

## Evelyne Axell *Axell's Paradise: Last works (1971-1972) before she vanished*

Broadway 1602 October 1 - November 21, 2009 John Yau

For those who are willing to go to a slightly out-of-the-way, risk-taking gallery, located at 1182 Broadway between 28th and 29th Street, now would be a good time to hightail it over there and discover the bright, bold, erotic paintings of the Belgian Pop artist Evelyne Axell (1935-1972). A contemporary and friend of the English Pop artist Pauline Boty (1938-1966) and the innovative Polish sculptor, Alina Szapocznikow (1926-1973), whose work has also been shown in this small, smart, exciting gallery, Axell's paintings and drawings epitomize "overlooked, neglected, and forgotten." In *POP* (2005), published for Phaidon's Themes and Movements series and edited by Mark Francis (with a "Survey" by Hal Foster), Axell is never mentioned, although Allan D'Arcangelo, Allen Jones, John Wesley, and Tom Wesselmann are discussed, as is Rosalyn Drexler. Axell belongs in this company, and, like Boty and Drexler, embodies a proto-feminist critique in her work.

This exhibition focuses on the very last works Axell made before she died in a car accident, and typifies what she became known for in France, where her biggest champion was the influential French critic Pierre Restany. Axell's style is graphic and direct. Many of the last paintings are like stage sets. They consist of a figure—often a naked female—that is painted on a cut piece of plexiglass, sometimes on both sides. The prone or relaxed figure is mounted in front of a lush landscape done in a different palette on Formica; generally warm colors for the figure and cool colors for the landscape. She used enamel to achieve a sensual, flat surface and always painted

the narrow frames that were especially made for each painting.

In "L'Herbe folle" ("The Mad Forest") (1972), the voluptuous, flame-like tropical foliage is largely done in two shades of blue, with a muted green sky above. The nude reclining woman is holding eyeglasses (Axell's signature prop) and daydreaming. Axell uses red and orange-red to emphasize the figure's heated body, a red dot for a nipple and red for her lips. As with the other paintings in this group, the landscape contains strong verticals (tropical foliage, waterfall, palm trees) while the figure is often nude and horizontal; the symbolism is cheeky and obvious but never ingratiating. Seen within the context of Modernism, beginning with Gauguin's views of Tahiti and including Wesselmann's Great American Nude series, Axell's views challenge the paradigm of woman as territory to be colonized or a willing subject of male fantasy. She does so unapologetically and with great verve, making no excuses or justifications for her intense desires. Her figures are in complete control and uncontrollable — the painted frames underscore this latter aspect. These are erotic images of autonomy and self-determination, and yet you don't feel as if the artist is preaching.

In another painting, "L'Oiseau de Paradis (version bleue)" ("The Bird of Paradise (blue version)", (1971), a naked woman is pulling her last piece of clothing over her head. Her breasts and arms are blue, while her lips are red and her pubic hair is orange. The remainder of the plexiglass cutout is left transparent. An orange hummingbird flutters nearby, ready to sip the nectar. The unpainted



"L'Herbe Folle" ("The Mad Forest") (1972). Enamel on plexi glass, Formica, 74,5 x 94,4 cm. Signed and dated on lower right corner: Axell 72.

plexiglass underscores the viewer's voyeurism, while the paint makes plain what some viewers would consider the only important parts: mouth, breasts and sex. Wesselmann's nudes look repressed and corny next to Axell's work, and Mel Ramos's women look downright trivial.

In her other paintings and works on paper, Axell painted cropped views of nude women, generally looking off-frame, that are titled after different countries. "La Tchèque" ("The Czech") (1969) hangs in the gallery's office, along with one of the two works on paper of *Angela Davis*. There was also a portrait of *Yael Dayan* (1969) that, along with the one of Davis, was part of an ongoing series on strong women. She painted women as unknowable countries and celebrations of independence, all inflected by an erotic imagination.

In the last few years, there have been gallery exhibitions of Szapocznikow and Drexler, as well as the recent New Museum exhibition of Dorothy Iannone. The exhibition *Seductive Subversion: Women Pop Artists 1958-1968*, which has been organized by Sid Sachs, will open in Philadelphia on January 22, 2010 at The Rosewald-Wolf Gallery of the University of the Arts. Works of Boty will be in that exhibition, which is long overdue and absolutely necessary. Long before Cindy Sherman, whom I once heard Peter Schjeldahl call a "genius," arrived on the scene, artists such as Axell, Boty, Drexler and Szapocznikow paved the way. That Axell was shameless about her erotic desires and celebrated them throughout her tragically brief career should not be forgotten. She was a groundbreaker, and, unlike Sherman, didn't empty out her subject. **BR**