



On Ellen Cantor: James Barron with Barry Schwabsky

A feminist multimedia artist and curator, Ellen Cantor's work began to garner critical acclaim in the early 1990's. As part of a generation of young feminist artists interested in female representation, Cantor explored the relationship between fiction and life, good and evil, and the role of the female protagonist. Cantor challenged female representation; in her work, Cantor explored the fairy tales and Disney movies that were the subject of her childhood fascination. Recently, there has been a tremendous resurgence in interest in Cantor's art. In 2016, three years after her death at age 51, Cantor's work was part of a multi-venue exhibition spearheaded by Lia Gangitano, founder of Participant Inc. Cantor's film, paintings, drawings and sculpture were shown at Participant, Inc., 80WSE, Foxy Production, and Maccarone, culminating in the premiere of her film *Pinochet Porn* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. The current exhibition *Two Edens*, at James Barron Art in Kent, Connecticut, focuses on displaying a range of Cantor's paintings, sculptures and drawings made from 1985 through 2013. On the occasion of the opening of the exhibition, Barry Schwabsky joined James Barron in conversation about Ellen's life and work.

James Barron: Tell me about Ellen. How did you meet her?

Barry Schwabsky (Rail): I don't remember exactly how we met, to be honest. I think we just kind of ran into each other in '90s New York art world. She was making drawings, and then collage video works made out of appropriated footage. And it was those videos that interested me at first. I really didn't get her drawings when I first saw them. You know, they seemed kind of crude, kind of naïve, in a way that I didn't quite get. It was only later that I became sophisticated enough to see how sophisticated they really were underneath their veneer of almost cartoonish directness. But we didn't know each other particularly well. Then she moved to London and I happened to move to London a little bit after she did. It was there that we got to know each other better and started to see each other pretty often and talk a lot. So that was when we became friends, in the 2000s.



Ellen Cantor, *Title Unknown*, c. 1990, oil on canvas, 46 × 42 inches (116.8 × 106.6 cm). Courtesy James Barron Art.

Barron: Did you talk a lot about her work with her?

Rail: Yes, particularly later on when she started to make *Pinochet Porn*, her long-term project to make a feature film, which is very different from the previous video pieces that she made out of appropriated footage. *Pinochet Porn* has some appropriated footage in it too, but it was mainly acted—not by professional actors, just people that she knew that she asked to participate. It was written, directed and filmed in a different way than her previous work, and she didn't really have the money to make it, so she would make it bit by bit, as she could. She was somehow always editing it and re-editing it, so every few months I would stop by and she would start to show me something that she was working on. And then she was also making a trailer for the film, which was going to be a separate piece in itself. At one point I was supposed to act in it and then I think I got sick or something the day that I was supposed to do it so it never happened.

Barron: There is a way that she puts together scenes in the videos, a of collaging elements that you see in her collages on paper. Do you agree?

Rail: I think that the relationship of the videos to these later drawings is... there's a more important relationship that comes out if you compare her early work, not only drawings, but paintings and those sort of totemic objects) which hardly anyone, including me, knew about until Lia Gangitano showed them last year at Participant Inc., and now you're showing some of them here in Kent—with her later drawings. Despite the almost primitivism of the early work, its subject matter and even many stylistic aspects continue into the later drawings, which is why it's really wonderful to see them exhibited together for the first time. But if you could put the videos in between those two groups of work as a kind of middle term, what you would see is that the videos enabled her to bring in the whole field of reference of mass culture and kitsch—Disney princesses, Barbie and all these kinds of references that come out of her video work where she appropriates a lot of kind of kitsch romanticism and pop culture—which are not in her early work.

Barron: Unlike some people who take pop culture ironically, Ellen saw no difference between a dream that recurred to her over twenty, thirty or forty years, or Snow White or Bambi, or a nightmare, or a painting she thought about, or a song. There was kind of an innocence about her, and an extreme intelligence.

