

Amy Goldin: A Retrospective

By Elizabeth C. Baker

Active as an artist for a number of years, Amy Goldin was nearly 40 when she began to publish art criticism. She made a splash in 1965 with an ambitious reassessment of Dada written in the context of newly urgent attention to a movement that had become a source and reference point for so much of the advanced art of the '60s.¹ Her voice is confident, assertive and challenging, the prose witty and stylish, the art-historical grasp firm. In this longish essay, she confronts some big questions: “the relationship between history, novelty, creativity”; the way the Dadaists “changed the kind of experience that art can provide”; their “passionate muddling of artistic and moral values”; their “violent jumble of affirmation and negation”; and finally, in addition to scrutiny of such specifics as surface, space, illusion and typography in Dada works, she gives us Beauty, God and Death.

Only two months later, she takes on Harold Rosenberg. At the time largely at odds with new developments of the '60s, he was no longer the horizon-filling presence he had once been, but still, as the art critic of the *New Yorker*, a formidable authority figure. She gives her piece a title that drips with skepticism, “Harold Rosenberg’s Magic Circle,” and despite some elegantly couched faint praise and a good-natured tone, it is an out-and-out attack. The following spring, Greenberg and Fried get the brush-off in “A Note on Opticality,” her consideration of space and surface in Op Art and Color Field painting. In the same issue of *Arts*—May 1966—she ventures into broader cultural territory in “McLuhan’s Message: Participate, Enjoy!” *Understanding Media* had come out in 1964. Focusing on this influential analysis of the impact of electronic communication (primarily TV) on print technology, she finds McLuhan’s theories to be based in part on a misunderstanding of avant-garde esthetics. Often very funny, much of what she has to say about this popular guru is perceptive, and very little of it is friendly.

As these articles indicate, she's often quite tough on writers, especially those with capacious theoretical programs. Artists tend to get more respect in the form of scrupulous accountings, frequently on their own terms. A good example is her extended consideration of the sculpture of George Sugarman.ⁱⁱ On the other hand, she takes an oppositional stance on Morris Louis,ⁱⁱⁱ comparing his paintings, then widely acclaimed as the intellectually inevitable successors to Abstract Expressionism, to "birdsong," the implication of mindlessness being far from accidental.

Faced with the range of subject, rhetorical finesse, intellectual energy and bristling contrarian tone of these early essays, not to mention the rapidity with which they appeared, one is impelled to ask, how did this come about? In what circumstances did this sophisticated critical personality materialize, seemingly out of the blue? During her career as an artist, Goldin had painted in an abstract style.^{iv} To supplement her income, she had freelanced from time to time as a ghostwriter, both on academic theses and—more surprisingly—sermons. How suggestive, how tantalizing! One longs to know the details. But both lines of work could well have fed her own developing critical skills—perhaps providing access to specialized academic knowledge beyond her own training in philosophy at the University of Chicago (doubtless the firm ground from which her skillfully constructed argumentation sprang), and perhaps contributing to the assurance with which she could deploy resonant Biblical allusions—a rarity, for a youngish critic, in those years when religion seldom raised its head in avant garde circles. When she started to write criticism, she pursued it with gusto. As she was bringing out these early, ambitious, rangy essays for several publications that are collected here, she was warming up with a torrent of short exhibition reviews for *Arts*. Not just two or three, or five or six, or even ten would appear in a single issue, but there were often more—at one point 13, then 14, and even 26!^v

I encountered Goldin in person in 1967 when she began writing for *Art News*, where I worked at the time. She published there frequently for several years, also contributing to *Artforum*, *Art in America* and other journals. After I moved to *Art in America* as editor in late 1973, she wrote for us regularly, though not exclusively. Working with her was a very intense process. It often seemed that every essay would trigger a swarm of new ideas and associations she had to pursue—and thus more articles would ensue. Issues of meaning—on many levels—engaged her constantly. She wrote about many established figures and mainstream topics—the Fauves, Fernand Léger, the German Expressionists, Matisse, Abstract Expressionism. But the world of contemporary art in the making—what was going on in the galleries and the studios—was her home territory, and she subjected every aspect of it

to questioning—not only the art, but its institutions, its politics, its critics and theorists, its gender and racial hierarchies. She wrote extended, rather contentious reviews of two major shows of black artists, one of them the Met's controversial "Harlem on my Mind."^{vi} She examined the art world as a complex organism. She wrote brilliantly and analytically about New York's museums in an overview partly co-authored with Roberta Smith^{vii} and art schools^{viii}; the latter, published under the editorship of Brian O'Doherty, generated heated follow-up in the Letters pages over several months. She was interested in the business side of things as well: early on, her "Requiem for a Gallery" had appeared when Dick Bellamy closed his Green Gallery.^{ix}

