

‘A True Pioneer’: Friends and Colleagues Remember Linda Nochlin

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Kathleen Gilje, *Linda Nochlin in Manet's Bar at the Folies-Bergere*, 2005, oil on linen. COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

There's no question that Linda Nochlin, who died this past weekend at age 86, shaped the way art history looks today. Her 1971 essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" has proven essential, and her writings and teachings about Realism, in particular her essays on representations of women and class in Gustave Courbet's paintings, are taught in universities around the world. This week, ARTnews reached out to critics, artists, and curators, and asked them to

share remembrances of Nochlin, as well as remarks on her work. Their responses are printed below.

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Deborah Kass

Maura Reilly

Guerrilla Girls

Philip Pearlstein

Amalia Mesa-Bains

Aruna D'Souza

Howardena Pindell

Natalie Frank

Lynn Hershman Leeson

E. Carmen Ramos

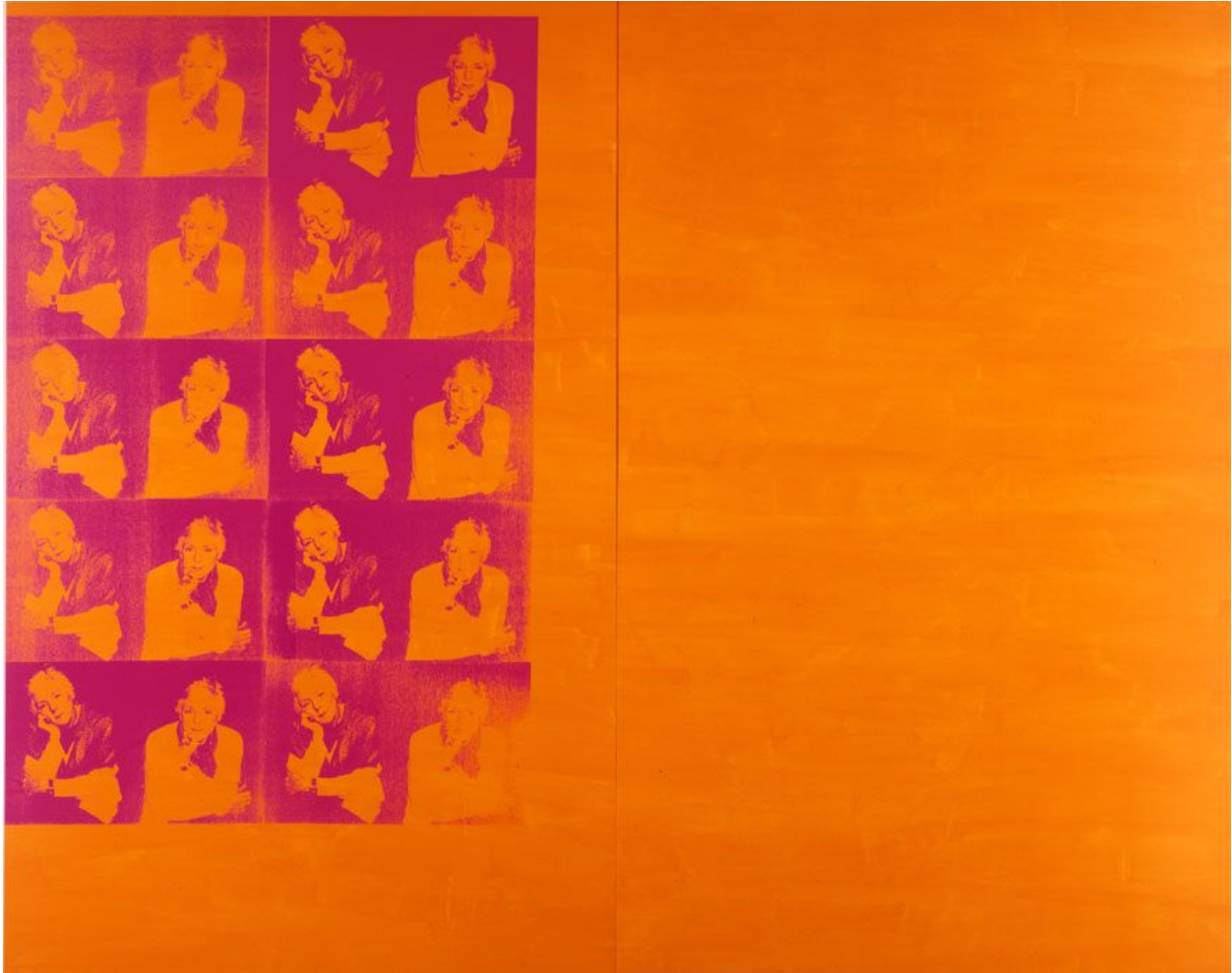
Lisa Phillips

Susana Torruella Leval

Deborah Cullen

Kellie Jones

Robert Storr



Deborah Kass, *Orange Disaster (Linda Nochlin)*, 1997. ©2017 ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK/JOSH NEFSKY/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PAUL KASMIN GALLERY

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Linda Nochlin had a towering, completely ferocious, revolutionary intellect. The magnitude of her intelligence—well, there are very, very few people like that. She literally changed everything. I think that with her essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” in 1971, she made women’s and queer studies possible because of how she reformulated the question. She shifted the focus from subjective experience toward an interrogation of the material aspects of culture: What were the conditions that make things the way they are? By restructuring cultural history, she also gave those of us who were marginalized by it a new way to look at literature and other disciplines.

But it was a solid 15 years before academics in these other disciplines started using her tools to approach their own areas of inquiry. She was the first. That is the nature of genius, and she really was a genius. How you looked at art history—all history—changed because of Linda Nochlin. It's just wild to think of what came out of that. Those of us in a resistant relationship to previous narratives as they existed undisturbed before Linda's revolutionary essay, we are all her proud daughters and sons. ([Back to top.](#))