Rail: I would agree with you. I think that there's no cynicism, there's no '80s style irony. Even though I think there were techniques that she got from the Pictures Generation artists or other people like that who had a very cool, distanced viewpoint on the mass culture that they were appropriating. She didn't have that distance to her. It was all about something that one individually lived and experienced and made one's own. Maybe closer to Kathy Acker's "plagiarisms" in her novels. I think, in a way, you can find the key to Ellen's in the title of that one big show she had in Switzerland in 1998 that was censored: *My Perversion is the Belief in True Love*. She would look at all these things in our culture that most of us sort of dismiss or think we gave that up as kids. And she seems to have felt that if you could take that feeling totally seriously it would be the most subversive thing that you could possibly do because it articulated a demand that our society was not actually prepared to honor. I think she was a quite idealistic person.

Barron: I have a slightly different perspective than most people because I knew her family. Her father is still a patent lawyer. He's in his 90s and still wears a suit and tie and goes to the office. The whole family is

brilliant. Her father brought her to the Detroit Institute of Arts every Sunday, and she was infatuated with Hieronymus Bosch and Goya. I was thinking about this untitled painting from 1990 in relation to her obsession with Bosch; the work depicts a kind of orgy happening within the body of an elephant. At one point, she even said, “I don’t see any difference between my work and Bosch, or between my work and these paintings that my father would take me to see on Sunday morning.” Again, it’s that extreme intelligence and innocence that I think was so intriguing about her.

Rail: Well, that also points out how artistically cultivated she was. During that period when we were living in London, I was working for a while as London Editor for a Scottish art magazine called *MAP*, and I asked Ellen to write for the magazine. The first thing I proposed for her to do was to review a Frida Kahlo retrospective at the Tate Modern. She wrote the piece, and she had a very surprising viewpoint. I thought she would identify closely with Frida Kahlo and her way of making painting out of her own life, and she did. But then, in the end she said something like, “Sometimes Kahlo can appear more naive than she really is and then sometimes she’s actually naïve.” Her conclusion was that Kahlo didn’t have a strong enough formal underpinning, and if only she had studied with Hans Hofmann, she would have been able to put everything together and bring it to a higher level. She really had that sense that you had to have an absolute grounding in artistic structure and in what you could learn from studying history in order to make your work completely out of yourself.

Barron: To think that she would have reviewed a Frida Kahlo exhibition in relation to Hans Hofmann is the most outlandish idea in the world, and to make it coherent! Her sentences were very beautifully constructed. And yes, in her own work, there was a certain primitive quality, starting with this group of totemic sculptures, all done very early in her career, between 1990 - 93. When you look at them, the language, the words in this untitled yellow wooden figure carry over to the collages over there (*All Hatred Was Forgotten* and *He Dreamed of Killing Her*, both from 1996), and then to these untitled Tarot Card pieces which she created at the end of her career, in 2013; it’s intriguing, the consistency of language and sexuality expressed in the work. Is that something you’ve thought about a lot in her work?

Rail: It’s something that I think she evokes as a possibility of transcendence in life.

Barron: You mean like a spiritual transcendence?

Rail: Right. And there’s so much of that search for a kind of absolute, which sexuality seems to be one of the possible pathways toward. At the same time, there’s so much awareness of violence, abuse and horror in life. That final film, *Pinochet Porn*, really brings that all together because it’s building up that basic reference of the political dictatorship in Argentina as a metaphor for power relations in everyday life. The fact that our sexual relations with each other are also conditioned by the will to domination. I think she has a very complex view of all the interwoven positive and negative polarities of that.

Barron: What do you make of the elephant in that untitled painting from 1990?

Rail: I don’t know what to make of that painting! She’s put so many different elements into it that I can’t quite figure out how they go together narratively. And it’s funny, we were talking earlier on the phone today with Ellen’s brother Mark and he said something like, “Well, she always really wanted painting to tell stories. And that’s probably why eventually she had to stop painting and go on to make these videos,

because she couldn't really do that in painting." In this painting, it's as if she tried to superimpose the different scenes of some story, to superimpose them on each other. But you can't actually retrieve the thread of it anymore.

Barron: I asked Mark if he thought that Ellen was like David Bowie, who would live out certain dramas in his life so he could invent the stories for his songs. I wondered if Ellen would do the same thing. She had been married and got divorced, then she was gay. She became part of a club called The Clit Club, which became part of an exhibition that she did called *Coming to Power: 25 Years of Sexually Explicit Art by Women*. Mark said to me, "It's exactly the opposite of Bowie. She was very private. What she was doing was keeping her art very much to itself, but the themes of her life would come out very subtly." I asked Mark if she ever talked about her life and her sexual life. He said not at all. With you, did she?

