

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

ARTFORUM

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Kiki Kogelnik, *The Human Touch*, ca. 1965, oil and acrylic on canvas, 30 x 24".

Kiki Kogelnik

SIMONE SUBAL GALLERY

“I’m not involved with Coca-Cola,” Kiki Kogelnik avowed in 1966, marking her distance from Pop art, or at least its consumerist strains. But making the association was sensible enough. After moving to New York in 1961 (encouraged by Sam Francis, whom she’d met in Venice), the Austrian artist befriended Claes Oldenburg and Roy Lichtenstein, and visited Warhol’s Factory; her early stateside output—in painting, drawing, prints, and sculpture—admits Benday dots and spray paint, flattened forms and jazzed-up surfaces. Kogelnik, who died in 1997, is having a belated moment. She was recently the focus of a retrospective at the Hamburger Kunstverein (another is slated for later this year at the Kunsthalle Krems in Austria), and was included in the traveling exhibition “Seductive Subversion: Women Pop Artists, 1958–1968” a few years ago. For New York audiences who missed the Brooklyn Museum stop of that tour in 2010, this show of three paintings and nine drawings was an introduction to her clever, exquisite work, which feels newly relevant in the wake of contemporary critical reappraisals of Pop.

If Pop art’s mostly male lions regularly tapped the domestic realm for imagery, Kogelnik’s enthusiasms skew masculine, toward the space age, robotics, and anatomy. *Outer Space*, 1964, pictures two humanoid silhouettes (Kogelnik based these and others on life-size cutouts of friends and fellow artists) ascending in a depthless cosmos of shimmering bronze and silver discs, their unmodulated forms unchecked by gravity. Elsewhere, bodies and body parts jutted into the picture plane, seemingly at random, as in *Atmospheric Drag on Satellite*, 1965, in which a headless figure edged in paper doll-like tabs, a second truncated profile, and a pair of disembodied arms are adrift in a field that collides various pictorial novelties of the moment: moody mottled sprays, stenciled dots, neon spatters, and blue stripes in a hard-edge band. The bodies that fared best here were those that have been turned into machines. *Untitled (robots)*, ca. 1967, depicts a phalanx of androgynous beings, yoked together by yellow filaments, soaring heavenward, surpassing not only the reach of a silhouetted hand but the boundary of a planet. Their forms, like many skeletons and organs here (Kogelnik’s husband was a doctor), were delimited using anatomical rubber stamps—mechanized physiques for the satellite age.

That space travel (for most of us) can be experienced only in mediation makes it a perfect Pop subject, and, like James Rosenquist’s rockets and Robert Rauschenberg’s nasa photos, Kogelnik’s early work registers cosmic exploration as communal spectacle. Yet her abiding concern is the consequence for subjectivity of scientific and technological progress. The subject here may be automated (gear shafts and chem-set tubing replace the organs of *Female Robot*, 1964), imperiled (the words *rush* and *fragile* are stamped repeatedly across the bodies in *Robots*, 1966), or jumbled up (*Untitled*, ca. 1967, shows an arm on the visor of a space helmet, a diagrammatic baby in the throat), but it is not snuffed out. Nor is it wholly superficial: For every simplified contour, one finds an X-ray-like outline; for each anonymous feature, an autographic glyph. Manual traces accordingly counterpoise signs of the machine, both thematically—in recurrent

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depictions of hands—and in the drawings’ intricate graphic patterning and hand-colored effects.

And while human anatomy here is (literally) rubber-stamped, desire has not been fully colonized by the mechanical: The vagina in *Untitled (erotic drawing)*, 1970, is penetrated by a finger, not a nearby phallus in the guise of a rocket. Kogelnik’s art, like that of a number of her contemporaries, testifies to the complexity of representing self and other, and connecting self to other, in the era of Pop, and finds its interest and poignancy in that very effort. A third of the works in this show have the word *robot* in their title, but it is the name of one canvas, ca. 1965, that tips its maker’s hand—*The Human Touch*.