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In 1988, Nochlin famously argued that “feminist art history is there to make trouble, to call into question, to ruffle feathers in the patriarchal dove-cotes.” She spent her entire professional career doing just that, making trouble, embodying the position of the maverick. She continually questioned academic assumptions of gender, race, and class—and, as such, transformed not only the discipline of art history, but academic investigations in general. She examined afresh the work of French painter and provocateur Gustave Courbet (*Courbet*, 2007); redefined realism as an artistic style, from the 19th century to the present (*Style and Civilization: Realism*, 1998); revised art history to include women artists, and the analysis of representations of women by male canonical artists (*Women, Art, and Power & Other Essays*, 1989); produced countless monographic texts on male and female artists; and contributed enormously influential thematic essays—most spectacularly “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” (1971)—which rang down like a clarion call, challenging each new generation to assess changes in the conditions under which women artists work. Among these many scholarly contributions, she also curated several milestone exhibitions, including the landmark “Women Artists, 1550–1950” in 1976 (at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art) and “Global Feminisms” in 2007 (at the Brooklyn Museum), among others. She was unceasingly bold, intrepid, inspiring, and influential, her scholarship consistently transgressive, irreverent, and anti-establishment. She will be remembered not only for her brilliant mind and intellectual rigor, but for her humor, joie de vivre, warm sensibility, and impeccable fashion sense. ([Back to top.](#))



Left: *Buy My Apples*, from a late 19-century popular French magazine. Right: Linda Nochlin, *Buy My Bananas*, 1972.
COURTESY THE ARTIST

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Linda asked probing questions that changed art herstory forever. And that photo she did of the male model with bananas will live on forever. ([Back to top.](#))

