

# HYPERALLERGIC

## Martha Rosler's Wicked and Welcome Sense of Humor

Rosler is not expecting art to end wars or change policy, but she wants to make the viewer pay attention to both in the first place.

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12/13/2018



Martha Rosler, still from “Semiotics of the Kitchen” (1975), black-and-white video, 6 min., 30 sec. (all artwork © Martha Rosler)

Martha Rosler hated the protest literature of the 1960s and 1970s. As she explained to Jewish Museum curator Darsie Alexander in a November talk, the messiness of the design was rivaled only by that of the messaging: no images, but jargon-heavy text more likely to be thrown out than to inspire action. Rosler thought, “Can I do better?” Could she show the horrors of war, of sexism, of the hidden and obvious ways women are looked down on?

The answer is yes, as revealed in *Irrespective*, a sweeping exhibition at the Jewish Museum of Rosler’s five decades of photomontages, videos, and installations displayed with a wicked and

## MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

welcome sense of humor. Rosler, as she explained during the talk, is not expecting art to end wars or change policy, but she wants to make the viewer pay attention to both in the first place.

It's hard not to pay attention to the large prosthetic leg — “Prototype (freedom is not free)” (2006) — hanging to the left of the entrance. The leg, with an exaggeratedly large, blue foot, hangs from the ceiling, swinging back and forth to the rhythm of a video — “Prototype, God Bless America” (2006) — in which a toy soldier, also with a prosthetic leg, plays the song “God Bless America” on a tiny trumpet.

The musical accompaniment felt somewhat excessive, like something out of a strangely political haunted house ride. The leg, though, remains seared in my memory. It's a visual, visceral reminder that soldiers leave very little simply on the battlefield. They literally wear those reminders back home.



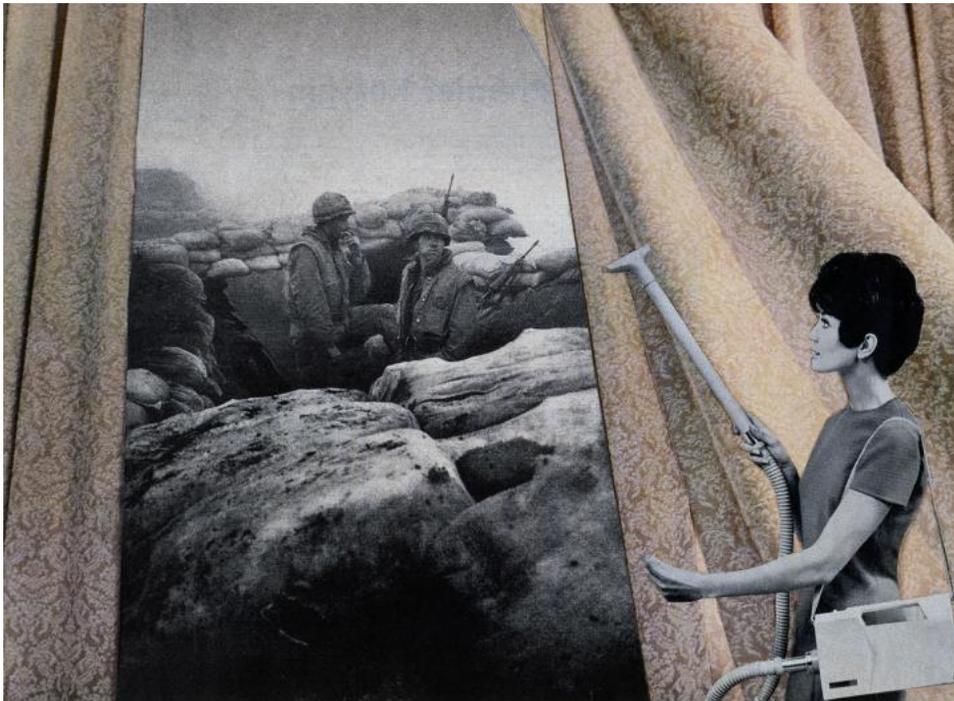
Martha Rosler, still from “Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained” (1977), color video, 40 min.

Bodies are a particularly fertile ground for Rosler's explorations of gender, as well as of a different kind of violence — not that of war, but of judgement and the subtler ways that

## MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

judgment is inflicted against women. In the 40-minute video “Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained,” multiple women strip for doctors who soberly recite their measurements, as if they were furniture, or perhaps cows being prepared for slaughter.

At first, I thought, “This is mildly triggering for anyone who has had an eating disorder, or has struggled with body image.” Then again, maybe this was just a magnified, exaggerated version of the small indignities we experience any time we have a physical. Physicals are supposed to be for our health, but watching these doctors measure and evaluate women made the routine task feel violating.



