

Gallery shows: The original art and life of photocopyst Pati Hill

by Edith Newhall, Contributing Art Writer, Posted: March 20, 2016

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"Alphabet of Common Objects" by Pati Hill, in a retrospective at Arcadia University to April 24.

The retrospective "Pati Hill Photocopier: A Survey of Prints and Books (1974-83)" provides a memorable introduction to and illumination of an artist you might not have previously known.

Like many of the one-person exhibitions Richard Torchia has organized for the Arcadia University Art Gallery since becoming its director in 1998, it's presented with his typical finesse. You sense you are seeing an exhibition that Hill (1921-2014) might have organized for herself. Torchia has tapped into Hill's psyche in an uncanny way.

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It's not hard to fall under Hill's spell. The way she came to making photocopies and thinking of them as her art, in the early 1970s - she did not know of the other photocopist artists working at that time - was one of those bold, intuitive moves that seemed to define her life (before becoming a photocopier, Hill had been a successful writer, and, before that, a sought-after fashion model).

As the story goes, Hill, who was living as a housewife in Stonington, Conn., in the 1960s and '70s, was thinking of discarding some small objects she had collected over the years. To have a record of them, she took a few to a local copy shop.

Intrigued by the results, she began photocopying her belongings, eventually securing the loan of an IBM Copier II machine from IBM for her Stonington house. Between 1975 and 1979, Hill had five solo shows of her photocopies at the Kornblee Gallery in New York. She moved to Paris in 1980 with her husband, gallery owner Paul Bianchini, and their daughter, and launched a project she'd planned for many years: photocopying details of the palace and grounds at Versailles.

Torchia's exhibition, installed in the Arcadia University Art Gallery and in two gallery spaces in the nearby University Commons building, can be approached from any one of these galleries. If you like to see an artist's development in chronological order, start in the Commons Art Gallery on the second floor of the University Commons. Copies of Hill's three novels, a memoir, and a book of her poems (illustrated by poet Galway Kinnell) are on view there, as are her artist's books and original copies of her short stories for the Paris Review.

Hill is brought to life in a 1980 New Yorker profile by Anthony Bailey, who visited her in France, and is laid to rest in a 2014 New York Times obituary by William Yardley. Also in this gallery are examples of what Hill dubbed "informational art": product assembly directions, advertisements, labels, and other domestic guides she collected and must have found amusing, being largely targeted at housewives. Also here is a series of pictographs she designed in an effort to create a universally understood symbol language.

Downstairs, in the Great Room Lobby gallery, you come face to face with Hill's photocopies from the early 1980s. Photocopies of scarves show Hill as the master copier she had become, capturing the gestural capacities of scarves, for example, by moving them across the copier platen. Her eerie photocopies of objects at Versailles - she managed to scan an espaliered pear tree and a cobblestone, among other things - suggest 19th-century grave rubbings.

Torchia wisely reserved the Arcadia University Art Gallery for the revelatory photocopy work Hill began in the early 1970s. Looking at her early photocopies of her cherished tokens, such as a well-used bar of soap with a hair on it, hair rollers, earrings, and such, you can easily imagine her excitement at the copier's interpretation of them.

Hill's most physically demanding work - before Versailles, that is - *A Swan: An Opera in 9 Chapters*, has the back of this gallery to itself, as it should. After finding a dead swan on a beach near Stonington, Hill took it home, photocopied its body, then took it to a butcher so she could photocopy its organs and eventually its skeleton.

But the 32 photocopies and accompanying poetic captions written by Hill (all of which were modified to fit this gallery space) aren't at all grim. Instead, they tell the story of a graceful creature and the romantic fairy tale life he might have lived. Hill, you suspect, must have recognized a personal connection in this creature.

Through April 24. Arcadia University Art Gallery, 450 S. Easton Rd., Glenside. 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Mondays through Fridays; noon to 4 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays. Information: 215-572-2131 or www.gallery.arcadia.edu.

Two at Fleisher/Ollman

The works of two Philadelphia artists - Sarah Gamble, a painter, and Jennifer Levonian, who turns her watercolors into cut-paper animations - don't take over Fleisher/Ollman's large open gallery space as some recent artists' efforts have. That's fine, though. It's a nice change to see to see two distinct bodies of work there.

When I first saw Gamble's paintings, in 2009, she was imagining wonderfully gloomy scenes of haunted Victorian houses. Her paint handling was deft. Since then, she's been painting images of solitary creatures - part-human, part-animal - that peer from behind and within veils of fretwork or beads and that seem to be in a process of transformation. She's also painting landscapes that appear to obscure a particular activity, as well as largely abstract canvases that incorporate painting palettes cut into shard-like shapes and collaged to the surface of the painting. This show seems to catch her refining her ideas.

Levonian is also stretching her wings, showing three quilts digitally printed with her representational watercolors. It's a good idea, but the images are too small on these large pieces and don't really convey Levonian's expressive way of painting. Her 2015 stop-motion animation, "Xylophone," is as endearingly kooky as any of her previous animations, telling the story of a single, very pregnant mother, her precocious daughter, and their accidental friendship with a goat on the lam from a petting zoo.

Through March 26. Fleisher/Ollman Gallery, 1216 Arch St. 10:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays; noon to 5 p.m. Saturdays. 215-545-7562 or www.fleisher-ollmangallery.com.

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