

Audrey Flack, A Feminist Pioneer of Photorealism, Dies at 93

Audrey Flack: May 30, 1931 – June 28, 2024

New York – Audrey Flack, a premier artist of the Photorealist movement known for her oversized vanitas paintings, died on June 28th in Southampton, New York. She was 93.

Her death was announced by her longtime friend Louis K. Meisel.

A founder of the Photorealist movement that emerged in the late 1960s, Audrey Flack is internationally recognized for her oversized still life paintings and her monumental bronze sculptures of female deities. She is the first woman artist, along with Mary Cassatt, to be recognized in an updated version of H.W. Janson's iconic textbook—*History of Art*. Her artistic career spanned over 7 decades and explored feminist and religious iconography during periods that were dominated by masculine imagery.

“As the only [prominent] woman artist in the groundbreaking Photorealist movement, I broke the unwritten code of acceptable subject matter,” said Flack in a statement to the Brooklyn Museum. “Photorealists painted cars, motorcycles and empty street scenes. Cool, unemotional and banal were the terms used to describe the movement. My work, however, was humanist, emotional and filled with referential symbolic imagery.”

A first-wave Feminist, Flack was born in New York in 1931. She attended Cooper Union in the early 1950s, and she was recruited by Josef Albers to attend the Yale School of Art on a scholarship. There she explored and immersed herself in Abstract Expressionism, pursuing it for years, before turning her back on the genre, in part, because of the debauchery affiliated with the scene. Seeking stability, Flack married her first husband and began a family, becoming a mother to 2 daughters—Melissa and Hannah.

It was through motherhood that Flack's passion for realism was kindled; she began photographing her children and painting their portraits. This evolved into painting imagery from news clippings, which led to her first Photorealist works. In 1964, she completed *Kennedy Motorcade, November 22, 1963*, a painting that captured President Kennedy prior to his assassination; this work foreshadowed her paintings to come and has been referred to by critics as the first Photorealist painting of the genre. At the time, her peers found her use of photographs as source material to be “divisive”, and yet she persevered, shifting from commercially sourced images to her own photography as source material in the mid 1960s.

In the early 1970s, Flack began painting imagery of ornate historic architecture and then notable religious artifacts. By 1972, Flack was painting still lifes, not from life, but from her own photography. Assembling items of historic and symbolic significance, Flack began to create complex compositions filled with what Lawrence Alloway would refer to as “speaking objects”. Each item, carefully arranged and styled, contributed to the greater narrative of the still life as a whole, imbuing compositions with layered references. Saturated with brilliant colors and softened airbrushed lines, Flack's work garnered attention, and by the end of the 1985, her work

was included in all 4 major museums in the New York City, including the Museum of Modern Art.

By the 1980s, Flack's career was strong, she had divorced her first husband and was happily remarried to Robert Marcus; yet, she felt directionless. After a 2-year creative block, Flack reinvented herself as a sculptor. For the next 3 decades, Flack sculpted. She created figures of powerful women and goddesses, drawing from mythology and Egyptian iconography. She won competitions, and she created public sculptures in numerous cities in the United States, including Rock Hill, South Carolina and Nashville, Tennessee.

In recent years, Flack has returned to the canvas, during what she deemed her "Post-Pop Baroque" period. No longer creating Photorealist works, her latest body of work further explored themes of female empowerment, tinged with religious, political and pop commentary. In 2024, she published a memoir entitled "With Darkness Came Stars". This memoir followed a full-length documentary about her life by Deborah Shaffer titled "Queen of Hearts: Audrey Flack" (2019). Jointly, these releases unveiled a more personal side of Flack's life—exploring themes of misogyny in the art world, abuse on the part of her first husband, and her struggle as a mother to 2 young girls, one of whom was non-verbal and autistic.

Audrey Flack's work has been highly celebrated. Of the 50 Photorealist paintings that she created, 32 paintings are presently in museum collections. During the course of her career, she had dozens of solo exhibitions, in addition to the hundreds of group shows which took place both domestically and internationally. Her work is in numerous museum collections, including the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, amongst others. She is currently represented by Hollis Taggart Gallery, New York.

In October 2024, the Parrish Art Museum in Water Mill, New York will present *Audrey Flack NOW*, an exhibition that presents work from the last four years of her career.

Audrey Flack lived and worked in New York and East Hampton, NY. She is preceded in death by her husband, Robert Marcus, and leaves behind her 2 daughters Hannah and Melissa.