

Collection in Focus
SQUEAK CARNWATH: THE UNMEDIATED SELF

July 29–September 27, 2015

For over forty years, Squeak Carnwath (b. 1947) has been prolifically making work in her pioneering personal style: paintings combining layers of words and images; fragments of things she comes across in daily life. The juxtapositions Carnwath creates seem like brooding versions of motivational posters, calling into question the viewer's relationship to what is represented, yet are so bold and elegiac that their materiality appears devotional, creating something salient from the familiar. Her paintings are just as much about the process as the product, becoming an extension of herself and her search for meaning, and allowing for imperfections and unplanned results along the way.

Carnwath came of artistic age in the '60s when Bay Area female artists like Joan Brown and Viola Frey were also gaining recognition. Each employed her own type of autobiographical approach to her work, parallel to but not engaging with much of the East Coast feminist art happening at the time. Exploring personal narratives through art was seen as both a freedom and responsibility, directly related to one's own independence in the world versus a collective movement or aesthetic. Carnwath has been ignoring outside standards her entire career, steadfastly creating her own iconography and symbols to illustrate her observations no matter what current trend may be surfacing in the community or the marketplace.

This exhibition focuses on five of Carnwath's works from the di Rosa collection, each created in the early 1980s. Four of the works depict limbless torsos betwixt obtusely scribbled lines of text. In *Kisses Given* (1982), a cropped male torso is spread over the center of the canvas and an orange flame-like form seems to stand in for the head—a common motif of Carnwath's at the time—while in *Stolen Kisses* (1982), a female torso occupies the middle of the arrangement. Each canvas appears purposefully rendered; the bold colors and thick handwriting-like text calls out to the viewer. To *give* implies a gift, a contribution, something bequeathed to the recipient with the assumption of delight on the receiving end. To *steal* implies something was hijacked, taken, snatched from someone else, who may not have been willing to give. When considered with the gender of the torsos, these implications could simply reflect a relationship Carnwath found herself in at the time, but also embody her ability to confront gender roles in her work, both in the family and in society, throughout her career. *Subject/Object*, also

from 1982, furthers this assertion. Depicting a darkly painted female torso in the center, the work conjures associations with the objectification of women in media and culture as well as the representations of race and the body, but Carnwath's message is not didactic. Her text functions like imagery—not like a caption or a fragment, but absorbed into her ethereal compositions, able to be interpreted over and over again, with the meaning shifting, or perhaps not, wherever we find ourselves.

Understanding that locating the significance our earthly presence is endless, tireless work that one must continually pursue, so does Carnwath paint. Presenting references from the past and present, her work creates timeless semblances that encourage us to look beyond our bodies as self—how we see the human form reflected in popular culture and media—to the allusive existential questions that lead us to a further understanding of our existence, which are just as personal as they are universal.

—Kara Q. Smith, Curatorial Assistant

Squeak Carnwath: The Unmediated Self is part of *Collection in Focus*, an ongoing exhibition series that highlight important and often understudied objects from di Rosa's permanent collection that would otherwise remain in storage. In addition to the five works from di Rosa's collection featured in this exhibition, we are delighted to include another Carnwath painting from the same era, *Moon + Venus / A Cup for the Star* (1982). The work comes to us on loan from longtime di Rosa members Natalie Ng and (di Rosa docent) Tom Arnold.



Squeak Carnwath
Subject/Object, 1982
Oil on paper, 33.5 x 25.5 in.
di Rosa collection, Napa