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Linda Nochlin became a close friend of mine after she included a double portrait I painted of my two young daughters in an exhibition of the new wave of realism that she organized at Vassar College in 1967. About a year later, in 1968, Linda commissioned me to do a double portrait of her and her husband Richard Pommer as a wedding portrait for which they both dressed in their wedding outfits. This was painted from life during one week in Maine, toward the end of the summer session at the Skowhegan Art School, where I was part of the faculty. During painting sessions, we had frequent discussions about my time and the mutual friends we enjoyed at the Institute of Fine Arts, from which I had received an M.F.A. in art history in 1955, and my subsequent development as an exhibiting artist. Linda took such great interest in what I had to say that I asked if she would consider writing an essay for a catalogue for a mini-retrospective show of my work that was being organized by the director of the Georgia Museum of Art of the University of Georgia. Linda readily agreed. Not only did she write a brilliant presentation of my development as an artist and the historical justification for my ideas, she also collaborated with the organizer and brought the exhibition to Vassar College Art Gallery.

Some time in the next decade Linda, Richard, and their daughter Daisy, four or five years old by then, spent a weekend with us at our house on Fire Island, on the great South Bay. I had recently acquired a small sailboat, about 12-and-a-half feet long with a jib and mainsail, and had a number of sailing lessons from a teenaged neighbor girl. So my wife Dorothy suggested the five of us go out for a sail in the afternoon. I said that it looked like it was going to be windy, and Dorothy told me not to be chicken. So we climbed into the boat. Linda said she would sit in the bow with Daisy, because she was worried about the swinging of the main-sail boom when we would come about. Richard sat in the middle. Dorothy and I were at the stern, with me holding the the rudder and the main-line for the main sail. Daisy and I had our life jackets zipped, Dorothy left her life jacket open, and Linda and Richard disdained wearing theirs.

As soon as were we out in the open channel the wind began to howl, and our small boat picked up real speed with the mainsail flying out at right angle. I decided to come about and get home, but the wind was so strong, I couldn't pull the main sail in to come about, so I called Richard to help me pull it in. At that moment he heard Daisy crying because another line had come loose and was flapping in her face. So he moved into the prow to help her. His weight combined with Linda's and the prow dipped. Within seconds the boast filled with water and began to sink. Richard and Linda called out: "What should we do?" Knowing they were both swimmers, I yelled:

“Jump out!” Holding Daisy, they jumped, followed by Dorothy. I stayed at my post as the boat rolled over, and saw my passengers being rescued by a big motor boat. I dove under the hull and untied the sails so they would not act as anchors, and I came up from under the boat with the main line still attached to the top of the mast, as I remembered from reading the manual on how to right an overturned sailboat. I stood on the opposite rim of the hull and tugged the line while leaning back-ward. Nothing happened after a dozen tries. Then a man in a motor boat pulled up offered his help. He tied the line from the top of the upside-down mast to his boat and speed off to pull it upright across the hull, but the rope caught me and was about to strangle me against the hull. He heard my scream and stopped. All ended well. On my return I reread the instructions, which said that to overturn the boat in the manner described, the sailor had to weigh a minimum of 150 pounds. I had been dieting and my weight was 135 pounds. The rest our weekend together was sunny and fun. But the last time I saw Richard many years later, shortly before he died, he said, “Remember that sail? What you should have done. . .”

In 2010, I did a second portrait for which she sat on an uncomfortable silver-painted florid cast-iron bench, holding a large-size pamphlet on the cover of which is reproduced another painting of mine. Linda, a few years before that portrait was done, had chosen a painting of mine to use on the cover of her book *Bathers, Bodies, Beauty The Visceral Eye*, published in 2006, and in which she writes of my work. As a friend I miss her very much. ([Back to top.](#))



Philip Pearlstein, *Linda Nochlin*, 2010. COURTESY THE ARTIST

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Linda Nochlin's early contribution opened the way to examining the institutional bias or sexism in the arts, and even though the majority of M.F.A. students are women, the issues for women of color are still formidable. The field of visual arts and art history is still a hard road for women of color, but for many of us, our rising group of Latinx women gives us hope. ([Back to top.](#))

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I don't even know how to describe what Linda Nochlin was to me; she was my dissertation advisor, my teacher and mentor, my best friend, and my family—she was my dear Linda. I have known her all my adult life, and anything I am today—as a writer, as an advocate, as a person of conviction and sense of purpose—I owe to her and the example she set. Full of life, with an endless capacity for love and care, she was a devoted parent and grandparent to her own family, at the same time as taking so many of us under her wing and into her generously conceived family of friends over the years. She proved that you could be both brilliant and kind, critical and empathetic, always.