Goldin's ideas and her writing were a frequent catalyst to our editorial process. We built several special issues around pieces she was either working on or that she hastened to undertake when a thematic issue was in formation. Among these were "The Esthetic Ghetto: Some Thoughts About Public Art,"^x "The Post-Perceptual Portrait,"^{xi} and "Matisse and Decoration: The Late Cut-Outs."^{xii}

As time passed, she tangled with an ever larger swath of art outside the contemporary framework as it was then identified. Amy needed to grapple with and understand art in its broadest and most diverse manifestations. Some of her most stimulating essays explore folk art and outsider art (then accorded little attention); she later investigated the art of Islamic cultures in considerable depth, taking a course with Oleg Grabar at Harvard, and traveling to Iran for a first-hand look (where she reviewed an exhibition of Qajar painting at the Iranian-American Cultural Center in Teheran.)^{xiii}

An intellectual powerhouse she undoubtedly was, and omnivorous in her curiosity, as the essays included here amply show. But she also loved being a *working* art critic—someone who willingly took on whatever came her way. Throughout her career, she never stopped writing exhibition reviews and book reviews. She enjoyed the review format and handled it inventively. She also did a couple of surveys of regional art scenes—a demanding amalgam of criticism and reporting on unfamiliar turf. In 1977, preparing for a Montreal/Toronto overview we had assigned her, she appeared in our office wearing a T-shirt emblazoned "Critic of the Year." She had recently received the College Art Association's Mather Award for criticism, and a friend had, in a teasing spirit, given her the shirt. Her assiduously maintained outsider stance did not prevent her from being pleased at this recognition by the art historians' professional organization.

Earlier in the '70s, a changing art world was soon reflected in her writing. In spring 1970 she co-authored "Conceptual Art as Opera," with Robert Kushner. Signaling yet another new interest is a short, probing essay (not published at the time) confronting that perennial problem known as "the

decorative”; the piece is a study of the use of patterning in kilim rugs (1972) and is included in this volume. The term “decorative” having long served critics as a multipurpose insult to convey superficiality or lack of seriousness, the broader concept of decoration was ripe for reassessment. An extended exhibition review^{xiv} of work by the Paris-based American painter Zuka explicitly articulates Goldin’s new interest. (The ’70s was also the decade of feminist art; it’s curious that, with the exception of Diane Arbus,^{xv} Zuka is the only woman artist Goldin treats individually at substantial length.)

Pursuing a historical and theoretical framework for the burgeoning Pattern and Decoration movement, with which she was deeply involved, Goldin’s explorations of the roots of the decorative ranged from Islamic art to Matisse to the American Prendergast brothers. Her articles on decoration, both historical and contemporary, were original, powerfully argumentative and controversial (one of her most provocative points was her elaborately reasoned insistence that decoration is essentially devoid of meaning), and these are the writings for which she is best known.

Goldin’s collection ends with a lengthy essay on the art of Manny Farber, an influential film critic based in Southern California and a staunchly independent painter whose career strategy, not unlike Goldin’s, was to energetically spurn prevailing expectations. Her article is filled with the kind of detail about procedure and its meaning that a (once) practicing artist could so well articulate. By this time she was already seriously ill, but she finished the piece with her usual meticulous attention and panache. She died in April 1978. The article was published in *Art in America* a month later.

The pieces in this collection provide a revealing and long-needed overview of her critical writing. The *Art Index* lists dozens more, but even that is not a complete tally of her articles. In addition there were some exhibition catalogues, and a comical cookbook called *The Wunnerful World of Food*, written with Robert Kushner. It was a short career—all this happened in less than 15 years—and an astonishingly productive run. Three decades after her death the essays come across with great acuity and freshness.

i *Arts*, September ’65.

ii *Arts*, June ’66.

iii *Art News*, April ’68.

iv A review of one of her exhibitions appeared in *Arts* in May ’65.

v *Arts*, September ’65.

vi *Art News*, May ’70.

vii *Art in America*, Sept./Oct. ’77.

viii *College Art Journal*, Winter ’72; *Art in America*, May/June ’73.

ix *Arts*, Jan. ’66.

x *Art in America*, May/June ’74.

xi Jan./Feb. ’75.

- xii *Art in America*, July/August '75.
- xiii *Art in America*, Sept./Oct. '74.
- xiv *Art in America*, Jan./Feb. '74.
- xv *Art in America*, March/April '73.