of providing an "open exchange of ideas and risk-taking by women artists in order to provide support and visibility."<sup>1</sup> From its inception, A.I.R. has offered a much-needed professional exhibition platform as well as mentorship and networking opportunities for women artists. Considered progressive—even radical and subversive—from the outset, A.I.R. has reshaped the entire artistic landscape by working towards the greater visibility and inclusion of women artists. As feminist practice and theory have evolved, A.I.R. has reflected and reacted to changing times, needs, and the perspectives of multiple generations of artist members. The artists in *Cooperative Consciousness*, through their diverse creative practices, insights and life experiences, demonstrate the continued value of community and fellowship in an increasingly market-driven art scene that often fosters and encourages competitiveness and isolation.

A spirit of experimentation and diversity has always characterized the work of A.I.R. artists, who take sole responsibility for curating and installing their exhibitions. Along with more traditional mediums, A.I.R. artists have contributed to groundbreaking art movements initially not deemed suitable for commercial galleries, such as environmental art, earthworks, performance, and the use of ephemeral and unconventional materials. Some of the many empowering benefits that members cite include not being bound by the tastes of a gallery director, the confinements of a gallery "style" or the constraints of commercial viability. Membership in A.I.R. has offered valuable professional career skills in gallery administration, members serve on the board as well as numerous committees centered around the continued operation of the gallery. They have opportunities to take on the role of curator for exhibitions of members and invitational shows of non-members, learning the logistics of traveling and installing group exhibitions, organizing cultural events and using social media to promote exhibitions and activities.

*Cooperative Consciousness* is responsive to what Sudarshan Shetty proposes in his curatorial statement – varied and fluid approaches to knowledge through making, performance, imagination, multiplicity, and tradition. His premise that the gap between "the real and the mythic, the seen and unseen, the hidden and the experienced" is illusory, opens up the possibility of multiple responses and pathways for encountering the multi-media and multi-dimensional works of this multi-generational group of women artists. Their work offers a generous inquiry into presence and identity that is both personal and social, intimate and expansive, absorbing and interpreting experiences of the world, reflected back through experimental processes and tactile, formal and symbolic uses of materials. Several themes, motifs and processes emerge that create connecting currents among the works of art in this exhibition. Viewing each in company with the others propels a collective process where each work might respond to and inform another in a continuous conversation.

**Louise McCagg, Nancy Morrow, Jayanthi Moorthy, Alisa Henriquez, Julia Kim Smith and Jody Joldersma** evoke unique and universal, unfixed, fluid, and shifting senses of personal, social or cultural identity. A fragmentation of the internal space and boundaries of their images often amplifies the potent and poetic issues and experiences they respond to and address.

Describing herself as "an artist of a generation that saw feminist art proliferate," **Louise McCagg's** cast paper life-masks mirror the growing ecumenical and democratic spirit of religious and cultural inclusion that characterized the decade when A.I.R. Gallery was launched. "Classical in method and contemporary in its political and social inquiry," her work multiplies, merges and magnifies the individuality of unique portraits with the sense of universality among diverse cultures.

The layered flickering line and translucent surfaces of **Nancy Morrow's** paintings on paper echo the "blurred boundaries of personhood" she movingly describes. As an intimate witness to her husband's late stages of dementia, her empathy with his increasingly fragile grasp on identity extends to imagining and visualizing of moments of clarity, and his fragmented, flickering interaction with his "heroic, hidden and devoted" caregivers. The luminosity of Morrow's work reflects an acceptance of the gradual but total loss of self and the transient but hopeful moments between.

**Jayanthi Moorthy's** versatile works explore "personal and cultural identity and their contemporary interpretations." Relocating to New York from India over a decade ago, Moorthy translates cultural and religious references from India into her creative practice. In her drawings she uses quotidian and ephemeral materials such as rice flour, sand and spices. In her painting *In & Out* she creates a woven texture on the canvas by layering acrylics which resemble threads. Moorthy's works can be viewed through the simultaneous lens of ancient and modern, east and west.

The striking totem-like structure of **Alisa Henriquez's** *Makeover Culture Disfigured #5* remixes and layers appropriated and refashioned images from popular and glamour culture. "Exploring multiple histories, various beliefs and contradictory notions of self, "her concepts and imagery are drawn from personal experience as well as historic and mythological representations of women." Shiny lozenge-like shapes forming the tower's glitzy surfaces suggest pills or cosmetic containers, attracting through their consumer flash, but warning through wary eyes at various vantage points.

