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## AN INTERVIEW WITH NINETY YEAR OLD ARTIST AMARANTH EHRENHALT: GESTURE UNHINGED

*Amaranth Ehrenhalt's painting, Jump in and Move Around, 1962, oil on canvas, 59"x 77".*

By **DENISE CARVALHO** December, 2018

Amaranth Ehrenhalt, Gesture Unhinged

I was excited to meet Amaranth Ehrenhalt, a ninety-year-old American artist whose unrestrained palette I recently began admiring. Her work reminded me of the scorching heat of the summer of my native Brazil, which most Brazilian artists took for granted. I also felt a certain affinity with her, perhaps because we shared similar interests, we both had a story about an avocado tree, mine I planted, hers was a gift to Sonia Delaunay, when both lived in Paris. Another common experience was that of putting oneself at risk, which I often did. As for Amaranth, Béatrice Comte called her “a creator accustomed to putting herself in danger to endlessly enrich her work and exceed her own limits.” This is the story of the modern avant-garde minus the romantic view of history: the rude awakening of many contemporary artists on their turbulent but exceptional path in everyday practice. But they all share the same mantra: “being an artist is all I wanted to be.”

As I entered the small foyer of the apartment on East 108<sup>th</sup> street, I immediately noticed the four black-and-white photo portraits of Amaranth as a classical beauty in the spring of her years. The open living room was filled with numerous paintings and sculptures in all sizes and shapes, stacked from taller to smaller against the walls. She welcomed me with a youthful smile as she sat in her wheelchair next to a large dining table. It was in fact more than a table, it was a piece of artwork made out of colorful ceramic tiles.

I asked her if she could still paint since being in a wheelchair has lessened her desire to create more artwork. She had just finished

creating a postcard collage for Visual AIDS. This organization helps users' artworks to create AIDS awareness.

During her many years of practice, she painted moving around, absolutely driven, focused, in a non-stop gestural impromptu in conversation with what the painting required. Following her words, I found my own rhythm around her open living room, glancing at each painting intensely. I noticed high on one wall a powerful oil on canvas, *Jump in and Move Around*, from 1961, shown in the exhibition "New Forces" at the American Center in Paris. This was the painting picked by the laureate American poet John Ashbery in his review in the International Herald Tribune in 1962:

A key figure among these 31 artists from 14 different countries might be the American Ehrenhalt, who shows a large canvas with the inviting title 'Jump in and Move Around'. It is both an excellent example of New York School abstraction (lush colors, fluent brushwork, bustling composition) and an attempt at a new possibly eerie form of figuration. The large flat areas juxtaposed with smaller, detailed ones seem always on the point of resolving themselves into a landscape or a portrait.

AE: A few weeks later, I met Ashbery in another exhibition of American artists in Paris and thanked him for the review, and he asked, "What is your name?" I said, "Ehrenhalt." He was surprised and said, "Oh, I thought you were a man."

Amaranth paused as she stared at me, then said emphatically, "I don't want to be perceived as a woman, but as a good artist, someone who can stand her ground next to the best."

I agreed completely, since I was once also perceived as a male artist. Nonetheless, I was aware that we both shared how differently the idea of a woman's identity was perceived today, especially after a recent backlash to a misogynist rhetoric after more than a century of feminist discourse. She nodded.

DC: Did you meet other artists in Paris?

AE: All the time. There were shows of American artists, and I participated in many of them. I showed with Sam Francis, met Beauford Delaney. I met Giacometti and Yves Klein. I also met Natalia Goncharova, she was wonderful, and I took an American collector to buy her work. I knew Joan Mitchell, who was financially independent and for that reason she could stand her ground amongst the male artists.

DC: Do you think your opportunities were limited due to your financial situation?

AE: It was very challenging when I wanted art dealers to see my work, because there was so much at stake. In the 50s and 60s, there were only two categories a woman could belong to: she either had to be the wife or girlfriend of one of the major male artists, or she had to be independent like Joan Mitchell. It was very challenging when I wanted art dealers to see my work, because there was so much at stake. During another show I met Alix de Rothschild, who was a big art collector. At some point, she came to visit but kept her coat on, because my place was so cold. She asked, "How to you heat?" And I said, "I don't." The children were wearing snow suits in the living room.

