

# BEA KRELOFF



A Life in Art and Politics



**Bea Kreloff** (1925-2016) died August 17, 2016, at the age of 90. She was a painter, teacher, activist, radical lesbian feminist, and deeply involved with the antiwar movement, gay liberation, and women's issues. She was a co-founder and Director Emeritus of Art Workshop International in Assisi, Italy.

Bea was born in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, in 1925, into a middle-class Jewish household, and showed an interest in art and political activism from an early age. Her father, a clothing designer, and her mother, a housewife, encouraged and supported her ambition. Bea attended Washington Irving High School in Manhattan, then studied at and worked for The Brooklyn Museum Art School from 1950 to 1958, where she took classes with the painters Max Beckmann and Rubin Tam.

In the 1960s she painted and taught privately, and from 1973 to 1985 she was Art Department Chair at Ethical Culture Fieldston School, Riverdale, N.Y. Bea taught painting workshops, seminars, and lectured on art at Cooper Union, Marymount Manhattan College, the Women's Caucus for Art, The New School University and The College Art Association, among other institutions.

This retrospective is both a celebration and exploration of her journey from the culturally repressive postwar years in Brooklyn—where she balanced being a wife and mother with her artistic growth—to living in Manhattan at Westbeth Artist Housing—where she was finally free to embrace fully her life as artist, activist and lesbian. Bea moved into Westbeth with her sons Charles and Elliot in December 1970, and lived there until her death with her partner Edith Isaac Rose.

Bea was exposed to progressive and leftist politics in the years leading up to World War II. Like many women at the time, she also married young (at 19). She maintained a home in Brooklyn with her husband until the late 1960s. While raising her children, Bea studied art and painting, and kept a separate studio of her own where she could work and teach privately.

Bea had begun as a figurative artist. In the 1940s and 50s she began to paint in a more personal expressionist style, which evolved further in the early 1960s, when her older brother was institutionalized for severe depression. Encountering him and other patients in the bright, impersonal interiors and on the lush grounds of Creedmoor psychiatric hospital inspired her to produce a series of vivid, unsettling paintings that featured him and other patients. The resulting works are a series of haunting portraits of disassociation that featured gray, expressionistic figures within flat, hard-edged, brightly colored environments.

Following the political evolution of the 1960s and the move to Greenwich Village in 1970, Bea divorced, came out as a lesbian, aligned herself with the political left and the antiwar movement, and embraced radical feminism. This was reflected more and more in her art. She was able to use her home studio space at Westbeth to explore her views on contemporary society and image. In many of her paintings at the time, Bea, drawing from personal photos, news photography and advertising, depicted women trapped in their environments and imprisoned in their roles.

Over the years, Bea had moved from using oil to a mix of oils and acrylics, finally concentrating solely on acrylic in her painting. In the acrylic works of her later period, she would stain her gray figures into raw canvas within a bright hard-edged environment that evoked the dissonance of modern life. Bea also produced a series of silkscreens of enlarged postage stamps of famous and influential women.

She eventually embarked on a series of large, square, pencil portraits of the women in her life, including friends, lovers, associates and acquaintances, with the goal of creating a wallpaper of impassive female faces gazing intently at the viewer.

Beyond her teaching at the Ethical Culture Fieldston School and elsewhere, Bea held annual painting and drawing classes at Art Workshop International, Assisi, Italy, over the course of 35 years.

She exhibited her paintings and drawings nationally and internationally, and her work is in the permanent collection of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C., as well as in a number of private collections.



*Edith Isaac Rose and Bea Kreloff*

Charles Kreloff



# We first heard

about Bea Kreloff from our great friends Audre Lorde and Frances Clayton. They had responded to an amazing article in the New York Times on the first Lesbian Mothers Group run by psychotherapist Bernice Goodman. Bernice, the article said, was a lesbian in a relationship with Bea Kreloff, mother of two sons, Charles and Elliot. Audre and Frances, parents of Elizabeth and Jonathan, immediately called Bernice and started working with her.

It wasn't long before Blanche and I called Bernice and started working with her in individual therapy. An out lesbian therapist—an out lesbian couple! It was the early 70's and we were empowered and inspired by Bea and Bernice's bold choice to be out and public.

Bea seemed to know everyone! Blanche lovingly called her "Our Centa Yenta." Her zest for life, high-energy, generosity, progressive politics, and passion for delectable food made Bea for all of us a force of nature.

