

Marjorie Nodelman (1950-2014) was a highly educated, high energy artist who helped define contemporary art-making in San Diego in the 1980s and early 90s. I met her in her downtown San Diego studio in 1979 as I was just beginning to collect art and just learning how to interact with artists. Spending time with and learning from Marjorie formed a foundation for my subsequent decades-long involvement with artists.

In similar fashion, Marjorie influenced many others around her. In this exhibition the tale of Marjorie Nodelman's artistic career in San Diego is told by her friends and husbands. Accompanying the artworks are snippets of her story as told by those who she touched. One can read (perhaps all of) the wall text and in a non-linear fashion learn why many of us consider Marjorie Nodelman to be an exemplary artist and of great importance in San Diego's art history.

Doug Simay, curator

The following people wrote essays about Marjorie for use in this exhibition. Without their contributions this story could never have been told.

Bob Niedringhaus
Tershia d'Elgin
Elvi Olesen
Scott Olesen
Sheldon Nodelman
John Herschel
Mark Elliott Lugo
Ellen Phelan
Ellen Irvine
John Durant
Doug Simay

Each of the writing contributors for this exhibition has had the opportunity to re-activate and live their thoughts about Marjorie again. For me that voyage has been insightfully rewarding.

Bob Niedringhaus has never lapsed in his active memory of Marjorie. His love for her is still strong. He has never flagged in his devotion – only Marjorie's physical presence is lacking in Bob's world. That Marjorie was a powerful person needs no more substantive proof than the devotion of Bob to her memory.

Doug Simay November 2015

Marjorie was born to Wilson and Florence Frescoln on November 29, 1950 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She grew up in a Quaker family with roots going back to William Penn Her childhood environment was rich in literature, music, and art and she was encouraged at an early age to make

things with crayon and paper, thread and cloth, glue and wood, and metronome and piano. These early experiences gave birth to a passion for the visual arts which she pursued in many forms for the rest of her life. She earned a bachelor's degree in fine arts from the Philadelphia College of Art in 1973 and went on to obtain a Master of Fine Arts degree from Yale University in 1975.

Robert Niedringhaus, 2015

In 1975, she moved to San Diego and began a professional career in painting and sculpture and for the next 17 years became one of the most prolific and inventive artists in the San Diego and Los Angeles areas. Marjorie had an irrepressible joy and exuberance for life and art and maintained a very intuitive approach to her paintings and sculpture. From a sweet potato to the military industrial complex, from an art deco button to an orange cement truck, nothing was too small or commonplace to explore or be a source of imagery for her paintings and sculpture. Echoing her childhood fascination with elemental stuff, no media was too challenging to investigate and use. She worked with paint and canvas, vinyl and thread, wood and nail guns, steel and reinforced concrete. In a deep sense, her art was egalitarian and non-hierarchical, which resulted in an openness to the universe and a purity of spirit.

Robert Niedringhaus, 2015

Marjorie's uniquely circular and shaped canvases became the hallmark of her paintings until they inevitably pushed out from the wall and became painted and even upholstered three dimensional wall sculptures. Toward the end of her career in San Diego, she moved entirely from the wall and was designing steel and wood sculptures in the round.

Robert Niedringhaus, 2015

In 1992 Marjorie remarried and moved to the Los Angeles area to embark on a second career as a social worker, obtaining a master's of social work from California State University at San Bernardino. For the next 12 years she worked as a clinical social worker for the County of San Bernardino and then as a psychiatric social worker for the State of California. During this period, she continued to grow as an artist, exploring conceptions of interior space in the design of her home environment, working with paint and walls, earth and plants, colored objects and furniture, always with love and affection.

Robert Niedringhaus, 2015

Marjorie Nodelman-Niedringhaus died on January 27, 2014 at the Kaiser hospital in Ontario, California. Marjorie's ashes were interred on June 7, 2014, next to her parents in the family's Quaker ancestral burial ground in Springfield Pennsylvania. She never stopped having a sense of wonder and awe with the universe. She will be sorely missed.

Robert Niedringhaus, 2015

I met (Marjorie) around 1977 or 78 in La Jolla. Her friendship was an enormous relief. Like receiving a long-delayed license to be who we already were.

