

## Wendy Shalen: Domestic Art in a Great Tradition

When I learned that Wendy Shalen had exhibited at Allan Stone Gallery, it made perfect sense to me. I knew Allan Stone from the late 1960s, until shortly before his death in 2006. When I first met him I still considered myself a visual artist and was showing my work downtown in the 10th Street scene. But like most of my friends, I was hoping to graduate to an uptown venue. And the Allan Stone Gallery, then on 86th Street, just off Madison, was the one I had in mind.

For while Allan had made his reputation as one of the early champions of the Abstract Expressionists (his purchase of a de Kooning drawing on the allowance his father gave him when he was still in Harvard Law School almost got him disinherited!), he had incredibly catholic taste, and along with de Kooning, Gorky, and Kline, collected and exhibited figurative artists like Wayne Thiebaud, Richard Estes, and Gregory Gillespie.

It was all about the quality of the work itself, regardless of “school” or style. And, unlike the other uptown dealers, who hid behind receptionists and glass partitions, Allan was willing to at least look at the work of a wild-eyed, longhaired hippie kid who walked in off the street without an appointment. I wasn’t quite ready, but the important thing was that he did not discourage me. He told me to come back and show him new work whenever I had some. Neither of us could have imagined then that I would end up a writer, rather than a painter, and would eventually write occasional catalog essays for exhibitions at Allan Stone Gallery. In fact, I wrote all kinds of other things as well, but one of the professional compliments I prized most was when, in his unpretentious, plainspoken way, Allan introduced me to someone in the gallery as “a no bullshit



“Mom at 101”



“Sophie’s Crocheted Pearl Collar”

art writer.”

So it pleases me now to know that Allan Stone shared my high estimation of the drawings and paintings of Wendy Shalen, a realist who has been teaching Drawing and Painting from Life for more than 30 years at The Art Students League.

“One of my principle goals as an artist,” Shalen says in the League’s catalog, “is to capture and communicate intuitive responses to a subject, carefully and sensitively, whether I am working from a model, landscape or still life.”

One of the most affecting images scheduled for inclusion in Shalen’s upcoming solo exhibition, “Family Matters,” at Prince Street Gallery, is “Mom at 101.” This beautifully delineated and emotionally-laden likeness in charcoal on Rives which depicts the artist’s bedridden centenarian mother

reclining on her back in one of those patterned hospital gowns that tend to depersonalize the elderly and the ailing. Shalen, however, shows us an individual rather than a stereotypical image of old-age.

The woman dozes in profile. Her slack arms and gnarled hands are as distinctly

rendered and expressive as her lined face, still poignantly possessed of a strong sense of character and personality, however still or mute (“...in bed, unable to walk or speak,” is how her daughter describes her, “yet free of pain and with a strong heart...”). The drawing is filled with deep emotional sentiment; yet it is not at all sentimental (an important distinction).

“Mom at 101” is just one work among a remarkable autobiographical series of drawings, paintings, watercolors, drypoint etchings, monoprints, and an innovative series of self-portraits incorporating embellishments of Shalen’s grandmother Sophie’s lacework.

“In this exhibition, I put aside my recent environmental art and draw inspiration from my 101-year-old mother, baby granddaughter, other relatives, and our family dog,” the artist explains. “The show focuses on contrasts — between generations, sensibilities, materials and techniques. I hope to capture and communicate emotions that we share — watching my late grandmother struggle with dementia and the fear of death at 90 . . . . At the same time, I celebrate my daughter’s excitement and exhaustion in caring for a newborn, the formal joy of my parents’ wedding day, and the amazing gift of having twins. The work, comprising watercolor, charcoal, graphite and silverpoint drawings, and monoprints done with drypoint, is in part from life and in part inspired by a recently discovered, 70-year old album of family photographs.”

The family photos, under Shalen’s hand, live and breathe with an immediacy akin to her drawings from life. Suddenly in her graphite drawing on paper, “Mom Wedding Day” the elderly woman in the hospital gown is restored to youthful dark-haired dark-eyed beauty, as she fixes the viewer in an intelligent formal gaze, betraying only the slightest hint of a brand new bride’s nervous timidity, just as only her old fashioned bobbed and waved hairdo gives away the period of the picture. The same goes for the clean-cut good-looking young man in the companion graphite drawing, “Dad Wedding Day,” gazing out with glittering eyes and a more slightly confident smile; only the too high collar of his white shirt, the too wide silken lapels of his tuxedo, and the Gatsby center-part in his slickly pomaded head tip you off that he is not a 21st century bridegroom.

Shalen’s family narrative again moves jarringly closer to the present in her powerful portraits of her grandmother, Sophie. In the charcoal drawing, “Sophie at Ninety,” the old woman raises a hand to her furrowed brow in

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*'Bedtime'*

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a gesture of o y vey dismay. Her long, delicate, seamstress' fingers hide one eye in a manner that makes the other eye appear more haunted, deep in its hollow socket. This drawing obviously served as a study for a smaller solarplate print simply titled "Sophie." For the gesture of tormented self-pity, of woe-is-me world-weariness, is identical; only, here, the grainy black shadows of the print medium simplify the image, endowing it with an emotional force equal to that in the most memorable images of the great German graphic artist and sculptor Kathe Kollwitz.

Indeed, Shalen herself employs form like a sculptor in yet another image of Sophie, this one in silverpoint. Its fine lines, delicate crosshatching, and the proud, almost defiant, angle of her upraised chin (making even the cords in her neck appear as solid as stone), create the impression of a heroic head carved in white marble. Here, too, we see vestiges of the pretty young woman with lustrous black hair pinned up above a high Victorian lace collar, limned within a cameo-like oval in sepia watercolor in the mixed media assemblage "Sophie's Crocheted Pearl Collar."

"My strongest memories of Sophie were the conversations we had while she was knitting or crocheting, or sewing," says the artist, who also incorporates impressions of her grandmother's vintage lace embossed in wet pulp in a series of self-portraits that unite them, while honoring Sophie's creative spirit.

Fortunately for all of us, not all family matters are elegiac. Shalen honors and celebrates the joyful continuity of the generations in luminous watercolors, such as "The Gaze," and "Bedtime," in

which she immortalizes the ever-evolving day-to-day relationship between her daughter, Samantha, and her baby granddaughter, Mia. Shalen's sublime maternal double-portraits may be among the finest examples of their genre since the heyday of domestic Impressionists such as Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot, whose paintings transcended the innate limitations of the so-called "Male Gaze"—all those centuries of Madonnas, odalisques, and bordello scenes—to give us the first truly intimate depictions of the women's daily lives.

Much in this tradition are Shalen's vibrant watercolors of mutual rapport between mother and child such as "The Gaze," in which Samantha, elegant in a long blue robe and dangling earrings, cradles Mia, cozy in pink flannel "footed" pajamas, in her arms; and "Bedtime," in which, presumably having worn each



*'Mom - Wedding Day'*

other out at "playtime"—mother and daughter lie down together.

Then there is "Samantha Focused," an exquisite silverpoint portrait of Durer-like linear sensitivity, depicting the young mother, her hair up, wearing an ornate but casual hood, its zipper slightly undone, like that of a careless high school girl. Contrary to her own Mother's title for the picture, her large, long-lashed eyes look a bit dreamy, her fine features slightly peaked with exhaustion, as she savors one of those precious idle moments that come all too infrequently to a new mother.

— Ed McCormack

Wendy Shalen, Prince Street Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, April 22 - May 17, 2014