Bea's pencil/charcoal portraits of strong women adorned the walls of the vibrant feminist 70's restaurant, Mother Courage. Everyone who was anyone in our movement dined regularly at Mother Courage in the West Village. All flavors of dykes and lesbians and straight allies crowded the sidewalk out front, waiting for a table, to plot the lavender revolution. Bea was for all of us a galvanizing charger, a mighty connecting link, making "shidduchs" here, there, everywhere.

Our lives have interwoven through five decades with our beloved Bea and Edith: Protests, Resistance, Banners Held High for Lesbian Feminist Rights, Artists, Civil Rights, Human Rights, Economic Security, Peace and Justice, global friendships with adventures from Montevarchi to Mongolia.

We arrived at Bea's hospital bedside a minute after she died, surrounded by her beloveds Edith, Charles, Elliot. We all toasted Bea and offered loving tribute to our great diva warrior with an hour of honor and remembrance which we will always cherish.

Clare Coss and Blanche Wiesen Cook  
December, 2016



Bea's 90th Birthday, from lower left clockwise: Edith Isaac Rose, Edie Windsor, Blanche Weisan Cook, Patsy Rogers, Clare Coss, Lucille Field Goodman, Bea Kreloff, Naomi Replansky, Eva Kollisch

Bea with her sons Elliot, (left), and Charles and her granddaughter Samantha



1950 to 1960



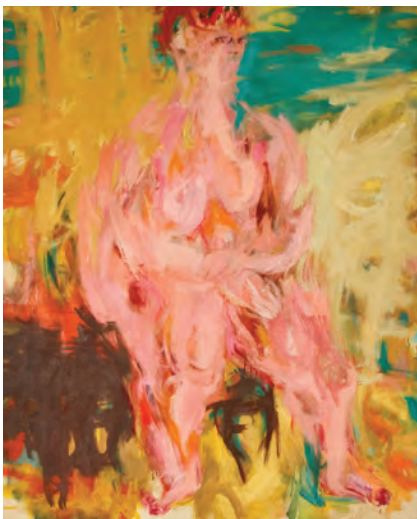
Oili on Canvas, 18" x 24", private collection



Oili on Canvas, 25" x 45", private collection



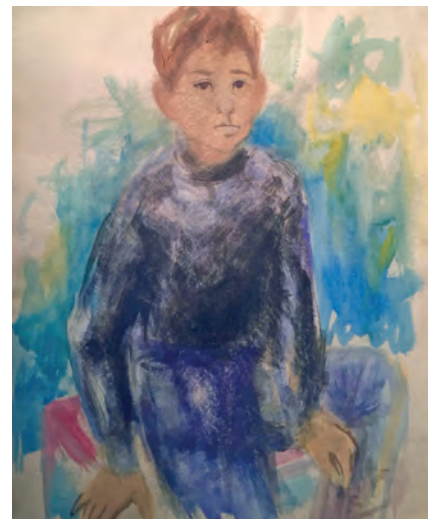
Oili on Canvas, 39" x 50", private collection



Oili on Canvas, 40" x 52"



Watercolor on board, 14" x 18", private collection



Watercolor on board, 18" x 24", private collection

1960 to 1965



Oili on Canvas, 42" x 30", private collection



Oili on Canvas, 25" x 42", private collection



Oili on Canvas, 40" x 36"



Oili on Canvas, 38" x 48"

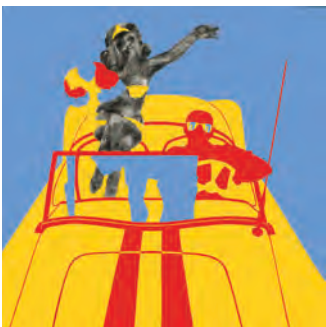


1966 to 1975

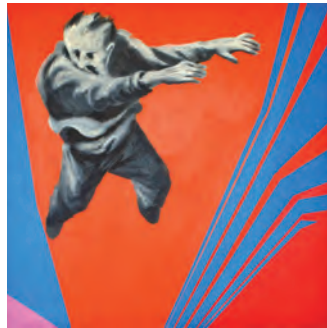
Oil and synthetic polymer on canvas, 72" x 72"