Marjorie's infatuations with subject matter, shapes and imagery were apt, odd, and critically relevant. Chatting about someone's skin color, the shape of a lipstick tube, or the whole idea of "carburetors," we'd fall into hysterics. Marjorie'd throw back her head, slap her knee with a brush of those animated fingers, and laugh and laugh. It didn't matter if the topic was wicked bomb builders, Ambrose Bierce, or chicken carcasses; the repartee was unhinged.

The recession hit in 1981 and during coming months art commissions dried up. (Also a big El Nino year.) For Marjorie, living without money and trying to survive by her art was even more difficult. Marjorie had time to paint my portrait, as a gift for my 30th birthday, in 1982. Having no money either, but knowing that she hoped for portrait commissions, I invited everyone I knew to the party. She and 400 others converged on my tiny Beverly Glen cottage in Los Angeles.

I have spent every second since receiving that portrait trying to grow into the Terchia my dear friend depicted. I still stretch. Some loves reduce us. Marjorie, in memory and in work, makes me feel invincible and radiant, as I suspect she does for all those she loved.

Terchia d'Elgin October 2015

With Bob Niedringhaus, Marjorie's final marriage reception was a unique occasion, hosted by one ex-husband and wife, and attended by another ex and his wife, as well as the rest of us, her unusual coterie. In my mind's eye, I'm trying to recreate Marjorie and Bob's wedding cake. It was gray and black, a series of stacked tubes. Did she cook it inside of a tire? Their wedding rings were diamond plate, non-skid surface. Of this marriage, Marjorie announced over and over again, "I finally got it right."

Terchia d'Elgin October 2015

In the 1970s (and 80s), downtown San Diego's high rises for Gen Xers were decades away. The design-driven art scene was yet to come. Gaslamp and the convention center hadn't happened. Economically ravaged, downtown smelled of urine. It looked of porn parlors, X-rated theaters, resident hotels, ragged residents, and cheap rents. Marjorie's huge studio in the basement of the old City Hall on G Street put her in San Diego's economic underbelly. Against the studio's brick walls, enormous partially painted tondos were her windows.

Terchia d'Elgin October 2015

Art maven and party person, Ellen Phelan launched her "Banquet Seminars," art parties given around specific San Diego artists. Since I was knee-deep in pots and pans as a caterer, Ellen enlisted me to help. Ellen and Marjorie decided her banquet should be in her studio. By then, I had somehow tapped into the *San Diego Magazine* staff, which attracted both writers and swoopful photographer John

Durant to the scene. Amidst Marjorie's sensational paintings, bare light bulbs, dripping candles, dripping food, and lots of red wine – we felt like a bold family of show-offs among whom Marjorie was the most fearless and talented.

Tershia d'Elgin October 2015

To quote Stephen Phillips: "Marjorie's wonderful tondo paintings of her friends and colleagues were are a vivid and accurate historical record of San Diego's downtown art scene. As important to us as Red Grooms, Alex Katz and Fairfield Porter's were to their circles." There was nowhere better place to be.

Tershia d'Elgin October 2015

I would go down to her OB studio ... overlooking Newport and Bacon. She would be wearing her overalls and be covered from head to toe in paint, including her hair and her toenails. I would listen to her carry on about art and the philosophy of art and she would show me her canvases, one bigger than the other (always, one bigger than the next). We would stop talking shop and start gossiping about women and men and lovers and ex-lovers and she would give me these knowing smiles. She was the big sister I never had. I am always going to cry (for Marjorie) as long as I shall live (be)cause she was a true spirit. It's the kind of spirit which cannot be denied - it doesn't die. It just moves on in different shapes and sizes and colors and attitudes just like her many paintings and her enormous, tolerant, expansive heart.

Scott (Elvi Olesen's son) October 2015

I met Marjorie in 1979 at one of Ellen Phelan's Banquet Seminars. Marjorie was a short woman with a mane of blond/bleached hair with dark piercing eyes and a pouty mouth. She was intelligent, smart and eloquent about her art. In her short shorts and décolletage and fanciful stories about the paintings, she was vulnerable and at the same time seemed to have a "kick ass" method to her madness. I commissioned my portrait. I did not sit for it; I am not even sure she took a photo. The finished portrait stunned me. Was this me? She depicted something other than physical likeness which required the viewer - including me - to think about the meaning and intent of the portrait.

