

Rosemary Mayer
Beware of All Definitions

Selected Works
1966-1973

Change Time: An Introduction

Dr. Katie Geha
Director,
Dodd Galleries

On Sunday night, December 5, 1971, the artist Rosemary Mayer wrote in her journal, “It’s change time—and I need a long session in here—love and art and me aren’t incompatible.”¹ It’s a short entry, but it reveals Mayer’s attitude toward her work—a dedication to the inevitability of time, change, and their effects on the personal, the combination of art and life. And yet the tone of the litotic phrase “aren’t incompatible” suggests hesitancy: a small doubt that creates an opening. This acceptance of mutability, in life and art, allowed her work to progress beyond system-based approaches, geometric abstraction and drawing, gaining dimension as the work began to literally move away from the wall. She transitioned into sculpture, but not quite sculpture, with wires and dowels, drapery and color, in an indefinable presence.

Mayer’s insistence on change informs all of her work, and it is the guiding principle of this exhibition and catalog. Mayer, who was born in 1943 and died in 2014, lived and worked in New York throughout most of her life and career. *Beware of All Definitions*, the title of this project, comes directly from notes Mayer scrawled on two photographs that appear on the front and back cover of this book. The line appears on the bottom of a black-and-white image documenting *Hypsipyle* from 1973, her last fabric piece. The work features silk and cheesecloth hand-dyed in greys, oranges, and shades of nude draped over bowed, wooden dowels. The work can pivot off the wall and thus more directly engage space. Mayer noted in her journal that an art object “should not be still, unmoving and independent of its circumstances. Nothing is.”² “Beware of all definitions” also appears at the top right corner of a photograph of *Bat-Kol*, a work created later in 1973 without any drapery to reveal the curved and tensile underlying structure of a wooden bow, cords, and wire, recalling, according to Mayer’s description written across the photograph, “an immaterial female angle whose only presence is sound.” To be defined, it would seem, is to be fixed. Was Mayer heeding a warning to “Beware of all definitions,” or simply writing herself a reminder to get back to “change time,” a continuous process of movement?

Against definition, Mayer sought out a new way of being in the world. She was no doubt influenced by the emergence of the women’s movement in the late 1960s and early ’70s. Mayer attended consciousness-raising groups and, in 1972, became a founding member of A.I.R. Gallery, along with artists like Agnes Denes, Howardena Pindell, and Nancy Spero. The feminist non-profit collective first exhibited several works featured in this catalogue in a solo exhibition in 1973. In addition to displaying art by women artists, A.I.R. held workshops and created a library of videotapes featuring women artists working in their studios.

In excerpts from her journal of 1971, published last year, Mayer charts the beginning of her interest in what she calls “women’s meetings.” She is apprehensive but curious before attending. After one of her first meetings, she writes, “A lot of what gets said though I think everybody already knows & doesn’t need to be said (but I guess someone needs to say it).” In a later entry, she reflects, “The meetings haven’t changed me—exc. that they’ve made me feel good about the group & trust the people in it.”³

While she may have been reserved about her involvement in the women’s movement, Mayer was never ambivalent about the inspiration women—especially their legacies in history, myth, and astrology—brought to her work. Several of Mayer’s titles reference women, including figures that were obscure or forgotten. She writes: “Enveloped in huge gowns, over centuries there were Marie de France, Anna Comnena, Hroswitha, Christine de Pisane, Theophano, Eleanor of Aquitaine...”⁴ Mayer’s works bring these women back to life, paying homage to them, often in the form of lusciously draped fabrics. The wood-and-textile sculpture *The Catherines* honors a selection of historical women sharing the same name, from Russian monarch Catherine the Great and Italian noblewoman Caterina Sforza to the theologian Catherine of Siena. The work hangs from three rods and, like *Hypsipyle*, protrudes from the wall, with gauzy veils of pink and purple cloth. In a recent review, Chloe Wyma describes the piece as “openly feminist and unapologetically ornamental.” Her analysis moves

¹ Rosemary Mayer, *Excerpts from the 1971 Journal of Rosemary Mayer*, ed. Marie Warsh (New York: Object Relations, 2016), 75.

² Rosemary Mayer, “Passing Thoughts,” unpublished artist’s statement, November 4, 1978, Rosemary Mayer Archive.

³ Mayer, *Excerpts from the 1971 Journal of Rosemary Mayer*, 45, 47, 48.

⁴ Rosemary Mayer, “Two Years, March 1973 to January 1975,” *Individuals: Post-Movement Art in America*, ed. Alan Sondheim (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co, 1977), 192.