Leslie Lohman Museum



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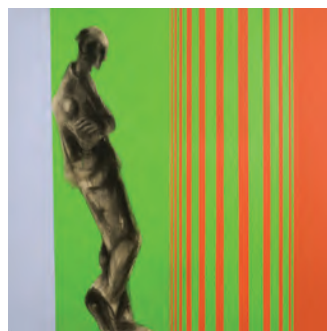
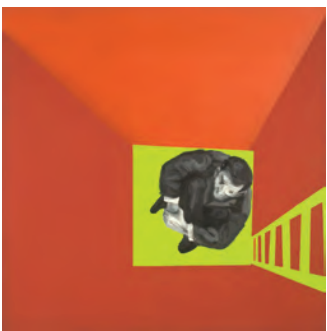


Leslie Lohman Museum



# 1966 to 1975

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, The Joseph H. Hirshhorn Bequest, 1981





1976 to 1985

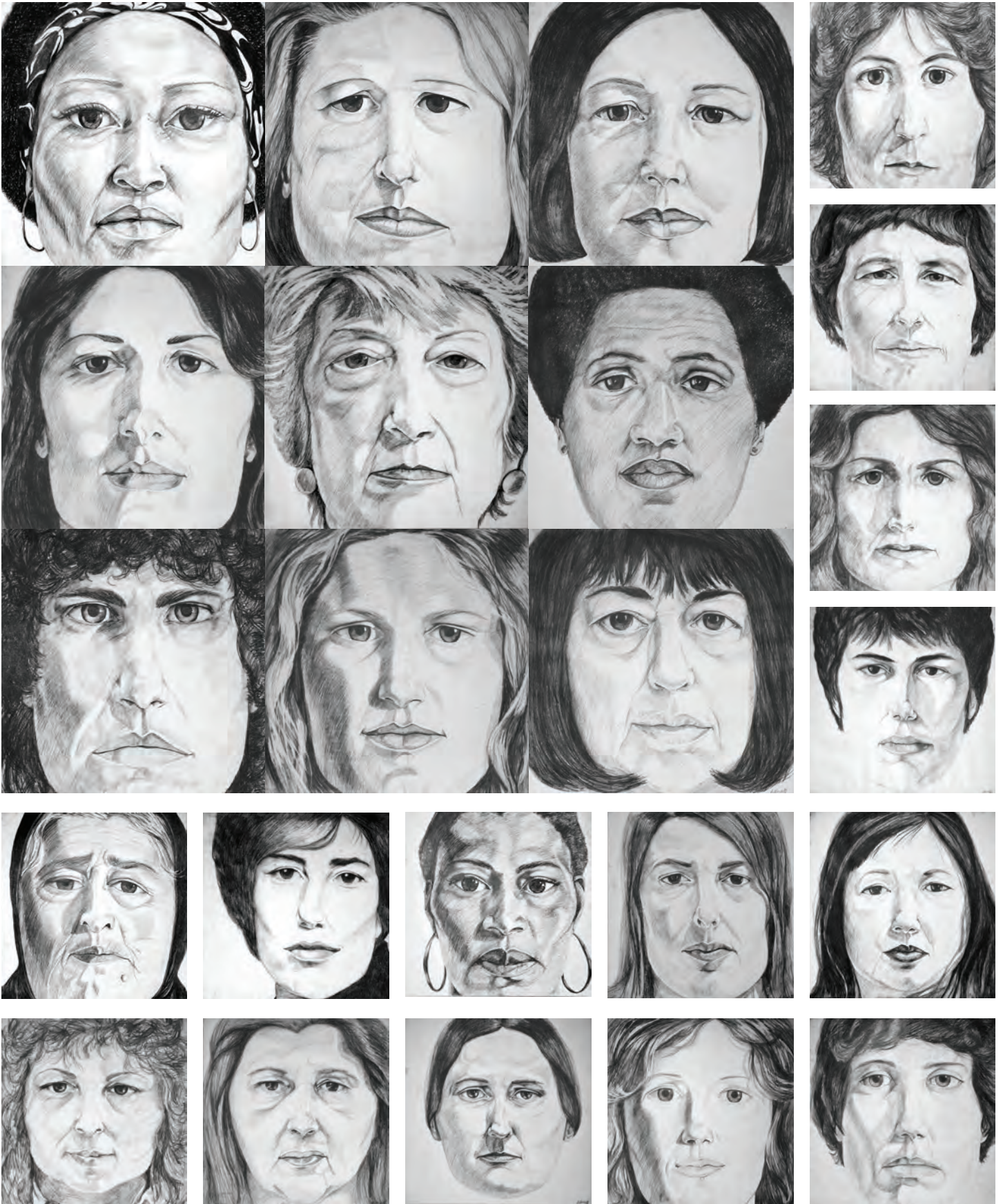
Oil and synthetic polymer on canvas, 66" x 66", all in private collections