Elvi Olesen October 2015

Marjorie was good and kind but also "sinful" – a rebel indicative of her time. I experienced her as someone who lived out her fantasies – she was the half of me that I wished at various times in my life I could have acted out. She was intuitive and passionate and imaginative. Her dreams and fantasies were acted out in her paintings. To become so close to a person who was not only an exhibitionist but a smart one (and who was) brilliant at putting paint on canvas creating both likeness and personality was fascinating. She was both child woman and aggressive vampire. In an art historical context she was a Pop art devotee, but also very personally involved in her iconography – it was not 'cool' and distant like minimalist and POP art is.

Elvi Olesen October 2015

When Marjorie and John moved to Ocean Beach she invited Ellen (Phelan) and me to salvage what we might want. One memorable painting we salvaged was a 6-8 foot tondo divided into 6 pie shapes of a nude Sheldon Nodelman in a classical pose of some kind. I have one piece of the “pie”. Sheldon’s left leg has been hanging in my bathroom for years.

Elvi Olesen October 2015

S. Why did you choose a circular format?

M. I think right angles are square – they box things in...

The visual field is roughly spherical, isn’t it? And it has no planar screen.

The right angle implies a plane and a screen.

I don’t want that screen between me and what I paint.

Marjorie Nodelman **(M)** in conversation with Sheldon Nodelman **(S)**, 1979

S. Why do you make your pictures project so strongly from the wall?

M. They’re round or irregular shapes. They need stability since they don’t line up with the floor. Their physical depth corresponds to the depth axis of vision.

It is a kind of alternative gravitation.

Marjorie Nodelman **(M)** in conversation with Sheldon Nodelman **(S)**, 1979

S. Why do you paint so large? It seems to offend a lot of people.

M. Things have to be bigger than me if I’m to find them credible.

I love to wrestle those big figures into place.

I don’t deny the chutzpah.

Marjorie Nodelman **(M)** in conversation with Sheldon Nodelman **(S)**, 1979

S. How can you do figural painting? It’s supposed to be obsolete.

M. I don’t see any difference between figural and abstract art – in principle.

I like company in my studio. I paint the people I would like to look at.

Marjorie Nodelman **(M)** in conversation with Sheldon Nodelman **(S)**, 1979

S. You do a lot of portraits, especially self-portraits.

M. I love the way I look. I wish everybody looked like me.

Marjorie Nodelman **(M)** in conversation with Sheldon Nodelman **(S)**, 1979

S. There has been a lot of talk ... about series.
Do you think (these paintings) belong in this category?

M. Most series are sets of formal permutations.
I don't deny that mine are formally integrated – but the effect is
intended to be simultaneous, not sequential.
Not sequence but consequence.

Marjorie Nodelman **(M)** in conversation with Sheldon Nodelman **(S)**, 1979

S. What do you have to say about the military subject matter?

M. I was brought up as a Quaker.
We were not supposed to admit to aggressive instincts.
This was hard to do as I have lots of them myself.

Marjorie Nodelman **(M)** in conversation with Sheldon Nodelman **(S)**, 1979

S. Is your content satirical?

M. Yes and no. ... I really like the drama and dynamism of the events I paint.
There's a kind of black humor.
Mostly I just enjoy the violence.

Marjorie Nodelman **(M)** in conversation with Sheldon Nodelman **(S)**, 1979

S. Why are your pictures so crowded?

M. I've never understood about less being more.
It seems to me more is more.

Marjorie Nodelman **(M)** in conversation with Sheldon Nodelman **(S)**, 1979

S. Your pictures have a very direct impact on the viewer.

M. Yes. A lot of current work seems bloodless.
There is no face-down between the artist and the viewer-
just two absent partners in an intellectualized limbo.
Content ought to carry total conviction.
Extremism is no vice.

Marjorie Nodelman **(M)** in conversation with Sheldon Nodelman **(S)**, 1979

S. You speak of content. Do you mean literal representation?

M. I'm not an illustrator.

I think of content as the effect of my images – not as their reference.

S. Some people describe your compositions as cartoon-like.

M. They're right. It's a combination of Captain Marvel and Caravaggio.

Marjorie Nodelman **(M)** in conversation with Sheldon Nodelman **(S)**, 1979

S. Are you a Pop painter?

M. No I don't try to squeeze ironies out of discarded representational systems.

Maybe the first Punk painter.

