Dotty Attie

P·P·O·W

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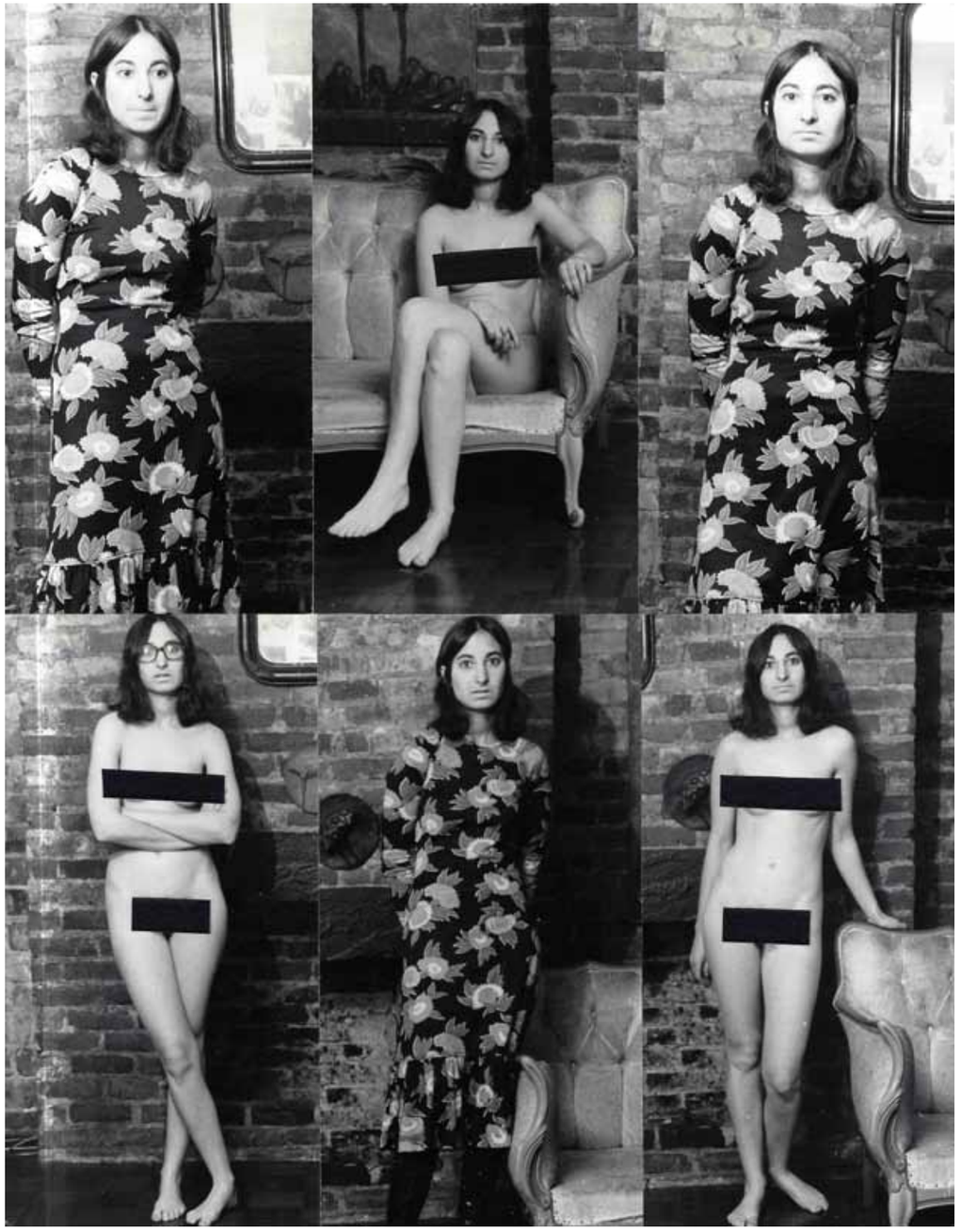
Dotty Attie was born in Pennsauken, New Jersey in 1938 and lives and works in New York City. She received a BFA from the Philadelphia College of Art (1959), a Beckmann Fellowship at the Brooklyn Museum of Art School, New York (1960), and attended the Art Students League, New York (1967). Attie was awarded a Creative Artists Public Service grant in 1976–77 from the New York State Council and National Endowment for the Arts grants in 1976 and 1983. In 2013, Attie was inducted into the National Academy of Design. Attie has exhibited nationally and internationally since 1972. Her work is in the collections of Yale University Art Gallery, CT; The Wadsworth Athenaeum, CT; Smith College Museum of Art, MA; The Museum of Modern Art, The Whitney Museum, and the Brooklyn Museum, NY; among others. In 2008, Attie was included in Burning Down the House: Building a Feminist Art Collection, curated by Maura Reily and Nicole Caruth, at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, NY. In 2012, Attie was featured in This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s, curated by Helen Molesworth, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL; the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA; and the The Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN. Attie has been represented by P.P.O.W since 1988.