**Julia Kim Smith's** investigations of "racism, sexism, misrepresentation and underrepresentation" inform her photographic series, *With Bansky: Great Artists Steal*. In images eliciting both impending threat and dreadful humor, a faceless man in a hoodie inhabits domestic spaces with woman calmly performing daily chores. Upon finding that the hooded figure is a stand-in for the artist Bansky, the identity of anonymous celebrity is paired with one of accommodation, as Bansky's host appropriates his identity at the service of her "new social memes and street art for the internet."

Informed by her youth in Pennsylvania spent "caught between a collapsing conservative steel town and the rural escapism of her grandparents' farm in the coal mountains," **Jody Joldersma's** haunting paintings and portraits suggest a range of psychic, social, geographic and class-based indicators of identity. Perhaps experiencing the trauma of isolation and alienation from personal tragedy, misplaced desires, economic downturn and changing fortunes, her anxious figures appear prematurely aged, too young for the pain they appear to endure.

An uncanny mash-up of materials sourced from the trash through the internet propel new forms and meaning in the works of **Daria Dorosh, Yvette Dubinsky, Jane Gilmor, d'Ann de Simone,** and **Melissa Furness.** Reclaimed, recycled and recombined materials and images are catalysts for their investigations of collective history, travel and culture as well as feminine and gender identity.

As fashion professional and theorist, **Daria Dorosh** is adept at translating and reutilizing social, cultural and political symbols of clothing and materials. In her fabric assemblage, *Social Grid*, the casual but globally universal T-shirt is elevated into "a powerful social signifier and a key transformational object between analog and digital culture." Through the embodiment of three key events, an environmental battle, a commemoration of a brilliant scientist, and the groundbreaking election of the first African American president, the varied components and symbols she embeds along the totem-like structure, conflate and contrast complex symbols of popular and political culture.

Responsive to "recent and historical dispersions of people around the world," **Yvette Drury Dubinsky's** works on paper project a dense, sensuous and intricate physicality. Through an inventive coupling of form and content, she layers and manipulates Japanese paper, maps and multiple printmaking processes over large circular shapes. As her silhouetted figures of multiple generations and occupations walk alone and together, they seem doomed to wander the globe endlessly, as Dubinsky tracks and traces their journey.

Nearly thirty years ago the serendipitous discovery of a hand-drawn *Kama Sutra* woodcut series in a Katmandu shop inspired **Jane Gilmor's** multi-component installation. The awkward, naïve style of these appropriated erotic images contrasts with the suggested eroticism of the frames' sensuous surfaces. The cast glass Japanese *Mikasa* frames, found on EBay, evoke "the *kitsch* factor in marketing the *sublime* in American culture." Beneath the floating images is a small table with embossed aluminum ruffles containing an open *Kama Sutra* book embedded in a pool of fake water. *Kama Kama Corner II* recalls the home shrines found in India and other locations Gilmor has traveled to, such as Mexico and Greece.

**d'Ann de Simone's** dazzlingly dense images are assembled from multiple found and hand-painted sources: consumer trash, digital images, recycled artwork and the handicraft of Chinese paper-cuts

traditionally practiced by women. Layering linear and patterned shapes over soft-edged monochromatic grounds, she “contrasts compositional elements that reinforce and symbolize opposing forces.” Her forms and forces suggest quotidian, natural and wondrous worlds, such as candy wrappers on a sidewalk, remnants of flyers on walls or the unfolding actions of a mysterious mythological cosmos.

Through her translations of historic artifacts, the “ruin” for **Melissa Furness**, serves as an “attempt to reconnect ourselves with the past that can create space for an alternative present.” In a series of paired oval paintings, *Manly Moss*, fragments from a series of historic Romantic images can be seen beneath layers of natural dried moss. By recontextualizing these historic works through a comparison of male and female gestures symbolizing “aggressive versus recessive sexual roles,” she observes that despite changes in history and the passage of time, gendered roles and relationships continue to endure.

Traversing the permeable boundaries between abstraction and representation, **Jane Swavely, Joan Snitzer, Maxine Henryson, Mimi Oritsky** and **Shannon Forester** explore cerebral and formal dialogues with art history, culture, space and sensation. Through the interplay of optics and perception, they attempt to visualize often imperceptible forms, feelings and forces through both the tactile presence and elusive subtlety of material and form.

Disorienting and furtive, **Jane Swavely's** intimately scaled semi-abstract paintings hover between reality and dream, suggesting landscapes or waterscapes where the viewer might have lost their balance, fallen sideways or upside down. Resembling the peculiar optics of photographs clicked unknowingly, they offer a new way of experiencing the familiar, hovering in a place “between darkness and light, conscious and subconscious, surface and material.”

