

HYPERALLERGIC

Art

50 Years Ago, She Broke Illustration's Glass Ceiling

An exhibition of Barbara Nessim's drawings contextualizes the artist's graphic portraiture of women against the backdrop of shifting gender roles and equity in the US.



Rhea Nayar December 7, 2023



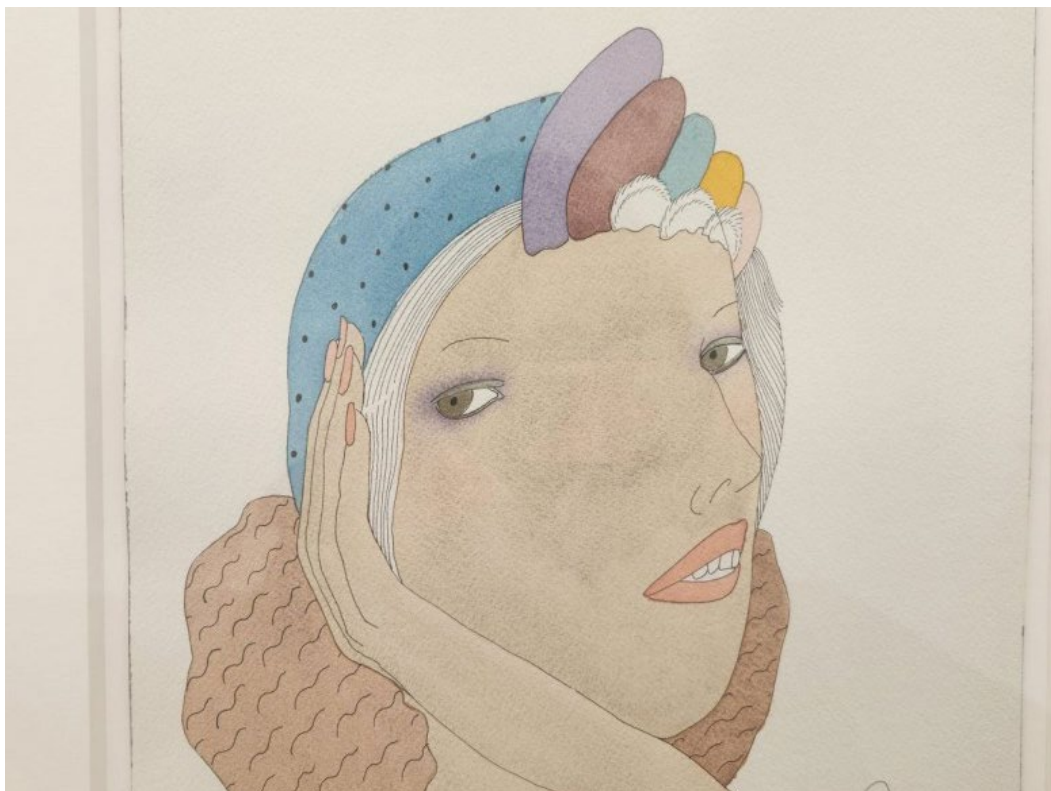
Barbara Nessim, "A Maze From Above" (1970), pen and ink and watercolor on paper, 14 x 10 1/4 inches (all images courtesy Derek Eller Gallery unless noted otherwise)

Artist, illustrator, and designer Barbara Nessim is one of very few women who found full-time work in the American editorial and commercial arts sphere during the 1960s. Shattering the glass ceiling without so

much as a glance over her shoulder, Nessim gained popularity early in her career through unabashed audacity, resourcefulness, and an open mind. Derek Eller Gallery in Manhattan is spotlighting 18 of Nessim's works through December 23 in *Balancing Act: Drawings 1969–1974*, an exhibition that seeks to contextualize the artist's graphic portraiture of women against the backdrop of shifting gender roles and equity in the United States.

Born and raised in the Bronx to a Sephardic Jewish family, Nessim graduated from Pratt Institute with a bachelor's degree in graphic art and illustration in 1960 and began her career as a freelance illustrator by submitting samples to every publisher she could contact. Fixated on the female form, Nessim found freedom to express herself through commissions for Playboy-esque "girlie" magazines that snowballed into editorial and cover art for larger publications, including *Time*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Esquire*, the *New York Times*, and *Rolling Stone*. Nessim also contributed illustrations to *Ms.* magazine, co-founded by feminist activist Gloria Steinem, her longtime friend and former studio flatmate.

Nessim is known for blurring the boundaries between fine arts and illustration at a time when both fields avoided intersection. Her style from the late '60s through the '80s was defined by fluidly inked lines, dynamic negative space, and undulating geometric forms filled with vibrant watercolor gradients. *Balancing Act* showcases a variety of works on paper from the artist's series *WomanGirl* (1972–73), consisting of lanky, nude, and somewhat androgynous women in ballet shoes on theatrical stages. Some figures have their hands separated from their bodies, perhaps alluding to a feeling of defenselessness or lack of control.



Detail of Barbara Nessim, "The Moment Glance" (1974), pen, ink, and watercolor on paper, 14 x 10 inches (photo Rhea Nayyar/*Hyperallergic*)



Left: Barbara Nessim, “Finger Signals From Afar” (1972), pen and ink and watercolor on paper, 14 x 10 inches;
right: Barbara Nessim, “Pushing Two” (1972), pen and ink and watercolor on paper, 16 x 12 inches

“I created the *WomanGirls* series during that time period — looking back on the idea, I see that I was clearly questioning when a woman can be referred to as a girl and when it is appropriate to be called a young woman and then a woman,” Nessim wrote in an email to *Hyperallergic*. “However, when creating the work, I just followed my feelings and didn’t have anything in mind. If there was anything I was conscious of, it was being ‘unconscious.’ That may sound like an oxymoron, but that is what it was and still is.”

“The work just flows naturally and I am in the moment of creation, enjoying what I am doing,” the artist said about her process. “That is what is important to me when I am creating the work. Now, 50 years later I can clearly see that I was commenting on the use, or misuse, of the word ‘girl’ for women of any age.”

Nessim’s fashion-heavy figuration abstractly chronicled the changing of the guards during the era of women’s reintegration into the workforce, the sexual revolution catalyzed by birth control access, racial justice movements, and the resounding splash of second-wave feminism.

“We focused specifically on Nessim’s portraits of women from the time period 1969–1974 given that it coincided with a pivotal moment in the history of women’s equality,” co-curator and gallery Director Abby Messitte told *Hyperallergic* in an email. “These fine art portraits which she developed in sketchbooks are metaphorical, as well as being direct and unapologetic. All of these qualities may also be applied to her commercial work; there is a seamless relationship between her fine art and illustration which I find compelling.”

Nessim's tenacity and commitment to her vision opened endless doors for her. She became one of the first illustrators to be introduced to computer-generated art by an invitation from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for the Visual Language Workshop in 1980. With its gentle palette and confident markmaking, Nessim's early work maintains relevance half a century after its creation as the experience of American womanhood is still impacted by contemporary iterations of the same conflicts.



Installation view of *Balancing Act: Drawings 1969–1974* at Derek Eller Gallery (photo Rhea Nayyar/Hyperallergic)



Barbara Nessim, "A Crown of Purple Squares" (1969), pen and ink and watercolor on paper, 14 x 10 1/4 inches



Barbara Nessim, "Dancing Within Two Sculptures" (1969),
pen and ink and watercolor on paper, 14 x 10 1/4 inches



Barbara Nessim, "The Grace of Grey and Grey" (1971),
pen and ink and watercolor on paper, 14 x 10 1/4 inches