In 2013, she asked me to accompany her to Ornans, to see a show of Courbet and spend time in a place that had meant so much to her. She was just recovering from a long and serious illness, and her family was (quite reasonably) concerned about whether she would have energy for the trip. I arranged a wheelchair to get her through the airport, which she gratefully received—and then showed off for the TSA by doing a literal jig through security. She insisted on hiking down to the source of the Loue, so we could see where Courbet had painted, and when we got to the end of the hike, this endlessly energetic 80-something woman who was feeling the effects of age and illness threw her leg up onto a fence for some stretching, drawing admiring glances from the other hikers. We dined and reminisced and saw art and went on walks—everything we loved to do together.

She's been with me at the best and worst moments of my life, in Paris, in New York, in Berkeley, in Los Angeles, in Whitefish, Montana, even . . . But when I think of her, I will think always of that trip to Ornans, which was for her a celebration of life and borrowed time, and for me a celebration of her and everything she gave to me. ([*Back to top.*](#))

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I remember Linda being a very stable influence on the women's movement because she was so articulate and so intelligent in her observations. I considered her to be an anchor in the feminist movement. I'm stunned that she's dead. ([Back to top.](#))

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I was looking at pictures of Linda last night, thinking how happy she would be that women are beginning to speak out en masse about sexual harassment. When I last saw her in September, we sat in her living room as usual, opera on the stereo, large grey cat screaming while perched under the Philip Pearlstein double wedding portrait he painted of her. Without fail, she always asked what I was doing and painting—she was like that: she had an insatiable curiosity about others, especially young people, and there was a reason artists loved her. I love her and think about her most days. She has guided my life both as an artist, a woman, and in so many other unquantifiable ways.

She was an inspiration in her generosity of spirit, both academically and on the most minute personal level and I've never met another person whose mind worked in leaps and bounds and with such poetry. We spoke that evening about painting and some gossip (she loved to trade it!), and held hands for a bit and had dinner. She was looking at some drawings I was making on *The Story of O* and kept saying, "how delicious" or "how naughty," and grinning and cackling in the most divine way. Beyond the ways in which she has iconically changed art history, history, she touched and taught so many and was loved by legions. When I think of her, I think of her work, but my mind always goes to those intimate moments she shared so openly with those she taught and cared about. She gave so much of herself to others, and her death seems genuinely surreal because it felt as if she had such an unending and infinite supply of spirit. She reveled and delighted each moment in being alive, and this joy was palpable and, itself, a beacon! ([Back to top.](#))



Linda Nochlin teaching at Vassar College in 1959. VIA JULIET SPERLING (@JULIETSPERLING)/TWITTER

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Linda was a vital influence to the empowerment of my generation. She revolutionized the way we saw ourselves and the potential for historical influence and validation. (*Back to top.*)

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Linda Nochlin was a paradigm shifter. Her analysis of the gender bias of art history went to the DNA and ideological underpinnings of the discipline. Her foundational article is still fresh after over forty years because it spurred so much thinking about bias and the implicit ways it shapes knowledge. Her framework continues to be

relevant today, as we work to both expand the narratives of art history with the perspectives of Latinx, African American, Asian, and LGBTQ artists, and understand how their work came to be marginalized in the first place. ([Back to top.](#))

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Linda was a pure force for good in our community. Her passion for women's rights and advocacy influenced so many of us. She beautifully embodied—as a scholar, wife, mother, teacher, mentor, and friend—the kind of achievement, balance, and integrity that we were striving for.

