AN INTERVIEW WITH
Christina Schlesinger

PAINTING WHAT I SEE

By Hunter O’Hanian

AS I WRAPPED UP A BOOK LAUNCH at the Leslie-Lohman Museum in 2014, Christina Schlesinger reintroduced herself. We had met several years earlier at a reading at the Fine Arts Work Center. I learned that she was living in New York and was maintaining an active studio practice, and asked if I could make a studio visit. She readily agreed. There, I saw a deep and diverse body of work, with unusual frankness and insight addressing her inner self, including images that explored the female form, pleasure, and flannel shirts. This profoundly personal work was created by someone who had a front-row seat at the Kennedy White House; lived in a 1960s commune in Venice, California; became a Guerrilla Girl; and fought back from life-threatening cancer more than once. It was refreshingly honest, cliché-proof work addressing a lesbian/feminist sensibility that I had seldom seen.

In the gay art world, there is no shortage of male art-makers who use the human form to express their otherness. Some have made a profound difference, while others have simply reworked well-worn ideas. However, women have seldom gone there. Whether it’s a response to centuries of patriarchy, or reflects the possibility that the genders are truly wired differently, women have not chosen to represent themselves the way men have. However, like Romaine Brooks, Ruth Bernhard, and Tee Corinne before her, Christina has addressed her otherness head-on, fearless in the face of claims of objectification. She epitomizes what it means to be a gay artist today.

HUNTER O’HANIAN: Great to chat with you, Christina. Tell us a little about your background.

CHRISTINA SCHLESINGER: I grew up in Cambridge—the middle child of a Harvard family. My father and both grandfathers taught at Harvard. My grandmother Cannon was in the same Radcliffe class as Gertrude Stein and was a student of William James. My antecedents were all hardy, bright, unworlly midwesterners who reached Harvard on their intellectual merit and stayed, becoming rooted to the institution.

HUNTER O’HANIAN: And you have an artistic legacy as well.

CHRISTINA SCHLESINGER: My great-grandfather Frances Haynes was an itinerant portrait painter, traveling across New England in the mid-nineteenth century painting prosperous Yankee businessmen and immortalizing their young children, often victims of tuberculosis. He contracted TB while painting one such child and died. We have found examples of his work in the New Hamp-
Almost as soon as Kennedy was assassinated, my parents' marriage came apart; by the time I was in college, their marriage had completely collapsed. My mother became well known among the “New Frontier wives” as a socialite. My father seemed to go out every night, and the nights they didn’t, there would be parties at our house. In the mornings to take my father to the White House. Jackie Kennedy, Caroline, and the Secret Service came to our house to trick-or-treat. Things changed in 1961, when I was thirteen and my father became special assistant to President Kennedy and the entire family moved to Washington.

CS: I had more serious crushes on the girls in jodhpurs. To be honest, it was rather provincial. I went to a private school. My parents seemed to go out every night, and the nights they didn’t, there would be parties at our house. I would come downstairs and might run into Bobby Kennedy, or the Kingston Trio, or Marlene Dietrich. Yes. I went to the Madeira school in McLean, Virginia. I had to say “Yes, ma’am” to my teachers. We wore uniforms and the girls came to class in jodhpurs so they could ride their own horses in the afternoon. I had crushes on girls at school, but in one sense it was okay because every “new girl” was supposed to have an “old girl” to bond with. But I had more serious crushes on the girls in jodhpurs.

My mother became well known among the “New Frontier wives” as a portrait painter, and she painted the children of Newt Minow, William vanden Heuvel, Jean Kennedy Smith, and Walter Lippmann. She was going through a painful time with my father—my smart, charming, charismatic, flirtatious father—but they were having such a grand and glorious time during the Kennedy era, the pain and disappointment of their marriage was swept under the gaiety.

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When looking back, I realize I had a great deal of support from my grandparents. My grandmother Cannon told me to always sit next to the strange-looking ones in class since they were the most interesting, and my grandfather Schlesinger encouraged me to live in California in my twenties. She told me Cambridge was not a place for me. I always wanted to take a dare; I always wanted to be an artist; I always wanted to run, jump, swim; I spent a lot of time trying not to be controlled by anyone. More and more, I see my grandmothers as role models; both were suffragettes, they both struggled, and mostly succeeded, to live independent lives as writers and adventurers.
earlier. It was with a sense of relief that I met her, someone who knew and understood both California and New York, and we soon became lovers. We have been together ever since, through various ups and downs. We have nursed each other through cancer, supported each other in our artistic endeavors, and, most importantly, brought up our beautiful daughter, Chun.

It took a long time for my family to recognize Nan as my partner. Now it is not a problem, but in the early years, I did not feel my family’s full acceptance of our relationship. Sometimes it is hard to communicate to younger lesbians the alienation and isolation that many lesbians of my generation, and older generations, felt in those days.

**H:** Tell me about your work.

**CS:** My painting is not conceptual. I did not set out to represent gender and sexuality in my work. My painting is based upon what I observe and how I interpret what I see—for example, I started as a landscape painter. With the paintings from the *Birch Forest* series, I transformed what I saw into what I felt, the birches becoming the torsos of women.

