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Ida Applebroog. Right Up To Now 1969–2021

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Cover image:

# Ida Applebroog. Right Up To Now 1969–2021

by Tom Denman • 16.03.2022

From 1977 to 1981 Ida Applebroog (b.1929) self-published several booklets, in editions of up to five hundred, and posted them to friends and other figures in the art world. At the nonagenarian's retrospective at Hauser & Wirth Somerset, it is these booklets that the viewer first encounters, which are arranged on wall ledges to be thumbed through **FIG.1**. The cover of each booklet bears its individual title, underneath which is written 'A PERFORMANCE', suggesting a possible function as theatre programmes or scripts **FIG.2**. This qualifier could relate to the act of posting 'performed' by Applebroog before she had gallery representation, as a way of publicising her work at a time when women artists struggled to be taken seriously. In the gallery space decades later, our turning of the pages revivifies a sense of performance, albeit a different one, by giving movement, as well as an audience, to the tableaux they contain. The booklets comprise monochrome prints of original Applebroog works; they depict scenes from puppet theatres, most of which stage everyday, seemingly uneventful dramas of gendered domesticity, made enigmatic by elusive narratives and an opaque correspondence between image and text. Reminiscent of silent cinema and flipbooks, the booklets speak to a performance that might have happened, could happen or is happening. Performance here is ephemeral, in the sense theorised by José Esteban Muñoz, who argued that 'this sort of anecdotal and ephemeral evidence grants access to those who have been locked out of official histories and, for that matter, "material reality"'.<sup>1</sup> Applebroog challenges 'the pre-established archive of evidence' and resists its phallogentric, objectifying practices.<sup>2</sup> Seeing the booklets in the gallery, literally pinned down, the viewer witnesses this conflict – between ephemerality and archivism – in action.

Each room presents a constellation of images and signs, producing a kind of psychic cartography that recalls Aby Warburg's 'Memory Atlas', which traced recurring visual themes and patterns across the Middle East, European Antiquity, the Renaissance and contemporary culture (1927–29).<sup>3</sup> However, in contrast to Warburg's hermeneutic tool, Applebroog's installations guard against analytical intrusion. *Galileo Chronology* **FIG.3** consists of many of the original puppet theatre scenes that are reproduced in the booklets: vellum and Mylar cut-outs of varying size with text and illustrations in red ink **FIG.4**. There is something bodily, placental even, in their mottled, translucent texture, as though to indicate an extraction from within. The text chronologises the life

of Galileo Galilei, which is often absurdly juxtaposed with images. One vignette, for example, shows a headless man – a stand-in for Galileo – bowing to a woman on a chair upstage; shown beneath are the words ‘Eros has shafted me’. Written beside this is a – likely fabricated – anecdote of Galileo, at the age of twenty, being ‘offered union with a virgin on New Year’s Eve’. Applebroog’s staging recalls Bertolt Brecht’s 1943 play *Life of Galileo*, which also humanises the ‘great man’ – a legacy that she both honours and contends with. Much of the installation focuses on Galileo’s illegitimate daughter Virginia, who Brecht represented as engaged to be married, but who was in fact a nun.<sup>4</sup>



**Fig. 1** Installation view of *Ida Applebroog. Right Up To Now 1969–2021* at Hauser & Wirth Somerset, 2022, showing *A Performance*, by Ida Applebroog. 1977–81. 3 volumes of offset lithographs, 28 books, each 19.7 by 15.9 cm (Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth; photograph Ken Adlard).

That Applebroog worked on the next installation, *I see by your fingernails that you are my brother* **FIG.5**, from 1969 to 2011, suggests that the work also embodies the mediating influence of time. It is difficult to tell exactly how this work developed over four decades, but the proliferation of certain images and texts gives an impression of perpetual incompleteness. Throughout the room, someone’s psyche – or a collective psyche – is charted across personal records, diaristic, clinical and otherwise hard to define, and pegged to the walls for scrutiny. A drawing shows a supine boy with two clerical figures looking on; beneath him are words: ‘I’ve gone crazy [.] They put me in the loony bin’. Elsewhere, this image is paired with one of the Virgin Mary; a boy suckles from her breast, the words beneath read: ‘My first sexual experience’. A row of soldiers in what appear to be German uniforms from the Second World War, in addition to the inclusion of Nazi symbols in other

parts of the exhibition, may be linked to Applebroog's Jewish ancestry, signalling intergenerational trauma. Applebroog's stagecraft invites what Michel Foucault called the 'medical gaze'.<sup>5</sup> The gallery space here acts as a clinic, in which we search for clues to comprehend the 'subject'. When we overstep the bounds of the clinical, by supplying our own narrative, we risk exposing ourselves.



