



Explosion, 1964. 50" x 60"

NORA SPEYER

APRIL KINGSLEY

Now, with three score years of abstraction behind us, we look at past art as though it was created according to modernist principles. That is abstraction's primary achievement; certainly it has failed to supplant representation as the dominant pictorial mode. Even during the few phases when abstraction has reigned supreme—Constructivism, Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism—its embattled position has been under constant assault for its alleged lack of humanism, warmth and meaning. For Nora Speyer, who matured as an artist while Abstract Expressionism held sway, abstraction provided the formal ideas, and expressionist gesture the technical means to formulate an idiomatic style of representation. As she puts it: "What was so marvelous about Abstract Expressionism was that they gave you a ticket to ride—to hell if you wanted."

Nora Speyer almost succumbed to the temptation. Some of her figural works of the fifties are barely decipherable as such. But for her the human form, in particular the female body, was too central an obsession to forfeit altogether and this marked its least stressed appearance. Though she does paint landscapes as well, during the summer when she's in them, they occupy a position of relatively less importance in her oeuvre. Speyer studied painting and drawing at the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia where three-week poses were usual and this had a strong effect on her attitude toward the figure. To this day she spends about 3 to 4 months on each figure painting, for instance, and the languorous indolence of her figures also probably results in some measure from her school experience. Tyler was, and remains, excellent for a thorough grounding in traditional art. She met her husband, painter Sideo Frombolotti, there and the two have worked in parallel styles ever since.

During the forties, while her husband was stationed in Kansas, and afterward living in Philadelphia and then New York with her two children occupying much of her time, Nora Speyer nevertheless continued to paint steadily. She searched for a way out of the academicism of her training which began to seem stultifying. Meeting the Abstract Expressionist artists in the early fifties and engaging in long discussions with them at the Club and in studios provided the liberating influence she needed. She moved away from thinking in terms of line and learned to mass solid forms in space instead, through accumulated intuitive gestures. By 1955 her figures, landscapes and interiors were characterized by a strong interest in the tactility of paint. It began as a response, she says, to the palpable quality of the elements—air, rain, light, wind—in the



Ties & Pleases, 1973. 50" x 70"

country, which she tried to capture while working out of doors on her landscapes. She felt that everything in nature had a positiveness and weight which it was her intention to transfer to canvas.

Speyer's haptic treatment of the surface has become the central feature of her personal style. Figure and ground must have a balance of weightiness, an equivalence, or the painting "doesn't work". She "turns the forms" of her figures tenderly into relief-like masses by building them up out of thousands of tiny brush strokes. The volumes of surrounding matter are treated more broadly with casual gestures, drips, gobs and swaths of impasto. Often background passages literally press forward of the thickness of the figures. This treatment of figure and ground as having equivalent materiality is reminiscent of Albert Pinkham Ryder's interlocking shapes where tree limb and sky appear to have an identical physicality. It is a very aggressive attitude toward paint and toward the picture plane.

During the fifties Nora Speyer's ideas about subject matter slowly clarified. She has always disliked the idea of painting studio-pose nudes. Though she continues to draw from the model frequently, she never uses these drawings directly for the paintings. At first she used classical subjects like Prometheus or Daphne and Apollo, then these were replaced by Adam and Eve in violent expulsion from Eden. These subjects all lent themselves well to an expressionist approach while incorporating overtones of heroism, love, sexuality, shame or fear. More recently movement has become less essential to her meaning and most of the figures are now depicted as inactive, usually reclining. Even when the figures stand they are immobile, as if frozen. Most of Speyer's figures are larger than life and seen up close, filling most of the picture space. We are given only the essential information about them, never the complete body. The result is that they seem to press forward aggressively into our space, even while they sleep. We relate directly, somatically, to their large, soft, physicality.

Late in the sixties a serpent began to appear with Adam and Eve, writhing around their recumbent naked bodies. Symbol of lust and guilt, Satanic evil, temptation and mindless animalism, the snake's presence is shocking in the context of fleshiness created by the figures. Recently females alone lie or stand amid masses of snakes, sometimes holding them back as if to ward off evil, but also as though in ambivalent acceptance of their frank sexuality. Thinking back to Edward Munch's *Puberty* and *Madonna* figures, set amid swirls of pigment evoking dark unknowable forces, one feels there is something of similar psychological import in Speyer's paintings, albeit post-Freudian in its openness.

