

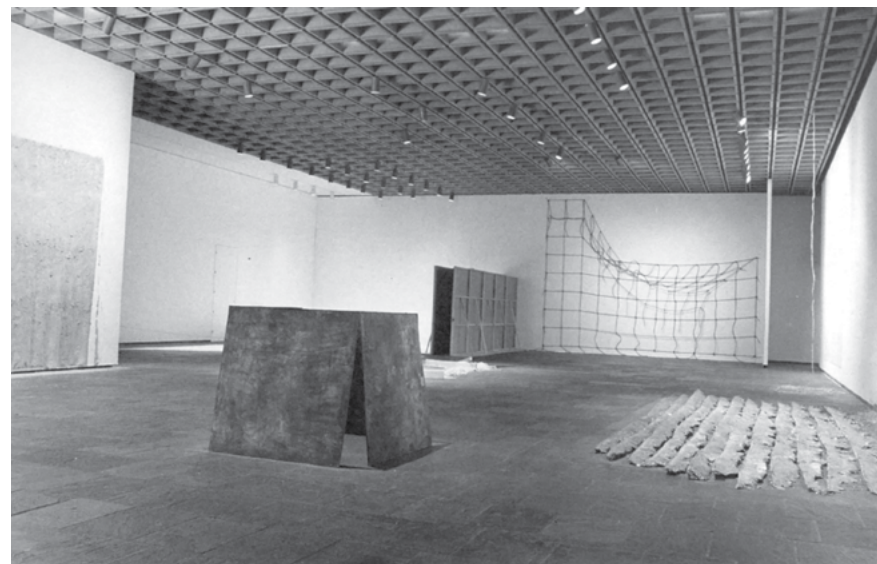


The Window, c. 1975. Acrylic on canvas, 77¼ × 57 in.

In 1969, Marcia Tucker was a PhD student at CUNY's Graduate Center and working on her dissertation with Leo Steinberg. As part of the curriculum, graduate students were encouraged to teach undergraduates. Her freshman survey class, which broadly covered everything from the Great Pyramids to Pollock, captivated the young artist Aura Rosenberg, who was a native New Yorker straight out of the High School of Music and Art. Rosenberg retained her relationship with Tucker while also establishing another with the art historian Barbara Rose, who was teaching Sarah Lawrence where Rosenberg had transferred to the following year. Both women recognized Rosenberg's curiosity and enthusiasm and encouraged her to apply to the newly established Whitney Independent Study Program, which was in Lower Manhattan on Cherry Street. Many artists who go through the program say the Whitney ISP's rigorous critical and theoretical debates encourage a rethinking of the conditions of artistic production, and such was the case for Rosenberg. During this period, 1969–70, Rosenberg was producing minimal stained canvas paintings, something akin to Helen Frankenthaler. One day, Richard Artschwager came to do a studio visit and asked, "Why is this artist doing this?" resulting in Rosenberg's first self-reflective crisis.¹ Why was she doing this? What is a painting and what even is a painter, anyway?

To be an experimental painter in Manhattan in the early 1970s was to be somewhat of an outcast. Painting discourse at the time was conservative and

¹ This text relies heavily on a number of in-person interviews with Rosenberg which took place in the summer of 2022.



Installation view, *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, May 19–July 6, 1969. Photo: Peter Moore; © Northwestern University.

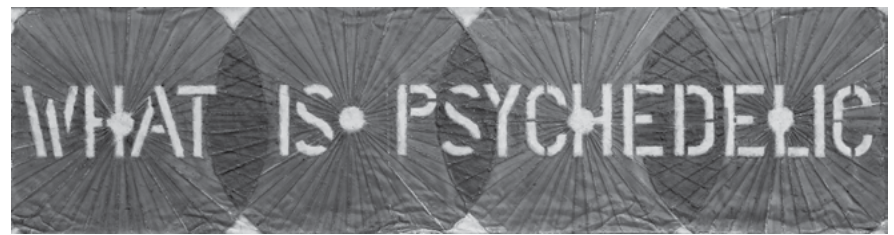
fueled by Greenbergian formalism. Michael Fried's "Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella," which Rosenberg read and was intrigued by, added to debates around formalism and Minimalism. Yet, many had declared "the end of painting" while sculpture dominated the art scene. Luckily, her former professor Marcia Tucker was now a curator of painting and sculpture at the Whitney Museum and challenging such formalism through organizing Post-Minimalism exhibitions like *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials* in 1969, exactly when this personal crisis reached Rosenberg. The two remained close, as Rosenberg had previously taken an independent study with Tucker, who in turn later invited her to come see the shows she was curating. *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials* was the first substantial American exhibition to include artists such as Richard Serra, Chuck Close, Phillip