Rail: A little bit, not a lot. I think you're right, she wasn't really a demonstrative person in her life the way she is in her art. She had a sense of delicacy about things. She was married at some point; she was involved at another point in this kind of hardcore lesbian scene. I think in the latter part of her life, I think her interests were more and more toward men. But even if she was going with a guy, it seemed to me that she really identified herself more with the queer world and not with the straight world. I think she identified very strongly with a lot of gay male artists. She absolutely adored Derek Jarman. She was very interested in Gilbert & George. She was very interested in the trans world. But she didn't have the need to act in a certain way in order to be part of any of those worlds any more than she had to act any particular way to be part of the straight world.

Barron: In London, did you ever go to Frieze or fancy parties with her?

Rail: I don't remember any fancy parties. [laughter]

Barron: I did, and I was always amazed. I know how much my wife, Jeannette, a photographer, hates going to art fairs. It's like what Chuck Close said: *It's like walking into a bedroom and seeing your parents having sex. You know they're doing it, you just don't want to see it.* Ellen would come to Frieze with me and I would say, "Aren't you appalled?" She would reply, "No! This is great, I'm seeing friends selling a painting for 200,000 pounds!" And there wasn't an ounce of jealousy. Sheer joy when she saw a friend succeeding. We would go to fancy parties and afterwards she would say, "Do you want to go to see a show?" and I would say yes. "Well, it's in a gay club." I'd say, great. "It's in the bathroom of a gay club." And I would say, great! And she said, "Well, it's in a really bad neighborhood." I said, let's go. So we go, and it's Wolfgang Tillmans curating the show, which turned out to be a very famous show. And then she would say, "Okay, now we're going to the most derelict area, it's a five-floor walk-up in a tiny, little tenement building that's completely abandoned." We would go see another show, and it was always somebody with an impeccable eye. My own time with Ellen was this kind of euphoric experience. She had a funny way of slipping from one world into another. In your article about her for *The Nation*, you talked about how she would repeat the same image over and over and over. Why would she do that, do you think?

Rail: Well, I think whatever the image was, she was committed to getting to the bottom of it. She wasn't interested in having a superficial relation to whatever it was that she felt, whether it was Barbie or anything else.

Barron: You had written that it was almost like a mantra. That she was trying to meditate on the image.

Rail: That's funny, I don't remember saying that. But maybe I did. [laughter]

Barron: Maybe I was misreading it. A meditation.

Rail: A mantra is not exactly it. I think the people who use the mantra don't think about the mantra, they use the mantra to get past thinking so that their mind can go to another place. She was interested in actually plumbing that image itself and what its possible implications could be, I think. She wasn't using the image as an instrumentality toward something else.

Barron: Right, not like Warhol.

Rail: Well, Warhol—that's a whole other discussion. I mean, the really good Warhols are the ones that are about something that he was passionate about. Whether it's the canned soup that his mother gave him for lunch every day or Marilyn Monroe. I think he was really interested in Marilyn Monroe, but then there are boring paintings of boring stars because he wasn't really as interested in them. He tried it out, but he kept going back to Marilyn or Liz because they had meaning for him that he somehow wanted to approach. So maybe it's not exactly that different.

Barron: We hope to show some of her films. We weren't sure about showing the films in the context of the gallery for various reasons. But her films are the missing link in this show. Tell us a little bit more about *Pinochet Porn* or some of her other films that you can think of—for the audience that's not as familiar with her films.