Marjorie Nodelman **(M)** in conversation with Sheldon Nodelman **(S)**, 1979

S. How do you expect viewers to react?

M. I hope they'll be appalled.

Marjorie Nodelman **(M)** in conversation with Sheldon Nodelman **(S)**, 1979

Marjorie and I moved to Ocean Beach in the fall of 1982. We found a place on the corner of Bacon and Newport, a block from the ocean, on the second floor of a rickety apartment house built in the 1920s. Below us were a drug store, a surf shop, and a dodgy laundromat that was often on fire.

By studio-rat standards, the place was impeccable: 2000 square feet of mostly empty space for \$350 a month. Yes, it was squalid and cold, and the bathroom was deep in the back, through a maze of the landlord's junk, but Marjorie loved the place immediately.

One advantage was the relatively long "throwing distance" (maybe 60 feet) between two of the walls. This meant she could examine a work in progress with a "long gaze," as if she were looking at a distant landscape. Later she put this to good use in the more panoramic scenes of her highway series.

John Herschel 2015

This (Highway) series took off because Marjorie was learning to drive. She quickly realized that as you drive, the road is talking to you through hazard icons, speed limit signs, flashing signals, curve warnings, and dozens of other signs and messages. She was fascinated by this conversation between the highway and the driver. But more than that, I think she was responding as a driver embodied by the car, absorbed by the physical and syntactical landscape through which the car is moving. As a visual artist, she intuitively saw this dialog in terms of images. And she was soon chasing images on most of the two-lane highways between Palomar Mountain and the desert.

As I recall, these paintings fell into roughly four categories: landscapes and roadscapes, dramas within the world of the car, the sexual adventures of trucks, and encounters with the Headlight Child "at the end of the open road."

The Headlight Child was a recurring theme. Marjorie was fascinated by Duchamp's poetic phrase, which she often painted as an eerie encounter between darkness and light at the edge of the world.

John Herschel 2015

This piece is the presentation rendering for an 8-foot-by-24-foot painting. The piece was commissioned by the Hahn Corporation and facilitated by the CCDC (Centre City Development Corporation) to decorate the construction fence that surrounded the Horton Plaza Shopping Center in downtown San Diego. Several San Diego-area artists, including Brent Riggs, Allan Morrow, and David Kimmel, were also commissioned.

Nodelman's final work was painted on six plywood panels, but contrary to the artist's wishes, was destroyed, along with all of the others. Several of the Horton Plaza artists, including Nodelman, sued and won their case in a landmark test of the California Arts Preservation Law.

This rendering is the only documentation of this project by the artist's hand that survives.

(Written by Mark-Elliott Lugo in 2003 from notes taken at the time the piece was purchased in the 1980s.)

One of the focal points of the image is an "orgasmic train" which heads toward the viewer. The spiral is its path, culminating in an orgasm, says Nodelman. The "headlight child" is a reference to Duchamp, a comet with its tail streaming in front of it. "Nighttime," "dreams," and "social maneuvering," were also words used by the artist to describe the meaning of this work.

(Written by Mark-Elliott Lugo in 2003 from notes taken at the time the piece was purchased in the 1980s.)

Marjorie was the most audacious, provocative artist in San Diego. Her slow demise and finally her death brought on such a feeling of loss, as she was a wonderful friend – an art friend who inspired and mentored me. She was lively, loving and always a profound influence. She always made me feel as if I were a painter too. We would talk for hours on the telephone as she painted and she would explain what she was doing and why. How many artists can transfer that feeling?

Richard Armstrong, now director of the Guggenheim, was a curator at the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art. Richard thought I should meet Marjorie, as he felt she was an important artist and needed the money. Richard suggested a portrait.

When I went down to her downtown studio, I was completely overwhelmed. Downtown was then very debauched. It was hard to accommodate meeting her and be in her space. The impact of her huge tondos, her gifts as a painter, and her focus stunned me, I was blown away.

When she presented me with the portrait.... With hardly any contact with us, somehow Marjorie had captured our relationship on canvas. Marjorie's deftness as a portraitist cannot be overstated.

