

# Inside the Hive

## AN INTERVIEW WITH NANCY MACKO

MARY-KAY LOMBINO

MARY-KAY LOMBINO: Which artists in the feminist art movement do you consider important, influential, or inspiring to you?

NANCY MACKO: The feminist movement really started to happen in the 1970s, when I was in my mid-twenties. At that time I took my first feminist art studio class at Queens College with a woman named Jane Kaufman. She was the person who opened my eyes to ideas of feminism and feminist art and the method of consciousness-raising. We went to the studios of women artists like Nancy Azara, which was a huge eye-opener for me. I had never really been in an artist's studio, and to see how women prepared their work and explored their ideas and talked about their work was brand new to me; it was amazing.

I finished my undergraduate degree at the University of Wisconsin, and there was a very important person on the faculty, Pat Clark, who introduced me to printmaking and painting. We were both in the original membership of Wisconsin Women in the Arts. We went to Green Bay for a conference in 1976, and both Kate Millett and Judy Chicago were there. This was before the *Dinner Party* project had started. Judy gave a lecture and showed us her butterfly series. That was the first time I had met her, and I got the sense that this idea of feminist art was more than just an idea: it was a huge movement and a real shift in consciousness for women.

Artists such as Ana Mendieta and Nancy Spero were also very important to me because of the way they integrated their ideas with a physical reality. Especially Nancy Spero, who was able to take up the universal representation of women's oppression and talk about it in very poetic ways. Her installation at MOCA in 1988 was very inspiring to me.

Probably the greatest inspiration for me was my mentor at the University of California, Berkeley, Sylvia Lark, who, although close to me in age, already had a very developed and successful career. She demonstrated how feminism and art practice could work together. Watching how she interacted with people; how she responded to them; how she treated her students and her peers; how fairness was important to her; and the roles that honesty,



playfulness, and humor played for her taught me a lot. She really helped me focus. I remember her sitting down with me one day and saying, "What do you want your work to be about? What is important to you?" and taking notes. Nobody had ever asked me this before or really listened to me. I think it was more a way for me to find out what was important to me and figure out what I wanted to pursue. She left an indelible mark on me. I was a member of the Northern California chapter of the Women's Caucus for Art when I lived in the Bay Area and learned a lot about how to become an artist, what were the steps to take, how to get into shows and create shows, what went into a packet, and all the nuts and bolts of being an artist.

An artist who has inspired me more recently is Pipilotti Rist, whose video installation I saw at the Venice Biennale in 1998. It was the first time that I had been to the Biennale, and I loved her work. It was humorous and ironic.



I also saw Ann Chamberlain's work then: enormous skirts that hung from the ceiling in the Arsénale and rotated very slowly.

Along the same lines, Laurie Anderson is also very inspiring to me. I love her manipulation of sound and mix of media, her belief in irony and satire, and the world that she creates with her stories. I'm also in love with paintings by Squeak Carnwath and Ciel Bergman and the sculpture and installation work of Mildred Howard, Harmony Hammond, and Magdalena Abakanowicz.

MKL: You mentioned Judy Chicago and having met her very early on, and I know that you worked on her *Dinner Party* for a brief period. How did that experience affect you?

NM: I was really fortunate to have a friend, the artist Audrey Wallace Taylor, who moved to Santa Monica to work on the *Dinner Party* project for almost a year. While she was there, she invited me to come and stay with her. I was in graduate school and was able to do that over a winter break. The whole world of women working together as though in a hive was an eye-opener because they were creating their own independent world. Anything that had to get done was being done by women. I had seen women able to accomplish things, but the whole idea of being completely reliant on other women was a revelation. I was interested in the notion that this could actually happen. At first, it made me slightly nervous that the whole thing could function by itself as well as it did, but it really did.

I sewed the labels on the back of the banners, and I was there when they began to create the tile floor. Just watching women work with what I would consider to be very difficult materials and technical information was inspiring. The level of work that was being done also set the bar for me, because everything had to be perfect—technically and aesthetically. If something didn't look right compositionally, it would be redone.

Meeting Judy Chicago was really exciting. She is quite a force. She was the hub of that whole enterprise.

*Breastskep Black*, 2001  
Thermal wax digital print  
on Rives BFK  
Image: 11¼ × 14⅝ in.;  
sheet: 30 × 22 in.

Many strong relationships were forged during the years that women dedicated their lives to the project.

MKL: Now let's turn to your work. For the last decade you've worked with themes relating to the honeybee society. What drew you to the honeybee?

NM: By the early 1990s I had been at Scripps College teaching for about four years surrounded by a strong academic environment that was very intellectually stimulating. I attended many wonderful lectures, and I was active in the women's studies program of the Claremont Colleges. One of the lecturers at a conference in 1992 on women and goddess traditions was Savina Teubal, the author of *Hagar the Egyptian: The Lost Tradition of the Matriarchs*. The text focuses on women in the Old Testament. I was curious about that since only a few women in the Old Testament are usually given credit as having any kind of power. And within that text she put these two words together: "bee priestess." I was already interested in some kind of a spiritual practice that would replace patriarchal religion, and I was looking for something that combined spirituality, sensuality, and sexuality.

The bee priestesses were a form of goddess novitiates. They cared for the temple to the goddess, and they were there to initiate men in sexual rites. They were often called sacred prostitutes, but they had an active, autonomous role that allowed them to practice their spiritual beliefs and also be self-governing as well as having a sexual life, whether they were with each other or they were initiating men. It interested me, because it seemed like a world in which women could function autonomously, love other women, and begin to realize their own ambitions.