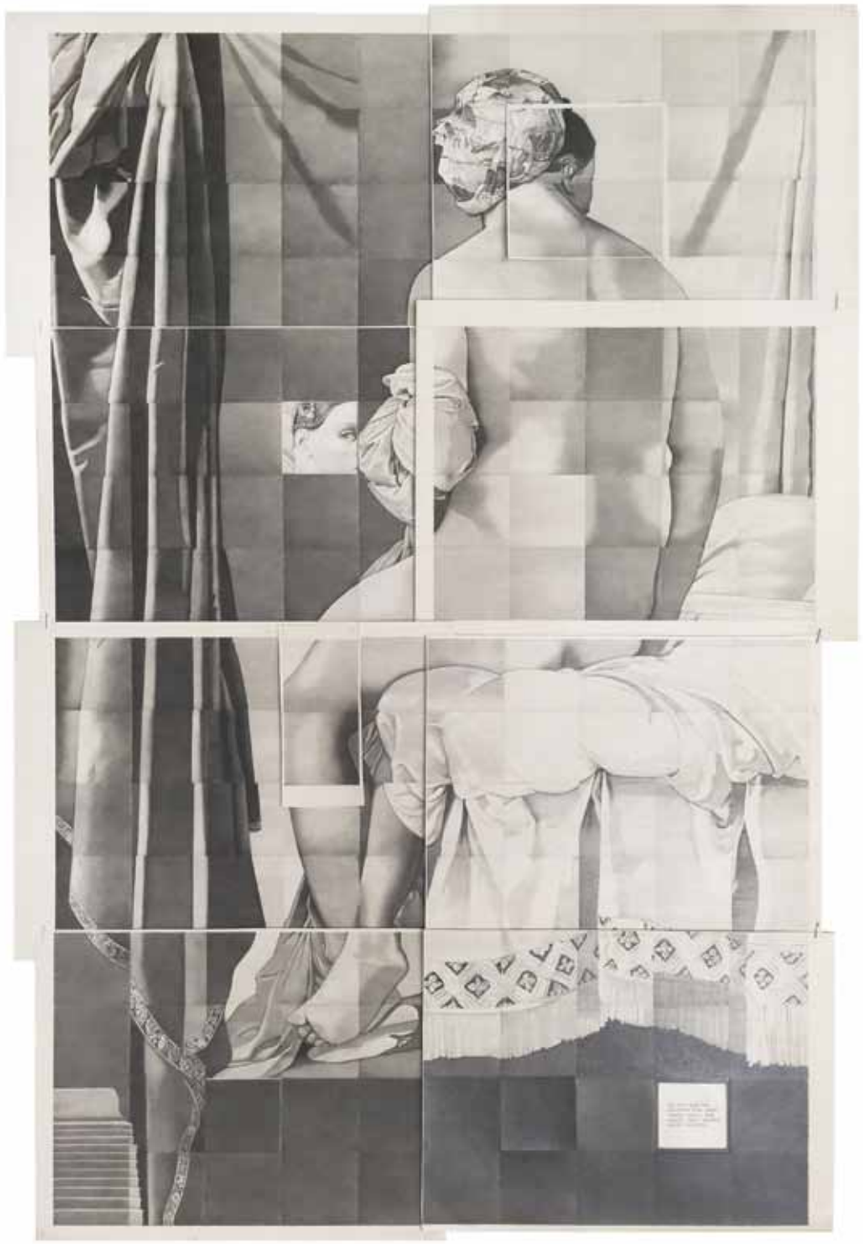
Dotty Attie, c. 1974, photograph by David Attie

The Golden Age of Radio, 2018, oil on linen, 3 panels: 6 × 6 inches each, 6 × 20 inches overall