⁵ Chloe Wyma, “Critics’ Pick: Rosemary Mayer at SOUTHFIRST,” *Artforum.com*, November 5, 2016 (accessed June 13, 2017).

from the symbolic to the visceral, adding, “its flesh-colored swags of various transparent fabrics make sartorial and genital insinuations.”⁵

Mayer was less inclined to align her work directly with the vaginal, perhaps seeing such a reading as too prescriptive, too defined.⁶ Instead, her draped fabric pieces are more open to interpretation, simultaneously revealing while cloaking meaning. The art critic and curator Lawrence Alloway noted in a 1976 *Artforum* review: “Her supple, radiant, and crinkled drapery act as the screen, and the signal, of a hidden presence; one not seen, but which shapes the lie of the drapery.”⁷ Or as Mayer described it, “presence caught in thin veils, films of color on color.”⁸ The folds and color of her drapery recall the elaborately swathed garments depicted in Renaissance and Mannerist paintings.

In 1983 Mayer, who studied classics at the University of Iowa and was also known as a writer and critic, published a translation of the diaries of the Mannerist painter Jacopo Pontormo. In a text from 1977, she describes Pontormo’s use of drapery and color:

The draperies of the figures of *Joseph in Egypt* have the double colors of shot textiles, a strangeness from ordinary, pastel pinks with blue, violet, and oranges and pale greens of soft cream centers of candies curved in rows inside heart-shaped, cardboard, valentine boxes.⁹

Several fabric works from the 1970s borrow from Pontormo’s color palette—lavender, yellow-orange, acid-greens—as well as his elongated and exaggerated forms. Mayer’s interest in art history ran deep; she pored over images from the past. In a note from 1973, she mentions the Isenheim Altarpiece and the ways in which Grünewald makes “fabric float.”¹⁰

Like some of the women referenced in her fabric pieces, Mayer, too, might have been forgotten by time, if not for the efforts of her niece and nephew. I first encountered Mayer’s work in 2016 in the studio of her nephew, and my friend, Max Warsh. Max and his sister, Marie, had set up a small exhibition of Mayer’s fabric pieces, drawings, and conceptual works for invited friends and colleagues. Since Mayer’s death in 2014, Max and Marie have taken up the job of archiving and exhibiting her work. What struck me most about that exhibition was a slideshow, over which Marie presided, of photographs Mayer had taken of her work throughout her career. The whirring slide projector revealed dozens of Mayer’s works, most of which are no longer available—lost to time and mothballs and attics and change. Watching slide after slide, I kept thinking, “How do we preserve a work that no longer exists?”

This catalogue—a collection of many of those photographs documenting Mayer’s art works, writings, and drawings—is an attempt to preserve her output from the years 1966 to 1973. It was a fertile time in Mayer’s career, as her work steadily moved from geometric painting to the loosening of the canvas off the stretcher to her iconic fabric works to larger-than-lifesize bows and wooden structures. As Alloway noted in 1976, unlike many artists who work in “constant production—a flow of roughly equivalent pieces,” Mayer makes relatively few works, “each of them consequential.”¹¹ Here, the documentation of these works is presented in roughly chronological order. Where possible, drawings are paired with works in fabric, as she often would work simultaneously in both mediums. Mayer’s notes and writings are also included. In an effort to sustain Mayer’s work, we present it as a continual process, one that involved research and experimentation in a developing arc.

The 1972 A.I.R. Gallery statement of purpose emphasized that the collective was not only to exhibit and promote women artists, but also to create encouragement for women art students. As such, this exhibition and catalogue, which displays Mayer’s risk-taking and embrace of the flux of everyday life, her refusal to be defined as any one thing, serves also as a model for art students, mapping a trajectory of mutability.

⁶ In 1978 Mayer reflected on her works titled after the names of historical women: “Also, in 1973, the titles were a deliberate feminist gesture to connect these works to a large body of female experience, but not to any particulars, especially not to sex, as silly folks have chosen to read these works.” Mayer, “Passing Thoughts.”

⁷ Lawrence Alloway, “Rosemary Mayer,” *Artforum*, Summer 1976, 36.

⁸ Mayer, “Two Years, March 1973 to January 1975,” 192.

⁹ Rosemary Mayer, “Surroundings,” *Art-Rite #15*, April 1977.

¹⁰ Rosemary Mayer, “Ideas About my Work,” unpublished artist statement, September 1973, Rosemary Mayer Archive.

¹¹ Alloway, “Rosemary Mayer,” 36.