



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 Corrine 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, unworldly midwesterners who reached Harvard on their intellectual merit and stayed, becoming rooted to the institution.

**HO:** In fact, there is a library at Harvard that bears your family name.

**CS:** The Schlesinger Library for Women was named for my grandmother and grandfather Schlesinger. Going to Radcliffe was a given for me. I had little choice in the decision, I think.

**HO:** And you have an artistic legacy as well.

**CS:** 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-

(above) Schlesinger at work on her recent *Justice Mural* with high-school students on Long Island, 2016



Photograph of president-elect John Fitzgerald Kennedy and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., taken in Cambridge, MA, when JFK set up headquarters at the Schlesinger house and met with several Harvard professors whom he appointed to jobs in his administration, 1960

shire Historical Society and the Currier Museum of Art. The paintings are beautiful: smoothly painted, optimistic. My mother always painted and had a studio in whatever house we had.

**HO:** *What was it like growing up in Cambridge in the 1960s?*

**CS:** To be honest, it was rather provincial. I went to a private school. Things changed in 1961, when I was thirteen and my father became special assistant to President Kennedy and the entire family moved to Washington.

**HO:** *How was that experience?*

**CS:** It yanked my young mind wide open! It was definitely a Southern city back then. I had never been in a place with so many African-Americans. We had an African-American maid, Sarah, who served us dinner at night. A limousine waited outside our Georgetown townhouse 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. I went to the White House with my dad for lunch and ran into JFK wandering in the halls.

**HO:** *So you began your teenage years in Washington.*

**CS:** 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 gaitie.

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. Almost as soon as Kennedy was assassinated, my parents’ marriage came apart; by the time I was in college, their marriage had completely collapsed.

**HO:** *Who were your influences growing up?*

**CS:** Looking back, I realize I had a great deal of support from my grandmothers. My grandmother Cannon told me to always sit next to the

strange-looking ones in class since they were the most interesting, and my grandmother 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.

**HO:** *I understand that your family has been coming to the Cape for many years.*

**CS:** Growing up, we spent half of every summer in Franklin, New Hampshire, on a hill surrounded by my mother’s family, and the other half in Wellfleet, which my father loved because of his love of the ocean. It also fed his friendships with Ed O’Connor, Edmund Wilson, Mary McCarthy, Dwight and Nancy Macdonald, Dan Aaron, Alfred Kazin, E. J. Kahn, Gilbert Seldes—there were so many literary types then, and the same sort of partying that when on in Washington continued on the Cape. We kids just loved the beach and the hours spent bodysurfing in the ocean and swimming in Slough Pond. I saw my first lesbians in Provincetown and was electrified and fascinated.

**HO:** *What was it like when you moved to Venice Beach in the early ’70s?*

**CS:** It was a wonderful time. It was just the beginning of feminism. It was a great time to come out, and Venice was a great place to come out. There were wild dykes in the Venice Canals and on the Venice Boardwalk. It was fun.

My career as an artist took a wonderful, serendipitous turn as a result of my early adventures as a lesbian. I was drawn to a shady lesbian bar on shabby West Washington Boulevard, which is now the fabulously chic Abbot Kinney Boulevard in Venice. There, over the pool table, I was introduced to Judy Baca, who was organizing artists to paint the “History of Venice” murals for the Venice Pavilion on Venice Beach. It began a friendship that endures to this day. I helped her recruit a dozen artists to paint the Venice murals. Then we cofounded SPARC, the Social and Public Art Resource Center, for which both of us have been recognized and honored by the city of Los Angeles. Over the years, I painted numerous murals for SPARC and organized dozens of others, working with communities to select artists and find walls. In 1991, I painted *Chagall Comes to Venice Beach*, a block-and-a-half-long mural that has been declared one of the “iconic murals” of Los Angeles and is permanently protected.



