Looking for That Tomboy Spirit

A CONVERSATION WITH CHRISTINA SCHLESINGER

By Susan Rand Brown

TO FEEL AT HOME in two or maybe three places on the map of geographical possibilities is all most people need. Some travel and remain, while others, like Christina Schlesinger, the archetypal prodigal daughter, venture out and return. Chrissie and a few friends and close acquaintances made over a lifetime of work, travel, art-making, and activism, she was born the second daughter and middle child to artist-writer Marian Cannon Schlesinger and Harvard academic- Washington insider Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., an attractive, sociable couple who numbered John F. and Jackie Kennedy among their circle of friends.

Children of Harvard-affiliated scholars and theologians, the Schlesingers themselves had been brought up in the academic enclaves of Cambridge. The Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America at Harvard is named for Christina's paternal grandparents (Elizabeth was a suffragette). Henry James was a neighbor; a few decades later, so was Julia Child. During Chrissie Schlesinger's girlhood the family summered in Wellfleet, alongside Edmund Wilson, Alfred Kazin, and Marcel Breuer. One summer they rented a small place on a sandy cliff near the ocean; later they bought a house on Slough Pond.

Our conversation took place in Schlesinger's Tribeca apartment, in a narrow loft building not far from the Brooklyn Bridge. She shares the space, a colorful menage of homemade tiles, Mexican folk art, family photos, and artwork, with her daughter, Chun, now fifteen, and sculptor Nancy Fried. At an early stage in her career, Truro artist Breon Dunigan did carpentry work in the apartment's kitchen, adding her artist's signature by painting a tile on the counter (one among many painted by friends). Frida Kahlo would feel right at home in the large bathroom, its toilet surrounded by tiles and raised to suggest an altar.

A large space, brightly lit and separated by French doors from the rest of the apartment—a true room of one's own—serves as Schlesinger's studio. Lately she has been combining painting and writing, incorporating fabric, paper, and acrylics in a style that would sit comfortably with a small Rauschenberg. As I asked about the journey of her life and work, her responses came back in a breathy, musical voice, words flowing as fast as they could go.

After four years at Harvard (her mother, now almost one hundred, attended Radcliffe), where Schlesinger majored in English Literature, a summer at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine left an impression in an unexpected way. The flaring temper of the late 1960s made the traditional curriculum seem irrelevant; together with an aspiring student muralist, Schlesinger created colorful protest art (one anti-war fresco depicted Uncle Sam eating a rat) to hang in a nearby barn. Truro resident Ben Shahn, whose photography during the 1930s documented the urban poor, was the Skowhegan faculty member who defended her political mural-making to conservative colleagues.

Schlesinger's experiences at Skowhegan were followed a few years later by a complete break with the East Coast. "My parents were being divorced," she explains. "I had a very famous father, and just wanted to get away. I needed to know that people liked me for myself. It's a confusing thing, having a famous name. . . . My father is a wonderful writer. It took me a long time to read his books."

Feminism and activism were in full boil when Schlesinger moved west to Los Angeles in 1971, a fertile direction for an outgoing artist determined to explore her spiritual, sexual, and aesthetic identity far away from the academic communities where her last name—the expectations imposed upon a "Schlesinger" by then feeling like a corset—would be recognized.

Following her instincts and without missing a beat, she found work and friends, studying for a while with Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago at the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia (CalArts), a hotbed of women's art theory and communal art-making. Her original plan was to move to Los Angeles for the summer. Then she met (in a women's bar in Venice) well-known West Coast muralist Judy Baca. Just getting started, Baca discovered Schlesinger a creative soul who could give substance to an art movement perfectly attuned to the times. "Judy asked me if I wanted to help paint a mural. We developed a plan for a city-wide mural project, and eventually we created the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC), one of the premiere public art organizations in the country, still going strong. We sat around thinking of what to call it, and I was thinking of the Weathermen, 'It only takes a spark to light a prairie fire,' and so we called it SPARC," Schlesinger recalls.

