an everyday life interiors magazine – issue #19

apartamento

Featuring: Alessandro Mendini, Bernard Rudofsky's 'La Casa', Kim Hastreiter, Barbara Nessim, Naoki Takizawa, Cristopher Nying, Flawless Sabrina, Antoni Miralda, Leonard Koren, Ford Wheeler, Richard Hell, and Penny Martin. Plus: Instagram stories, a conversation with Carlota Guerrero, Paloma Lanna, and Soraya Rosales, and a portfolio of Robby Müller's Polaroids

€12.00

18

9 772013 019003

Barbara Nessim defies categorisation and I think that was her plan all along. Born in the Bronx in 1939 to hard-working parents—her father was a postman with a side business importing and exporting raw perfume materials, and her mother worked full time as a fashion designer—it's clear where she developed her work ethic. After studying art at the Pratt Institute she began a lifetime career as an illustrator at a moment when men dominated the profession. Yet Nessim is the first to acknowledge that she is not a card-carrying feminist, despite being Gloria Steinem's roommate for six years, but rather someone who just followed a path of independence. Her work has been celebrated with retrospectives at the Victoria and Albert Museum and at the Bard Graduate Center. She continues to work, now concentrating more on fine art. Her Upper East Side apartment edges up against the East River, with

BARBARA NESSIM

INTERVIEW BY LEAH SINGER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DANIEL TERNA
ILLUSTRATIONS BY BARBARA NESSIM

the Blackwell lighthouse down below and Queens beyond. Although she has a small office and studio here, most of her work is done and kept in a studio downtown that hugs the Hudson River on the west side. Well kept, organised, and classic—both spaces reflect her serious side, but on closer inspection the whimsy and light-heartedness of her personality show through, especially in her choice of collected artworks by artists like David Shrigley, Saul Steinberg, and metal artist Herbert Hoover. Bouncing back and forth between uptown and downtown, Nessim is quick to smile and shrug her shoulders when asked to elaborate on her varied career as an illustrator, fine artist, educator, and administrator, preferring instead to pull out one of her sketchbooks that she ritually works in and keeps filed by year on the shelves. It's here that all her ideas spring forth and where she continues to feel free to do what she pleases.

I read in your monograph that you felt you never fit in. What do you mean by that?
When you're growing up, you have your friends, and you think everybody is kind of the same, but you feel different. Being an artist I guess I felt like I never fit in because I was interested in different things. I was a mambo dancer. I used to go to the Palladium all the time. Nobody danced in school, nobody listened to rock 'n roll; they listened to classical music. Well, I liked rock 'n roll.

What years are we talking about?
We are talking a long time ago—1956 to 1960. There was only one radio station that played rock 'n roll, and I used to rush home so I could listen to it.

So, starting as a child you felt an awareness of being a little different. How did that extend to your professional life? Did you feel like you fit in immediately?
No, because I didn't get married, and everybody got married. Everybody was divorced seven years later, but they all got married! I wanted a career first, and that was different.

Did you feel by not getting married right away you were able to launch your career and work with a focus?
Yes. I knew either you had a life with somebody else and moved to New Jersey or Long Island, or you didn't get married and you focused on what you wanted to do. I knew what I wanted to do, but there wasn't the women's movement then; everybody thought, 'She's not getting married, she must be gay'.

What were your early working experiences like after college?
I had a part-time job—three days a week doing colouring for a textile designer—so I had some steady income. I brought my portfolio around to art directors on days I didn't work. I lived with my mother and father in the Bronx because I wanted to save money; I didn't care about living in New York. I had wanted to save $5,000, and back then that was a lot of money, like a year's salary. With that I didn't have to think about somebody supporting me at all, and that was my salvation.

Where did you go to show your portfolio?
I would see about five art directors a day. They worked with BBDO or any of the big ad agencies, small agencies, and girly magazines—that was where I got most of my jobs, at the girly magazines. Agencies saw me, but my work wasn't that commercial even though I tried to make it commercial.

