

CAROL × NATALIE



Natalie
Brettschneider
performs *Rapunzel*
and *Medusa Sit Down*
to *Chat about War*,
c. 1947.



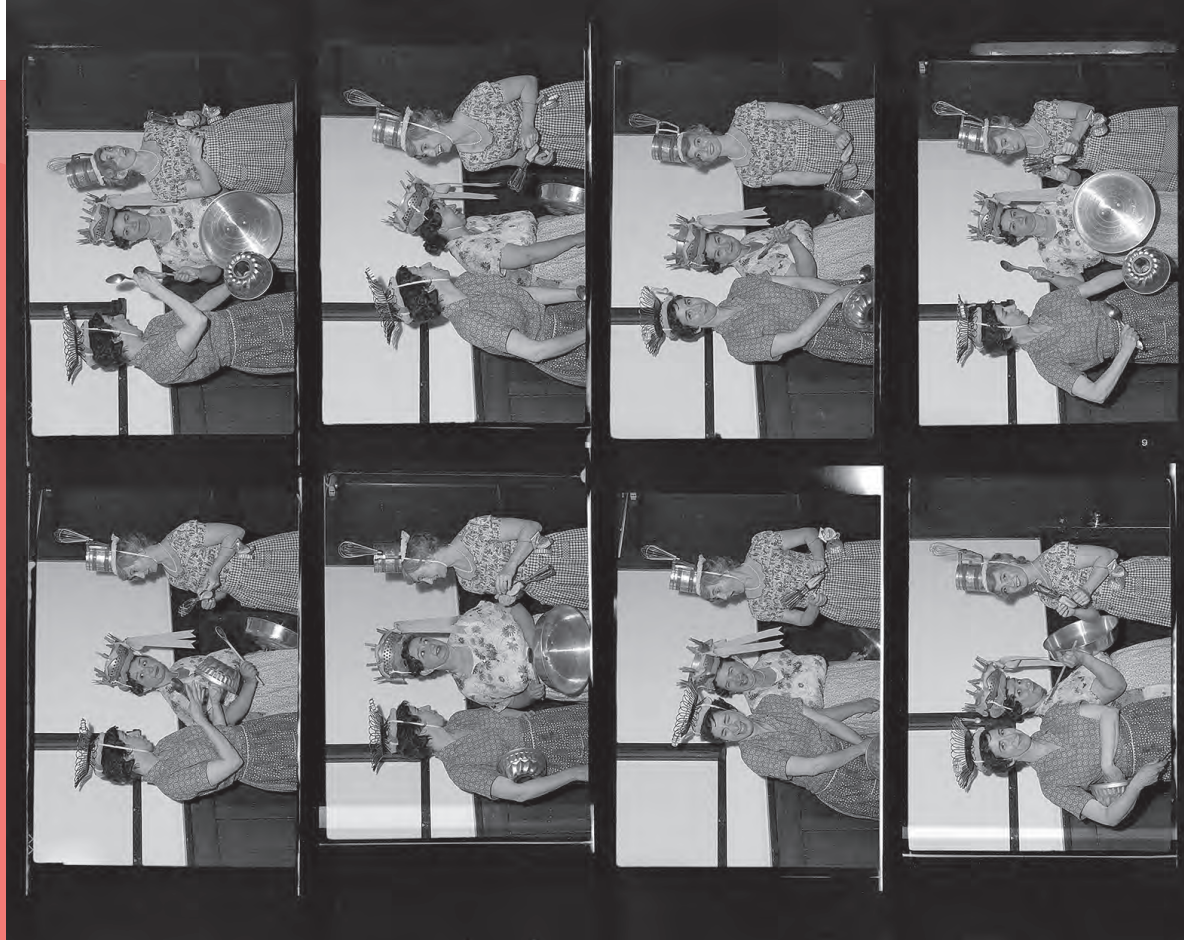
**NATALIE
BRETTSCHEIDER**

CAROL SAWYER



LEFT: *"L'Ensemble
trois femmes
mécaniques"*
promotional
photograph,
c. 1958. Acquired
with the assistance
of Blaine Campbell.

RIGHT: *"Woman
ponders Sophie
Tauber-Arp,"*
Oskar Schlemmer
interjects, 2015.