Her seminal essay “Why Have There Been No Great Woman Artists?” was a thunderbolt that forever altered the course of art history. After inviting her to speak about it at Middlebury College, where I was a student, I followed her to the doctoral program at CUNY and enrolled in a seminar by the same name. There, eight of us began groundbreaking work on 20th century women artists. The field was wide open in 1976—there had been so little scholarship on women up until then. Linda was encouraging and kind, funny and brilliant—the best mentor imaginable for all of us. With her passing we have lost a true pioneer and wonderful human being. ([Back to top.](#))

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Linda Nochlin was an inspiration for all female art historians of my generation. A brilliant scholar with laser-sharp eye and boundless imagination, she was free of academic verbiage and pretension. Her thinking transcended traditional academic hierarchies, boundaries, and binaries. She rethought everything, saw everything anew. This allowed her to make important contributions to a broad spectrum of fields beyond her own.

I met her in the '80s at the Museo de Arte de Ponce, where she made a brilliant presentation on Francisco Oller, the realist Puerto Rican painter. She also was the

first in the pool at the crack of dawn, swimming countless laps to keep fit. She was generously interested and friendly to me from that time on.

Nochlin was named professor at NYU's Institute of Fine Arts late in her career—an appointment all of us female students had advocated for a long time. By then it was too late for me to benefit from her warm support and wise guidance—one of my few regrets in life. ([Back to top.](#))

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While studying at art history at CUNY Grad Center in the early 1990s, I was fortunate to take a course on Impressionism and gender with Linda Nochlin at the IFA through the Inter-University Doctoral Consortium. I still recall riveting details about legs, feet, hygiene, and display in late 19th-century Paris, while she was immensely supportive of my early work on multicultural artists in New York at the time. I can imagine her laughing alongside another pioneer, Dr. Jaqueline Barnitz, who also just passed, and whose fundamental 2001 publication *Twentieth-Century Art of Latin America* still stands as the definitive introduction to her field. ([Back to top.](#))



Boryana Rossa's *Celebrating the Next Twinkling* (1999) was included in Linda Nochlin and Maura Reilly's 2007 Brooklyn Museum exhibition "Global Feminisms." COURTESY THE ARTIST

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Linda Nochlin was a significant presence during my graduate school days at Yale in the 1990s. Indeed, her impact was outsize to the years she did spend in New Haven. It can be seen in the work of classmates like Marni Kessler, whose book *Sheer Presence: The Veil in Manet's Paris* (2006) originated from her studies with Linda (and remains timely), and Beth Handler Riebe, whose gallery project *Local: Art + Ideas* in North Carolina evinces the openness that Linda always carried with her. While her classes schooled us largely in things prior to the twentieth century, what she taught always felt current; her mind and spirit were in the present. And she engaged with what each and every student brought to the table. Regarding art

historical method she reminded us: stay enthralled, stay obsessed, always push your ideas and work forward.

Her essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” was, of course, groundbreaking, not only in what it insisted we consider but in its boldness of address and framing. Like Linda herself, it opened the door to so much more, whatever others were doing and concerned with. Two decades later, Michele Wallace would pen “Why Are There No Great Black Artists? The Problem of Visuality in African American Culture.” Teach them together. ([Back to top.](#))

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Over the years, I knew Linda in many capacities, but I first became aware of her on the page, which is where most serious art historians prefer to be met and where their legacy, if they have one, will endure. Linda's most certainly will, and in several domains: as a scholar of 19th-century painting, as a theorist and critic of that much-maligned-or-taken-for-granted “style” Realism (both old-school French and contemporary American,) and as a fighting feminist from the early days of the second wave of the 1970s. Of the texts that I always recommend or assign to students, be they historians, critics, or studio practitioners, are several of Linda's, notably “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” and “The Realist Criminal and the Abstract Law.” All offer fresh and usefully down-to-earth perspectives—she was a realist after all—on subjects that are too often addressed only in generalities. And all are tough-minded, carefully researched, solidly argued and well and clearly written. At a time when these standards are ignored at the cost of truly and substantively radical rethinking of basic issues of aesthetic and gender politics, Linda Nochlin's work stands out as a model other should look to emulate. I did. ([Back to top.](#))