What made you think of going to girly magazines?
This was not only me; a lot of illustrators were doing that. I would go to the New York Public Library, because if I had to draw a 19th-century chair for a manuscript I was working on I would look it up in the picture collection. Alan Cober was there, too—all these people who were illustrators used to informally meet there.

What were some of the magazines?
Escapade, *Swank*, *Nugget*, *Playboy*. Well, *Playboy* was already fancy. They used more famous illustrators, so I think I did one or two jobs for *Playboy*, but most of them were for those other titles.

So there was a community of illustrators in the early '60s?
You would see them on Madison Avenue with their portfolios and you would have lunch with them and basically everybody got to know each other and it was very nice. I shared my list of art directors and mailing lists with everyone. The Society of Illustrators had just been formed, and they had an exhibition I was a part of.

Were the illustrations for articles?
Yes, there were really good writers working for these girly magazines.

Did they pay well?
Between $75 and $100 for an illustration.

Was that better than what an ad agency paid?
At an ad agency it was more like $1,000. You wanted to work for an advertising agency.

Were you aware of the art world in New York at that time?
Yes, I knew galleries like André Emmerich, or Tanager Gallery on 10th Street. There were a lot of galleries that don't exist anymore. I went to a lot of openings.

Was Andy Warhol showing at this time?
He was around, I knew him as well because he was an illustrator. But I wasn't friendly with those people. I didn't stay up late at night. I didn't go out that much. I needed to save my money; I wasn't going to go out to a nightclub unless I was invited.

Did you ever go to the Factory?
No, but Sybil Burton—Richard Burton's first wife—had a club called Arthur, a big fancy nightclub that I used to go to. I knew musicians, so I was part of the social fabric.

Artists cross over from commercial to fine art and back again. What was it like for illustrators in the '60s?
There was a prejudice against illustrators back then. I didn't want to lie about it, because that was the work I was doing. This is the early work like the piece down there, which I did in 1961–62.

Right.
So it has very dark colours. Then in 1965–66 I started doing these brightly coloured line drawings. And that started a trend, where Peter Max used to come to my house and look at my work and then he did his thing and then people used to say, 'Do you know Peter Max?' when they looked at my work. But he had a knack of really promoting himself; Andy Warhol had a knack of promoting himself; I didn't have the knack of promoting myself in that way, even though I did send out mailers.

Do you think there was sexism at work at the time?
I wouldn't have known that it existed, but maybe it did. I went to one gallery, they said, 'You know, your work is very good and I would take you on but nobody is going to take you seriously because you're going to get married and have kids, and even if you don't, they're going to think you will'. OK, I get it. I'm sticking to illustration. I'm not even going to go the gallery road.

Did you feel maybe it was also about the work and the line drawn between fine art and illustration?
It could have been about illustration, too, but it was less about that. I didn't come from a big rich family that could support me, so I had to think practically instead of negatively. And my practical thinking was that I wanted to make a living and it wasn't going to be in an art gallery.

Were you aware of Push Pin Studios, which started in 1954?
I met the Push Pin artists in 1960 because I was part of an exhibition supporting the Sane Nuclear Policy cause at the School of Visual Arts. Seymour Chwast, who was at Push Pin, bought a little etching of mine.

So Milton Glaser, Seymour Chwast, and Edward Sorel started the studio to promote their graphic art and illustration.
Right, to have a community.

And you became friendly with Shirley and Milton Glaser.
Milton introduced me to his best friend, Frank Roth, and we went out together for two years. I used to see Milton and Shirley all the time, so that's how we really got to be acquainted.

So it was more social?
Yes, and also workwise. They would have wanted me to be in Push Pin Studios; in fact, Seymour once said, 'I don't know why we didn't ask you to come work with us. Look at us, we're all guys. We needed a woman in there'.

Right.
I wouldn't have wanted a job; I liked my work, and I liked my freedom.

You draw a lot of female figures.
I didn't even realise I drew only women until somebody pointed it out to me.

