Miranda

Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone /
Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-speaking world

21 | 2020

Modernism and the Obscene

N'importe où hors du monde : Susan Bee in Paris

Barbara Montefalcone

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/29288>

DOI: 10.4000/miranda.29288

ISSN: 2108-6559

Publisher

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

Electronic reference

Barbara Montefalcone, "N'importe où hors du monde : Susan Bee in Paris", *Miranda* [Online], 21 | 2020, Online since 13 October 2020, connection on 16 February 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/29288> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.29288>

This text was automatically generated on 16 February 2021.

Miranda is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

N'importe où hors du monde : Susan Bee in Paris

Barbara Montefalcone

"I want the paintings to create a space that people want to be in, that the paintings will give them some hope for the future."

Susan Bee

- 1 On November 27, 2019, I had the pleasure to host a talk by artist, editor, and book artist Susan Bee. An audience of professionals and art students from Paris College of Art attended the event and were introduced to Bee's rich and multifaceted creative universe.
- 2 A New York native, Bee has developed, since the early 1970s, a deeply personal painterly style combining art historical and literary references, gender-related issues, and an expressionist use of color and line. A series of early photographic experiments were followed by a more assertive painterly style characterizing both her own work and her collaborative projects with poets and artists including Charles Bernstein, Johanna Drucker, Susan Howe and Jerome Rothenberg. These projects led to the publication of sixteen artist's books and to a series of one-of-a-kind books Bee is currently working on.
- 3 To date, she has had nine solo shows at A.I.R. Gallery, New York, including a solo show (*Anywhere out of the World*) at A.I.R. in September-October 2020. Her work has been widely reviewed and is in many public and private collections including Bibliothèque nationale de France, Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery at Reed College, Getty Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Victoria & Albert Museum. As a parallel to her artistic production Susan Bee edited, from 1989 to 2016, *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*, a leading feminist magazine publishing the work of critics, art historians and poets.
- 4 Some of these key moments in her artistic career were addressed during her public talk at Paris College of Art and, more in depth, during a private conversation the following day. The interview that follows is the result of that conversation, and of some recent correspondence with the artist whom I wish to thank for her openness and generosity.

Barbara Montefalcone: Let's start by talking about Paris. You seem to come pretty often...

Susan Bee: I have come to France since I was a child with my parents, and since then we have been coming often because I love French culture and I studied French in high school. And so did my husband, poet Charles Bernstein. We have friends here, but we also admire the culture of France: the food, art, and poetry. I feel there is a rapport between Paris and New York: friends that we have in New York have places in Paris, and there is a rapport between French culture and the culture of New York, so it's a place that I love to come to.

BM: When you studied French in high school did you study the language, the literature or both? Which authors did you read?

SB: I read some Balzac... I studied literature too. In the end, I read French authors that I really like more often in English, such as Baudelaire, Proust, and the poets. I read Victor Hugo, Dumas, and, of course, Simone de Beauvoir, who was very important in terms of feminist thinking, and Sartre. During the time in the 1960s, when I got involved with French culture it was more about Godard, and the existentialists. I love so many aspects of French culture that have drawn us here, and also the exchange with poets, my publishers like Gervais Jaussaud of Global Books and the editors of *Piet Bot* from Joca Seria, which published my photos and book covers, academics, and with the artists here. Everybody we know in New York are either poets or artists ... it seems like I hardly know any regular people, normal people! (Laughing)

BM: You said that you first came to France when you were a child. What do you remember of those trips?

SB: My parents were artists from Berlin, so they had a tie to Europe, and we often came to Europe. I have always felt that I was somewhat more European. My parents were German Jews, so that's not a happy group. They left when they were teenagers, and went to Palestine, but we had a very European upbringing as opposed to an American upbringing. They came to the U.S. in 1947 and I was born in 1952, so they had only been in New York for five years when I was born. So there was still the sense of a tie to Europe and to European culture. That's probably why I am more tied to European culture than a lot of Americans are. I don't feel myself to be fully American in some ways because of this tie to Europe. I was born in Manhattan, so I am a native New Yorker, which is unusual. Usually when I meet people in New York they have just moved there, their families aren't there, they have not this tie to New York as an actual place where people live. I think it's true of Paris too.

BM: When did you start drawing?