With a new body of work and experience behind her, Schlesinger moved back East in the early 1980s. She headed to Manhattan, arriving in the East Village just as cheap rents were attracting a wave of urban artists and galleries. Her work quickly attracted interest and shows. She also returned to spending summers in Wellfleet, which led to showing at the Cherry Stone Gallery in 1982, when it was still on Railroad Avenue, and forming a relationship with owners Sally Neber and Lizzie Upham that lasted over twenty years.

In the summer of 1988 she studied Chinese landscape painting at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in eastern China (Hangzhou), drawing with ink on rice paper; soon she was making collages by gluing rice paper to canvas using flour and water paste. The Hal Katzen Gallery (its founder/owner is the son of sculptor Lila Katzen; the family summered in Provincetown for many years) showed her work in the early 1990s; so did the Jan Baum Gallery in Los Angeles. Both shows were reviewed in Art in America in 1991.

Around this time Schlesinger became involved with the Guerrilla Girls, activists using street theater to protest the invisibility of women artists in major museums and blue-chip galleries. A Guerrilla Girl would appear publicly in the guise of a dead woman artist. Schlesinger chose Romaine Brooks, whose portraits and self-portraits helped define the elegance and the fluid sexuality of the 1920s.

Remembering these high-flying days, Schlesinger does a fast-forward to the mid-1990s and the Tomboy Series created for her master's thesis show at Rutgers, where she received an MFA in 1994. For these powerful paintings, never shown again—"I still have not found a dealer willing to show women with cíclidos," she comments wryly—Schlesinger tweaked conventions of hermaphrodite imagery from Greco-Roman art and made it her own.

"Even in Los Angeles," she explains, describing her work on a mural in East LA, "working with gangs not as a middle-class white female, I was looking for that tomboy spirit. I was the middle child. I was sort of wily, and had to figure out how to survive. The Tomboy paintings were a way of tapping into that strength, that tomboy strength."

We discuss one of her mother's paintings of her children, done in an Early American folk-art style, which is on the back cover of I Remember: A Life of Politics, Painting, and People, the second volume of Mary Cannon Schlesinger's memoirs. The Schlesinger daughters are depicted here as dolls; Chrissie, the baby, is in a long white christening dress. "We used to have terrible fights about getting me into a dress," she remembers. "Being a tomboy was what got me out to California, got me to paint murals; it's always that thing that saved me."

Schlesinger describes her large, mixed-media paintings of the intrepid Dorothy and her dog, Toto, inspired by a 1950s coloring book based on The Wizard of Oz. Schlesinger began the Dorothy Paintings in 2001, when she adopted Chun and was studying illustrations from children's literature. Creating paintings of a powerful young girl also tapped into Schlesinger's tomboy spirit. "I made a girl, larger than life—the paintings were six feet by four feet—a curious, mischievous, and willful Dorothy—with my mural brushes, using the same technique and beginning with the grid I'd use for a mural. So again, I feel like I am always going back to find that strength of a tomboy.

"When I did the Tomboy paintings, I used my old flannel shirts, painting on top of them. And later, with the Dorothy series, I used material that had personal significance. I had studied with Miriam Schapiro, who always used fabric, and there was Sigmar Polke [a German painter whose work layers dream-like imagery]. So I always liked fabric, but it wasn't until I could connect working this way to my personal experience that it became part of my process. "Grinning, she adds, "I am also a little bit of a New Englander, who likes to use what I have."

Schlesinger explains the delicate design in an encaustic painting (where hot wax bonds image to...
surface), incorporating her mother’s painting shirt, fabric that sat for years on a sofa in their Wellfleet house. Other pieces incorporate a soiled napkin, thread from a skirt, sign-language cards seen on the subway, images from Chinese tea bags. "The butterflies in this pattern make me think of picnics in the summer," she says about a piece hanging on the wall.

Schlesinger learned encaustic techniques in the mid-1990s while teaching at the Ross School, a middle school in Southampton on the tip of Long Island. One of the school’s original faculty members, she smiles as she remembers an early project, “painting a big mural with the kids.” She rented painter Peter Busa’s studio in East Hampton from his widow, Ross colleague Alex Cromwell, then found additional studio space nearby, which she still uses. She stayed on the faculty until 2005, teaching medieval cultural history, surprised by how naturally she moved into the role of professor, her father’s daughter come home.

