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Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Black Mountain College Veteran's Curiosity Spurs Her Art

by [Jason Andrew](#)



"Susan Weil: Time's Pace," installation view at Sundaram Tagore Gallery, with "Georgia" (2013), left, and "Perspectacle" (2013), right (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic unless otherwise noted)

The brilliant and inventive mind of Susan Weil is on full display at the [Sundaram Tagore Gallery](#) through June 15. At 83, Weil has lived at the epicenter of the New York art world since the early 1950s, and although her art has been relatively overshadowed by that of her contemporaries, Weil's current show has the makings of her best.

Weil was born in New York City in 1930 and grew up on Outer Island, NY. She came of age as an artist just as the postwar New York School was gaining steam. While attending the Académie Julian in Paris in 1948, she met Robert Rauschenberg, and for a time they became an inseparable pair. He followed her to Black Mountain College, both studying under Josef Albers. "I was still a teenager at Black Mountain," Weil said in an interview years ago. "I had a defensive response to Albers's authoritarian, exacting style. And yet I can see how his teachings have influenced me to this day." Rauschenberg and Weil returned to New York and began participating in the extraordinary art scene of the time. "The interdisciplinary collaborations that we had enjoyed at Black Mountain were also blossoming in New York with events that combined dance, photography, and music," Weil said. "Fences separating different disciplines came down." Rauschenberg and Weil shared their thoughts and work with de Kooning, [Kline](#), [Tworlov](#), and others.

The pair spent the summer of 1949 on Outer Island. They bought a roll of blueprint paper and began staging compositions, exposing the paper to sunlight (Weil had experimented with cyanotypes since she was a child). The results of the collaboration were "thrilling," according to the artist — Bonwit Teller used them in their department store windows; *Life* magazine published them in an article in April 1951; and the next month one was shown in the exhibition [Abstraction in Photography](#) at the Museum of Modern Art.



Susan Weil, "Escape" (2013), mixed media with collage on canvas and Masonite, 28 ½ x 57 x 3 ½ inches
(image courtesy Sundaram Tagore Gallery)

Rauschenberg went on to gain greater recognition; Weil remained a quiet yet innovative artist. "Curiosity has been no small part of Weil's lifelong inquiry," wrote historian Dore Ashton in an essay for *Susan Weil: Moving Pictures*.

From her beginnings Weil has felt free to the traditional two-dimensional surface. In her paintings she combines unexpected materials and mediums — including collage, blueprint, and paint on recycled canvas, acrylic, and wood — to create multi-dimensional works that explore the passage of time and movement. "A lot of my work is specifically about time — moving from day to night or one breath to the next, expressing time's movement," she said in a recent [interview with Christie's](#).



Susan Weil, "The Queen's Tea Party" (2011), acrylic on canvas, 48 ½ x 48 inches (click to enlarge)

While many of her generation have got themselves tied up with themes of sex, class, power, and gender, Weil has preferred to embrace nature, literature, and her personal history. And she's never shied away from pursuit of the figure. Trees, birds, water, and time are themes Weil has tossed around for over five decades. "I grew up on an island, and I was very aware of the sea and the horizon," she said. "I got it in my little head that the straight horizon was the curve of the earth."

She has a flexible style, a mobile vocabulary that allows her the freedom to recite these themes like well-versed poems. And even at 80 the role of inspiration and spontaneity in her work is alive and well. "I'm just astonished to be in my 80s and thinking about my journey, and I like to express that." Her compositions reach out into space to embrace us with a vivid narrative.

“The Queen’s Tea Party” (2011), with its fractured picture plane on multiple canvases, features a vibrant table set with tea and a funny red lobster (Weil’s mother was a licensed lobster farmer). “Tea Party” is like Matisse on speed but with more joy and more humor than any other artist might allow.

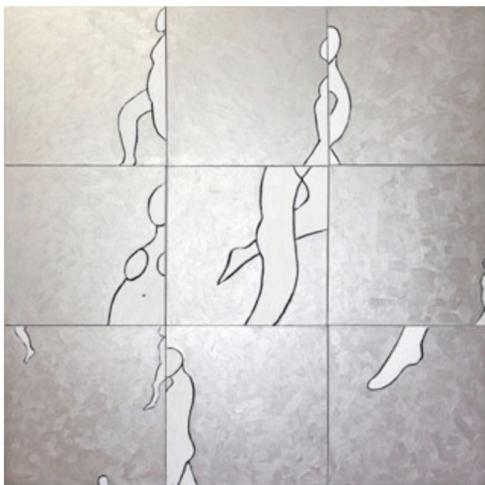
In “Time Table” (2012) Weil seems altogether quite serious, offering a series of five canvases that depict a pared-down table, complete settings, and a chair. The composition repeats in horizontal succession in the most somber and saddening undulating series of grays. The chairs, painted like church windows, remind me of the window painted by Grant Wood in his “[American Gothic](#)” (1930).



Susan Weil, “Time Table” (2012), acrylic on canvas, 24 x 84 x 3 /12 inches (image courtesy Sundaram Tagore Gallery)

In “Perspectacle” (2013) four self-portraits sit around a table whose top is the cross section of an enormous tree. “Making the table be the rings of the life span of the tree is like a metaphor for my fascination with passage of time,” Weil explained. The work is a reference to Marcel Duchamp’s “[Five-Way Portrait of Marcel Duchamp](#)” (1917), which was very experimental for its time. Like Man Ray, László Moholy-Nagy, and Dziga Vertov, Duchamp was experimenting with multiple exposure composites, and this discovery opened up photography as a flexible tool for combining images. Often in her work, Weil makes a historical reference then turns it on its head. In “Perspectacle,” one of her multiple selves, positioned at the top of the table, toasts to her other selves as if to acknowledge, “here we are now and look at where we’ve been.”

Weil makes another reference in “Georgia” (2013). On a silvery canvas she paints and collages a standing nude, which holds in its outstretched hands a pair of breasts, apparently belonging to Georgia O’Keeffe. It’s likely a reference to Alfred Stieglitz’s 1919 photograph “[Hand and Breasts](#)” (1919), which features O’Keeffe with her hand on her bare chest.



Susan Weil, “Apace” (2013), acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60 inches (click to enlarge) (image courtesy Sundaram Tagore Gallery)

Collaged portraits of James Joyce and Gertude Stein are also on view and are nice accents to Weil's ongoing affinity for both writers. "All of art and art history is part of your history," Weil told Eric La Prade in a [recent interview](#), "but it's not an immediate influence. You just take it all in as your own history, go from there."

"Peep" (2013) and "Rotato" (2013) are freestanding sculptures — columns of image and sound. They spin in place on a slow axis like a colorful carousel full of the music of birds and bright images from nature.

Weil is at her best in works like "Apace" (2013) and "Perspect" (2012), where she demonstrates with such precision the sublime line that only a seasoned artist could draw.

In the three canvases that comprise "Escape" (2013), we experience a bird sitting, a bird flying, and a bird escaping. "It's important to recognize how there's a before, and there's a now, and there's an after," Weil remarked. "We live as if [in] a photograph in a single moment."

Every artist's output attests to his or her use of time. From Monet to Matisse, Pollock to Gerhard Richter, there is a pace and cadence to their art. It's comforting to know that Susan Weil, with her diverse oeuvre, is still there to open up time and let us climb in.

[Susan Weil: Time's Pace](#) is on view at Sundaram Tagore Gallery (547 West 27th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through June 15.