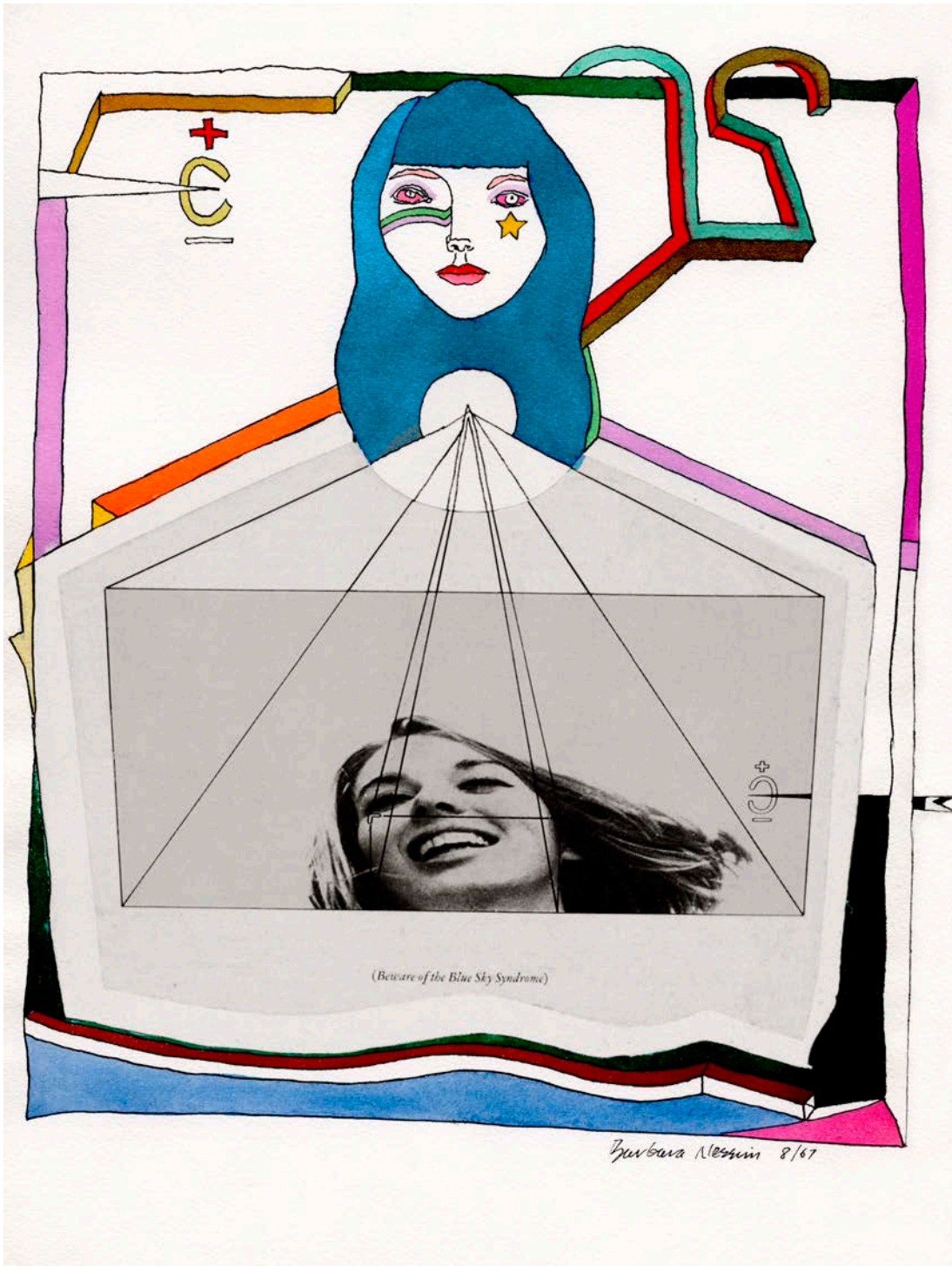


# Barbara Nessim: An Artful Life

On View September 19, 2014–January 11, 2015



Barbara Nessim. *Beware of the Blue Sky Syndrome*, 1967. Pen and ink, watercolor, collage. Courtesy of the artist.

