

# HYPERALLERGIC

## How Five Women Artists Made It Happen in 1970s LA

A two-part, bicoastal exhibition centers a group of artists united by their commitment to feminism, subversive humor, and distinctively DIY spirit.



Matt Stromberg August 12, 2024



Susan Mogul, "Moses Mogul Parts the Hollywood Hills" (1977), framed hand-cut black and white photo-collage, 21 x 21 inches (~53 x ~53 cm) (image courtesy the artist)

LOS ANGELES — Remembering Los Angeles in the 1970s, artist and filmmaker Hildegard Duane described the sense of freedom and possibility that cracked open the insular, mostly male art world of the previous decades. “Something new was happening, shifting from the all-boys network to a more open feeling,” Duane told *Hyperallergic*. “What really united us was the DIY thing. We were gonna do it, no matter what.”

The two-part, bicoastal exhibition *Five Women Artists in 1970s Los Angeles* features Duane's work alongside four of her contemporaries — Nancy Buchanan, Susan Mogul, Susan Singer, and Nancy Youdelman — who all emerged as artists in the southland five decades ago. Although not part of a formal collective, they are connected through their interest in feminism, autobiography, the body, subversive humor, photography, and the do-it-yourself spirit Duane refers to. Taken together, the two exhibitions at [Ortuzar Projects](#) in Manhattan and [As-Is Gallery](#) in LA's Pico-Union neighborhood offer windows onto an expansive time and place, and five artists who took advantage of the possibilities.



Nancy Youdelman, "Shallow Grave" (1973), six vintage color prints, 14 1/2 x 10 inches each (~37 x ~25 cm) (image courtesy Ortuzar Projects)

The Feminist Art Program (FAP), started by Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, and others at Fresno State College in 1970 before expanding to the California Institute of the Arts in 1971, had an outsized influence on several of these artists.

"There was such newness, anything would go," Youdelman told *Hyperallergic* of her experience in the FAP at both Fresno and CalArts. She would go on to participate in other pioneering feminist art spaces including [Womanhouse](#), Grandview gallery at the [Woman's Building](#), and the [Double X](#) collective. Youdelman often depicted her dreams, which she would act out and photograph, offering surreal, whimsical portraits of her subconscious. In the photo series *Running With a Tail in Griffith Park* (1974), on view at As-Is Gallery through August 24, she can be seen frolicking in the idyllic LA park, feral and mischievous, as her tail trails behind her.

There is a more somber tone to Youdelman's other work, such as "Self-Portrait as Ophelia" (1977–2017), a funereal mound of dirt and flowers through which ceramic casts of her face, hands, and feet poke through. Since the exhibition opened, the living flowers have withered and dried out in a kind of time-based *memento mori*. At Ortuzar, whose show recently closed, "Shallow Grave" (c. 1973), an unnerving series of six photos, depicts her lying in a grave and disappearing under a mound of dirt.



Hildegard Duane, "Snow Whites" (1981), eight silver gelatin prints, one white satin wedding dress, and one veil (1917), dimensions variable (photo by Dario Lasagni; courtesy the artist and Ortuzar Projects, New York)

"The beauty of all these female spaces was that, although people made fun of us, the spaces themselves were welcoming," Mogul, who also participated in FAP at CalArts and was involved in Woman's Building, told *Hyperallergic*. "Our goal wasn't to get into male art spaces."

In the late 1970s, the artist created her *Hollywood Moguls* series, intricate photo collages in which she pictured herself as a giant trampling LA landmarks to imagine a female mogul replacing the male studio heads who dominated the entertainment industries. Working outside of traditional art systems, she originally exhibited these collages at a Hollywood soda foundation in 1979. Similarly, Duane showed her films in non-art spaces like movie theaters and a shoe store. "Galleries weren't really ready for it," she said.

In addition to the barriers female artists faced, it didn't help that many of them were working in performance, video, photography, and art books. "Painting is of course what sells, not performance, and photography was debated as a 'serious' medium in the '70s," Buchanan told *Hyperallergic*. Documentation of several of her early performances are featured at As-Is, including "Hair Transplant" (1972), in which she shaved a male performer's mustache and body hair, cut her own waist-length red hair, and replaced the man's missing hair with her own. Documented in a photo at As-Is and shown at Ortuzar is "Twin Corners" (c. 1974), a crafty send-up of Minimalism featuring a triangular corner pile of metal shavings next to a photograph of the artist's legs and crotch with a triangular patch of pubic hair.



Detail of Nancy Youdelman, "Self-Portrait as Ophelia" (1977-2017) (photo Matt Stromberg/*Hyperallergic*)



Susan Singer, "BODIES" (1976–77), flipbook with original photos, 74 x 48 x 10 inches (188 x ~122 x ~25 cm) closed (photo by Dario Lasagni, courtesy the artist and Ortuzar Projects, New York)

“For galleries concerned about making the rent, photos are tough, but tougher are art books,” Tom Jimmerson, curator of both exhibitions and owner of As-Is, told *Hyperallergic*. “It makes sense why this work would offer commercial challenges.” Still, he noted, “some of the best works in the New York show are unique books.”

These include Susan Singer’s “Bodies” (c. 1976–77), an oversized flip book featuring full-body nude portraits of artists such as Barbara T. Smith and Allan Kaprow, curator Hal Glicksman, and others. Their body parts could be reassembled into “more than 19,476 combinations,” as the cover notes, merging seriality, photography, publishing, and sculpture. Singer, however, left the art world shortly after creating this work to become a teacher, leaving the lingering question of how her career would have evolved had she kept making work.



Nancy Buchanan, "Twin Corners" (c. 1974), installation with metal shavings and photograph, dimensions variable (photo by Dario Lasagni; courtesy the artist and Ortuzar Projects, New York)

Despite the "anything goes" attitude that pervades these shows, a high level of production value is evident.

"Mostly we aspired to look legit," Duane told *Hyperallergic*. "We weren't trying to look punk." Duane had experience working in commercial film, and the short videos she showed at Ortuzar, which play with notions of Hollywood glamour and narrative, are made more convincing by their polished appeal. "Having worked in Hollywood, you're aware of the evil behind the beauty. I try to present that in a funny way. You can be funny and still be taken seriously. That's a contradiction that works," she said, a maxim that could apply to all the artists in the show.

Unlike so many historical exhibitions that attempt to rescue a lost artist from obscurity, four of these artists are still quite active, and although the show's title references only the 1970s, there is more recent work on view, illustrating continuity rather than a historical rupture. Duane's series *My Dead Friends* (2014), which pairs photographs with texts, creates poetic rather than didactic memorials to lost loved ones and comrades, including comedian Rodney Dangerfield, musician Peter Ivers, painter Margaret von Biesen, and others.

"I think of myself as a narrative artist, a storyteller ... This is an extension of what I've always been doing," Duane explained. "That was one reason I wanted to show contemporary work. I'm still in the game. I'm still doing it. We've been doing it all along."



Installation view of *Five Women Artists in 1970s Los Angeles* at As-Is Gallery, Los Angeles showing works by Susan Mogul, Nancy Youdelman, and Susan Singer (photo by Matt Stromberg/Hyperallergic)



Susan Mogul, "Crisis in Capitol" (1978), unique vintage silver print collage, 21 x 19 inches (~53 x ~48 cm) (image courtesy the artist)