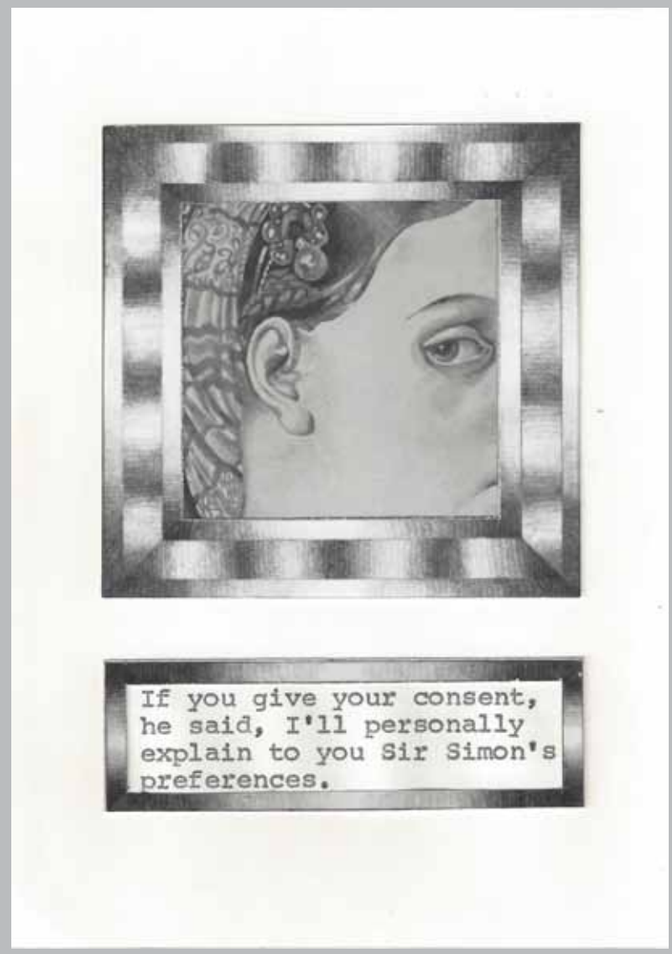


Self Portrait, c. 1978, collage, 9⅝ × 7¾ inches

Dear Sisters, 1998, oil on linen, 27 panels: 6 × 6 inches each, 26 × 62 inches overall



In Old Age He Painted, 1986, pencil on paper, 43 × 29½ inches



Announcement for Dotty Attie: Drawings, A.I.R. Gallery, November 16 – December 4, 1980 (actual size)

A.I.R. Members, 1972, photograph by David Attie

Past and present A.I.R. members, from left.
First row: Howardena Pindell, Daria Dorosh, Maude Boltz, and Rosemary Mayer.
Second row: Mary Grigoriadis, Agnes Denes, Louise Kramer, and Loretta Dunkelman.
Third row: Patsy Norvell, Sari Dienes, and Judith Bernstein. Standing: Barbara Zucker, Laurace James, and Anne Healy.
On ladders: Nancy Spero, Pat Lasch and Dotty Attie.

Disturbing the Peace: The Art of Dotty Attie

On the eve of second wave feminism, the very early 1970s, Dotty Attie's husband asked her, "Could you remind me again why I have to do the cooking?" Attie, surely annoyed, said, "Remember we decided to divvy up the domestic responsibilities, so I would have the same amount of time in my studio that you have in yours?" "Right."

Attie had been brought to a domestic boil listening to a women's consciousness-raising group on radio station WBAI. They were discussing the inequities of housekeeping among couples. That same year she, with several other feminists including Nancy Spero, Judith Bernstein and Barbara Zucker, organized the A.I.R. Gallery, a women's artists cooperative in New York City. When some women Attie spoke with said they'd rather be in a commercial gallery, she asked, "Why? Here we can do what we want. No one tells us what to do." Like women all over America – then and now – she didn't want to be told what to do.

Attie is ornery. Always has been. Taboos are my subjects, she says. "When I realized that, it made me extremely happy." There's something in her personality, a fiercely American confidence that right makes might. And that right will triumph. And that she knows what right is. This confidence shapes the stubborn, direct form of her work: small, precise, seemingly obvious narrative bits. Incontrovertible details. Apparent certitude. Whether it's *The Lone Ranger*, Courbet's omnivorous The Origin of the World, forensic details of murder victims, or intimidation of immigrants, her crisp, up close examinations in few colors plow towards a verdict, a conclusion that will inevitably persuade you. Or so you think.