SB: I started during my childhood. My parents were both artists, my mother used to put me in her studio, she was an oil painter and she would stick me in the corner of her studio as a child with oil paint and a piece of paper. As a child I was going to openings: she had shows in New York, my father also showed there. So you can say I was brought up to be an artist. They were against my being an artist, because it's a very bad profession, which turned out to be true, (laughing) but nonetheless that is all I was trained to be. I saw them doing their artwork and their friends were artists. I went to Barnard College where I studied art history and art, and then I went to Hunter College where I got my MA also in art. We left New York, Charles and I for two years, we went to the West Coast, and that was the only time we were really out of New York because my husband is also a New York native.

BM: How would you describe your early work?

SB: I have always been painting in oils, and also watercolors. I went to the High School of Music and Art in New York, which is a specialized public high school and many important artists and musicians have come from that school. To get into the school, you have to show a portfolio of your work. I am still in touch fifty years later with friends who went to that high school. Many professional artists and designers, opera singers, and jazz musicians came out of that high school, so I got more out of my high school than I got from my later education.

But I also learned a lot at Barnard, where I studied art history, and I have a strong editorial and writing background. In graduate school, I wrote my thesis on Man Ray and Moholy-Nagy and photograms, and I was making photograms and altered photos then. I had a show in 2015 in New York of work I did in the 1970s¹, which people loved now, but didn't like in the 70s, when I couldn't get the work shown. People wondered why I stopped doing that work. I had a darkroom and had migrated from painting, which was frowned upon in my graduate program, to photography. However, the photography I was doing was abstract and very painterly. So, I couldn't show it until 2015 but it was work I did in 1977 to 1981 and people love it now. But they didn't at the time, because it was not the time when abstract photography was in vogue. Most photographers then were doing street photography. My work in photography was so painterly that I realized I might as well just go back to painting. It was dark room work and I painted the developer on so it was very experimental.

BM: Were you ever tempted to go back to that kind of work?

SB: Once I had children, I had to give up the darkroom. I had a studio downtown that was a half an hour away, so without a darkroom I couldn't do that work anymore, so I went back to oil painting.

BM: And then you started a series of artist's books

SB: The first one that I did in 1978 was called *Photogram*². It is all abstract and there is no text, it's just my photograms. That was a beginning of what I didn't realize was going to be a lifelong project of artist's books. It was self-published and I was part of the early artist's book movement that was happening at that time. Since then I have published sixteen more books. The first book I did for Granary Books was in 1985, *Talespin*, and that's just my book, there is no poetry involved. Steve Clay who is the publisher, asked me if I wanted to have a poet to collaborate with, and I told him, I just wanted to do my own book. He published it and I was happy to have the opportunity. I have done a few other books that are not very well known, that are very limited editions, small unique editions with texts and collage, and a more recent series of accordion books that are hand painted.

BM: Why are you moving towards this kind of projects?

SB: I don't need a publisher and they are really more like long drawings, but they are also narratives. It's something that I can do on my own and I enjoy doing them. I am selling them as unique objects. I have shown them in art and book fairs. I have done seventeen now including two miniature books. It's a new direction that feels personal but now that they have been shown in galleries and art fairs, they are out in the world.

If you work with a publisher you have deadlines, and if you work with a collaborator you have certain parameters you have to respect. That is true even when I worked

with Johanna Drucker, she wrote stories for our upcoming book, which I am very excited about *Off-World Fairy Tales* to be published in November 2020 by Litmus Press, the same publisher that did our collaborative book, *Fabulas Feminae*³. We have been working on *Off-World* for two years. I am always involved with my newest projects, so that I don't think so much about the past projects. That would be the third book with Johanna. *A Girl's Life*⁴, *Fabulas Feminae*, and *Off-World Fairy Tales* are sort of a trilogy because there are relationships between the ways we did those three books and also the subject matter.

BM: They all focus on gender roles...

SB: Yes, they are about gender roles, *A Girl's Life* was about two teenage girls and their relationships and their friendships and how they came together. That was also about our friendship, because Johanna and I have been friends since we met, which is in 1977. We have been friends for forty years and we each have our own practices. She is a scholar and also a professor. In addition, she has a visual art and poetic practice, and she is the leading scholar of artist's books. I edited her book *The Century of Artists' Books*⁵, so that there are all these overlaps in our practice.

BM: Who had the idea to start making books together?

