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BARBARA T. SMITH

1965-1972

Maccarone

630 Greenwich Street, at Morton Street, West Village

Through March 21

The installation and performance artist Barbara T. Smith, born in 1931, is having her first New York gallery exhibition. It contains work made from 1965 to 1972 in southern California, providing a core sample of a fast-moving period from the angle of a busy, innovative and little-known career that is even more little known in these parts.

Ms. Smith earned a degree in painting from Pomona College in 1953, and following marriage, children and divorce became a full-time artist in the 1960s. The work in this show catches her in transition, moving from abstract painting to installation art on her way to feminist performance pieces, like the 1973 "Feed Me," which is included in "Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution" at P.S. 1. The through line is the growing role of the perceiving, gendered body and an active sense of play.

The Maccarone show begins with Ms. Smith's 1965 "Black Glass Painting," a group of eight large panels combining bright, spare geometric motifs on black backgrounds. They seem abstracted from neon signs seen at night, similar to the work of Ed Ruscha, but the configurations are hard to decipher because the paintings are framed with glass. The viewer's reflections turn the act of looking into a performance; perception is challenged as it was in contemporaneous paintings and sculptures by California artists like Larry Bell and Robert Irwin. But in addition active and passive states are confused. Ms. Smith extended the performance potential of these paintings by staging the photographing of their reflections: the large images capture her vamping flirtatiously while the photographer bends over his camera, all business. A swath of sunny, arid California landscape behind them adds to the suggestive mix of light, space, gender roles and social behavior.

An act of perception - looking at blades of grass - inspired the show's main event, "The Field Piece," an installation that preoccupied Ms. Smith from 1968 to 1972, as a series of rather beautiful drawings suggest. With much experimentation and at considerable expense (basically her divorce settlement) she fabricated 180 enormous blades of grass in fiberglass resin, each more than nine feet high and lighted from within.

Photographs of its first incarnation resemble a sci-fi forest of a fairly phallic nature. The people in these photographs (the artist and several friends) look like Lilliputians: naked ones, as if "Gulliver's Travels" included a love-in.

At Maccarone, with only 16 blades installed, the work is more like a discrete sculpture, but there's a clear relationship to contemporary works by Eva Hesse, Yayoi Kusama and Louise Bourgeois.

While working on "The Field Piece" Ms. Smith was already exploring performance art, which she also studied at the University of California, Irvine, where her fellow students included Chris Burden. By 1973 her female body had become her primary instrument, as demonstrated by "Feed Me," at P.S. 1. Ms. Smith's revelatory show plays micro to the macro of "Wack." It is just another day in the life of rebuilding art history one career at a time. ROBERTA SMITH