But then she takes a step back, twirls around and tosses in the wild-card, the doubts, the strange attractions, the appetite for perversity and violence, the admission of darkness in each and every one of us. She does all of this without flinching. It is these contradictions that snag you and make Attie's work memorable and distressing. Simultaneously cringing as you wait for the worst to happen, you are also on the verge of hysterical laughter. And you are not afraid. It's not Kafka-territory; you're not shivering in a black hole. So obvious and scandalous is Attie's material that it inspires outrage, inspection, rejection. Action. Anything but passivity.

In her early large drawing, In Old Age He Painted (1986) where Attie uses Ingres' Valpinçon Bather, discomfort and a response to it are both present. First, the potentially sadistic set-up of the endless expanse of a woman's back, her complete vulnerability to the spectator whom she does not see. But the spectatorial catch is abruptly withdrawn by a detail of the direct, confident gaze of another woman hovering at the bather's left arm. She too is from an Ingres painting, his Grande Odalisque. She peers directly at us and stops us in our tracks. But this solution is too easy for Attie. She doesn't want the resolution to come that fast. She doesn't want the discomfort and its remedy in the same place. She's looking for something else.

Anyone who grew up in the 1940s and '50s and avidly listened to the thrilling, scary, moral tales spun out in *The Shadow* –"Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows!"– will recognize the tenor of Attie's work. Gripped by imminent danger but also certain that things will turn out all right in the end, justice must be extracted from chaos. But will it be?

Like many women of Attie's generation she probably thrilled to the danger and the ultimate resolutions of these tales. Even if something didn't quite work for her. Wasn't the story a bit too pat? Maybe as a girl and then a woman, too much of her messy emotional life and thwarted desires was left out. Streamlined, triumphant narratives weren't for her.

It is the night of July 20, 1969. Attie, her husband, and their two young sons are sitting around the television set. Neil Armstrong is about to take his first steps on the

moon. Father and sons are riveted. Attie is flipping through a photography magazine. Armstrong steps on the moon. Oohs and aahs erupt in the room. Dotty simultaneously happens on some photos by Duane Michals with his handwritten text below each and bursts out with, "Yes this is it!" The solution to her creative and probably emotional dilemma: dilute the intensity to the extent that you can live with it, but create exactly the unwieldy, permissive narrative that you need and your work needs: Add words.

Rage and violence are barely under wraps in Attie's work. Like a good writer, Attie knows that anger and violence on their own kill art, hatred is dead on the page. Alongside her stark, harsh pictorial narratives, her verbal narratives take up their tasks. The ravenous vaginas, the hideously dismembered murder victims, the brutal interrogation of men cannot stand alone. The spectator will stagger blindly out of the room. Bonds must be loosened, wild, uncertain, inconclusive elements let in.

Words and phrases in Attie's paintings unleash your imagination, daring you to write the story that goes with the pictures. This is quite the opposite challenge from crossword puzzles which obsessed Attie for years and the mystery stories she devoured. One all disconnected words, the other all pat solutions. Attie's words must find a way to, and with, her pictures.

She wants confusion and contradiction, suggestiveness, absences. She told me once about an 11th century Japanese play where the action took place separate from spoken words. Like intertitles in a silent movie. Attie made a distinction, however. The words in the Japanese performance didn't illustrate or explain the actions, they forwarded it. That's what she wanted her words to do in relation to her images, push "whatever" was happening forward.

Attie's harsh visual imagery bursts out of a pre-verbal place often of horror, fear, pain, anxiety, loss. Words in these situations are normally lifelines; it is with language that we attempt to control anguish. But in Attie's case that's not the job words do. Rather, they create just the distance we need to experience the ambiguity of Attie's ambitions – you get the disturbance and just enough language to find your way in more deeply, or out, or somewhere in-between. There is no single narrative, only choices. Like life.

—Eunice Lipton

Eunice Lipton is an art historian and memoirist who lives in New York and Paris. She's written for *Hyperallergic*, *Art in America*, *Artforum*, *The Nation*, *The Daily Beast*, *The New York Times*, and *The Guardian*. Lipton is best known for the now classic *Alias Olympia: A Woman's Search for Manet's Notorious Model and Her Own Desire*.