SB: We were both being published by Granary Books and I was working at the time also with Susan Howe and other poets. I asked Johanna: Do you want to do a book together? We also checked with Steve Clay to see if he would publish it. He already published both of us separately, and we had been collaborating with other people. Johanna had been collaborating with her husband at the time, Brad Freeman, and I had been collaborating with Charles, so we thought that rather than collaborating with our husbands, let's collaborate with each other. That was the feminist aspect, but it was also a question of friendship and admiring each other's work and wanting to see how we could work together. We had so much fun working together, and I am

enjoying it even more now. We started working together in 2000 (*A Girl's Life* came out in 2002) and so since 2000 off and on we have been collaborating.

BM: What do you mean by working together? Do you set up a meeting and work in the same place at the same time or do you correspond?

SB: Mostly we have not been in the same place at the same time. But with *A Girl's Life* I made several trips to Virginia (Johanna was teaching there at the time) and she came to New York. So, some of that was done in person and some of that was done where she would send me the text and I would read it and respond. She would ask for certain images--collaborations as you know are very back and forth, plus she and I have not lived in the same place for many years so the projects have required travelling.

BM: How about your first collaborative book? Was it with Charles Bernstein?

SB: Yes, we made some little books on our own, like one called *Disfrutelos* in 1977 that is up on my website and also on Ubu Web⁶. We started collaborating even when he was in college: I made some posters for productions that he did and then we did a piece called "Johnny June" in 1971. He gave me a poem--and I made illustrations. It looks like a page from a children's book. We met in 1968, at that time Charles was the editor of his high school paper at Bronx Science.

In 1981, Segue published *The Occurrence of Tune*, which was our first offset printed collaborative book as opposed to our own little productions in-house, and that one was based on my photo work from the 1970s and included a long poem by Charles. It was the first book that was published by a regular publisher as opposed to being self-published. We had our own little press called Asylum's Press--and also Charles was publishing his magazine, *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* in 1978-1981. I was the designer of that magazine and made the logo for it. So, I was working on his projects to some degree and also writing for his magazine.

BM: Going back to the 1970s, could you say a few words about your early paintings and the numerous art historical references that are still very present in your work?

SB: I grew up in New York City and studied art history in college, and I always went to museums. I grew up a few blocks from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, so I spent a lot of my spare time going to the museum, and I am steeped in art history. There is no blank slate for me because I have seen so much art, also my parents took us to many museums in Europe, so I feel everything that I do have some reference to something in the past. Though I was an abstract painter for a while in the 1970s, I returned to figuration in 1980. Then I realized artists like Marsden Hartley and Edvard Munch are very important to me, and I wanted somehow to get them into the paintings, so they became important reference points. I also use images from medieval manuscripts, which are a very important source and inspiration to me. There are also many Matisse paintings that I admire. I have a love of many different painters and they enter into the vocabulary of what I am painting. I don't think any contemporary painter comes out of nothing; even naïve painters come from some reference points. I have also looked at a lot of folk art and I am very interested in naïve artists and in their approach to making art.

My artwork involves collage in the books, but also in the paintings. I sometimes collage items into the paintings too. It's a way to take something from the real world or from the art historical world and make it my own. When I look at Munch, it's my

version of what he did, but I like to enter into his space, as in my painting *Demonology*. There are references to the self-portrait of Ensor, which I changed to my own self-portrait. That's a very obvious example of taking somebody else's work and revising it, because people have recognized the Ensor. It's a tribute to his work and it's also a way for me to understand his work. I put myself into his work without his work taking over. It's not a copy exactly and it's not appropriation, it is more of a tribute. A lot of appropriation is not really done with a sense of love, whereas the reason I wanted to redo the Ensor was that I love the image, and I admire what he was doing surrounding himself with these demons, and I wanted to understand it.

BM: You use numerous patterns in your paintings, and I noticed a recurrent dripping motif on figures, cloths, on a bed cover... Is this a tribute to Abstract Expressionism and Jackson Pollock?