**Fig. 2** From the series *A Performance*, by Ida Applebroog. 1977–81. Offset lithograph book, 19.7 by 15.9 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth; photograph Ken Allard; exh. Hauser & Wirth Somerset).

The *Marginalia* series of the early 1990s showcases most fully, and beguilingly, Applebroog's graphic and painterly skill. The canvases, often jammed together to produce fragmented, altarpiece-like arrangements, are both hung on the walls and standing on the floor **FIG. 6**. Whereas the previous installation relies on clinical distance, here we are in the depths of a nightmare: a woman with a tap bandaged to her head pours brain fluid into a beaker, a boy brandishes a machine gun; a young girl's hands constrict the throat of another. One quickly becomes lost, not just in the confusion of images, but in the captivating, yet understated virtuosity of Applebroog's painted theatre.





**Fig. 3** Installation view of *Ida Applebroog. Right Up To Now 1969–2021* at Hauser & Wirth Somerset, 2022, showing *Galileo Chronology*, by Ida Applebroog, 1975. Ink and lacquer on mylar, dimensions variable. (Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth; photograph Ken Adlard).

We return to the clinic in *Variations on Emetic Fields* **FIG.7**. A broken mosaic of watercolours and paintings are mapped – or vomited, as the title suggests – on the walls, which are painted ‘hospital’ green. The component parts of this installation are scattered across the walls, seemingly unconnected, like freely associated memories. It is a testament to Applebroog’s graphic economy that she evokes trauma without showing it. Her characters often appear to be hiding something; are they family members? The images certainly feel related, and not only by Applebroog’s hand. A painting of a woman holding an axe is constructed across five canvases, one of which depicts a man’s head where her torso should be, the orange colours jarring aggressively with the green tones of the remaining panels. The suggestion is of familial and psychic entanglement, along with the violent urges, conscious or otherwise, that this entails. White chairs lining the opposite wall invoke the presence of an audience, but the uncanny scenes painted on them – a woman showering in blood, another climbing a ladder with a flower between her buttocks – undermine any assumption of clinical objectivity.

It would have been instructive to see more of Applebroog’s most recent work in this exhibition, most notably her *Angry Birds of America*, which she began in 2016 in response to the rage-ridden presidency of Donald Trump. Only three paintings from this series are included in the show, consisting of ‘portraits’ of birds inspired by John James Audubon’s stately compilation of ornithological illustrations (1827–38), in addition to a small flock of plaster

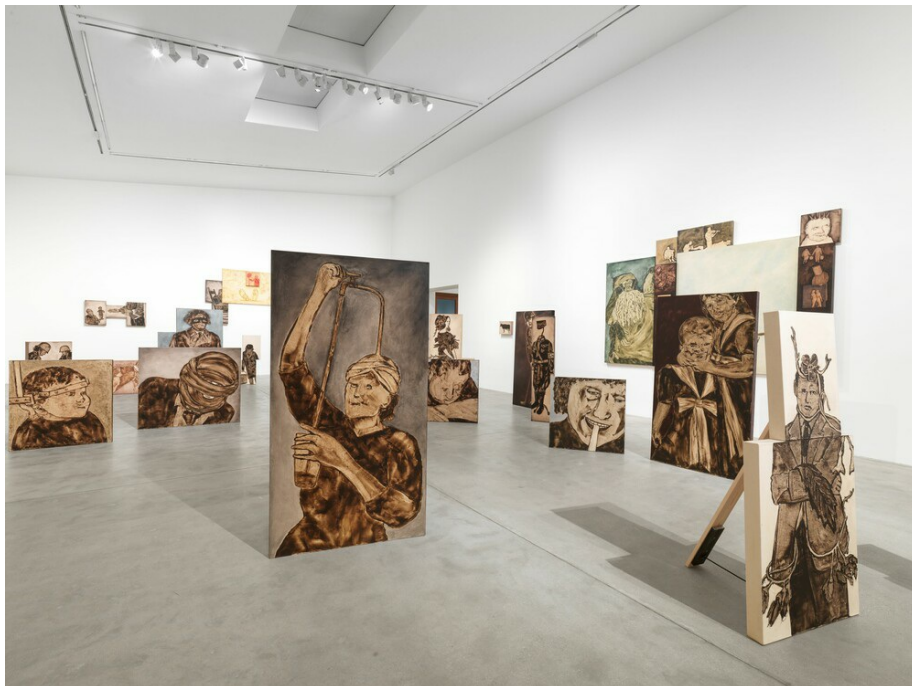
sculptures **FIG.8**. The birds look happy enough, but one needs to get close to the paint to sense the emotion referred to in the title. It is not the birds who are angry – it is Applebroog. Again, it is remarkable that she is able to convey trauma with such nuance, adopting the signification and symbolism of abstraction in what, at first glance, appear to be fairly saccharine animal portraits. Applebroog's brushstrokes are agitated and unstable, producing unctuous, pungent textures, and a sense that something – brush, feathers or both – is being rubbed the wrong way. A layer of gel, presumably to protect and add lustre to the colours, has been hurled at the surface. If Audubon's celebrated volume is an archive of sorts, in Applebroog's version, the colours are running; some birds are taking flight.



