

THE NEW YORK TIMES

JUNE 17, 2016

SHE'S HER OWN ARTIST. AND A DAUGHTER'S MUSE.

by Patrica Leigh Brown



Ida Applebroog, left, and her daughter the filmmaker Beth B.
Credit Damon Winter/The New York Times

The filmmaker Beth B was 13 in 1969, the year the fraught event occurred that would become a family secret. That was when her mother, Ida Horowitz, checked herself into the mental ward of Mercy Hospital in San Diego. Ida was then a Chevy-driving mother of four and a struggling artist who kept a suicide contingency plan — a plastic bag just the right size to fit snugly over her head — at the bottom of her purse.

Incoherent, Ida spent much of her six weeks at Mercy Hospital drawing what would become her salvation: over 100 fantastical images in which abstract forms — some recognizable as Ida — collide, float, somersault and are engulfed by others, an emotional reckoning in India ink, watercolor and pastel. Her daughter Beth struggled to understand the sudden disappearance of the mother she knew.

Five years later, Ida Applebroog, as she christened herself, burst onto the New York art scene at the age of 45, eventually becoming a feminist boundary-breaker. Her technical prowess as a painter has been accompanied by a fierce commitment to questioning business as usual: the clichéd concepts of female beauty and sexual pleasure; the power dynamics between men and women; the violence that percolates, like bubbling lava, through ordinary life. Anchored in dark humor, her work resides in the collections of the Whitney, the Guggenheim and the Museum of Modern Art.

But her extraordinary drawings from Mercy Hospital were forgotten in a basement locker for 40 years until studio assistants unearthed them in 2009. They are the centerpiece of an exhibition opening July 8 at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami, the first solo show of Ms. Applebroog's work in the United States in nearly two decades. (It will travel next year to the Karma Gallery in New York.)

For her daughter, whose film career grew out of the East Village 1970s punk era, her mother's demons and eventual breakthrough from the chrysalis of depression are the underpinnings of her moving new documentary, "Call Her Applebroog," at the Metrograph theater through Thursday, June 23 (a schedule is at callherapplebroog.com). Fifteen years in the making, the film is an intimate portrait of a formidable artist who continues to innovate at 86, in fuzzy slippers at her SoHo studio.

But perhaps more than anything, it is the story of a mother and a daughter exploring the tumultuous years of their shared past.

“It’s very difficult to see a film about yourself — plus, by a daughter,” Ms. Applebroog said on a recent morning, wigs from one of her digital art projects poking out from the bookshelves. “I was positive it would be something that Beth would put out after I’m gone. It never occurred to me she’d say, ‘Oh, I finished the film.’”

For Beth — the “B” is a homage to B-movies — the process has finally brought an appreciation for her own difficult history. “I think I spent a lot of my childhood protecting my mother,” she said, sitting in a white room at the School of Visual Arts, where she teaches. The backdrop set off her vivid blue hair.

The pair share many of the same preoccupations, almost telepathically. But Beth B had not seen the Mercy Hospital drawings until they looked at them together before the camera. “What a profound treasure,” she said. “It was like seeing the shell of who my mother was when I was 13, then looking at her today as this powerful, strong artist.”

Since Beth’s 1979 film “Letters to Dad,” a collaboration with her husband at the time, Scott B, in which actors read aloud letters written to Jim Jones by cult followers, she has hardly shied away from tough subjects — juvenile sex offenders, the United States penal system and her more recent “Exposed,” which examines sexual taboos through the subculture of contemporary burlesque. Still, taking on a film about one’s mother is arguably a category unto itself. “My god!” she exclaimed. “The fear! The fear of disappointing her or making her angry.”



Ida Applebroog working in the 1970s, from the film “Call Her Applebroog.” Credit Gideon Horowitz

At one point, Ms. Applebroog asked to be involved in the editing, hoping her daughter could omit material that made her uncomfortable. After several sleepless nights, Beth B said no. “I was interested in portraying Ida’s mind, her passion and yes, sometimes her insanity,” she explained. “I think that’s what makes her such a fascinating artist.”

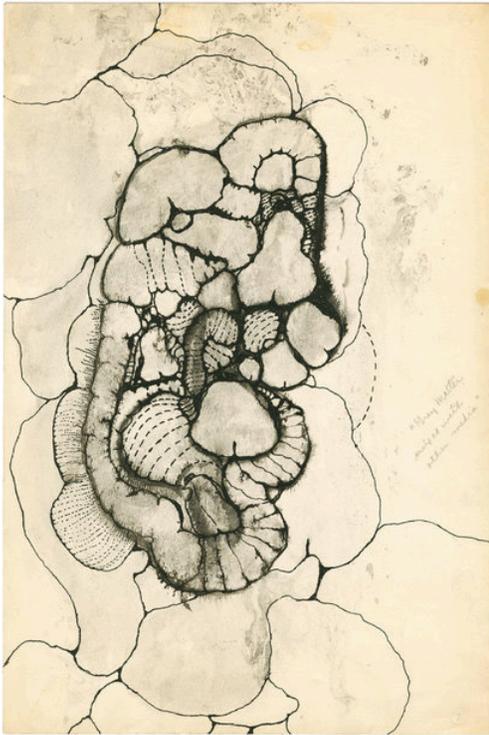
“I was there,” she added. “So I knew what happened.”