Why do you think you gravitated to drawing women?
I have no idea. I'm not influenced by the outside, I'm only doing things from the inside, and when you do things from the inside, you really don't know why you're doing it. It's a hard question to answer when it's innate.

And the women that you draw are—
Self-confident?

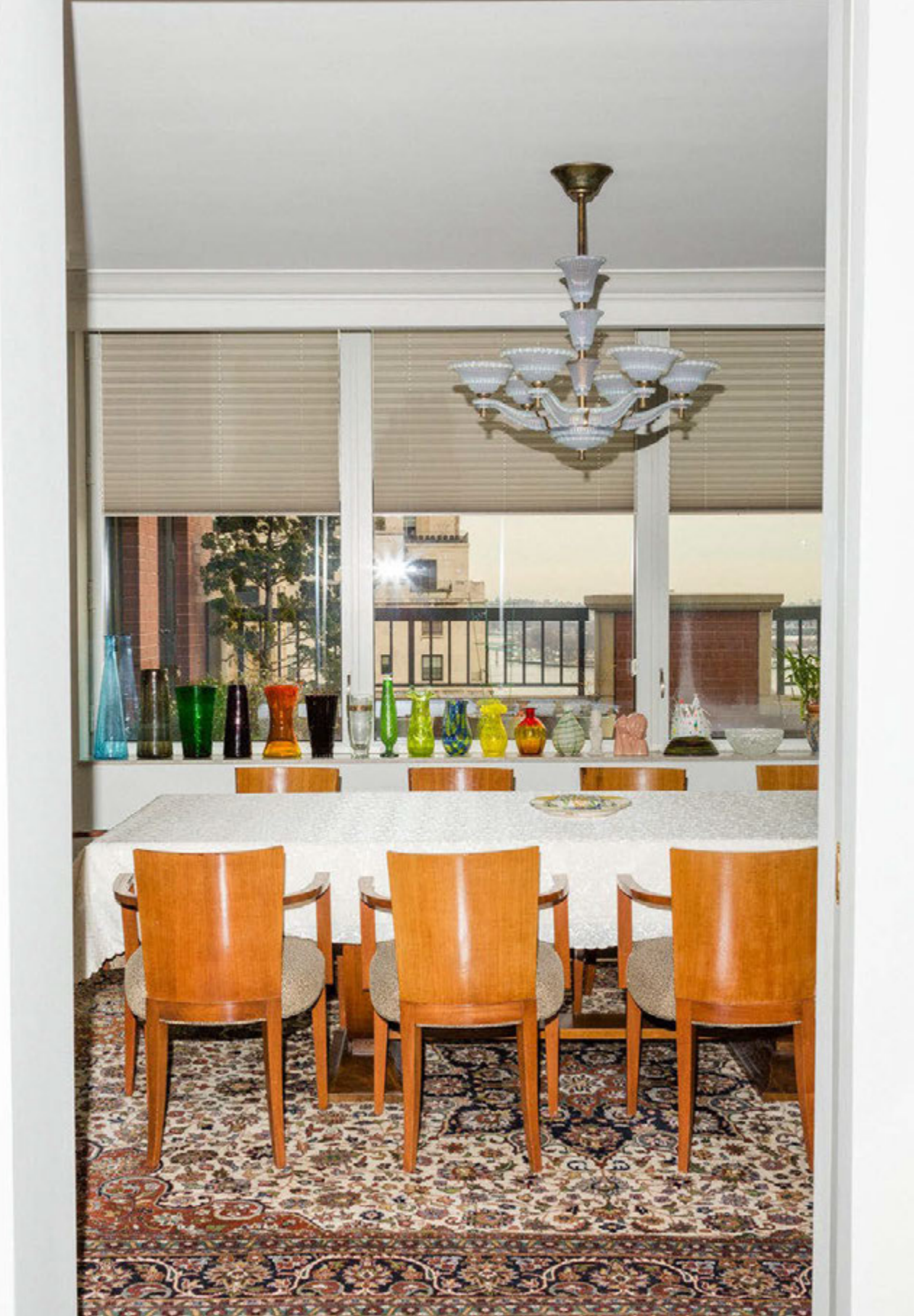
Yes, self-confident, especially because a lot of the figures are topless—you weren't afraid of showing a nipple. Was that really outrageous at the time?
I had a show with my series called WomanGirl at the Corridor Gallery in Soho in 1973. The figures were drawn with exposed vaginas and nipples. I was afraid I might get arrested if a policeman came up and looked at my work because it was pornographic, and it would have been considered pornographic because I was showing pubic areas.