Though the juxtaposition of naked female flesh redolent in its golden flush with glistening green snakes unavoidably suggests an extremely loaded psychological content, the faces—often depicted with eyes closed—give us few clues as to what it

might be. Ms. Speyer herself insists that, aside from being an "elemental force" in the paintings (something that has movement and implies nature instead of man), the snakes are only forms to be manipulated for compositional purposes. With them she can fill the picture space to bursting with matter. There is no empty place where air rushes in. Something claustrophobic happens psychologically, but formally the result is one of total interlocking solidity. You feel as though, if you shook the painting, nothing would be jarred out of place. Speyer's paintings are characterized by near-Baroque curvilinearity. Though axial stresses are emphatic, they are accomplished with a minimum number of straight lines. Snakes and women, of course, lend themselves to a very fluid treatment and she capitalizes on this. Men are usually underplayed in the paintings, sometimes even to the point where one is unsure of their gender. Human strength and presence seem to be reserved for the female figures. Speyer is a natural feminist, functioning on a completely equal basis with men without making a point of it. Perhaps she regards the painted image as an alter ego. In any case, she creates the clearest depictions of female power that I know of.

It has been a long slow process for Nora Speyer to master form without line, to model without conventional shading and to think primarily in terms of touch, mass, and hue. She works very close to the canvas, building it up in an intuitive way as though she were modelling it with her hands in clay, instead of in pigment delivered by brush. In the end, her paintings have a superficial resemblance to traditional figuration, but it has been achieved by completely different means. This is apparent on anything more than a cursory glance at the actual works. Reproductions emphasize dark/light contrasts making gradual shifts in tonality seem sharp. This creates an impression of clarity which belies the real opticality of her surfaces in which separate strokes of color blend and blur almost like they do in an Impressionist painting. Focus seems to shift constantly from one place to another as one's eye mixes the colors and perceives the shapes they coalesce to form.

In her landscapes, Speyer uses shifting focus very deliberately to manipulate the viewer's perception of space. She also treats scale unpredictably for the same effect. Within a single canvas we might feel as though we were "staring down the throat of a flower" which looms large in the foreground while a tree, which seems to be located right next to the flower, is treated as though it is far behind it in terms of color and submersion in foliage. Bursts of sunlight seem like blurry flowers too as they force their way before the tree trunks and branches they ought to intersperse. An all-over pattern of dappling chromatic sensation results which is vaguely partitioned by tree trunks that are imprecisely locatable in the picture space. In some paintings where a few gigantic flowers fill the picture space the whole sense of scale is disrupted by a macroscopic perspective. These are particularly powerful paintings in which the flowers become personages.

Nora Speyer's treatment of ordinary landscape motifs, using changes of scale, atmospheric perspective, and focus to disrupt our normal perception of them, is paralleled by her treatment of the figure—that most traditional of subject matters—so as to mythologize it. *Young Woman with Snake No. II*, 1974, shows some of the ways she brings this about. First, the painting is bathed in an unreal, high key, pinkish-lavender light all-over. The figure is a vertical axis cut by the frame at mid-forehead and mid-thigh so that we are given no clear sense of her location (no floor, room or landscape indications). She could be anywhere. Her many mellifluous curves echo each other (in a manner reminiscent of Cubist rhyming) and reiterate the curvilinear formations taken by the sea of snakes amidst which she stands. Her staring eyes seem frightened, but her hand gently fondles a lock of her hair. The hand relates (in reverse) to the large snake's head nearby in terms of shape. We are given an heroic, erotic, strangely disturbed and disturbing portrait of a woman who seems to have no definable relation to the real world. Instead she plays a mythic role for all womankind.

The difference between Speyer's approach to the figure and that of her contemporaries (namely that small and all too often overlooked group of figurative painters who are not involved with popular or photographic forms of realism) can be made even clearer by a comparison of her work with that of her friend Philip Pearlstein. Pearlstein tells us exactly what his



Woman & Dog, I, 1974. 80" x 70"

studio-pose models are like (we could even guess their ages) and where they are (every detail of floor, furniture and wall decor is lovingly rendered). His approach is factual, precise, and worldly. Speyer's figurations seem to have more in common with the symbolic dream states of Munch or with Gustav Klimt's *Leda or Danae* than with Pearlstein's prosaic naturalism. Her mythologizing tendencies, her obsession with the female form, and her expressionist sensibility conjoin to create a world apart.

Note: All quotations taken from an interview with Nora Speyer in January, 1974.

All reproductions by courtesy of the Darthee Speyer Gallery, Paris, where Nora Speyer's paintings will be on view during May.

Woman & Snake, II, 1974. 80" x 70". (Photographs by Charles Uhl. See also colour illustrations on page 29)