Beth B's father, Gideon Horowitz, to whom the film is dedicated, was a Viennese-born psychotherapist who died of cancer last summer. Ms. Applebroog, whose maiden name is Appelbaum, met him when she was 15, and they were married for 60 years. Both had lost family members in the Holocaust. The artist grew up speaking Yiddish in an Orthodox household in a Bronx tenement. "I didn't have to wear a burqa, but I had to follow the rules," she said. Which she did — usually. "I would sneak out to a luncheonette and order bacon sandwiches," she recalled. "I should have been struck dead."

Ms. Applebroog's father was an imperious furrier who terrified the household. And unlike her beloved older sister, Frieda, she was not a fighter. (Until recently, when she "became a geriatric," as she puts it, the artist was shy to the point of near paralysis.)

"There's not a peaceful day as a child, when you are shaking in your boots and afraid to enter the house," she said. Her mother, who was illiterate, was a "crazed creative figure," Ms. Applebroog recalled, who added fur accents to her daughter's hand-sewn clothes. Her mother would spend hours staring out the window. "Did I mention she was depressed?" Ms. Applebroog inquired.

Attuned to gender expectations early on, Ms. Applebroog recalled working for her father modeling fur coats for buyers. "Those sons of bitches would feel me up, pretending to stroke the pelts," she said.



A drawing Ida Applebroog made at Mercy Hospital in 1969.
Credit Ida Applebroog and Hauser & Wirth

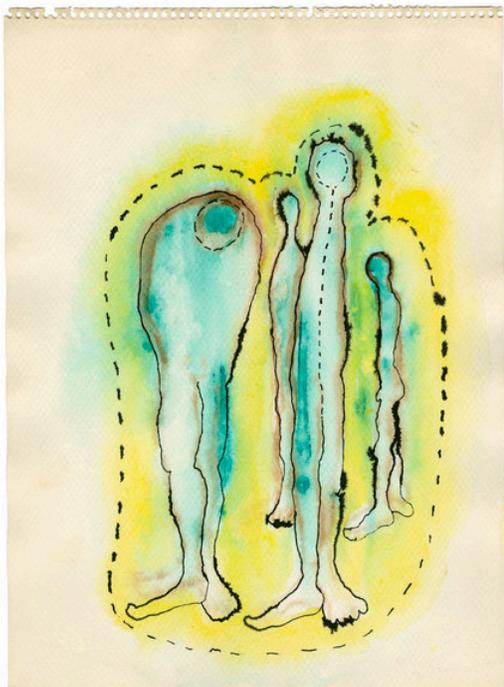
Her gift for drawing has always been effortless. (She compares the ease to making instant coffee.) She attended commercial art school and after moving to Chicago with her young family, she made the bold decision to go back to school at the Art Institute, a renegade move in an era when finding a balance between motherhood and being an artist was next to impossible.

In 1968, the family moved San Diego, where Ms. Applebroog's mental health began to unravel. Like many women who had nipped their creative potential in the bud, she felt trapped — "like an empty house inhabited by hungry tenants," she would write.

The film by Beth B takes a nuanced look at her mother's triumph over depression, combining a daughter's impressionistic images with her mother's journal entries to convey the depths of her harrowing descent. It was triggered in part by Ms. Applebroog's residual grief over Frieda's death from rheumatic heart disease 20 years earlier.

In a series of devastating poems called "The Green Dress," Ms. Applebroog recalls the dress she wore the morning everything started to fall apart as she drove her two young sons to the zoo — unable to distinguish traffic lights and guided by two tiny voices in the back seat. She committed herself to Mercy Hospital that day.

Beth cried while editing passages from "The Green Dress." "My mother's illness was hidden from us," she said. Depression was a taboo subject; the siblings were told their mom had a bad back. "My most vivid memory is sitting by my mother's bedside trying to talk to her but not getting any response," she added. "A great sadness was palpable but unexplained."



A watercolor Ida Applebroog made at Mercy Hospital in 1969.
Credit Ida Applebroog and Hauser & Wirth

When Ms. Applebroog left the hospital for good, she moved alone into an apartment. Her priority became her art. "There was of course a sense of loss and confusion," Beth B said. "My mother was searching for herself in a place that was foreign to me." Yet on some deeper level, she understood and supported her. She, too, knew she wanted to be an artist.

They wound up moving to New York at the same time, with the family joining them later. The feminist art movement was in full flower, and Ms. Applebroog joined the Heresies Collective, which published a journal of art and politics. She would show up at meetings with hip-length black hair tied into a bun. "She barely spoke," recalled Elizabeth Hess, an art writer and founding member. "But when she spoke, everybody listened."

Women's gender roles and the tipping points of power remain searing touchstones of Ms. Applebroog's work. "Mona Lisa" (2009), sketches of her vagina, have the delicacy of Asian brush painting, and "Modern Olympia Scrolls" (1997-2001), a five-panel riff on "Olympia," Édouard Manet's controversial nude, celebrates women's freedom to revel in the pleasures of their bodies.

As a filmmaker, Beth's major challenge was to capture her mother's tenacity and fearlessness as an artist, while persuading her to be open about her past. At times, tension crackles between the women. Yet the painter knew that Beth B's talent for revealing the melancholy truths beneath life's placid veneer was learned at the foot of the master.

Ms. Applebroog's increasing physical frailty is poignantly illustrated. She no longer climbs ladders to paint, relying on assistants to position the canvases. Yet she continues to enthusiastically embrace new media and is steeping herself in taxidermy for her current project — an Applebroogian twist on John James Audubon's "Birds of America" series, to be called "Angry Birds of America." She is poring over taxidermy catalogs full of long needles and other tools. "I haven't told anybody because it would be laughed out of the art world," she said.

But like a hawk, she is circling.