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### FIRST RETROSPECTIVE IN THE U.S. TO EXAMINE A PIONEERING ARTIST AND ILLUSTRATOR

A constant innovator for more than five decades, Barbara Nessim was one of the first professional illustrators to master the computer as an artistic tool. This exhibition examines her sketchbooks, hand-drawn and computer-generated illustrations, paintings, collages, textiles, and fashion.

*Barbara Nessim: An Artful Life* presents an overview of the work of this pioneering American artist and designer from the 1960s to the present day. Nessim's distinctive illustrations have appeared on the covers of nearly every major American magazine, including *Time*, *Rolling Stone*, and the *New York Times Magazine*. Her work ranges from provocative prints, drawings, and paintings that represent her feminist views to illustrations for advertising campaigns for companies such as Levi's and Ralph Lauren. She employs a wide variety of techniques, including line drawing, watercolor, printmaking, photography, and collage. In a career that spans more than fifty years, she is still actively working on new projects.

*Barbara Nessim: An Artful Life* is curated by Douglas Dodds, Senior Curator in the Word and Image Department at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. This exhibition, organized by the Bard Graduate Center, New York City, expands the 2013 presentation in the V&A's Twentieth Century gallery.

## WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Visitors to the exhibition will first encounter *Star Girl Banded With Blue Wave* (1966). Commissioned for George Beylerian's Scarabaeus home furnishing store in New York City, Barbara Nessim's *Star Girl* refers to Wonder Woman, the American comic superhero who became a feminist icon. From 1962 to 1968 Nessim shared an apartment with Gloria Steinem, who went on to become a leader in the women's movement, and Steinem subsequently used an image of Wonder Woman on the cover of the first independent issue of *Ms.* magazine in 1972.



Barbara Nessim. *Superman Carrying Girl with Green Shoes*, from the series *Coney Island in the Winter*, 1963. Monotype etching; hand-colored with oil. Victoria and Albert Museum, E.11-2013.

## Beginnings

Born in the Bronx, Barbara Nessim studied at New York's School of Industrial Art (now the High School of Art and Design) and attended Pratt Institute from 1956 to 1960. Her mother, a blouse designer, supported her daughter's efforts to obtain an art education and become a commercial artist. Nessim majored in graphic art and illustration at Pratt, where her teachers were artists and illustrators such as Richard Lindner and Robert Weaver. Friends and professional colleagues included prominent designers and art directors such as Milton Glaser, Henry Wolf, Robert Benton, Seymour Chwast, and Bob Gill.

Nessim's early paintings, drawings, and etchings provide an introduction to many of the techniques, iconographic devices, and preoccupations that inform much of her later work. She has also maintained a series of unique sketchbooks from the 1960s to the present day, and these provide an invaluable source of inspiration for other projects. Sketchbooks are displayed throughout the exhibition to reinforce their central role in Nessim's artistic practice.

Nessim's art began to receive recognition in the early 1960s, when she won an award for the Man and Machine series of etchings. She worked as a textile designer but also provided illustrations for various men's magazines, creating powerful images such as *Superman Carrying Girl with Green Shoes* (1963). At the time, Nessim was one of only a few women working as a professional illustrator for mainstream publications such as *Harper's Bazaar* and *Redbook*, which provided much-needed income at the time.

## 1960s: Word and Image

In the late 1960s, Nessim created a number of oil paintings depicting female heads, with such titles as *Woman Thinking Blue at a Party* and *Woman with Mask*. The images exist within defined borders, some reminiscent of early Italian Renaissance portraits.

Nessim also made a series of vibrant watercolors with equally enigmatic titles, including *Beware of the Blue Sky Syndrome* and *Periscope Vision Isn't Everything*. Works such as *Blue Hair*, *Block Eyes*, *Cube Cheeks*, and *Striped Lips, Now!* seek to explore women's engagement with contemporary fashion, or what Nessim calls "aspects of the female social mask." *Man Looking at Woman Dancing* or *Three's a Crowd*, for example, examine interpersonal relationships. Some watercolors were made for friends, including Gloria Steinem, Ali MacGraw, and Milton



Barbara Nessim. *Birdlike Shoe*, 1974. Pen and ink, watercolor. Victoria and Albert Museum, E.39-2013.

and Shirley Glaser, but most were simply inspired by Nessim's acute interest in people, fashion, and culture.