**Fig. 4** *Galileo Chronology: I'm dying* from the series *Galileo Chronology*, by Ida Applebroog, 1975. Ink and lacquer on Mylar, 4 panels, overall dimensions 170.8 by 220.3 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth; photograph Emily Poole; exh. Hauser & Wirth Somerset).



**Fig. 5** Installation view of *Ida Applebroog. Right Up To Now 1969-2021* at Hauser & Wirth Somerset, 2022, showing *I see by your fingernails that you are my brother*, by Ida Applebroog. 1969-2011. Journals, UltraChrome ink, paint, Mylar, paper, wood, cardboard and metal racks, dimensions variable. (Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth; photograph Ken Adlard).

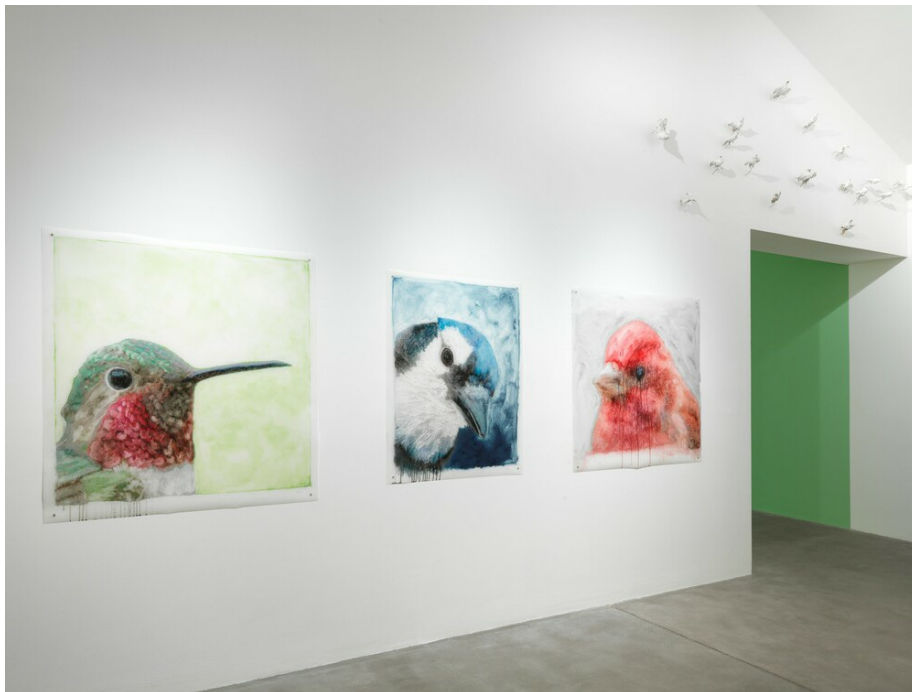


**Fig. 6** Installation view of *Ida Applebroog. Right Up To Now 1969-2021* at Hauser & Wirth Somerset, 2022. (Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth; photograph Ken Adlard).





**Fig. 7** Installation view of *Ida Applebroog. Right Up To Now 1969–2021* at Hauser & Wirth Somerset, 2022, showing *Variations on Emetic Fields*, by Ida Applebroog. 1990. Watercolour on Arches Aquarelle paper, oil and resin gel on canvas, 366 by 1400 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth; photograph Ken Adlard).



**Fig. 8** Installation view of *Ida Applebroog. Right Up To Now 1969–2021* at Hauser & Wirth Somerset, 2022. (Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth; photograph Ken Adlard).

**Exhibition details**    Ida Applebroog: Right Up To Now 1969–2021  
Hauser and Wirth Somerset  
29th January–2nd May 2022

## Footnotes

- 1** J. Muñoz: 'Ephemera as evidence: introductory notes to queer acts', *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8, no.2 (1996), p.9. This notion of ephemerality is developed in relation to the archive in R. Schneider: *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*, London and New York 2011, esp. pp.94–102.
- 2** Muñoz, *ibid.*
- 3** See R. Ohrt and A. Heil: *Aby Warburg: Bilderatlas Mnemosyne – The Original*, Ostfildern 2020.
- 4** G. Szczesny: *The Case against Bertolt Brecht, with arguments drawn from his Life of Galileo*, New York 1969, p.54.
- 5** M. Foucault: *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, London 1973, p.90.

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