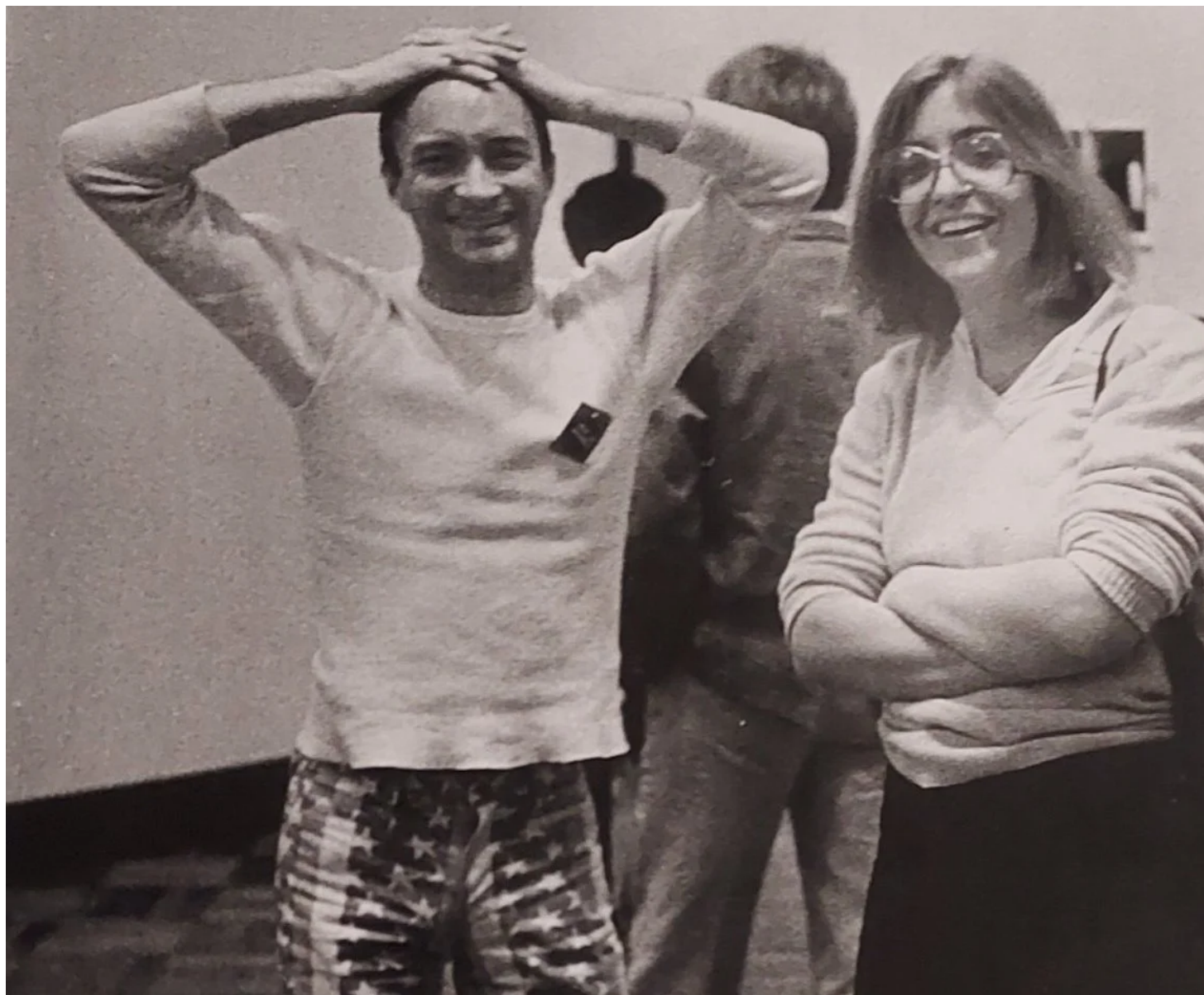


Janet Cooling, Painter Who Broke New Ground for Lesbian Artists, Dies at 70

BY ASHTON COOPER March 14, 2022



Hudson and Janet Cooling, ca. 1970s. COURTESY ESTATE OF JANET COOLING

Janet Cooling, who imagined a style of figurative painting built on lesbian and feminist symbologies during the 1970s and '80s, died in Richmond, Virginia, on February 25 at the age of 70 from breast cancer. Her partner and wife of 40 years, Jackie Corlin, confirmed her death. Among the first artists to be an out lesbian in the American art world, Cooling fearlessly painted works that went against popular taste and normative social mores.

Among her earliest proponents were New Museum founder Marcia Tucker, feminist art historian and Woman's Building cofounder Arlene Raven, and curator Dan Cameron who, in 1982, included Cooling in "Extended Sensibilities: Homosexual Presence in Contemporary Art" at the New Museum, the first museum show in the U.S. to address gay and lesbian themes in contemporary work. (Disclosure: In 2019, I curated a solo show of Cooling's work at Jack Hanley Gallery in New York.)

"Janet Cooling was a courageous and groundbreaking artist, whose work in the early 1980s laid the groundwork for how female painters, especially those who are not heterosexual, would develop a range of imagery that contradicted centuries of the male gaze in pictorial art," Cameron wrote in an email. "Years from now, I believe historians will recognize how prescient her development of a woman-focused aesthetic really was. Janet was also steadfast in her belief that 'Extended Sensibilities' was a necessary and important advance in the curatorial field, and she never wavered in her personal support of my efforts."