I also paint from memory and experience. The *Tomboy* series sprang from memories of myself as a tomboy, and later from my sexual experiences. For me, the difference in confronting gender norms lies in two areas: the objectification of women in society, the bland and homogenized view of women’s beauty and sexuality as determined by media and a dominant white male culture, and the invisibility of women in general.

Despite some progress over the past decades, women simply are not in positions of power. In that sense, our gender “norms” are essentially male determined. Therefore, it is in our own interest as women to represent our gender norms as faithfully and truthfully as we can. While that was not a conscious choice on my part when I started the *Tomboy* series, it was an underlying principle. I started the series, as I do with most, by just picking up the brush and starting without exactly knowing where I was heading.

**H:** What are your thoughts about objectification of the female form?

**CS:** I do not worry about objectifying the female form. The female form is my subject, and I am portraying the female form from my own female point of view. Can genitals be effectively depicted in art? In my own work, I have not really dealt with women’s genitalia. I believe women’s genitalia can be effectively depicted; mostly it has been done...
metaphorically with flower forms and abstractly in folded hidden forms. Men depict their genitalia constantly in every thrusting monument.

**HO:** Tell me a little about the role of women in the art world.

**CS:** Men and women are not treated the same in the art world. That is the point of the Guerrilla Girls and why I became one. Simply study our posters to know what was and still is going on. We started gathering statistics in the late ’80s on the representation of women artists in galleries and museums, the number of women reviewed in newspapers and art magazines. The numbers are pathetically low. The situation for women has not changed significantly, although the issue has now become mainstream. Now, as a matter of course, people discuss and write about the number of women in a particular gallery or museum exhibition. However, all you have to do is look at the auctions to see how poorly women artists fare. Misogyny in the art world is rampant. Women artists who do well tend to be either young or very old. Women artists who have toiled in obscurity for decades are, in some cases, suddenly now doing well. A close friend in her seventies just had a show at Mary Boone Gallery; her success has come late, but fortunately she is still alive to enjoy it. Another woman friend, who has been in a Whitney Biennial and is a recipient of a MacArthur genius award, was dropped by her Chelsea gallery, being told that “the gallery could not sell the work of a middle-aged woman artist.”

**HO:** Can artwork be gay? Is there a “lesbian sensibility”?

**CS:** I have been curious for some time about the notion of “lesbian sensibility,” whether it exists or whether it is even important to consider. I reached out to a number of lesbian artist and writer friends to see what I would find. While there was no particular consensus, two themes emerged: the desire, the demand for visibility and validation, and the persistence of attitude. Lesbians are filled with attitude. The poet Mary Meriam said: “I love this woman, I know her, and she knows me, and I don’t give a damn what anyone thinks of that.” We want to be seen. We are here. We exist. See me. I am part of the story. Ariel Luna Anais, a wonderful artist, said: “Our experiences speak to us because they validate our existence and over time write our history. It’s so natural to want to see a piece of your heart outside of yourself.”

**HO:** You have spent a lot of time over the years in Provincetown and East Hampton in the summers. What is your sense of the art community in those areas now?

**CS:** It is expensive to live in Provincetown and East Hampton. Artists in these places are not young. Twenty years ago, I was more a part of the art world on the Cape, showing at the Cherry Stone Gallery in Wellfleet. Now I am not so involved. Artists find other artists wherever they go, and that has been true for me. I have artist friends and am a part of artist communities in Cape Cod, New York City, East Hampton, and Los Angeles. They really aren’t that different from place to place. We show each other our work, show up for each other’s openings, bewail the state of the art world, tell each other about great shows to see, exhibition opportunities, artist residencies. I have discovered as I’ve grown...
Aging and surviving cancer twice are transformative experiences. I was sick for nearly two years with stage four non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma and learned how precious and fleeting life is. I had watched my sister die of ovarian cancer in her early sixties. I did not and do not want to waste any time. I have no tolerance for negativity and bullshit. I also have a legacy of tremendous longevity in my family. My father died at 90, intellect totally intact, and my mother is still articulate and energetic at 103, frustrated only by a weakening body. I also recently survived uterine cancer. I figure I could live a long life or die at any moment. So I try to live my life as fully and honestly and truthfully as I can. I tell people I love them all the time, because you never know if it will be the last time. I travel, read books, look at art, make art, write, embrace teaching, love my family, pet my pets, swim, walk, whatever, with abandon.

In some ways, I think I am a better painter. I was recently in California working on the restoration of my Chagall Returns to Venice Beach mural and enjoyed making improvements to the hands and faces, knowing I was better at it now. I am glad I did my mural painting when I was younger and stronger, and I am also glad I did a lot of printmaking and fine-brush egg tempera painting when I was younger, because my eyes tire more easily now. Yes, my career as an artist has nourished me. It has not always been easy, but I can’t imagine not having lived my life as an artist.