Ellen Phelan October 2015

In 1985 the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art got a new director, Hugh Davies and the museum soon committed to exhibit San Diego's top 42 artists. A number of important artists, Marjorie at the top of the list, were left out of the show. I suggested an alternative exhibition at The Athenaeum in conjunction with the City Library in La Jolla. (It was called) "More Is More," *salon des refuses*. Once again Marjorie was the main reason and she rallied the other artists who took over the upstairs of the Athenaeum and made an art gallery for the show. Marjorie had the idea for klieg lights to draw attention to our show on opening night. Not to be outdone, the museum rented klieg lights too. With a concurrent opening at the museum, it was a great event for San Diego artists. Epic! The enormous lights arced and crossed in the night sky, uniting the two institutions as one. The events attracted over 1,000 people and over 50 pages of press coverage. It was major. Of the "More is More" show, *Los Angeles Times* critic Christopher Knight called Marjorie's "techno-pop futurist painting the only a fully realized work in the show."

Ellen Phelan October 2015

As overt as Marjorie's appearance and paintings were, she had a shyness and vulnerability about her, when it came to promoting herself. For all its inspiration and spirit, her refusal or inability to kowtow or "play the game" socially also worked against her, marketing-wise. People could be uneasy with her style, much as they admired it. She was hostile towards local institutions. She wanted to shake them up.

Ellen Phelan October 2015

Marjorie was always there. She had a girlfriend's qualities of caring, being there for you. But to me, she was also an art friend – a friend who shared the creative side of life. I loved talking to her about her art and what she was thinking of doing. I loved her little hands that seemed so tactile and gentle in expression.

Marjorie Nodelman's art was the art of being, the art of living. Whether the canvas was her body, her wardrobe, her persona, or her home, it always answered the question "who am I?" She was the artwork. And her artwork is Marjorie.

Ellen Phelan October 2015

I met Marjorie at Yale in 1974. She had completed one year of a two-year MFA program; I was beginning mine. Lester Johnson was one of her advisors, and her work reflected that. She was creating a 'larger than life' persona -- in that high stress environment -- that persisted for two decades.

In San Diego she had several studios -- the top floor of the old city hall, then the basement; from there, a brief period in Chula Vista (upholstery), then to Ocean Beach, then a space in LA.

She said her initial intention as an art student was illustration. Her work reflected that for some years. She loved early and mid-19th century (American) book illustrations as well as the simplicity and beauty of Japanese and Chinese prints.
Ellen Irvine, January, 2014

Her work became more abstract, and often decorative. She interspersed large works with still life vegetable paintings and figure works, including portrait commissions.
Ellen Irvine, January, 2014

Her transition from 2D abstract to 3D, initially through upholstery techniques, pushed the envelope by taking her vision to new challenges. She mastered the art and craft of upholstery through an intense apprenticeship (with men who did car and furniture upholstery in Chula Vista). She created astounding, large pieces, of great beauty.
Ellen Irvine, January, 2014

From upholstery, she moved to 3D wood-based wall-mounted works with her artist/engineer husband, Bob Niedringhaus. These would be the last major works she accomplished before a mid-life change to social work.
Ellen Irvine, January, 2014

I met Marjorie a couple of years before this banquet - she was wild. We liked each other but she was restless and a little destructive - which I understand perfectly now - but in 1979 she was on close personal terms with demons I could only guess at. Of course she made all my friends nervous - Marjorie looked like she came in with a motorcycle gang most of the time.
John Durant 10/2015

She wasn't that much older than I was at the time but I remember how *out there* she seemed - like one of the Shirells or a biker chick. Great painter of course. Scared the shit out of me but completely fascinating.
John Durant 9/2015

Street and traffic signs, octagons, triangles, traffic lights-their function of warning and their aesthetic visual punctuation of the roadside, have always fascinated me. I would like this group of pictures to impact and slide away, to give feelings of acceleration and movement. I feel these images have a kind of compulsive tunnel vision, bearing down on themselves and the viewer in a way i find oppressive but compelling. I have tried to stay away from sequential narrative, but they all share a "twilight midnight melancholia". Their surfaces glisten with black enamel and pop impressionist codes of dots, lozenges,

and spirals, sometimes drifting too far into decoration, dissolving and reconstructing their subject matter.

Marjorie Nodelman, date unknown