

Shirley Gorelick (1924–2000)



Shirley Gorelick (1924–2000):  
Painter of Humanist Realism

By

Andrew D. Hottle

**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**

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P U B L I S H I N G

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### **Credits**

All works of art, writings, and artist's statements by Shirley Gorelick are used courtesy of Jamie S. Gorelick and Steven M. Gorelick.

## INTRODUCTION

*Her tough, unromantic paintings forgive nothing and present subjects as she finds them—all faults, all humanizing factors intact. She deserves consideration with the leading figure painters of the day.*

—Ellen Lubell, *Soho Weekly News*, April 19, 1979<sup>1</sup>

At the time of its creation in 1968, Shirley Gorelick's *Self-Portrait in a Fur Hat* was revelatory (Plate 1). As described by the artist, the work "was initiated when I entered my studio on a freezing day and found the heater had failed. As I was leaving, I glanced into the mirror. Seeing myself in a high fur hat, bulky sweater, jeans and boots, I recognized a quality and mood I wanted to capture."<sup>2</sup> Her subsequent works were praised for their "considerable immediacy and impact,"<sup>3</sup> a characterization that also applies to her *Self-Portrait in a Fur Hat*. The directness of Gorelick's gaze, the assertiveness of her posture, and the straightforward rendering of her features foretell the direction of the artist's work in the 1970s. At the same time, the flat planes of color and broad application of paint reflect her compositions of the previous decades, which were strongly influenced by Cubism. In her formative years, Shirley Gorelick explored a variety of styles and subjects, mostly in paintings, drawings, and sculptures. As her work evolved, she expanded her media to include printmaking and silverpoint while focusing increasingly on the human figure in a range of psychological states. Her realist works of the 1970s and early 1980s were widely exhibited and consistently lauded by reviewers in the *New York Times*, *Newsday*, *Soho Weekly News*, *Long Island Press*, *Arts Magazine*, *Feminist Art Journal*, *Womanart*, and other publications. She was an early member of SOHO 20 Gallery, the second artist-run, all-women exhibition space in New York City, and was among the women who established Central Hall Artists Gallery in Port Washington, the first cooperative of its kind on Long Island.

I never knew Shirley Gorelick. She died nearly six years before I began to research *The Sister Chapel* (1974–78), for which she created a nine-foot painting of Frida Kahlo (see Fig. 3-44). At the time, I was unaware of Gorelick's work and did not recall ever hearing her name. (Although not an especially unusual surname, *Gorelick*—syllabicated *Go•rel•ick*—is often mispronounced and was sometimes misspelled by contemporaries as

*Gorelik, Gorelic, Corelick, and Gorlock.*) In the process of researching and writing *The Art of the Sister Chapel: Exemplary Women, Visionary Creators, and Feminist Collaboration*,<sup>4</sup> it became clear that Ellen Lubell's claim was no exaggeration. Shirley Gorelick was indeed a meritorious figurative artist, which prompted me to initiate a small exhibition that materialized as *Shirley Gorelick—Frida, Pablo, and the Self: The Artist as Model* at the Rowan University Art Gallery in 2008.<sup>5</sup> Thereafter, I began to research and write the present monograph. The result is a detailed investigation of Shirley Gorelick's artistic evolution, from the early influences of modernism to her artistic maturity as a painter of distinctive and compelling realist works. The subtitle of the book, *Painter of Humanist Realism*, was partly inspired by the following sentence in one of her artist's statements: "Miss Gorelick's objective is to reinterpret[t] the figure in a contemporary manner within the framework of a personal humanism."<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the book is divided into four chapters, which bear titles that are likewise derived from her statements; each presents an overarching aspect of Gorelick's work.

The present volume is an extensive monographic study that emphasizes significant developments and important works. It is not, however, a comprehensive assessment of Shirley Gorelick's oeuvre, nor does it attempt to fully elucidate her position in the history of art. Gorelick rarely inscribed dates or titles on her paintings, sculptures, drawings, and prints, which precludes a complete understanding of her stylistic chronology. This circumstance is mediated by an interview by Dorothy Gees Seckler (1910–1994), conducted in Provincetown in 1968, during which Gorelick revealed a number of details about her education and formative years as an artist.<sup>7</sup> In an attempt to preserve Gorelick's own voice, I have quoted fairly extensively from the interview, personal letters, artist's statements, and press releases. Beginning in the 1960s, Gorelick took many photographs and slides of her work, some of which are imprinted with the month and year in which they were processed. Those dates provide a *terminus ante quem* for the creation of certain works, but not an exact date. Since she likely photographed recent work in a timely manner, an approximate chronology can be established for undated works of this period. Careful excavation of published records, correspondence, and other archival material has yielded additional titles and dates. Her works of the 1970s and early 1980s, which correspond to the period of her greatest critical success, are more fully documented.

Where possible, I have assigned the approximate year or range of years to an undated work. For most of the titles that are unrecorded, I have provided descriptive ones. In those instances, each caption includes the

word *untitled*, followed by my title in parentheses; in the text, however, I have simply used the descriptive title in order to avoid the repetitive and burdensome use of the word *untitled*. For undisputed early portraits and self-portraits, the sitter's name is used as a title. In addition, each of Shirley Gorelick's works is identified by a unique catalogue number. In 2007, the artist's daughter arranged for an inventory of the remaining works in storage. In consultation with Jamie Gorelick, I have continued to update and supplement the inventory catalogue to include all of the artist's known works. The catalogue numbers, prefixed *SG-* and followed by three numerical digits, are parenthetically listed in the image captions. For unillustrated works that are mentioned in the text, the catalogue numbers are identified in the endnotes.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ellen Lubell, "Shirley Gorelick," Art Figures, *Soho Weekly News*, April 19, 1979; "Correction," April 26, 1979.

<sup>2</sup> Shirley Gorelick, artist's statement on professional letterhead [late 1970s], collection of Jamie S. Gorelick. Although *Self-Portrait* is the title, as recorded in the artist's statement, I have identified the painting as *Self-Portrait in a Fur Hat* to distinguish it from Gorelick's numerous other self-portraits.

<sup>3</sup> Malcolm Preston, "Parallel Expressions," Art, *Newsday*, July 9, 1974.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew D. Hottle, *The Art of the Sister Chapel: Exemplary Women, Visionary Creators, and Feminist Collaboration* (Farnham, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> *Shirley Gorelick—Frida, Pablo, and the Self: The Artist as Model*, Rowan University Art Gallery, Rowan University, Glassboro, NJ, April 14–May 29, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Shirley Gorelick, artist's statement [c. 1962–63], photocopy, collection of Jamie S. Gorelick.

<sup>7</sup> Shirley Gorelick, interview by Dorothy Gees Seckler, August 20, 1968, audio cassette recording, Dorothy Gees Seckler collection of interviews with artists, 1963–1976, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