Glass, Bill Bollinger, and Eva Hesse (all whom Rosenberg remembers seeing) and included works that did not have the representational function of modern sculpture and painting.

Many artists at the time were rejecting Minimalism's cold and impersonal rhetoric, responding with sculptures of more expressive qualities, often evoking the body and the personal. Painting was opening up to the social world around it. Many experimental downtown artists at the time—like Lynda Benglis, Alan Shields, Carolee Schneemann, Jack Whitten, and so many more—did not see painting as a transcendent space separate from the world but rather understood painting as an object *in* the world.

Importantly, this period collided with a wave of hallucinogenic, hippie, and consciousness-expanding culture as well. Rosenberg herself was interested in the relationship of such culture and the phenomenological substance of painting. She wanted to see if she could reintroduce a figure that defied illusionism, that was different than formalist painting, that created a picture plane without hierarchy, that allowed the painter and viewer to have a “higher” experience, and that expanded the definition of painting altogether.

Wanting to continue her education, Rosenberg enrolled in Hunter College (CUNY)'s MFA program where she studied under Robert Morris. What came next was a series of works where Rosenberg built up the canvas with modeling paste and dozens of layers of paint in geometric patterns with text. *Spaced*, a 75-by-77-inch work from the early 1970s, has two convergent diagonal fields of raised modeling paste painted in acrylic green and blue.



What Is Psychedelic, 1973. Acrylic and acrylic gel on canvas, 32×120 in.

Across both color planes in capital letters is the word “SPACED,” as if looking at this work could make one really “space out.” It also suggests a more formal meaning because the painting was made by applying countless layers of watery pigment, so that as the color built up, the lettering appeared sealed into the color planes. In another work from this period, the banner-like *What Is Psychedelic*, which is 32 inches wide and 120 inches long, Rosenberg painted four pinwheels over a light-green-stained canvas. Again, using hundreds of thin color layers, Rosenberg build up the pinwheels except where she had stenciled the letters “What is Psychedelic.” The result was that the words, although they belonged to the canvas surface, appeared to float in front of the pinwheels. By adding in rhetorical phrases, Rosenberg collapsed the making and experiencing of painting. Other works from this period include raised canvases, and brightly saturated and metallic paints which added depth and shine and played with two- and three-dimensional spatial properties of her artwork. Rosenberg remembers when Tony Smith, a professor at Hunter at the time, came to her studio on Canal Street during a recurring critique course, saw these works and said, “Well, you don’t need to come to class anymore.”

Under Morris, who was also her thesis advisor, Rosenberg learned about deconstructing the art object, dabbled in performance, and moved farther away from the formalist painting championed by Greenberg. Morris challenged his students to think about making work in public space in new ways. She organized a performance in a quiet reading room of the New York Public Library wherein, once giving the signal, she and her classmates would whisper “Attica,” as if to remind the public of the Attica prison rebellion which had just occurred in upstate New York. Rosenberg’s work at the time did not come out of a vacuum. It was related to art historical and political factors in the early 1970s: the feminist movement, the war in Vietnam, the civil rights movement, Minimalism, conceptual art. While she was always painting, Morris also challenged her to think about making art that related to world around her.

After Hunter, Rosenberg continued to paint and supported herself with work in the art direction department at major magazines like *Rolling Stone* and *Esquire*. Newly accustomed to looking at staged photography all day, Rosenberg began to trace these images with her paintbrush back in her studio. After Modernism and the reign of Greenbergian formalism, how does a painter put an image back into a painting without falling into traditional tropes of illusionism/anti-illusionism? One way was to paint things that already existed as flat surfaces (Jasper Johns had his flags, Sturtevant had her Jasper Johns); reproducing magazine images by painting on top of them followed this logic. *Focus on Your Best Feature* is a long, horizontal painting (14

by 74 inches) from 1974. In this work, Rosenberg appropriated a cover story from a women’s magazine by painting over the image and removing all the text except for the titular phrase. *Focus on Your Best Feature* critiques the idealized female body as well as the production and circulation of these images. Tracing these works with her own line allowed Rosenberg to take control of these images by inserting her unique mark onto the picture plane.