SB: I am definitely influenced by Pollock. I have been using his drip technique. I like to also work on the floor. I watched the film called *Painters Painting*⁷ of him working. After watching him work and studying his paintings, I decided I was going to be dripping too. I use enamel paint and I drip on the floor and then I leave the paintings on the floor flat to dry. You see the painting totally differently when it's on the floor and I also put sand in. It's a question of texture, but it's also something that's less controllable and I like the idea of accidents. I sometimes spatter the watercolors in the books. I am fairly controlled about it but I spattered many pages in the entire edition of *Little Orphan Anagram*⁸. There is spattering through the entire forty copies, so each copy was different because you cannot spatter in the same way twice so it brings a sense of the accidental and the unconscious, which is what Pollock believed he was doing. For me, because I get very controlled and tight when I work sometimes in those patterns, this is a way of bringing in more spontaneous movements, which can exist in painting. However, I have a tendency to get so involved in reworking and

working over and over again whereas the spatter is not easily controllable. I control it in my way, but things happen, it's not predictable.

BM: You couldn't base one entire work on this technique though.

SB: I have used it to a more or less degree, but I am still using it in the studio. I have a painting right now that I am working on that has feathers in it, *Witches Brew*; it has drips and it has sand. The elements are very layered so it feels archeological. There is a sense that there is a layer building up which you can't really see unless you are seeing it in person, but the texture is very important in the paintings. People are often surprised after they have seen me talk about my work or seen it in reproduction on my website and then when they see the paintings they realize it's very textured. There is scraping into the painting, there are built-up sections that are not that visible. It's hard to see those things in reproductions, but to me texture is very important. That's what I like about paintings: you can make a texture, and that's very visceral.

BM: Can you tell me something about the accordion books that you are currently working on?

SB: These leporellos have a relationship to Chinese calligraphy and scrolls. I did do a limited edition accordion book called *Fool's Gold*⁹ with poems by Charles Bernstein. It is a very rare, eighty-inch-long book. There were forty copies and it has been shown in some museum shows. That one was not done by hand, but it is a very lengthy book. I love that format, because the leporello is very interesting to read--you can open parts and then you close parts. It's rarely seen in its full length. One of the accordion books I did in 2012 is eighty inches long, so nobody ever sees the whole book. Even when I was working on it, I could only work on parts, because my table wasn't long enough to unfold it to its full length.

I also love working with Johanna. I made illustrations for her stories and then she asked me to make little spots. I had assignments that were very funny like “make a cloud with an arrow”, “make an angel with a wing”, “make a spaceship with a creature on it”. I have a whole list of assignments that she gave me for *Off-World Fairy Tales*. It’s sci-fi and it has robots and creatures ... it has a lot of fantasy in it.

BM: You don’t mind having assignments then

SB :No, I think it’s great to have assignments, especially assignments that are almost ridiculous. I kept the funny list of what Johanna asked for. She started to tell me on the phone and I made notes of what I was supposed to do. The list was so idiosyncratic, but I interpreted it the way I felt like. When I do my own book there is not the same back and forth, it’s just me and the book, so it’s more like making a painting. But when I work with somebody else they have opinions: they like things; they may not like things.

BM: And you seem to like sharing the creative space with someone...

SB: I like to do it sometimes. But, even when I work on my own there is always the feedback from an audience, so I am not working in isolation, because I always have viewers. Other artists come to my studio and give me their opinions, which I don’t always appreciate. People are very critical in New York and tell me things that I don’t necessarily want to hear. In the first issue of my magazine, *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* #1, 1986, I published a list of all the critical comments that people had said in my studio. People still find that piece relevant. I read it aloud in Barcelona for a MACBA podcast in 2019¹⁰. It includes critical comments like “you should use a bigger brush”, “you should buy more paint”, “what is this work about”. So, I started keeping track of all these remarks that had been made in my studio, and it still holds up. You have to be very tough to survive all these critiques. There are artists who live out in the country; they just send their work to galleries and they never have to interact with other people. But I am part of a community, in fact, poets have been my best supporters: they are the ones who buy my work and they seem to like it the most. So, I feel very supported by the community of poets. Artists are more critical, but they are also my friends. I worked with the artist and writer Mira Schor for thirty years.

BM: Yes, could you tell me more about *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*? How did the project start and end?

SB: We started in 1986. We just wanted to make a magazine of critical thoughts that was run by artists and painters, but had more of an orientation towards painting, and New York, and feminism. It was a feminist publication that included men, which at the time was frowned upon. I also worked for *Women Artists News*, while we were involved with the feminist art movement, but we wanted a broader perspective. I wanted to be able to include poets, art historians, and critics that were not necessarily part of *October* or *Artforum*. We wanted to bring a different perspective, and strangely it took off: we didn’t expect really to go past the first issue, or two, and then people wanted more issues, and so we kept going for thirty years.