Above: Natalie Brett Schneider with friends Lori Weidenhammer and Soressa Gardner, c. 1951.



ABOVE: Natalie Brett Schneider performs *Oval Matt*, Paris, c. 1920.

LEFT: Natalie Brett Schneider performs *Feather Hat*, Montreal, c. 1950.

NATALIE BRETTSCHEIDER

Excerpt from *My Blue Canoe: A Life in Canadian Art*

BY WALTER MARKSON

NATALIE BRETTSCHEIDER STRUCK ME as being a woman in a hurry. When I met her for an interview in Toronto in the fall of 1972, she was waiting for me at The Senator diner, her egg salad sandwich half eaten and lipstick already staining a freshly refilled cup of coffee. She let out a barely audible snort of disapproval. I was five minutes early, but that didn't matter.

But that was Natalie in a nutshell. Ahead of the curve. If you were riding the crest of an Art Deco wave, she was towelled off onshore, building a Bauhaus-inspired sandcastle with Gertrud Arndt. She wasn't one to wait for the rest of the world to catch up.

From what I had heard, Natalie was always the most interesting, effervescent person in the room. However, when I met her, she was already 76; she seemed to have lost patience at being asked the same questions over and over by the newest art critics on the beat. I may have overdone things with my black turtleneck and tweed jacket that day. Here I was, interviewing the grande dame of performance art, and I looked like an over-eager puppy dog.

Conversation was curt but professional. I did manage to confirm a long-disputed rumour about her entire career being built on mouthwash. She told me that while studying opera in Paris, a condition of her scholarship required her to give demonstrations of the sponsor's antiseptic throat gargle. Natalie, easily bored, turned these weekly sessions into impromptu performances she held in a tent outside the Paris Opera House. One evening, she said she spotted Vaslav Nijinsky among those in attendance, and shortly thereafter most of avant-garde Paris had witnessed her tonsillar escapades.

She began creating and performing new works, historically accepted as "revolutionary in their audacity and playfulness." These early years saw the development of her dynamic fusion of camp and esoterica that would leave critics scratching their heads and modernists vying for a place at every performance. Sitting across from her in our booth, I could feel that legendary energy. It was hypnotic. Listening to her rhyming off names of friends and collaborators made it impossible to concentrate on the task at hand. I was in the presence of greatness but, at the age of 22, didn't know how to react.

Through her modelling career in the 1920s, Natalie met Lee Miller and Man Ray. The trio became friends and had clear influences on one another's work. Natalie's performance of *Jacket* in Paris roughly coincides with Lee Miller's and Man Ray's own experiments with solarization. Rumours swirled around the three of them at this time. To my knowledge, I was the only one to ever make the mistake of asking her directly if they were true. Never before (and never since) have I felt a stare dig through my eyes and down into my spine. She said — and I am paraphrasing as her words were far too colourful to accurately capture here — "I haven't dished on either Man Ray or Lee and I'm not about to now." It wasn't until my lunch arrived five minutes later that I got up the courage to speak again.

The fact is ... I was enamoured with her. Or her work. Or both. I didn't know which. At this point, my nerves getting the better of me, I veered into a monologue. I was flailing, and she knew it.

I told her that I always felt (and still do) that you could draw a direct line from any bold new artistic endeavour of the twentieth century back to something she had done or to people with whom she had worked or socialized. The intersections seemed astounding.

Natalie was friendly with the incredibly influential Piscator triplets, who confounded audiences by giving performances of their compositions in multiple venues at the same time, all while claiming to be one person. Photographs from Natalie's performances seemed to lead to all sorts of new movements in fashion and photography. *Shadow Tree*, performed against intertwining foliage, showed traces of Aaron Siskind and abstract impressionism; *Burnt Tree* is the model Dovima without her elephants; and *Feather Hat* seemed a precursor to the modern photographic stylings of Richard Avedon and Irving Penn.

I finally felt I was making headway as her look became merely noncommittal instead of outright disdainful. "There are so many artists who slip through the cracks," she said with an encouraging lilt in her voice. She was about to make my career. I readied my pen and paper to write down the names of who knows how many undiscovered greats.

"Like who?" I asked.

"You have mustard on your lip," Natalie replied. With that, she got up from the table, and walked out of the diner, heading north towards Dundas Street.