Christina Schlesinger and her father, Arthur, on the deck of the family house in Wellfleet on Slough Pond, 1962



“The title of the original mural painted in 1991 was *Chagall Comes to Venice Beach*. In 1994, the Northridge earthquake damaged the wall to such an extent that they had to sandblast the mural off the wall. I received a call in NYC that winter telling me they had to remove the mural but they ‘would get me back to paint it again.’ I thought—no way. But people really missed the mural, petitions circulated, the Jewish Federation and SPARC raised the money, and so, in the summer of 1996, I went back to Venice to repaint it. The magic happened again—original crew members showed up; Bill, the homeless painter of angels, reappeared; and Dougo, a homeless aged surfer, walked up and added a whole new section depicting the Pacific Ocean Park Pier, which he pointed out had been right in front of where the mural was located and was a popular amusement park and surfing site. This 1996 version of the mural is called *Chagall Returns to Venice Beach*.” — Christina Schlesinger

**HO:** You came back East after about a decade?

**CS:** After a major relationship ended, I left California. I had finally come out to my parents, and they had not accepted the news well. My mother was worried I would have a sad and lonely life, and my father quoted Emerson to me over a lunch at the Century Club in New York, but neither felt comfortable with the subject of my sexuality. But I loved them both—in particular, my dad—so I never felt comfortable discussing my sexuality with either of them.

Looking back, I realize that I had to go to Venice, California, three thousand miles from the East Coast, to come out. After eleven years away, I came back a lesbian and an artist, and while the lesbian part did not sit well with my family, the artist part did. I also felt ready to deal with my father’s fame, which had overwhelmed me before, and I was curious to see what New York had to offer.

**HO:** Tell me about that transition, moving from the West Coast to New York.

**CS:** The artists I had known earlier from my time on the Cape had already established themselves in careers in New York by the time I returned from California. I had my murals; I had connections from the feminist community, and I soon met Nancy Fried, who had also been in Los Angeles at the Woman’s Building and had moved to New York a year

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.

