

‘WORK HAPPENS FOR A REASON’: IDA APPLEBROOG TALKS
‘MERCY HOSPITAL,’ HER CURRENT EXHIBITION AT KARMA IN
NEW YORK

By John Chiaverina



Installation view of Ida Applebroog “Mercy Hospital” at Karma.
EMILY POOLE. COURTESY IDA APPLEBROOG AND HAUSER & WIRTH.

“Mercy Hospital” is the title of the exhibition and book by the 87-year-old artist Ida Applebroog on view at the East Village gallery and publishing house Karma through April 30. It is also the name of the San Diego mental-health facility where the artist made the show’s 97 drawings with watercolor, ink, pencil, and pastel while she was a patient at the institution. They were filed away for many decades before being rediscovered in storage while archival work was being done. When she saw them, Applebroog told me, she “had no real connection to them except other than, I would think to myself, ‘Oh she was a pretty good artist.’ ”

“Pretty good” is an understatement. The drawings, which were first shown last summer at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Miami, are emotionally resonant, moving between abstraction and figuration, sometimes incorporating text and images that scan as self-portraiture. They obliquely recall both the psychedelic art and cartoons of the era as well as deeper art-historical touchstones.

Talking to Applebroog at her SoHo studio recently, the artist told me that “usually when you’re in a hospital setting like that, they make you go to occupational therapy, where you weave baskets or something. [The doctor] excused me from that, he instead just said, ‘Work in your room.’ ”

“Work happens for a reason, whether you’re located in a certain place, or you have certain experiences,” she continued. “Things change.”

For a good portion of the first half of Applebroog’s life, change was a constant. The artist was born into an Orthodox Jewish family in the Bronx and went to school for graphic design because, in her words, “there was no way I could be a real artist because I had to make a living.” After graduation, she landed a torturous short-lived job with an advertising agency, which she was able to gracefully quit by faking a marriage. “That was very acceptable” in that era, she explained. “If a woman was getting married she didn’t have to say to them, ‘I’m leaving here because I don’t like being here.’ ”

In 1950, Applebroog got married for real, and by 1960 she had four children (one of the four children, who now works under the name Beth B, made a documentary about Applebroog that was released in 2016). It was also in 1960 that Applebroog's family moved to Chicago and the artist started taking classes at the School of the Art Institute. Her family moved again, in 1968, to San Diego. Both moves were on account of her husband's academic career.

Around the time of her hospitalization, she began sketching nude self-portraits, a series that would not be displayed until 2010. She was included in one of her first group exhibitions in 1972, at the age of 44. By 1974, she had changed her last name to Applebroog (based off Applebaum, her maiden name) and moved to New York City, where she took the same SoHo studio that she has used for over four decades. Back then, the artist told me, "I could count the people living in SoHo. You know, you look at SoHo today, it's disgusting."

Commercial acceptance has never been a main concern for Appleboorg, who recounted something that she remembered hearing the artist John Baldessari say a long time ago. "He was sort of making fun of the hobbyist Sunday painters in San Diego," she told me. "And I remember he said, he was telling them what kind of art they should make." Baldessari recommended that young painters trying to make a quick buck should "do birds but no dead birds." It was at this point that Applebroog gestured to the paintings surrounding her—part of a larger series called "Angry Birds of America" that is based off of John James Audubon's famous series and are created by painting over a digital print. "These are all dead birds," she said. "No one wants to buy a dead bird." (Nevertheless, Applebroog has amassed a distinguished and celebrated body of work over the past 40-plus years. She is currently represented by Hauser & Worth and has received a lifetime achievement award from the College Art Association and an honorary doctorate from the New School.)

Contemporary art can often feel frivolous; the work in "Mercy Hospital" is anything but. I suggested to Applebroog that her lived experience added a level of depth to her output, making it stronger. "Perhaps—I don't know, it's all I can do, it's the way in which I do it," she said of her work. "It doesn't really matter to me, strong or not, I have to do it and I do it."