Janet Cooling was born in Chester, Pennsylvania, in 1951, but grew up in the New Jersey suburbs. In 1969, she moved to Brooklyn to attend Pratt, where she received her B.F.A. in 1973, immediately going on to complete an M.F.A. at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1975. After graduation, Cooling worked at Artemisia, the women's cooperative gallery in Chicago, which was then newly opened. Artemisia helped bring Cooling into the emergent worlds of feminist art spaces and lesbian politics. It was at the gallery that she met Raven, who offered Cooling her first solo show at Canis Gallery in the Woman's Building in Los Angeles in 1976.

Working in Chicago in the late 1970s, Cooling was associated with a group of artists (among them Phyllis Bramson, Nicholas Africano, and Hollis Sigler, Cooling's partner at the time) who were dubbed "Post-Imagists" by art critic Joanna Frueh in an October 1978 article in the *New Art Examiner*. Frueh explained: "If Imagism flashes and blares, like television or rock music, then [Post-Imagism] induces like poetry, a slower communicator that compels us inward." During her time in Chicago, Cooling showed at Nancy Lurie Gallery, where several of her "Post-Imagist" peers also exhibited. There, in 1979, Cooling debuted her erotic drawings of entwined naked women in sublime landscapes. In an artist statement, Cooling positioned the show as a breakthrough for her practice: "I began trashing my academic training about proper subject matter by using my own experience as a young woman as the content. The subject became the coming out narrative."

At the time, only a handful of artists were out lesbians. Even fewer were making explicit, figurative work about their sexualities. In an interview from 2008, artist Harmony Hammond, who had included Cooling in her landmark 2000 book *Lesbian Art in America*, explained: "At that particular time in the mid-'70s, lesbians didn't represent themselves sexually. We were conscious that images of lesbians were something that the men got off on. Because we wished to avoid the male gaze, any kind of visual representation of sex or sexualized acts between women by women was rare." Cooling took on the challenge of representing the female form, working outside the conventions of lesbian art at the time, which, as Hammond pointed out, tended to avoid depictions of lesbian sex.

Cooling moved back to New York in 1981, the same year that she was included in curator William Olander's "Young Americans" show alongside Cindy Sherman, David Salle, and Hudson. During this time, Cooling began to make large-scale shaped paintings with black backgrounds and swirls of apocalyptic imagery. One of these shaped works, *Morgana* (1982), was included in "Extended Sensibilities." That work in particular was inspired by New York City nightlife in the early 1980s, especially the iconic club Danceteria, where Cooling saw performances by a very young Madonna and the drag queen Divine.

The paintings she was making in the 1980s resonate with the work of other queer figurative painters working at the time, including Martin Wong and David Wojnarowicz, the latter of whom shared Cooling's romantic understanding of one's art as an outlet for personal feeling, a stance at odds with emergent postmodernist theory in the art world. Writing on Cooling's work, Olander explained: "To be a figurative painter in the 1970s was not a simple task: it was an era of minimal and conceptual practice, unsympathetic to the expressive rhetoric of painting."

In 1984, Marcia Tucker included Cooling's paintings in the contentious all-painting U.S. pavilion at the Venice Biennale, titled "Paradise Lost: Paradise Regained. American Visions of the New Decade." In the exhibition catalog, she highlighted the extremes in Cooling's symbology between pain and pleasure: "Janet Cooling paints paradisiacal landscapes, Edenic panoramas filled with exotic flora and fauna and naked, amorous couples, and simultaneously has dealt chillingly with the theme of urban warfare and nuclear destruction."

The Biennale pavilion was, in many ways, an extension of Tucker's 1978 "Bad Painting" exhibition, which foregrounded irreverent work that eschewed what she described as the "standards of good taste." In the New York Times review of Tucker's pavilion, John Russell wrote: "It came as a surprise to almost everyone that out there in the heartlands of America, and even in some of its great cities, there were so many younger artists whose ambition was not to 'paint well,' in the sense that William Merritt Chase painted well, but to come to terms with overwhelming sensations of fear and disquiet, violence and foreboding. The combination of slapdash painting with horrendous subject matter was in sharp contrast to most Europeans' idea of the American psyche."

Cooling moved to California in 1984 to teach at San Diego State University, where she remained until retiring in 2013. In 1985, she had a solo show at the Chicago location of Hudson's gallery Feature and in the 1990s, she pivoted to making large, colorful paintings of female bodybuilders, which would come to be featured in the New Museum group exhibition "Picturing the Modern Amazon" in 2000. During this period, her work was canonized in important volumes on feminist and lesbian art, including *The Power of Feminist Art* by Norma Broude and Mary Garrard and *Lesbian Art in America* by Harmony Hammond. In the latter, Hammond writes: "Cooling's paintings are about as close as contemporary lesbian art gets to a feminist camp sensibility. Interested in kitsch and notions of 'bad painting,' she used lurid colors against black-velvet-like backgrounds to depict hallucinatory apocalyptic scenes. In her world, animals and women are endangered species in an endangered landscape threatened by patriarchal encroachment."