## 1970s: WomanGirls

By the early 1970s, Nessim's paintings and watercolors were generally softer and more delicate than the vibrant works she produced in the late 1960s. Although some were completely abstract, others focused on the human form. She created an exquisite—and somewhat ambiguous—series of figure drawings she called *WomanGirls*. The young women in the series seem self-possessed and at the same time rather exposed. Many of the young women stand gracefully on their toes, wearing very little other than ballet shoes. The artist compares the female position to that of the ballet dancer whose seemingly effortless poise conceals the grueling training and discipline it takes to sustain the performance.

In 1973 Nessim was asked to illustrate a *New York Times* article on censorship entitled "For Permissiveness, with Misgivings." She decided to use a *WomanGirl* as the basis for the image, scratching out areas of the female figure to emphasize the topic. In addition to work for magazines, Nessim was commissioned to create a number of public artworks during the 1970s, including *BridePrice* for the World Trade Center (1975).

## 1960s and Beyond: Popular Culture

Throughout her career, Nessim has engaged with fashion, music, and other aspects of popular culture. Fashion designs include the *Lady Van Tastic* range of blouses commissioned for Van Heusen (1965), shoe designs for Carber (1972), and a costume for the New York premiere of the film *Ladies and Gentlemen: The Rolling Stones* (1974). For this costume Nessim employed some of the same features that are evident in the *WomanGirl* watercolors. Although the model who wore the costume appeared to be almost naked, she was actually wearing a skin-colored leotard.

Footwear features prominently throughout Nessim's work, which can point to themes of womanhood, identity, or conspicuous consumption, and is particularly evident in an exquisite series of watercolors created in the early 1970s that included *Fire Engine Heel* (1971) and *Birdlike Shoe* (1974). Some of the footwear designs are whimsical, whereas others are more practical. In the





Barbara Nessim. *David Bowie Then: 1973* artwork for the Spring 2013 cover of *V&A Magazine*, 2013. Pastel. Victoria and Albert Museum, E.117-2013.

late 1960s and early 1970s, Nessim produced a highly distinctive series of images of fantasy shoes, many of which feature the platform soles and flamboyant colors associated with the Glam Rock era.

The artist's links with the music industry are also evident in posters for Dionne Warwick (1969) and Lincoln Center (1976), as well as banners for the 52nd Street Jazz Festival (1978) and portraits of Joni Mitchell (1979), John Lennon (1988), and David Bowie (2013). She also continued to work for many magazines, including *Ms.*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Viva*.

## 1980s: Computer Art and Graphics

In the early 1980s, Nessim was well established as a professional illustrator, and her hand-drawn artworks often accompanied articles on social issues. In 1982 she produced the cover image for a *Time* magazine article on women's rights, just as the Equal Rights Amendment was defeated in three U.S. states.

Nessim became increasingly aware of the potential benefits that computers could bring to her work. She was invited to become artist in residence at *Time*, where she used the firm's computer system to create striking images, such as *Ode to the Statute of Liberty* (1982–84).

By the mid-1980s, Nessim was using her own Macintosh Plus computer and MacPaint software to create smaller works, such as *Woman Contemplating Man in Shadow* (1985). She went on to incorporate digital technology into much of her artistic practice, devising ways to create larger and increasingly complex images, exemplified by *American Lives* (1987) and *Thoughts of the Moon* (1989).

## 1990s: RAM and More

Nessim continued to pursue her own artistic practice throughout the 1990s, while she also explored the increasing capabilities of digital technology. Her *Random Access Memories* exhibition (first presented in a gallery in New York's SoHo in 1991) featured an Apple computer installation, plus a series of computer-drawn flags and stereoscopic images. In these works, Nessim examined art, technology, national identity, and population growth. She also produced a range of commercial and non-commercial artworks for other organizations. A series of advertisements for Levi's women's jeans (1991) rely on the use of elegant line drawings. Other striking examples of the artist's use of a single line include *Breast Cancer at 35* for the *New York Times Magazine* (1997) and *Portrait of Gisele Bündchen* for Ralph Lauren (1998).

