CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN

Some people in the art world say that #MeToo has gone too far. What modern misogynist will be yanked from museums next? Gauguin? Picasso? I say, sure, why not? Let’s set them aside for awhile, give them a rest, make room for what we never see, which means art by almost any woman you can name.

Carolee Schneemann is an artist I’d move right into the cleared-out spotlight, not just because she has star quality, which she does, or because she has majorly shaped art history, which she has. I’d put her there because, in a career of some 60 years, she’s been one of the most generous artists around: generous with her presence, her thinking, her formal and political risk-taking, and her embrace of embracing itself — across genres, genders and species.

You find evidence of all of this in “Carolee Schneemann: Kinetic Painting” at MoMA PS1, the artist’s first comprehensive career retrospective. The show, which comes from the Museum der Moderne Salzburg in Austria, has problems. It is, disorientingly, installed in reverse chronological order. This means you encounter not-always-strong recent work on the first floor, and the now-classic early pieces only later on the second.

Yet as a sprawling totality, it works. And it succeeds in clarifying the artist’s own long-range view of her career: Although she is best known for her innovative performance work, live and on film, the show supports an assertion she made long after much of that work had been done: “I consider myself a painter still and forever (no matter what ‘medium’).”

Born in Pennsylvania in 1939, Ms. Schneemann was the child of a country doctor. “There was always physicality around us,” she once said in an interview, “leaking, spilling out of boundaries, wounded farmers with bleeding limbs, hemorrhages, infections. No fantasy of the sanitized body in this household.” She latched onto painting, in a messy, expressionist form early, and went to Bard College in upstate New York to study it. But she ran into trouble there. She wanted to paint; her all-male teachers wanted her to pose. When she painted a nude self-portrait, she was accused of moral turpitude and expelled.

Ms. Schneemann had little use for Abstract Expressionism’s culture of angst. What interested her was the physical action in “action painting.” She took it seriously enough to slice into her canvases and layer them with collage material, and then move into assemblage (at one point she forged a mutually beneficial friendship with Joseph Cornell). For a while she used fire as a mark-making medium.

By the early 1960s, after she had converted a Manhattan commercial loft into a studio, her assemblages grew to the size of environments, in which she performed, her nude body smeared and streaked with...
paint, for a series of photographs titled “Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions for Camera.” The performances, which included live snakes, shattered mirrors, and cow skulls as props, suggested archaic rituals, violence-tinged but executed with surrealist wit.

It was a short, logical step from the studio into a theater. Ms. Schneemann made the transition as a founding member, along with dancer-choreographers like Deborah Hay and Yvonne Rainer, of Judson Dance Theater, a company that was changing American dance. In the Judson aesthetic, everyday actions – walking, running, lovemaking – assumed expressive dimensions. In 1964, Ms. Schneemann, using a pop-song score composed by Mr. Tenney, directed nine performers in an epochal event she called “Meat Joy.”

Staged first in Paris and then in New York, it had at least the appearance of being an erotic free-for-all with men and women in bikini briefs rolling around among piles of newspapers, slathering each other with blood-red paint, and clutching the bodies of dead fish and raw chickens. Seen in blurry film montage, the work is a landmark, but also a period artifact. It again confirms the painterly impulse behind the artist’s work: here she turns bodies into brushes. But of far more interest, with its mingling of creaturely flesh, living and dead, is the work’s deep investment in ideas of transience and mortality.

If “Meat Joy,” which she termed “kinetic theater,” reflected the liberationist spirit of the proto-feminist early-60s, other work tapped into darker political realities, namely the war in Vietnam. In a flickering 1965 film called “Viet-Flakes,” the artist’s camera scans newspaper clips of battlefield atrocities as if from a fighter-plane perspective. Two years later, she incorporated this film into a performance piece called “Snows,” in which the audience had a role in dictating which live photo-derived tableaus would be staged.

Most of her theater work, documented in photographs or on film, exists only as ghost traces in the show, organized by Sabine Breitwieser, of the Museum der Moderne Salzburg, and Branden W. Joseph, a professor at Columbia University, along with Erica Papernik-Shimizu and Oliver Shultz of MoMA PS1. Yet some images, such as shots of the solo piece “Interior Scroll,” still startle. For the 1975 performance, the artist stood alone on a table, nude, posing like a studio model, and reading aloud from a book of her collected writings, “Cezanne, She Was A Great Painter,” which includes a litany of misogynistic reactions a female artist could expect to encounter in her career:

“BE PREPARED:
to have your brain picked
to have the pickings misunderstood
to be mistreated whether your success increases or decreases
if you are a woman (and things are not utterly changed)
they will almost never believe you really did it
(what you did do)
they will patronize you humor you
try to sleep with you want you to transform them
with your energy”

She then put the book down and slowly extracted a narrow strip of folded typewritten paper from her vagina, reading the text on the scroll as it emerged. It included, among other things, a direct appeal to a film historian — female, as it happened — female artist who had been dismissive of her work, as a sizeable swath of the art world was at that time.

Ms. Schneemann has consistently run into resistance, often from conflicting directions. Some feminists have viewed her body-positive
art as exploitive in an old, essentializing way, failing to see the claim
to power implicit in her erotic self-portraiture. Yet in 1969 at Cannes,
when she screened her film “Fuses,” with its images of the artist
and Mr. Tenney having sex, male critics were furious: the film wasn’t
pornographic enough for their taste.

Made in increments between 1964 and 1967, “Fuses” is a beautiful,
complex work, among Ms. Schneemann’s most moving achievements.
Like much of her art, it bridges interior and exterior worlds: we see
the lovers in their darkened bedroom and we see a rural landscape in
changing seasons beyond the window. It’s hard to follow: organically,
it’s here, then it’s there. But the flow, metaphoric and visual, is rich. And
like so much of her art, the dynamic is fundamentally collaborative,
shared.

The loving-making, which is continuous, was shot by both partners
passing small portable cameras back and forth between them. Most
radically, the entire film is framed as if seen through the eyes of a third,
observant, unjudging party, the female cat, Kitch, the first of several
“muse-cats” that Ms. Schneemann has bonded with, and included in
her art, over the years.

For me, their inclusion is defining, and the artist is well aware of
what she’s gained from it. In 1981, she wrote about life-lessons,
which in her case are invariably art lessons, learned from her
fellow-creatures: “risk and self-confidence linked in physical action;
unrestrained tenderness and demonstrative love and affection; they
have instructed as to the transitions between visible and invisible;
they have clarified the motion between domestic worlds and a
scale of landscape inaccessible to humans; they have heightened my
concentration, patience; taught me the ability to sit in total stillness
and react instantaneously.”

Another lesson-giver, Mohandas K. Gandhi, is often (though
uncertainly) credited with saying that we can judge the moral progress
of a culture by observing how it relates to, and treats, animals, an ethic
that effectively consigns Western humanism, with its idea of man as
the measure of all things, to the dust. I suspect that Ms. Schneemann
might agree with his view, which offers yet another explanation of
why she continues to stand in “a zone corresponding to the art
world’s blind-spot” as she has put it, which gives an excellent reason
to give her embracive, karmically corrective art a permanent place
on center-stage.

Carolee Schneemann: Kinetic Painting
Through March 11 at MoMA PS1, Queens; 718-784-2084,
momaps1.org.