In the late 1970s, she began a series of large works in which she painted images of so-called masterpieces by well-known male artists. Simultaneously commenting on the de-subjective practice of copying master works to learn how to paint, as well as disrupting the idea of virtuosity and proficiency in the long legacy of painting, Rosenberg carefully reproduced “great” paintings of Matisse, Lichtenstein, and Van Gogh with acrylic on canvas. She then applied a secondary image over the works, just enough so that the initial image was still visible: large multicolored polka dots over Matisse’s *The Red Studio* (1911), multicolored stripes over Van Gogh’s *The Night Cafe* (1988), a flat image of the World Trade Center over Matisse’s *Dance* (1910), and large monochrome polka dots over Lichtenstein’s *Still Life with Goldfish* (1974) (inadvertently, an appropriation of Matisse to begin with). She considers these secondary layers to be dialectical images that were in dialogue with the original works. Ironically, the more she painted these images, the better skills she acquired as a painter.

In *The Window* from around 1975, Rosenberg paints a realistic but flat, green-tinted window with four panes. Sitting in the window frame is a black table lamp and five empty flowerpots. It was the

window in her studio. Over this personal image is a meticulous remake of Lichtenstein's 1962 simple black-line painting *Curtains*. From Lichtenstein, to Matisse, to Bonnard to Vermeer—windows have been motifs, subjects and framing devices in Western art which confront a particular gaze. As such, *The Window* critically addresses the canon of painting as well as the limits of pictorial space and the literal conditions of painting itself. Now it is Lichtenstein who becomes the dialectical layer over Rosenberg's original projection of depth and space. It is an important breakthrough where Rosenberg maintains a central position and personal perspective within the larger field of painting. The work is less about emulating the pervasive pop artist and more about inserting oneself in the discourse.

In *Barn with Snow and Body Imprint* a work from around the same time (c. 1976), Rosenberg meticulously paints a wintery pastoral landscape. She then covers herself in white paint and presses her own body over left side of the rustic image, as if mimicking the form of the nearby birch tree. A nude in the landscape turns forcefully from the flattened space of the canvas to the kinetic body of the artist. The practice of registering a body to confront “the prohibition of illusionistic space which seemed to preclude a figure” is one that continues to inspire her and reappears in later works such as *The Dialectical Porn Rock* (1989–93) where the “natural” is confronted and collapsed, or in *The Astrological Ways* (2012) where members of Rosenberg's community become figures imprinted on black velvet.²

2 Email exchange with the artist, July 4, 2022.

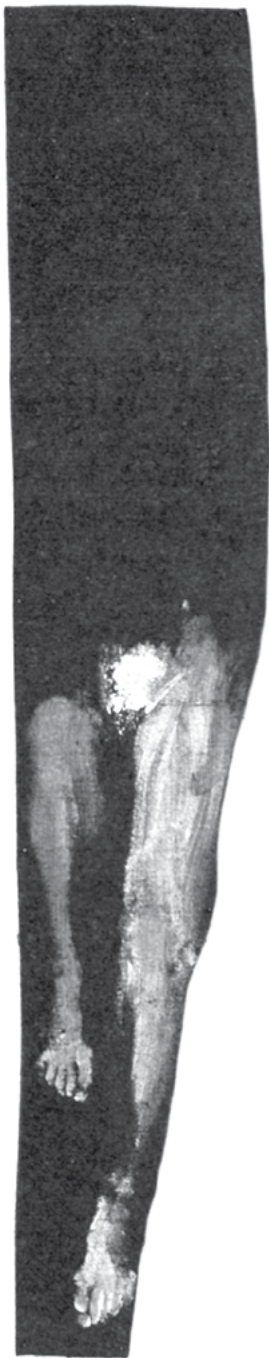


Calligraphs, c. 1984–85. Acrylic body imprints on vinyl, 48 × 118 in.

