

## CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN

Gabrielle Schwarz, *Carolee Schneemann: Barbican Art Gallery*, Artforum, 1 December 2022Carolee Schneemann, *Snows Drawing*, 1966, Watercolor, crayon, and ink on paper, 12 1/2 × 20

“I’m a painter,” Carolee Schneemann once said. “I’m still a painter and I will die a painter.” Right up until her death in 2019, the artist insisted on the centrality of painting to her wide-ranging and profuse body of work. Across six decades’ worth of performance, film, photography, drawing, sculpture, installation, artist’s books—and, yes, some painting—she always maintained that the eye and hand of Schneemann the painter could be discerned: in her work’s intimate tactility, in its attentive treatment of color and form, and often also in the literal presence of paints or painterly apparatus. It is fitting, then, that her first museum retrospective in the UK opens with a canvas. *Pin Wheel*, a gestural abstraction from 1957—mostly yellow with loose streaks of vivid red, orange, blue, green and purple—hangs at a jaunty angle on a gray wall. Its frame is affixed to a spinning potter’s wheel; when activated, the painting is transformed (here I quote Schneemann again; her words are irresistible) into a “flying rectangle of color.”

At the Barbican, this kinetic experiment is included in a display of Schneemann’s early paintings and prints, consisting of portraits, self-portraits, and landscapes that she mostly deemed failures, although they brim with an expressive vitality. You could think of it as one of many shows within a show. The expansive survey, curated by Lotte Johnson, progresses mostly chronologically while toggling between Schneemann’s best-known pieces, such as the 1964 performance *Meat Joy*—featuring seminaked bodies slithering around in wet paint and raw meat, for anyone who needs a reminder—and more neglected aspects of her practice. Her early-1960s series of small painted-box assemblages filled with photos and objects, then sometimes doused in turpentine and set alight, was on display. I only wish I could have got behind the vitrines to peer at the detritus more closely. *Fuses*, 1964–67, an erotic filmed portrait of Schneemann and her then partner, composer James Tenney (she called it their “love-fuck”), gets its own

private viewing room—complete with rows of folding seats. A somber section gathers work produced in response to global atrocities: the Vietnam War, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, and 9/11.

Across the split-level gallery, noises from different pieces—the thwack of a mop hitting a video monitor (*War Mop*, 1983); a sound collage using props from an early performance (*Noise Bodies*, 1965/2015)—clash and commingle. The works offer plenty (sometimes too much) to read. Some exhibits are intensely moving or upsetting, while others, such as Schneemann’s meticulous record of details including the “genital size” and “orgasm sound” of her and four other women’s male sexual partners in *Sexual Parameters Chart I–III*, 1969–75, might have you stifling a giggle. It’s discordant, unruly, overwhelming: a perfect encapsulation, then, of the creative vision of the exhibition’s subject. Throughout her career, whether working on the canvas or off, Schneemann remained committed to the notion that art is inseparable from life in all its contradictions and ambiguities, its joys and heartaches. As she noted in one of the drawings used to plot out her 1967 anti-war performance *Snows*, the “audience must be given more sensory information than they break down at once.” Anything too readily synthesized or apprehended would simply be false. Reality, as Schneemann intuitively understood, is far too mysterious to be captured in a single static frame.