**HO:** 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.

**HO:** 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



Christina Schlesinger and Nancy Fried, 1990

PHOTO BY MARIANNA COOK

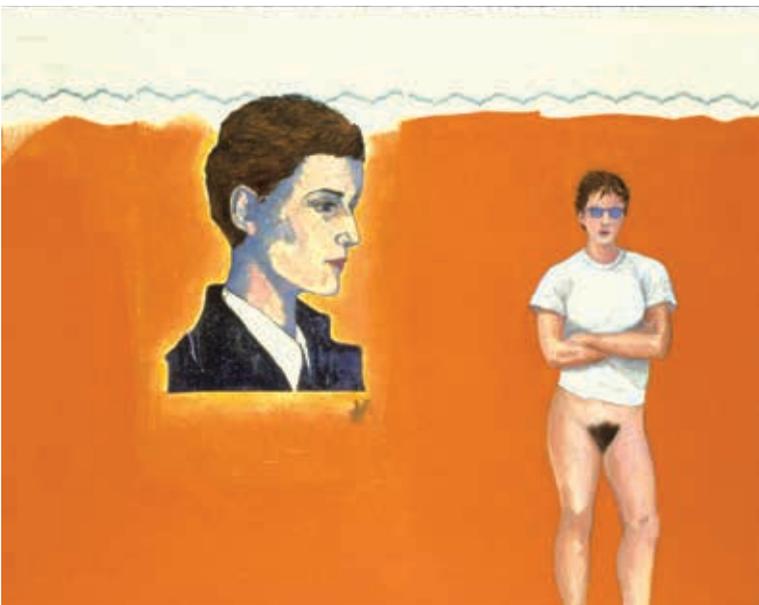


*Jacks*, 1994, mixed media on canvas, 20 by 16 inches

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



*Romaine Brooks and Me*, 1994, mixed media on canvas, 26 by 33 inches

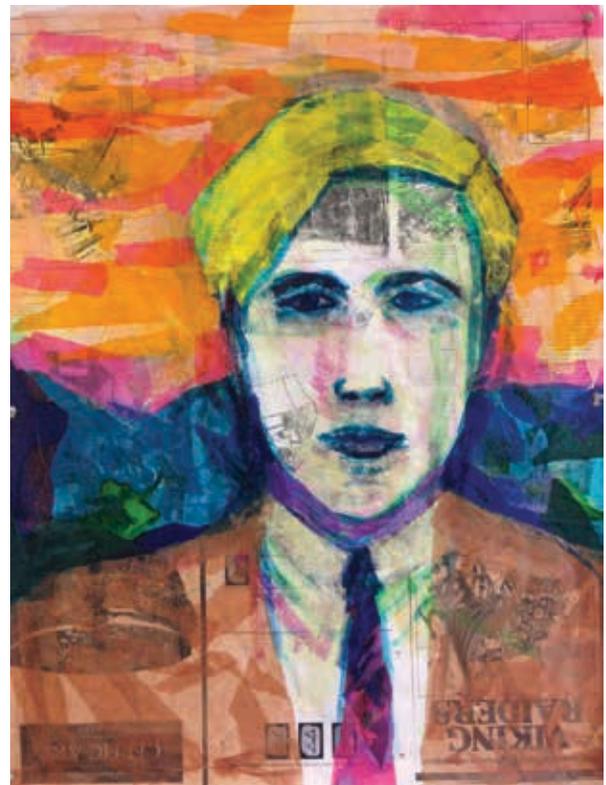
exhibition. However, all you have to do is look at the auctions to see how poorly women artists fare. Misogyny in the art world is rampant. Women artists who do well tend to be either young or very old. Women artists who have toiled in obscurity for decades are, in some cases, suddenly now doing well. 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



*Viking Raider*, 2015, tissue paper, rag paper, acrylic paint, and matte medium on cloth, 34 by 26 inches

**THESE ARE THE MOST BIGOTED GALLERIES IN NEW YORK.**

Why? Because they show the fewest women & artists of color

GALLERY	No. of women 1989-92	Artists of color 1989-92
Blum Helman	2	0
Diane Brown	3	1
Leo Castelli	0	0
Charles Cowles	3	1
Larry Gagosian	0	0
Gemini G.E.L.	2	1
Marian Goodman	2	0
Jay Gorney	2	1
Hirsch & Adler Modern	1	0
Kent	1	0
Knoedler	1	0
Koury Wingate	1	0
David McKee	1	0
Pace	3	1
Tony Shafrazi	0	1
Holly Solomon	3	1
Sperone Westwater	1	1
Stuz	0	1

**GUERRILLA GIRLS**

Guerrilla Girls poster: *Bigoted Galleries*, 1990, 22 by 17 inches

older that I am more generous about sharing whatever access I have to opportunities and much more interested in advancing the careers and success of others. One regret I have is that I did not buy more art as I was going along.

**HO:** *What are your thoughts about art in NYC today?*

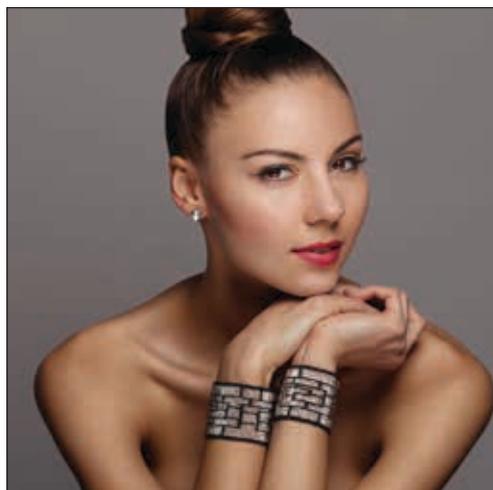
**CS:** I prefer going to the small galleries on the Lower East Side. They remind me of the East Village in the old days. I like the intimate spaces, and the work is generally more interesting than the corporate spaces of Chelsea. However, you can't help but go to Chelsea. The galleries there put on museum-quality shows: Morandi, Ad Reinhardt, Picasso. I pick and choose where I go. I recently saw Martin Wong's show at the Bronx Museum, which I loved. I knew him a bit, and it was great to get a chance to explore the range of his work. His work evoked feeling and a mood and the experience of a life fully lived as a Californian, second-generation Chinese, gay male artist who became enthralled with Loisaida, firemen, and Latino convicts. I like all kinds of art. It just has to feel truthful. So much of the art I see in Chelsea feels shiny and expensive and leaves me feeling nothing. I always try to go see shows by women artists.

**HO:** *You have been making work for nearly forty years. How has aging changed you?*

**CS:** 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. ❏

*HUNTER O'HANIAN has lived in Provincetown for more than twenty years. He has led many renowned visual arts organizations, including the Fine Arts Work Center, the Anderson Ranch Arts Center, the MassArt Foundation, and the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art. In July 2016, Hunter became the head of the College Art Association.*



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