By the 1980s, Rosenberg abandoned all external images and turned entirely to her own body. Continuing the luminosity of her early-70s paintings, she continued to make these body imprints on bright neon vinyl and luxurious blue, green, and red velvets. The works are created by an extremely physical process of painting over her body and pressing herself onto the surface hard enough so a visible mark was made, thus producing an image that also registered the process. They vary from black to white to neon orange paint, and are not always full body impressions, some are of just legs, some just torsos, and even a vertical line of shoes (as if walking down the spine of a painting).³ These paintings record an action and the process of making the painting, which Richard Shiff has referred to as “declarative” paintings, or paint applied “very matter-of-factly.”⁴ Of her body imprints, Rosenberg has said, “I was thinking about making a figure

3 David Hammons's body imprints might come to mind, as he produced these works which also address body politics around the same time as Rosenberg.

4 Richard Shiff, “Autonomy, Actuality, Mangold,” *Robert Mangold* (London: Phaidon, 2000): 7–58.



Untitled, n.d. Acrylic body imprint on gray felt, 80 x 15 in.

without depicting it, without having to will it into being. It's already there—you paint your body, you print it, and you have a figure.”⁵

The body imprints defy the boundaries between an original and a copy and between abstraction and representation. This was a task Rosenberg was most interested in complicating. Her *Animal Skin* series, from around 1982–85, are also proto-body imprints of sorts. Rosenberg sought to literally turn a painting into skin, eventually also pressing her body over the animals as if to camouflage herself within them. The paintings are just that: flat, unstretched canvas with colorful realist paintings of zebra and cheetah skins. The canvas is cut to outline their anatomy, there is no background or foreground. Carol Ann Klonarides curated these body imprint and animal skin paintings into their first public presentations in the 1983 group exhibition *Borrowed Time* at Baskerville + Watson Gallery in New York. Artists in these exhibitions included Louise Lawler, Richard Prince, and others who would come to be known as the Pictures Generation. Douglas Crimp first noted, “For their pictures, these artists have turned to the available images in the culture around them. But they subvert the standard signifying function of those pictures, tied to their captions, their commentaries, their narrative sequences—tied, that is, to the illusion that they are directly transparent to a signified.”⁶

Rosenberg brought painting supplies with her on holiday in 1988 when a group of friends decided to rent a house together in the countryside. She found the new bucolic environment incongruous

5 Interview with the artist, June 28, 2022.

6 Douglas Crimp, *Pictures* (New York: Artists Space, 1977); essay repr. in *X-tra* 8, no. 1 (fall 2005): 17–30.

with her painting, and instead played a practical joke on her friend Mike Ballou, an artist and avid trout fisherman. Ballou had been using pornographic magazines for his own sculptures at the time. Like she had meticulously traced over the models in *Focus on Your Best Feature* or imprinted her own figure straight onto the canvas, Rosenberg pasted onto stone some carefully torn porn silhouettes and then placed the sculptures in the river hoping he would stumble upon them. He never did. Intrigued by her own gesture, Rosenberg grabbed a camera and documented the shimmering bodies in their new pastoral landscape, initiating the *Dialectical Porn Rock* series. She wouldn't return to painting again for several decades.

Throughout history, men have projected women's bodies onto nature only to be recast as nature itself, a founding trope of the pastoral which allowed for nature's domination. Geographer Gillian Rose argues that "[t]his compelling figure of Woman both haunts a masculinist spectator of landscape and constitutes him."⁷ Reflecting on Rosenberg's earlier painting *Barn with Snow and Body Imprint* in which the female figure asserts her presence in contrast within the snowy pasture, it becomes apparent that a female positionality in her work often contradicts the "master subject" position.⁸ Tracing the body is not just a technique but an active message within itself.

In *The Dialectical Porn Rock* Rosenberg found a way to overcome the exteriority of painting that lets "being" and "doing" coexist in the same medium,

7 Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993).

8 Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–99.

just as she had earlier in the declarative body imprints. These early experiments of injecting performative reconfigurations onto two-dimensional work set in motion ideas that she would continue to return to throughout her career. Beyond the poetic and metaphorical readings her work can inspire, her practice can also be understood as attempting to revise the limits of a medium, whether photography, performance, sculpture, or painting.