In a play between hard and soft edged forms, expanded and confined space, **Joan Snitzer** explores visual and emotive tensions between free flowing warm and cool brushwork, and the organizing structure of the grid. “Paying tribute to the abstract artistic movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,” as the exuberance of Abstract Expressionism and Colorfield painting gave way to spare monochromatic minimalism, Snitzer’s work enacts a visual dialogue between movement and stasis, form and structure as well as with art history.

In photographic diptychs of sacred sites in India, **Maxine Henryson** pairs literal and imagined realities. Identifiable spaces or scenes paired with blurred details are linked by symbiotic color relationships. Her series *Ujjay's Journey* “is a visual poem in which she explores religious coexistence, rituals, the female world and nature.” Suggesting the moment of *Darshan*, where a current of connection occurs as the devotee’s eyes behold those of the deity, Henryson’s images perhaps visualize a moment of altered optical, sensory and psychic states of self.

Using humble quotidian materials, **Mimi Oritsky's** delicate ink tracery on paper napkins attempts to trap the rhythm of air and subtle shifts of space, light and time. Based on the speed of movement of her hand on paper, “the elements have a sense of urgency within the vast stillness of airspace.” Evoking currents of the breath of life itself, the dematerialization of her images suggests representations of air and space transmuted by the hand of an attuned consciousness open to forces of nature.

As direct studies of nature along with attempts to find the ethereal, the sublime, and the magical, **Shannon Forester** merges vignettes observed in the physical world with translations from a more philosophical space that exists somewhere between “possible and impossible.” Traversing realms of observed landscape and imperceptible metaphysical experience, her paintings “aim to find the essence of magic in the physical while also pursuing avenues to convert the metaphysical and abstract into material representation.”

These interconnected creative currents of *Cooperative Consciousness* - identity, materials, substance and formlessness - typify the range of artistic diversity and experimental approaches that have always characterized the work and creative practices of A.I.R. artists. The opportunity to exhibit and engage in dialogue with artists and audiences in Kochi, India, is due cause for celebration.

## About A.I.R.

A.I.R. Gallery was founded in 1972, during a decade when the feminist movement in the United States was gaining traction. While women were winning groundbreaking legal victories, including reduced discrimination in employment, equal pay and legalized birth control, they were far from equal in their visibility and gallery representation in the art scene nationally. Although some might have felt that the opening of women's exhibition spaces contributed to marginalization, and that "cooperative" rather than "commercial" meant compromised artistic standards, others agreed that for women to be truly empowered where they were otherwise invisible, they required viable alternative spaces and structures of organization where they could determine their own agendas, share resources and connect with other women artists.

A.I.R. was founded by a small group of notable woman artists including Nancy Spero, Barbara Zucker, Dottie Attie, Agnes Denes and Daria Dorosh, a multi-media artist who is included in this exhibition. Launched in a former warehouse space on Wooster Street in SOHO that the founding artists renovated, gallery policies were soon established and A.I.R. was launched as a non-profit organization. A.I.R. is now located in the lively gallery district Dumbo, Brooklyn. Initially including twenty members, A.I.R. membership is now slightly larger now in both New York and nationally, in addition to variable numbers of fellowship and alumni artists. New York A.I.R. members serve as the Board of Directors and the primary workforce of the collective, serving on committees, and are active in fund-raising initiatives for public programs and day-to-day gallery operation. The A.I.R. archives, housed at New York University, have provided valuable materials for those researching the history of women's cooperative ventures.

As well as providing support and opportunities for member artists, A.I.R. reaches outward by hosting invitational exhibitions for non-member artists, community programs, forums for discussions, internships, and a fellowship program for emerging and unrepresented artists. Networking with other women's cooperatives, A.I.R. artist members have taken part in exchange exhibitions with other notable U.S. cooperative galleries, such as Artemisia, ARC and NAME, in Chicago, and Womenspace, in Los Angeles. Increasing its international reach, A.I.R. has hosted exhibitions by artists from Europe and Asia. An exhibition including work from developing countries titled "Dialectics of Isolation" presaged the later importance of multiculturalism. A.I.R. members have exhibited their work in group exhibitions abroad, increasing the sense of connection and sharing of information and resources among women artists world-wide. This exhibition in Kochi introduces A.I.R.'s creative practices, ideals, and inspiration and the commitment of member artists who hope through this exhibition to create a dialogue with women artists in India on issues of art and feminism and the opportunities and challenges of starting and maintaining a cooperative gallery. In the spirit of cooperation and community that has always been an A.I.R. Gallery ethic, the exhibiting artists of *Cooperative Consciousness* are excited by the initiative of New York A.I.R. member Jayanthi Moorthy who has made a bridge between A.I.R. gallery artists and her community in Kochi and India.

Kathryn Myers  
Professor of Art  
The University of Connecticut

1. *A.I.R. Mission Statement* [www.airgallery.org](http://www.airgallery.org)