Rail: Maybe it's better to start with some of the other videos. The one that, in a way, makes it the most obvious what she was doing in the late '90s, early 2000s videos is the one, I think it's called, *Within Heaven and Hell*. Which is simply made out of, if I recall it correctly, pieces from two different movies that she wove together. She put together the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *The Sound of Music*. And found an incredible synchronicity between horror on one hand and sentimentality on the other. And other works of hers kind of went on from there in more subtle and nuanced ways. Her desire to encompass the totality of those contradictory feelings of a single thing was always there. *Pinochet Porn* was made in a different way. It was written out, story-boarded, acted and filmed. It was a story, that actually, I think it was based on someone that she had been acquainted with but elaborated by her in fantastical ways. The story was about these two sisters from Chile who were from family that was involved in a high level of the dictatorship. They're trying different ways to escape from their background to find other lives for themselves but they keep getting kind of dragged back the horror of their own upper-class upbringing. She herself acts in it but



Ellen Cantor, Title Unknown, c. 1990, oil on wood, cinder block, newspaper, beans, mixed media, 37 × 12 × 5 inches (93.9 × 30.4 × 12.7 cm). Courtesy James Barron Art.

she plays the maid. Which is somehow funny. It's like she's the servant of the story. It's not a story about her, it's a story about her imagination of what other people have gone through and she's there to make that story possible.

There's something I realized, that I didn't write about it in that article, because I didn't exactly know what to make of it and I still don't know what to make of it, but I'm going to put it out there because it's something I want to study and try and figure out. At one of the shows that they had of her work in New York last season, the one at the 80 Washington Square East Gallery, they had a drawing series called *Circus Lives from Hell*. It's a series of over 80 drawings, in which Ellen first started to work out the story about the twins that then later she made into *Pinochet Porn*. It was a really extraordinary sequence of drawings. Talked about narration, this is really where she found her possibility of narrating through a sequence of images in a way that she had could never have done through a single image. I had seen some of those drawings before in her studio, but I had never seen this whole sequence of 80 drawings. Seeing them in New York, I realized, or started to think, that in the making of a narrative sequence of images there was a real relationship to the art of Charlotte Salomon—the German-Jewish woman artist who died, I think she was in her late twenties, as a victim of the Holocaust. And she left one great work, which is a narrative sequence of gauche paintings. I forget how many hundreds of them there are, but there's several hundred of them. It's called *Life? or Theater?*. It has all the elements, in a way, that Ellen was interested in. From the most horrific things to exalted experiences of desire and so on. And as the title says, it works with an ambiguity between reality and the imagination, between representation as a form of dramatization of life and then the bedrock reality of things. It made me realize in a way, the way the Chilean dictatorship serves for her in *Pinochet Porn* as a background in the way that Nazi Germany serves as a background in *Life? or Theater?*. I wish I could go back and ask, "Did you look at Charlotte Salomon?" I mean, she must have, because she just investigated everything that related to what she was doing. She was a researcher, and how could she have not been interested in a Jewish, female, narrative, pictorial artist like this? So I suspect that Charlotte Salomon is actually the key, somehow, to the development of Ellen's later work.

Barron: Did you talk to Ellen a lot when she was sick?

Rail: Not so much. We would make an appointment and then maybe it would be a bad day, she would be too sick. She would say, "Well, maybe next time." It was that kind of thing. We would email or whatever.

Barron: According to Lia [Gangitano], she desperately wanted to finish the film and not to talk about her illness at all; just to talk about the film and talk about how she was going to get it done. I describe her as: take no captives, make no excuses, no prisoners. She was not somebody who would bullshit at all.

Rail: That sounds more aggressive than how I think of her.

Barron: No, no. I just mean a quietness. She was so subtle.

Rail: She had that ability to follow her intuition and not be dependent on how it looked in anybody else's eyes.

Barron: We were talking with Mark Cantor, and I asked about the Tarot Cards. He said that Ellen was very good friends with Nicola Tyson, an artist who lives in upstate New York. Ellen started going to a tarot card

reader upstate, and that's what that whole series is about. These six Tarot Card drawings from 2013, they're readings that she's making for herself. A lot of them are pleas for help and about guidance mixed with sexuality. They're really interesting works. If you look on the right of some of them, it looks almost like her hand has smudged some of it. And if you look carefully, she wrote very, very hard so that it's indented into the paper and then erased it. It's very intentional.

Rail: Yeah, the kind of layering and weaving in and out of the elements in those drawings is very strong.

Barron: With someone as enigmatic as Ellen, we can only touch on some of the fringes. I hope we've opened up some avenues for further thought. Thank you all for coming.

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