# 1976 to 1985

Graphite on paper, 30" x 30", Leslie Lohman Museum





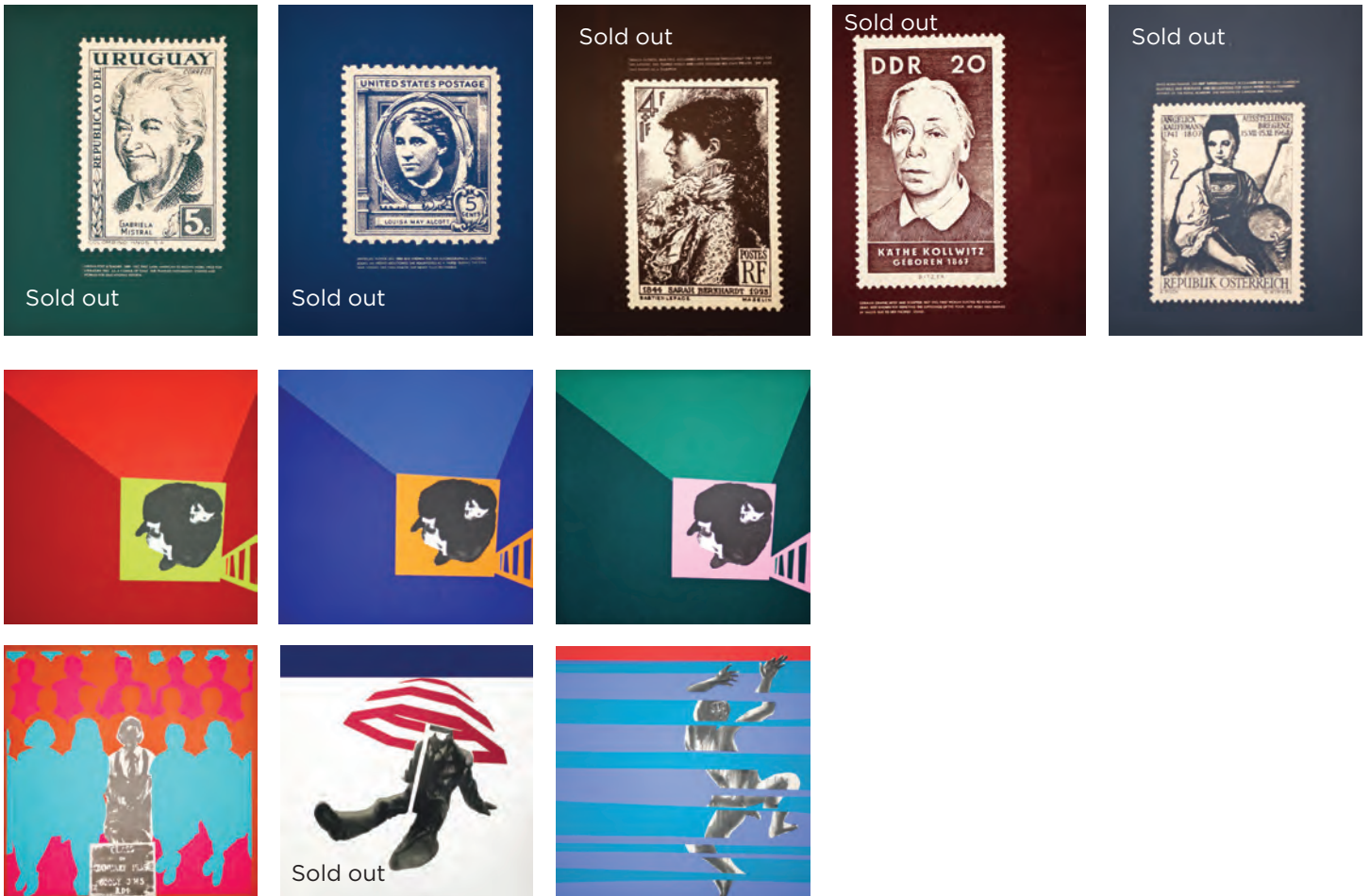
# 1976 to 1985

Graphite on paper, 30" x 30", Leslie Lohman Museum



# 1972 to 1985

Silkscreen on paper



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JANUARY 14 TO 28 2017

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