

Doing her own thing

A big personality in a diminutive frame, Edith Schloss is an artist, writer and longtime Rome resident who likes to be called a storyteller and always says what she thinks

Edith Schloss is a small woman with an impish smile. "I was so worried I would not like you," she says, meeting me at the door of her Rome apartment near Piazza Navona. Then, gravely, "It can happen, you know." As Edith starts talking, indicating with impatient gestures that I am not to take notes, I gather she likes, as she later admits, "to be contrary." "As a painter I do not like many other painters, but as an art writer I have to put myself in their place." Or, "I do not like to be called an art critic, I am a writer." Someone once said she was a storyteller. "I liked that," she says.

Edith is always painting, writing, putting together collages, collecting, photographing and taking notes, and is, she points out, still only at the "beginning." Her prolific output of work is scattered around her apartment on walls, shelves, tables, and in trunks. A lot of what is on the walls is from the summer of 2001: oils brimming with Greek mythological figures, watercolors and ink drawings featuring her beloved diver (from the tomb fresco of a young diver found in Paestum, which moved Edith to add swimmers and "falling or striving bodies" to her work). Every year she chooses a theme from Greek mythology which dominates her work. Last year it was Eos. "She is pulling up a man from his sleep," says Edith. It was Eos's task to ride in her chariot to Mount Olympus every night and announce the rise of her brother, Helios, the sun. She is, in effect, the bringer of daylight.

The figures in Edith's works are constantly in movement, abstract tangles of color on canvas, spiraling ink drawings on paper, watercolor friezes of fighting men and women, or detailed paper cutouts of coupling men. Punches are literally flying. Figures are in hot pursuit. Men are pulling women down, women are carrying men, limbs are entwined. These are important stories, timeless stories. Sometimes the themes are erotic or, as often in Greek mythology, they deal with dark and pressingly sensual themes such as rape, or ravishment. "I read that it was always called rape, but the Latin word *rapere* means 'to seize,' 'to carry off,'" Edith explains. Carried away? "Yes," she nods, "So what may really have happened was that the women fell for the handsome god-men in various shapes and gladly went off with them."

When starting out Edith was taught that art had to function in society. A personal turning point was her realization that politics was not going to achieve much and the only way to try to change things was through art. At the time, she was a friend of many abstract expressionists but was always protesting against what was fashionable or "politically correct," struggling to find her true voice, her true style. She became less abstract and more figurative at a time when the action painters were becoming dogmatic about their abstraction. She started to write reviews for Tom Hess's *Art News* magazine. (Later she was to be the *International Herald Tribune's* art critic for Italy for almost twenty years.)

In 1961 the Museum of Modern Art showed a box assemblage she had made. Boxes were deemed "okay" by the action painters, as they represented an avant-garde technique. Meanwhile, her figurative painter self remained firmly in the closet. Now that the artist is in her eighties, her work on canvas is almost abstract again. As before, she is motivated by a need to "scoop shapes and colors" from the world, to satisfy a boundless curiosity. At one point, she tells me that being wrong is not so important, so long as you are enthusiastically wrong.

For Edith is one of those big personalities, not in the sense that she is a celebrity, but that she is vital and unaffected. The fact that neither of her German parents were artists was a great help, she says. "I know many children of artists, and they have hang-ups." When she was growing up her father took her to see Greek tragedies and she learned about protagonists struggling in "the mesh of fate." She was drawn by the Mediterranean and thoughts of becoming an archaeologist. In 1936, as a teenager, she visited Italy for the first time. She

traveled around Europe, ending up in Shrewsbury, England, where she worked as an au pair and attended life classes in the evening. During the Blitz she sailed to the United States and studied in Boston, then at the Arts Students' League in New York, where she spent the 1940s and 1950s. It was then that Edith came to know some of the biggest artists of the time, both in Rome and in New York. Some became friends: Willem De Kooning, Fairfield Porter, Joseph Cornell, Edwin Denby, Jean Arp, Giorgio Morandi and Meret Oppenheim. Another, Swiss filmmaker and photographer Rudy Burckhardt, she married.

Edith moved to Rome in 1962, but New York is never far from her mind. She goes back regularly, and her son lives there. "Rome and New York have something in common: They both think they are the only city in the world." Edith laughs: "And it's true both times." When she first came to Rome with her son, after separating from her husband, she intended to remain only a few months. Why did she stay? "It was a gradual thing." Every time she went back to New York the pull to remain there weakened, until eventually she understood that Rome was going to be her home. There she became a friend of artists Cy Twombly, Giulio Turcato, Paul Klerr and Peter Rockwell. American composer Alvin Curran was her longtime partner.

She mentions the passion and formality Italians ascribe to food and the art of eating. How each course is a ritual. In a typically unusually punctuated preface to a 1976 exhibition catalogue, she writes, "there are still ties to the land a taste for simple values food and ancient sanity there." Other clues lie in the colors and history in her work. It is the Mediterranean that Schloss cannot live without. In the 1960s and 1970s she painted still lifes of objects, vases and jugs set against the deep blue sea, neatly juxtaposing "nearby personal objects against faraway impersonal views."

And it is perhaps this quality that is most indicative of the person behind the painter and writer. Edith is both personal and impersonal, involved and detached, erudite and innocent. She is always compassionate but never tragic. When her husband Rudy Burckhardt died in 1999 she spoke about him at a commemoration in New York, remembering their trips in Europe just after the war. It was the small incidents and moments that somehow said more. Before I leave, Edith tells me she is writing to her grandson Hughie. He lives in New York and is twelve years old. He was deeply shocked by the events of September 11 and she wants to tell him that he must not be afraid of the future. In the letter, she speaks of Hitler and the war and other events in her life that frightened her to the core, most recently the nuclear accidents at Three Mile Island and Chernobyl. She ends the letter with the words, "There has always been fear and cruelty, but there has always been growing and blooming. Don't we all hope it will go on?" As I leave, we start talking about something else, and as she often does in conversation, she shakes her head and injects an opinion, "It's awful." But she is grinning. Impishly.

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