*Amaranth Ehrenhalt's studio in New York City.*

DC: Were you living permanently in Paris?

AE: I was in Paris since the 1950s until 2007, but never just there, I was always traveling, from New York to Paris, and to other places. I always met a lot of different people. I was having dinner with Carlo Levi, a distinguished writer, poet, painter, politician, who wrote *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, a memoir about his exile to small towns in Southern Italy by Mussolini. Earlier in Rome, he introduced me to Simone de Beauvoir and Jean Paul Sartre. Then he asked me if I would pose for him? “On one condition,” I said, “that you pose for me.” There is a painting of me in his foundation, and my painting of him – I don’t know where it went.

DC: How did you make a living?

AE: At the time, I was married, then divorced with two children and no child support. I was sitting at a table at Montparnasse, and I asked the people at the table next to me, “Do you know anyone that would like to take English lessons?” And somebody answered, “Yes.” I did odd jobs like teaching English, and I could design anything in the world. I had a girlfriend who was designing sweaters. I bumped into her at the Coupole one day and she asked if I could do some designs for her, and I said, “How many do you need and when do you need them?” The next morning, I gave her the designs, and they became best sellers.

*Young Amaranth with her two children.*

DC: Traveling seemed very much part of being an artist.

AE: Yes, it meant meeting people, other artists, in major cities of the world. I met the Viennese artist, Hundertwasser, in Marrakech and we hitchhiked across North Africa. I was always holding a sketchbook, working constantly. Today, traveling to places like that would be extremely dangerous.

DC: How did you meet Sonia Delaunay?

AE: I met her in another group show I had in Paris. I was standing next to my painting when a very lovely, beautifully-dressed older woman came over to me and asked me if that was my painting. She said to me, "You are extremely talented." It was Sonia Delaunay. We started a friendship, and eventually she came to my studio. I was married with two children but we were very poor, and so for Christmas she gave me a wonderful present. She invited me to pick my art supplies at her supplier, and this was the best paint you could get in the world, Lefebvre-Foinet. On Christmas eve, someone rang our bell, and when I opened the door, it was a man who worked for Sonia Delaunay holding a roasted turkey, with all the trimmings, and a bag with presents for my two children. I went to visit her many times, but you couldn't see her alone. She was so well-known, always surrounded by art critics, collectors, and other artists.

DC: Did you meet any of the New York School abstract expressionists? You were from different generations. How difficult was to communicate

with them?

*Amaranth Ehrenhalt at work.*

AE: When I was in New York I met Merce Cunningham and John Cage in a party. I also used to go to the Cedar Tavern, where many of the NY School artists hung out. Quite a few of them were womanizers I met Bill de Kooning who said, “Call me when you get back from Paris and we will have dinner. But, of course, I didn’t come back, so we never had dinner!” Here’s another interesting vignette: Many artists were studying with Hans Hoffman, including Lee Krasner. She thought that Hoffman should meet Jackson Pollock. When they met, Hoffman said that Pollock should return to school and take lessons in abstraction with him, starting from the beginning, from nature. Pollock, said, “I am nature.”

DC: How do people describe your work?

AE: I am a colorist. I like to think about my work as a symphony on a flat surface. Everyone who has written about me use words like energy and color, “Joie de vivre.” My work is about whatever. I am trying to get out. Color is important, but not as decoration. I enjoy big works, but it is hard to find a place for them. I do everything, anything – from paintings and sculpture to ceramics and textiles. I’ve done silk scarves – and a 150 foot ceramic mosaic mural in the town of Banlieue, where I lived.

DC: What is your most recent project or exhibition?

AE: I showed at Art Miami Fair in the booth of Lawrence Fine Arts. I will also continue to be represented by the Anita Shapolsky Gallery in New York City.

I left the building feeling that not enough has been done to recognize her work's worth, as abstract art is not just gesture unhinged. It is the ability to continue superseding one's own practice through ever newer relationships of color, line, form, and composition. This unpredictable fluidity of visual signs and the multiplicity of their relations in pictorial space is the kernel of Ehrenhalt's production. **WM**



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