

Eulogy

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Carolee Schneemann 1939 ——— 2019

Carolee Schneemann was an artist who worked across many mediums—paint and film and photography and performance—and dedicated her life to making art that speaks honestly about the female experience.

Born in 1939, she spent her childhood in Fox Chase, Pennsylvania. She later recollected being comfortable with and fascinated by the human body from an early age; her father, a rural doctor, encouraged her interest.

Moving from the suburbs to the city to pursue her desire to become an artist, at the age of 20 she won a scholarship to New York's Bard College. There, the performative, experimental nature of her work began to emerge. Through her role as the model for her boyfriends' nude portraits, she came to believe there was more power in creating nude self-portraits herself.

She spoke often of the difference between male and female attitudes and perceptions of the female naked body. She railed against the dominance of male depictions of the female form in both the rarefied art world and in mass media and wanted to seize back representation of the female body. 'The female nude is part of a revered tradition, although she is not to take authority over depictions of her nudity,' she once said. 'She is just to be available.'

On graduating, she moved and was associated with various art scenes, including Andy Warhol's Factory and the Beat movement. She was, however, dedicated to finding her

own authentic, self-created forms of artistic expression.

She started her career working with paint, but soon gravitated towards live performance and recording experiences on film. One of her more controversial works, *Meat Joy*, depicted men and women writhing semi-naked with paint, scraps of paper and raw meat. Another one of Schneemann's most famous performance art works, *Interior Scroll*, saw her slowly extract a scroll from her vagina, from which she read out criticism of her films for their 'persistence of feelings.' Despite the vitality and originality of her early work, it failed at the time to garner the respect and interest of high-profile New York galleries and museums.

Schneemann spent her life fascinated by female sensuality. She used her art to explore her own relationships with friends, lovers and even her pets. A lifelong cat owner, her *Infinity Kisses* photography series later in her career involved Schneemann taking 140 self-portraits while being kissed by her cat, Cluny.

As the years progressed, her stature in the art world rose. Schneemann's work has now been exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art and the London National Film Theatre. Her frank, self-revelatory work is now recognised as foreshadowing later art rooted in brutally honest depictions of the female experience of sex and the body—performances like *The Vagina Monologues*, Lady Gaga's 2010 'meat dress', and Tracey Emin's conceptual art.



In an interview with *The Guardian* at age 73, Schneemann said her unflinching renderings of sex, gender and female desire were never intended to shock, but only to illuminate. 'I never thought I was shocking,' she says. 'I say this all the time and it sounds disingenuous, but I always thought, "This is something they need. My culture is going to recognise it's missing something."'

by Olivia Gagan

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Eulogy

Toni Morrison 1931 ——— 2019

Toni Morrison stands as one of the most influential voices in American literature—a writer whose cultural impact spanned making regular appearances on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* to winning a Nobel Prize.

Born Chloe Ardelia Wofford in 1931, she gained the nickname 'Toni' after taking Anthony, the patron saint of lost things, as her baptismal name when she became a Catholic at the age of 12. She was raised in Lorain, Ohio, a midwestern town, which was largely integrated. But the Wofford family still experienced abuse: their landlord set fire to their home, with the family in it, when Morrison was a child because her parents could not afford the rent.

Growing up, her favourite writers included Charles Dickens, Leo Tolstoy, James Joyce and Jane Austen, influences who would later flavour her writing alongside the African American folk tales, ghost stories and songs taught to her by her parents.

Working as a teacher throughout her twenties, at 27, she married Harold Morrison, an architect with whom she had two children. They divorced six years later, and Morrison began editing textbooks at publisher Random House in New York. She rose through the ranks, becoming their first black female senior fiction editor. As an editor, she became known for ushering black literature into the commercial mainstream, commissioning work from writers including Chinua Achebe and Angela Davis.

Morrison was 39 when her own first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, was published. The story

of a black girl who dreams of having blue eyes, the book started life as a short story she wrote for a university writing group in her early twenties. Years later, she fleshed it out into a novel, waking up at 4am to write before her children woke up. An exploration of—among other things—beauty standards, racism and child abuse, the book marked out Morrison as a serious literary talent. Such complex work won her criticism as well as praise, with multiple (and ongoing) attempts to ban the book in classrooms.

Nevertheless, Morrison accumulated a slew of awards throughout her career, including the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for the book considered to be her magnum opus, *Beloved*. *Beloved's* meditations on women, mysticism, race, and the power of female agency and friendship—'She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order'—converged with darker themes of infanticide and slavery. The book made Morrison the first black woman to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993.

Morrison's oeuvre encompasses 11 novels, children's books, hundreds of essays and an opera. Her writing is now a key part of the English curriculum in American classrooms and a staple of American literature reading lists in universities around the world.

Her friend and collaborator Angela Davis said: 'I don't think that our notion of freedom would be what it is without the impact of Toni Morrison. She said that one cannot be free without freeing someone. Freedom



is to free someone else. Those of us who do political work, radical political work, always insist on the importance of transcending the single individual and to think about collective processes, and Toni Morrison has done this in her writing.'

Morrison's writing set both her characters and millions of her readers free, releasing them from the silencing effects of oppression, racism and shame—especially for black American women whose lives, loves, losses and experiences her work gives a name and voice to. 'When I began, there was just one thing that I wanted to write about, which was the true devastation of racism on the most vulnerable, the most helpless unit in society—a black female and a child,' she once said.

Like her namesake, Saint Anthony, Toni Morrison made it her mission to find and revive lost things. Or as the Nobel Prize committee put it at the time of her award, her work 'gives life to an essential aspect of American reality.' Morrison remained a lifelong believer in the healing power of writing and art. In a speech at Vanderbilt University in 2013, she said: 'Art invites us to know beauty and to solicit it from even the most tragic of circumstances. Art reminds us that we belong here.'

Morrison died on 5 August 2019 in the Bronx, NY.

by Olivia Gagan

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