CAROL SAWYER

A Life in Canadian Art

BY MARK WALTON

Carol Sawyer looks disconcertingly like Natalie Brett Schneider. You can see it in the mouth, the nose, and most definitely in those questioning, intelligent eyes. Of course, Carol IS Natalie. Or Natalie IS Carol. Our conversation led me to believe that it may be a combination of both.

Regardless, Carol's work is a natural progression of the feminist work of Suzy Lake and Cindy Sherman, carefully crafting a fictional biography photographically through years of growth, and not just a series of fragmented moments. Carol created the detailed, years-long account of her character, Natalie Brett Schneider in the Natalie Brett Schneider Archive (NBA).

"My dream as a young girl was to study theatre, singing, and visual art, and do something that combined them.... Everybody told me I couldn't do that," says Carol. Her

22-year (and counting) project fuses all three elements into a strong narrative that focuses on the history of women in the arts, specifically — in her own words — on "who is included and who isn't, how different people get forgotten or remembered and the whole role of sexism and identification. It's playful and funny and invites people in but there's that serious feminist question at the heart of it."

Artists can be completely involved in a specific movement or arts community but unless there is someone to write their stories they risk being forgotten. "This is what interested me," says Carol, "that role of identification and how an artist might be known or unknown. I took that identification to an extreme by inventing her."

Natalie Brett Schneider became an "excavation tool." The recent touring exhibition of the NBA (which concluded in

Toronto in November 2020) gave Carol an opportunity to draw some work by lesser known women out of gallery collections and show them alongside her images of Brett Schneider. In Toronto she was challenged to explore the fact that "feminism has really moved on and there's a lot of challenging of feminism to acknowledge the additional barriers to success that queer and racialized women have had [to overcome]."

Carol taught the history of photography on several occasions at Emily Carr University, and this fact shows up in the images she created for the NBA. Many are evocative of the greats (Stieglitz, Lee Miller, Man Ray, Siskin, Avedon, Penn), but Carol insists that they were not conscious references but rather a result of her "super affectionate relationship with all kinds of photographs," including vernacular and more modernist photos. The word "affection" comes up often when Carol talks about photography.

Carol is conscious of the role of women as models, and very much aware of "how much somebody like Dovima is the author of the image ('Dovima with Elephants Evening Dress by Dior, Cirque d'Hiver, Paris' by Richard Avedon), but how their part of the creation isn't considered important."

Carol has created numerous other small bodies of work between working on the NBA. She says, "One of the common themes in my work ... is the relationship between photography and truth and the tension between the document and the lie. Cameras look so truthful. People have this desire to believe in them."

"A lot of my work has used more than one camera. There's a video I made in 2001 that I shot in a proscenium arch theatre and I couldn't fit the whole stage in the shot. I shot it with two cameras turned vertically, fixed throughout the video, but it leaves a seam in the middle. All of these fictional things can happen because of the seam. It looks so real because it's lens-based media so you want to believe in that architectural space."

"Lens-based media invites viewers to participate in an illusion but at the same time they know it's an illusion. That's the tension happening in the Brett Schneider archive. People encounter their desire for her to be real and long to project certain things onto her."

"I've always [got] that feeling of being slightly in the unknown and I think it's a fertile place for me."

What's next? Carol says she hopes that she can put Natalie Brett Schneider to rest, but she can't rule anything out. According to Carol, she carries Natalie around in her head. She is intrigued at the idea of bringing Natalie herself to the stage in a play.

Carol is currently working in a more collaborative process, shooting portraits and videos of performer friends trained in baroque opera. She plans to continue to explore the space of the theatre stage.

How very Natalie Brett Schneider of her.



Natalie Brett Schneider performs *Jacket*, c. 1930.



GET THE FULL STORY

The *Carol Sawyer: The Natalie Brett Schneider Archive* catalogue, produced by the Carleton University Art Gallery in collaboration with the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, the Vancouver Art Gallery, and the Koffler Gallery, traces the history of the archive's iterations over the last 20 years. In addition to photographs from the archive, the book features an essay by Erin Silver.

Get your copy of this must-have book through the above listed galleries.



Rose Droop Panorama, from *I attempt from love's sickness to fly, in vain*, 2017.

See more of Carol Sawyer's work at:
CAROLSAWYER.NET