BM: How did you distribute the magazine?

We had a distributor to bookstores, but mostly we just mailed it ourselves. We only made five hundred copies of the first issue, then we started making bigger runs, like a thousand. It was offset, we printed it in downtown New York. I had a studio in Tribeca, and Mira was there too and we met up. We never expected it to last. Then we got a little bit of government money -- not very much, and subscribers. We sent out a

subscription notice, which is what we did with *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* and people subscribed. We did two issues a year, and they came out as hard copies. We made twenty issues of the hard copies from 1986 to 1996, and then after that we made a book, an anthology that came out from Duke in 2000¹¹. It was almost 500 pages, and that was a huge project.

All the original magazines are now on our website, they have been scanned¹². After that we decided to go online: we continued with the project but virtually, without having to print it. People miss the printed copies, but it just became too difficult to raise the money. We never really made any money and we never had any help. It was really a two-person operation. We both had other work and commercial jobs. I had kids; there was just a lot going on; it became too much for us. The virtual online issues started in 2002 and were easier to produce: you could include eighty people, or a hundred people because you weren't actually printing the pages. So, we went on until 2016. We covered various topics: feminism, collaboration, and resistance. We had themes, but we published articles as well.

BM: When is your next show, and what kind of work do you plan to present?

SB: My solo painting show, “Anywhere Out of the World: New Paintings, 2017-2020,” is scheduled for March 2020¹³. It involves fantasy, mythology, and dreamscapes. It's a different direction than my last solo show, which featured paintings of couples based on film stills and had a lot of patterning¹⁴. This one is about mythological creatures: harpies, demons, and angels. *Demonology* is in it, and the painting called *Anywhere out of the World*, which is based on Chagall's self-portrait from 1914 and is titled after a quote from Baudelaire¹⁵. I am going in a more introspective direction. This has to do with my reaction to being in Trump's America, which is a very disturbing place. This reality is pushing me into escapist fantasies and ecological themes. There is a painting called *Underwater*, which features a large shark in the water and deals with the feeling of dystopia. The studio is not an escape from the world for me. I get the newspaper every day and so I am immersed in the news. I feel I am reacting by wanting to be in a more romantic and dreamlike space that's my own little utopia, which is reflected in the paintings. I want the paintings to create a space that people want to be in—that the paintings will give them some hope for the future.

ENDNOTES

1. "Photograms and Altered Photos from the 1970s", Southfirst, New York, January 10 – February 15, 2015.
2. New York: Asylum's Press, 1978.

3. Susan Bee, and Johanna Drucker, *Fabulas Feminae*, New York: Litmus, 2015.
4. Susan Bee, and Johanna Drucker, *A Girl's Life*, New York: Granary Books, 2002.
5. Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists' Books*, New York: Granary Books, 1995.
6. <https://www.ubu.com/contemp/bernstein/index.html>
7. *Painters Painting: The New York Art Scene 1940-1970*, directed by Emile De Antonio, 1972.
8. Charles Bernstein and Susan Bee, *Little Orphan Anagram*, New York: Granary Books, 1997.
9. Tucson, Az: Chax Press, 1991.
10. <https://rwm.macba.cat/en/sonia/sonia-308-susan-bee>
11. *M/E/A/N/I/N/G: An Anthology of Artists' Writing, Theory, and Criticism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000.
12. *M/E/A/N/I/N/G Online*: <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/pepc/meaning/>
13. "Anywhere Out of the World: New Paintings, 2017-2020," that was scheduled for March 2020, was instead presented in September-October 2020 at A.I.R. Gallery in Brooklyn, due to Covid.
14. *Pow! New Paintings*. A.I.R. Gallery, New York, March 16-April 16, 2017.
15. "N'importe où hors du monde", *Le Spleen de Paris*, 1989.

INDEX

Mots-clés: art, poésie, américain, livre d'artiste, collaboration, petite édition, féminisme

Keywords: American, art, poetry, artist's book, collaboration, small press, feminism

Subjects: American art

AUTHORS

BARBARA MONTEFALCONE

Chair of Liberal Studies

Paris College of Art

barbara.montefalcone@paris.edu