## 2000s: Digital Collage

In recent years, Nessim has made increasing use of collage in many of her most powerful works, which often employ digital techniques as well. The last section of the exhibition features the original artwork for The Model Project (2009), plus larger digital prints on aluminum, such as *Ancient Beauty* (2009). Collages for *Chronicles of Beauty* (2010) are also on view, alongside some of the finished printed works.



Barbara Nessim. *Sea Pearl*, from the series *Chronicles of Beauty*, 2010. Digital print on aluminum. Courtesy of the artist.

Barbara Nessim at the School of Visual Arts, 1986. Photographed by Seiji Kakizaki. Courtesy of the artist.



Throughout her career, Barbara Nessim has often reused existing images as inspiration for new work and continued to experiment with large-scale works from much smaller originals. In 2014 she started to create high-resolution digital prints of images from the sketchbooks, many of which also incorporate elements of collage. Working on both a small and large scale, she retains a fascination with the female form and woman's place in the world. The prints nevertheless retain the fluency, power, and immediacy that Nessim's work has always possessed.

## THE BOOK

The exhibition is accompanied by *Barbara Nessim: An Artful Life* edited by the art writer and critic David Galloway. Published by Abrams, the book explores her versatile career with essays by a dozen international authors. Contributors include Roger Black, Elyssa Dimant, Douglas Dodds, Milton Glaser, Cynthia Goodman, Steven Heller, Matthew Israel, Philip Koether, Kiša Lala, Christoph Benjamin Schulz, Gloria Steinem, and Ann Telford. It will be available at the BGC Gallery and through the website ([store.bgc.bard.edu](http://store.bgc.bard.edu)).

## ABOUT BARBARA NESSIM

Barbara Nessim, a life-long New Yorker, was born in 1939. Inspired by her mother, a clothing designer, Nessim supported her education at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn by working as a fashion illustrator in New York's garment district. Soon after graduating in 1960, she began her career as a freelance illustrator. During the 1960s and 70s, her imagery reflected the changing role of women in society. In 1982, Nessim was artist-in-residence at Time Inc.'s Video Information Services where she taught herself how to use and make art on the computer. Since then, computers have played a major role in her work. Nessim has taught in the MFA Computer Arts Program at the School of Visual Arts and in the Illustration Department at Parsons The New School for Design, where she was chair from 1992 to 2004. The Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge, Massachusetts named her its first Artist Laureate in 2009. With a career spanning more than 50 years, Nessim is actively working on new projects.

## GALLERY PROGRAMS

Lectures, gallery talks, and conversations are offered in conjunction with the exhibition. For more information, please call 212-501-3011 or e-mail [programs@bgc.bard.edu](mailto:programs@bgc.bard.edu).

## EXHIBITION TOURS

Group exhibition tours for adult and school groups are offered Tuesday through Friday between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m. and Thursday until 7 p.m. Reservations are required for all groups. To schedule a tour, please call 212-501-3013 or e-mail [tours@bgc.bard.edu](mailto:tours@bgc.bard.edu)

The Bard Graduate Center Gallery is located in New York City at 18 West 86th Street, between Central Park West and Columbus Avenue. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Sunday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Thursday from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Suggested admission is \$7 general, \$5 seniors.

## ABOUT THE BGC

The Bard Graduate Center is a graduate research institute in New York City. Our Gallery exhibitions and publications, MA and PhD programs, and research initiatives explore new ways of thinking about decorative arts, design history, and material culture. Founded in 1993, the BGC is an academic unit of Bard College.

For information about the Bard Graduate Center and upcoming exhibitions, please visit [bgc.bard.edu](http://bgc.bard.edu). For press information and images, please e-mail [barnhart@bgc.bard.edu](mailto:barnhart@bgc.bard.edu) or call 212-501-3074.