**Kiki Kogelnik**

**MODERN ART OXFORD, UK**

**Sarah Wilson**

“FLY ME TO THE MOON,” Britain’s first Kiki Kogelnik retrospective, complemented Tate Modern’s revisionist and staccato survey “The World Goes Pop.” Coinciding with Modern Art Oxford’s exhibition, Tate Modern showcased the work of female Pop artists who had been rediscovered during the past decade, including Kogelnik herself. (It’s worth noting that Katalin Nay invited Kogelnik to hold a retrospective in Budapest in 1992; her work was also included in the 1993 show “Variations on Pop Art,” curated by Katalin Keserü at Budapest’s Mücsarnok—a purely Hungarian story, yet an unacknowledged predecessor of “The World Goes Pop.”) Born in Austria in 1935, Kogelnik during her pop period was essentially based in New York, though over the course of her career she spent time in Europe, in particular her native Vienna. Influenced by the Viennese Actionist generation, she was a performer to the bone. In addition to actions like Moonhappening, 1969 (in which she wrote Neil Armstrong’s words directly onto a silk-screen print in real time—4 AM in Vienna), and appearances in Claes Oldenburg’s Store, 1961, and Kenneth Koch’s 1965 play The Tinguely Machine Mystery, she cut a glamorous swath that was its own kind of theater. This performative dimension is a crucial aspect of her contribution to global Pop, captured in superb and sexy photographs—alas, entirely absent at Modern Art Oxford. A modernist display in a vaulted white space, curator Ciara Moloney’s installation nonetheless offered a beautifully selected range of works from the 1950s through the ’80s, both joyous and macabre.

The show demonstrated that Kogelnik’s work, with its wry feminist critique of Cold War technopolitics, was as much in tension as in sync with Pop’s silvery lunar utopia. Brightly colored female silhouettes, soaring or leaping,velte and elegant, were everywhere countered by vinyl silhouettes lifelessly suspended on coat hangers, like skins. A tall and imposing crimson skeleton was pasted upside down on a white background (Bleiburg Skull, 1972), while a ceramic sculpture (Hungry Deathshead, 1986) featured a hanging skull, jagged backbone, spoon, and fork. Death and the maiden danced everywhere together.

Kogelnik is perhaps best known for her paintings—flat, chaotic, vibrant with colorful discs and spots. At Modern Art Oxford, a wall of her fascinating works on paper demonstrated a surprising expressionist roughness and certain obsessive pursuits: the body transparent and technological (Robots, 1966); crashed, victimized, inverted (Untitled [Hanging], ca. 1970); sans-organes (Analyst-Couch, 1970). One thinks of Kogelnik’s diaries, which record that she felt torn, indeed “schizoid,” about her roles as a mother, artist, wife, and lover.

That Kogelnik was an artist of the Cold War was clear. Consider the gloriously funny—and not so funny—Death with Sunglasses, ca. 1963. Death’s eyes are nuclear-yellow holes; his zapped rib cage is all that remains of his torso. Female limbs in turquoise and green drifts down through space: freedom and weightlessness, death and gravity, fused in contradiction. Faceless, they resonate with the dismembered hands, arms, and legs in her paintings. Might the flatness, the blankness of her forms express a kind of refusal of Cold War propaganda and consumerism alike?

Might not the flatness, the blankness of Kogelnik’s forms express a refusal of Cold War propaganda and consumerism alike, a refusal to let go of history as much as a reluctance to express the dark elements of her own subjectivity? In the amnesiac exuberance of the Pop era, she articulates a postnuclear aesthetic of dissociation, disarticulation, and shock, in which garish, glowing brightness is more frightening than darkness (her husband was a radiation oncologist). A similar dialectic is in play in the sole moving-image work in the show, the ghostly black-and-white film Untitled, Floating of 1964. Kogelnik’s body, a black-clad silhouette, drifts down through space: freedom and weightlessness, death and gravity, fused in contradiction. □

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