Her last year at Ross, she had a one-person show, The White Swan Hotel, named after her painting of three Chinese male figures seated around a table. The image was based on tea bags used at the White Swan Hotel in Guangzhou, a meeting-place familiar to Schlesinger and others who have adopted children from China.

Schlesinger retired from Ross the year her sister, Katharine Kinderman, died. The two had become very close. At the same time, her father was becoming noticeably weaker (he died in 2006). “That was when Chun and I moved back to the city so we could spend time with him. We really enjoyed each other’s company. They say I got along with him best of all the siblings. We’d tease each other and laugh.”

Not quite two years after her father’s death, Schlesinger was diagnosed with stage four non-Hodgkin lymphoma. She traces the ways her cancer and recovery, a process that took over two years, affected her work. “Even when I got well, there was a period when I was too depressed and exhausted to paint. I’d walk into my studio and walk out. Then when I finally did have the strength to go back, I started making abstract paintings. This was completely unexpected. I also began writing poetry. So maybe I have started putting images into my poems,” she muses.

For her show this August at Gallery Elva, Schlesinger is preparing a series using encaustics on material on panels incorporating geometric shapes influenced by Greek mathematics. She is also working on bound, accordion-style books that blend image, text, watercolor, acrylics, and smudges of poetry. The project—intimate, personal, and fragile—seems a lifetime away from the public, collaborative mural-making process with its grids, large brushes, and expanses of bright colors. “I pour as much energy into these as I do into my bigger paintings,” she says with a sigh.

Like an Asian scroll, individual storytelling pages fold out and expand into surrounding imagery, creating horizontal journeys. Schlesinger pours through a book: several pages incorporate inside flaps of envelopes, each design a little different, marrying the impulse to save and reuse with the diarist’s impulse to reveal as well as conceal.

A natural raconteur, Schlesinger tells a complex story of meeting Georgia O’Keeffe when the notoriously reclusive painter was squirreled away in New Mexico. Before sending Schlesinger and a friend to a remote desert area on what amounted to a wild-goose chase, the senior painter queried the younger women: “Who do you make art for?”

That question lingers as Schlesinger pours energy into the small handmade books. “This is work where I am trying to answer some need inside myself. I keep adding images, faces. I am enjoying doing these immensely: images and texts, poems and collage. They are not commercial; yet I feel if I died and left them behind, these would be a record of my life. There was this period of about two years where I feel that I stepped out of life. I have come back. I started making paintings, I started writing poetry, I started making these books.”

Schlesinger is also gathering material for a memoir, just now rereading the journal she kept as a preteen when the family was in Europe. “It’s very detailed. I am writing every day. Reading it now, I am seeing this little girl who is very observant. I even write about meeting Peggy Guggenheim.” There are also boxes of letters to be combed through from her grandmother Schlesinger, the woman who early on encouraged her to stand on her own two feet and whose support meant so much.

“When I was young, I was so ambitious,” she explains. “I wanted to make murals, I wanted to show my work, I wanted to change the world. I really modeled myself after my father. I liked the way he lived his life. He had an effervescent quality that was wonderful to be around. At sixty-five, I still feel young, but I am looking at my life, asking how did I get from here to there and who am I now . . . And so this is a process of self-discovery. I feel like I am on the brink of I don’t know what, happy to be having this show in Provincetown. The paintings are like getting dressed up and going to a party, the elegant going out into the world thing, creating objects that can sell. The books are more like poetry.” Schlesinger looks up at me. Her voice is filled with its own unique collage of energy and wistfulness. “I am always trying to define myself, as a woman and as an artist.”

SUSAN RAND BROWN profiled the painter Lillian Orlowsky for the 2004/5 issue of Provincetown Arts, and has since written about artists Ellen LeBow, Barbara E. Cohen, Mike Wright, Sky Power, Marion Roth, and Bren Dunagan. Brown began writing about the arts in the 1970s, and has profiled many of the Outer Cape’s major artists for the Provincetown Banner (and its predecessor, the Provincetown Advocate). She has spent summers in her family’s Commercial Street home for five decades.