

MARC STRAUS

“IF ONLY BELLA ABZUG WERE HERE”

May 25 – July 29, 2016

Opening Reception: Wednesday, May 25, 2016, 6 – 8pm

Curated by Tim Hawkinson and Ken Tan



NEW YORK – MARC STRAUS is proud to present “*If Only Bella Abzug Were Here*”, a group exhibition which commemorates the life and achievements of Bella Abzug with a selection of works by both established and emerging female artists, chosen for their highly original voices and unique visions.

Born in the Bronx on July 24, 1920, Bella (Savitzky) Abzug was a tireless and indomitable fighter for justice and peace, equal rights, human dignity, environmental integrity and sustainable development. Known as “Battling Bella,” and easily recognized due to her penchant for large hats, Abzug co-created and was president of the Women’s Environmental and Development Organization (WEDO). The

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organization was the culmination of her lifelong career where Abzug galvanized support and helped transform the United Nations agenda regarding women. She served in the U.S. congress. Today's generations still benefits from her timeless ideals and actions.

Recognized for her distinctive figurative language, Nicole Eisenman is one of the most important painters of her generation. She captures an array of characters who range from friends to imagined heroines and tragic losers. In the painting "*Whatever Guy*" (2009) Eisenman reflects an attitude of a generation: casual dismissal as a protection or coping mechanism for the dramas of modern life. Eisenman is currently enjoying her first New York museum survey exhibition at the New Museum.

In Liliane Tomasko's latest abstract paintings her examination of domesticity, such as the unmade bed, has become more urgent and fragmented, perhaps in accordance with the times. In contrast, Shara Hughes paintings of Fauvist landscapes are dreamy and surreal; like Eisenman and Tomasko, Hughes distorts the world to gain insights into it. Although young, Eleanor Ray has already established herself as an intriguing new voice in painting. In her small canvases, Ray shows cropped scenes of quiet, unassuming interiors and exteriors, buildings and landscapes that are often important sites of personal or art historical value.

New York based Iranian artist Shirin Neshat creates video and photos that portray issues of gender and society, the individual and the group. While her narratives hint at the restrictive nature of Islamic laws regarding women, they also deliberately allow multiple readings, thus ultimately reaching towards discussions of universal conditions. In "*Pulse*" (2001), a woman singing alone becomes a powerful symbol of personal identity and social boundaries.

The subjects in Emily Wardill's films include ghost stories, mental illness and religion. "*All the Clothes of an Imelda I Know*" (2011), is a sculpture comprised of the objects and ornate architectural models used in the film, "*Full Firearms*" (2011), a loosely adapted the real-life story of Sarah Winchester, the Connecticut gun heiress who, in the 1880s, built a manor to house the 'spirits' haunting her: the victims of her father-in-law's arms empire. Emma Rivers's dollhouse-like dioramas house secrets and unsettling memories in childlike yet intricate details, equipped with furnishing, lights and photographs from her past.

"*If Only Bella Abzug Were Here*" features works by: Nicole Eisenman, Anj Smith, Joan Levinson, Tomona Matsukawa, Ann Craven, Eleanor Ray, Rachel Selekman, Holly Coulis, Bettina Blohm, Lily Kelly Napangardi, Anna Leonhardt, Genieve Figgis, Tarra Bandet, Rachel Garrard, Emma Rivers, Sarah Crowner, Shara Hughes, Nicole Cherubini, Shirin Neshat, Emily Wardill, Kirsi Mikkola and Liliane Tomasko.

About MARC STRAUS Gallery

MARC STRAUS, located at 299 Grand Street, is a contemporary art gallery that opened in 2011. The gallery specializes in discovering and fostering some of the best new international art talent, representing 15 artists from 11 countries most of whom have not shown in the US before. The discovery of new artists and rediscovery of recognized talent has established MARC STRAUS as one of New York's leading contemporary art galleries. The gallery continues to extend its program to a wider audience by regularly participating in fairs and biennials in the US as well as Europe and Asia.

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ADDENDUM

The conversation between Marc Straus and Ken Tan took place on March 18th, 2016.
Edited by Ken Tan

Ken: So you knew Bella Abzug?

Marc: Not well but everything about her is memorable.

Ken: You proposed this title for our summer show? I am curious and catching up about her. Coming from Singapore as I have last year I was unfamiliar with her.

Marc: The title just presented itself to me and no doubt informed in part by the current presidential race. Bella might have commented succinctly as no one else might have.

Ken: She was a great liberal and feminist leader. I suppose she would have been shocked by much of the direction of the campaigns and rhetoric.

Marc: I am not sure if you could shock her. She was a person of action and followed her heart.

Ken: I want to get to the title and the present show but first ask when you first met her.

Marc: The last time we met was 20 years ago.

Ken: Where and why?

Marc: Mostly medical.

Ken: You are an oncologist. Can you tell us about that?

Marc: Not really, I can't say more. She had an amazing memory and irreverent humor. Bella was Bella. She and I both recalled when we likely first met. My Dad's textile store, 290 Grand Street, around 1968.

Ken: Why there?

Marc: Bella bought her linens there; sheets, towels and I was close to graduating medical school and still often worked there on Sundays.

Ken: I heard you once say you started at age 5.

Marc: Yes, right after my birthday. My dad was an immigrant, an orphan from Poland who came here at age 15 and a few years later had his own store, Roman Cotton Goods. Just a few weeks ago the original sign was finally removed during reconstruction. She bought a Bates bedspread – "George Washington," and Martex towels.

Ken: She was not yet in Congress?

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Marc: No, just a couple of years following but she was already a seminal figure in human rights issues and she and my dad were so similar in their views.

Ken: I read that Bella had to battle the Democratic establishment and first lost and then was elected.

Marc: Yes, as I recall but she did not mince words. She didn't change a thing in order to get elected and in her district she was hugely trusted.

Ken: She was one of the founding feminists.

Marc: No doubt but back then I only know her as a woman who just said what needed saying and backed it up with organizational skill. She began one movement after another.

Ken: And her hats?

Marc: "Battling Bella," and her hats. She liked the hats so she wore the hats. I think her taste in curtains was less eclectic.

Ken: So this show?

Marc: I am not certain. I see a great deal of campaigning now about equal pay for women for equal work. Bella was on the bandwagon almost 50 years ago. It is not as if anything much has happened since. Bella was a lawyer admitted very early to Columbia Law, a time when very few women were admitted and also very few Jews. Then she went to work to legally assist people in lower income brackets. In the 80's there was a great deal of dialogue about the paucity of women artists in major shows as the Whitney Biennial.

Ken: Tim Hawkinson and I curated this exhibit of all women.

Marc: But still I am thinking we need Bella very much. She was a litmus test, I suppose, and right now walls are getting higher not lower.

Ken: Things seem to come around. You own a gallery on Grand Street.

Marc: Bella would laugh. My Dad would really smile. But he really understood. I learned much from him and likely from Bella as well. It's how you do what you do, as an oncologist or gallerist.

Ken: And as a poet.

Marc: I recall Bella read my first collection. A tough book for her as it dealt largely with cancer. My Dad had already died of cancer and I was his physician. They were great.

Ken: Bella and Sam Straus.

Marc: Yes.