Martha Rosler, “Cleaning the Drapes,” from the series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (c. 1967–72), photomontage (image courtesy the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York)

In the photomontage series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (c. 1967–1972), Rosler juxtaposes Vietnam War battlefield scenes from *Life Magazine* against domestic scenes in spotless kitchens and living rooms cut out of home decoration magazines, as in “Cleaning the Drapes,” in which a woman happily vacuums her curtains, opening them just enough to reveal the battle scene outside. It’s as though she’s attempting to vacuum out the violence of the world — to sanitize the reality of the carnage.

## MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

For Rosler, kitchens are a stage on which to explore the politics of gender, class, and food. They're also where she can display her sense of humor. One of my favorite pieces in *Irrespective* is "Semiotics of the Kitchen" (1975), a six-minute black-and-white video parodying the likes of Julia Child. In the video, Rosler, dressed in black, holds up various kitchen appliances, listing them in alphabetical order and wielding them like weapons. The still of her holding up a knife and slashing the air is both funny and inspiring; she could have been joking around while making dinner, or posing for a recruitment poster for a badass female army. Either way, I was more than ready to join.



Martha Rosler, "Red Stripe Kitchen," from the series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (c. 1967–72), photomontage (image courtesy the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York)

The large, L-shaped kitchen island in "Red Stripe Kitchen," also from *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home*, is enviably filled with red bowls and cups, even what looks like a deep double sink. I marveled at the clean lines and ample lighting for a minute, but any design jealousy was tempered with fear at the sight of the soldiers hovering in the background, perhaps looking for weapons or enemies.

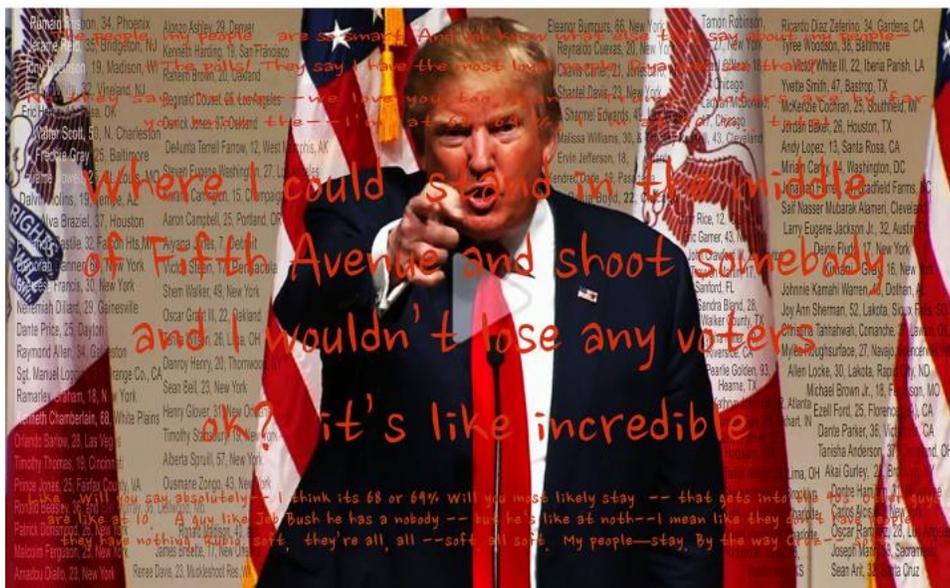


Martha Rosler, “A Gourmet Experience” (1974), installation with banquet table, video, slide projections, audio, books, cookbook readings, and prints of the food novel *A Budding gourmet*

In the multi-part installation a “A Gourmet Experience” (1974), a long, rectangular table is set for a banquet, complete with immaculate china and table settings. At first, it seems like a nice place to rest in a sprawling exhibit, but before visitors can relax, they’re presented with videos and projections of people cooking, as well as voiceover from Rosler admonishing her guests: “A cook can’t just slap things together. The best cooks are like magicians. Chefs are like orchestra conductors. Taste, mastery, and magic are things that need cultivation. Art is not an accident.” Rosler’s deadpan delivery in the audio pokes fun at the self-seriousness of food media. When did nourishment and joy become so theoretical, so in need of advanced study?

The weaker points in the exhibit are when it gets closer to the present.

# MITCHELL-INNES & NASH



Martha Rosler, “Point n Shoot” (2016), digital print (image courtesy the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York)

In “Point n Shoot” (2016) Rosler uses a photo of the president pointing a finger at an unseen audience. Over it, in red text that looks like it was written in lipstick, is a fragment of a speech: “I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn’t lose any voters, OK? It’s like incredible.” Behind that is a list of people of color who have been shot by police.

The piece is a mallet where her previous work was a scalpel, both text-heavy and literal, two qualities Rosler, in her earlier work, actively fought against. Then again, that work was in response to Nixon-era politicians, who at least pretended to hide their lies to the American public. It’s hard to reveal anything about a President who no matter how violent his words and actions, doesn’t think he has anything to hide. It’s right there in his speech.

Or maybe it’s frustrating that decades after the Vietnam War, Rosler still has to make these points at all.