

THE NEW SEASON ART



MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

Glossy Idealism on the Front Lines

By CAROL KINO

ON a recent afternoon Martha Rosler welcomed a visitor to her three-story Victorian home in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, to discuss her new show at Mitchell-Innes & Nash in Chelsea. Midway through the visit she said, "I'm a mad clipper, I don't know if you noticed."

Yet you can't help but notice. Step inside the house where Ms. Rosler has lived since 1987, and you see piles of newspaper and magazine clippings, photographs and books littering every conceivable surface. In her downstairs office four Macintosh computers fight for space with a sea of videotapes, slides, film canisters and political buttons and posters. More piles lead the way up the staircase, and line her tchotchke-filled living room.

Ms. Rosler's home may help explain why the work of this video and political art

critiqued female social roles. Since then she has tackled subjects as diverse as the Bosnian war, the 1973 Chilean coup, the semantics of airports, the plight of the homeless and the social politics of the Baby M custody case. So it's no surprise to also see at least one television set and stacks of newspapers in every room.

Newspapers are Ms. Rosler's obsession. She likes to read a week's worth of The New York Times in a single sitting, and she takes it the old-fashioned way: in print. "I love the newsprint, and I love the serendipity — that you have no idea what you're going to turn the page and find," she said. "There's a certain formal quality to reading the paper the way it's organized. Of course I'm from another era."

But you would never guess that looking at her new work.

The show, running through Oct. 11, is largely devoted to new photomontages from Ms. Rosler's series "Bringing the War Home." She began making political photomontages in the 1960s, to protest the Vietnam War, and reactivated the project during the 2004 presidential election, in response to the Iraq war. They are composites constructed from the incongruous photographs commonly found cheek by jowl in commercial news media: advertising images of idealized American homes conjoined with combat scenes from overseas.

The earlier series, made from about 1967 to 1972, brought the war home; she introduced Vietnamese refugees and American troops into images of suburban living rooms. The pieces were intended to be photocopied and passed around at antiwar rallies in New York and California, where Ms. Rosler, a Brooklyn native, lived on and off throughout the 1970s.

The photomontages in this show, all made this year, differ in that they are large, vibrantly colored, digitally printed and hung in a commercial gallery. In them Ms. Rosler often collages Americans onto scenes from Iraq and Afghanistan.

In "Point and Shoot" a glamorous bride poses on a Baghdad street, holding an old Polaroid camera, while troops behind her train their guns on civilians. "Invasion" shows a tank flanked by an army of men in identical black suits. In "The Gray Drape" a woman triumphantly lifts a cloth from a picture window, as if unveiling a public



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The artist Martha Rosler at home, far left, and some of her work: "Point and Shoot" (2008) left, and "Invasion" (2008), above.

A political artist no longer avoids commercial galleries, enabling her to reach a broader audience.

monument, to reveal a fiery battleground.

Initially Ms. Rosler felt some trepidation about reviving the project. "The downside was that people could say, 'She's revisiting something she did 30 years ago,'" she said. "But I thought that actually was a plus, because I wanted to make the point that with all the differences, this is exactly the same scenario. We haven't advanced at all in the way we go to war."

When it came to making the new work, however, she encountered one salient difference: today combat photojournalism is harder to come by, partly because media access of this war has been restricted, but also because journalism itself has changed. In the 1960s she got most of her war photographs from Life magazine;

now, she said, there are fewer outlets for photojournalism. Added to that, contemporary photographs of domestic interiors are often covered in type.

The current work differs in another respect: It notes the human toll exacted on our military. One photomontage, "Prospect for Today," which is printed on a 20-foot vinyl banner, features two American veterans with prosthetic legs.

"I always want to remind people of two things," she said. "One is to reconnect the here and the there, and say that they are both parts of our world. But the other is to say: 'Look how easy this is. You could do it.' Which I want people to feel about all my work."

Earlier in her career Ms. Rosler avoided showing her work in commercial galleries — especially the antiwar photomontages — preferring to disseminate it through underground publications and other grassroots methods. She sometimes declined to sign or date the work, or give her age. (Although her own biography suggests that

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TONY CECICOLA/THE NEW YORK TIMES

pioneer is so hard to characterize. Over the last 40-odd years she has worked in many different media, including photography, video, site-specific installation, critical theory and the Internet. In the 1960s she made photomontages that protested the Vietnam War and the objectification of women. During the 1970s she became known for her videos — some quite hilarious — that

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she is in her mid-60s, she still won't confirm it. "I see it as a form of commodification of the artist," she said.) To support herself Ms. Rosler, a longtime professor at Rutgers University, has been teaching since the mid-1970s.

After she returned to New York in 1980, she said, "It became clear to me that the alternative art scene was drying up, and that I was losing any platform for my work." In 1993 she finally agreed to be represented by the New York dealer Jay Gorney, now director of the contemporary program at Mitchell-Innes & Nash.

Mr. Gorney was drawn to Ms. Rosler because "she is such an influential figure," he said. "She is the kind of artist that, when you work with artists as I do, you keep hearing about her again and again." He sees more than ardent social consciousness in her work. "There's a reason the photomontages are so resonant. Yes, they're timely, they're important, they're first-generation American agitprop, but they're wonderfully successful images and they're powerfully composed."

Ms. Rosler said she was gratified to find that with a gallery's help her work began reaching broader audiences. In 2000 she had her first major museum show, a 30-year retrospective split between the New Museum of Contemporary Art and the International Center for Photogra-

A feminist's works are 'powerfully composed,' a dealer says.

phy. "What I didn't realize was the efficiency with which a gallery could actually convert me into somebody that people paid attention to in the larger art world," she said.

She was also a key player in "Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution," the first major museum survey of the subject, which opened in 2007 at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. "She has always claimed feminism and called her work political," said the curator Cornelia Butler, who organized the show. "I really admire that because it goes in and out of fashion, and it's mostly out of fashion. I think that's part of the reason that her work is very fresh to a younger generation of artists."

But while political art may be out of vogue, it's also fashionable to carp that young artists don't make enough of it. Ms. Rosler, who frequently collaborates with her students, takes a more charitable view. Her generation had it easier because "we were brought up to believe that the U.S. was the shining light of the world," and "there were so many more of us," she said. But "there are plenty of young artists who are activist in some way or another."

One is her son, the cartoonist Josh Neufeld, who spent about a month as a Red Cross volunteer in 2005, working with Hurricane Katrina survivors. Now, in the Web comic "A-D: New Orleans After the Deluge," he is chronicling the experiences of six of the city's residents.

Growing up, Mr. Neufeld said, "I thought of my mom's work as being angry and strident." He gradually came to believe otherwise. "She sees herself as a teacher," he said, "someone who can see a better way."

Ms. Rosler makes plenty of work outside commercial galleries. Her "Prospect for Today" photomontage just went up on highway billboards in Missouri, as part of Art the Vote, a get-out-the-vote effort. This year for a project at the Tompkins County Public Library in Ithaca, N.Y., she compiled some of her photomontages and photographs of books for a screen saver that can be downloaded from tcpl.org/exhibits/unnamablename/screensaver.html.

Then there's "Martha Rosler Library," a project that allows visitors to peruse nearly 8,000 of her own books, which opened in 2005 at e-Flux in New York and has toured Europe since 2006. (She seems a bit anxious about finding space for them all when they're returned next year.)

"I'm mindful of the fact that the gallery is a commodity exchange system," Ms. Rosler said. "But my practice reaches in so many different ways outside the art world that I don't feel bad about that." Besides, she added, "I realized that if I made political work that was shown in galleries, it would wind up in mass newspapers and magazines. And it did."