Marilyn Pappas: A Retrospective

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Brockton, Massachusetts, US
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Reviewed by Caroline Kipp

At first glance, Pappas’ career seems to be dominated by two major bodies of work: one from the 1960s and 1970s of garment-based assemblages, and the second beginning from the mid-1990s onwards, coinciding with her retirement from a 20-year teaching career at Massachusetts College of Art and Design. It’s only upon touring through the gallery, and looking closer, that we begin to understand Pappas’ practice was uninterrupted during the intervening decades, developing quietly through her continued engagement with assemblage.

While working as professor and chair of fibers at MassArt, Pappas was creating collages and “fragments,” as she calls her smaller works, which begin to focus on fragmented statuary figures that later developed into the Goddesses series. These bridge pieces help us to understand the artist’s way of viewing imagery, of composition and concerns, in ways that more resolved, larger-scale works do not. As part of the retrospective, they provide insight to the ways that the artist discovered paths...
forward—a visual language and visual thinking that is just as applicable today when considering all the disparate influences on an individual existing in the 21st century—and particularly on an artist trying to create original works of art. Pappas’ work acknowledges that art is not created in a vacuum, nor should an artist strive to dilute the discordance of their work in order to fit within easily understood narratives. Throughout her varied practices and series, Pappas has continually accessed threads to build her artwork, using them like drawing or painting strokes, veering between abstraction and representation through her assemblages, collages, and goddesses. Pappas also repeatedly employs the composition of embroidery verso, and by creating these pieces at a large scale clearly links the relationship to and influence of abstract expressionism’s dynamic compositions.

Comprised of a single but generous gallery, the visual layout cleverly replicates the collage and assemblage techniques that inform or comprise many of Pappas’ works themselves. Throughout the gallery, interesting sight lines layer objects, with centrally placed sculptures that ground the center of the room and through which one literally sees all other works. These 3D pieces are Pappas’ newest creations, and they marry the artist’s diverse bodies of work as sculpture, garment and depiction of the body. This latest series is titled Nevertheless She Persisted, speaking to both women in a larger, abstracted sense, and more

directly to Pappas’ own life and career. At 91, the artist is still stitching away—making works which delight—as she has been doing so for most of her life. It’s only now that the larger art world is catching up to her and many other artists who have been overlooked, and it makes it that much more wonderful to see this comprehensive exhibition of Pappas’ more than 60-year career. It is a step towards righting the sexist, misogynistic oversights of the art world.

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