

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 Múcsarnok—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, svelte 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 are strewn about for the fluorescing ogre to crunch, while his bomb emits red rays. This is the atomic-bomb "father," Robert Oppenheimer's destroyer of worlds as a figure of psychedelic satire, and demands to be read alongside films such as Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) or *Mr. Freedom* (1969), William Klein's hilarious parody of American Superman ideology.

More broadly, Kogelnik's X-ray effects and irradiated halos recall Yves Klein's Hiroshima-inspired spray paintings and *suaires* (shrouds), which she may have seen at New York's Jewish Museum in 1967. Kogelnik

was very much in dialogue with fellow Big Apple artists such as Oldenburg. Yet traveling frequently back to Vienna and other capitals, she remained a deeply European artist. Like the work of Klein and so many others, such as her older contemporary from Prague Ruth Francken, her art seems haunted by war and genocide. While her floppy silhouettes (inspired by the New York rag trade) evoke vinyl body bags returning from Vietnam, their helpless facelessness also suggests the imagery of the Holocaust.

Kogelnik's female silhouettes are images of Everywoman: the emergent feminist, the wife-mother-worker, tragically adrift. Faceless, they resonate with the dismembered hands, arms, and legs in her paintings. Might not the flatness, the blankness of her forms express a kind

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of 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. □

SARAH WILSON IS PROFESSOR OF MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART AT THE COURTAULD INSTITUTE OF ART AND THE 2015 RECIPIENT OF THE AICA INTERNATIONAL DISTINGUISHED AWARD FOR ART CRITICISM.



From left: View of "Kiki Kogelnik: Fly Me to the Moon," 2015. Photo: Benjamin Cosmott Westoby. Kiki Kogelnik, *Bleiburg Skull*, 1972, vinyl, mixed media, 95 1/4 × 27 1/2 × 1". Kiki Kogelnik, *Death with Sunglasses*, ca. 1963, oil and acrylic on canvas, 35 1/8 × 47 7/8".