In the '60s you were friends and roommates with Gloria Steinem, and *Ms.* magazine came out in 1971, around the time you were working on the WomanGirl pieces.
Bea Feitler was the art director. *Ms.* started as an insert in *New York* magazine for the first issue. Everybody was equal, that was the political structure of the magazine—it was more about equality than the head editor being in charge. I was hired to do an illustration for an article called 'Women and Madness' by the writer Phyllis Chesler. That illustration is now part of the Norman Rockwell Museum's permanent collection.

Do you think the women's movement gave you a certain freedom to do the WomanGirl series?
Probably, but without my knowledge, and probably my work influenced a lot of other people. When I did work for myself and not for hire, I didn't want to know anything.

How was the reaction to the WomanGirl series?
Maybe one or two people bought work, and I remember a guy came to the gallery show with his wife, and he wanted to buy something, but she was not going to let him. I didn't realise it was so visceral.

Let's talk about your sketchbooks, they strike me as really important to you. Tell me about them, when did you start?
In 1961. I didn't know they would become a practice. In 1971 I bought a house in the country. I had brought everything up to the country from my place in the city. All the sketchbooks, 50 of them, all my work and paper drawers, all my clothes. Then I had a fire. In the middle of the night I went downstairs, and the whole wall inside the house was on fire.
The funny thing is, I had no parents, I had no money, I had no boyfriend, I had no clothes.



I was amazed at how I felt. I didn't feel sorry for myself, I didn't feel bad, I had nothing, and I thought, you know, it's not the worst thing that ever happened, I'm still here, and I'm just going to go forward.

That's really devastating to have a fire. You're lucky that you didn't get hurt. That kind of devastation really forces you to start again. How did it affect your life as an artist?
I would say it had a positive effect, positive because I understood that I could withstand tragedy and being alone in the world—really alone, with nothing. I thought I wouldn't feel that way. I thought I would be devastated, but I wasn't, and that affected me. That gave me a confidence that I couldn't possibly get in any other situation. It had to happen. You can say that you're going to feel a certain way, but when push comes to shove and that happens, you don't know how you're going to feel.

You strike me as such a disciplined artist.
I don't feel disciplined—people think I'm disciplined.

You were born in the Bronx.
It was the last house on the Grand Concourse: 3,235 Grand Concourse. Apartment 6K.

I understand that it was quite a neighbourhood, with many interesting neighbours.
Yes, like Penny, Ronnie, and Garry Marshall. Their mother, Marjorie Marshall, was the dance teacher. Across the street was Carl Reiner and his son, Rob Reiner. Ralph Lauren and Calvin Klein went to Public School 80, they all went to that school.

How would you describe the neighbourhood?
I would say it was solid middle class. My father was a postman. My mother was the only mother that went downtown to work—there were 88 apartments in our building, but only three women worked.

That must have had an impact on you, to have a mother who worked as a designer at that time.
Whenever she came to school, everybody else's mother looked like a 'mother', but mine looked like the glamour woman.

So she didn't fit in either, just like you.
I guess she didn't.

You stayed in New York, you went to school here, and you had your career here. Did you ever travel for work?
The first time I went to Europe was in 1964. I saved my money to go over there, and I think I did one job for *The Times*, in London.

Were you influenced by fine artists? I find your line is very Matisse-like.
My influences are not conscious. I love his work, obviously. I feel close to his work, let's put it that way. But I'm not sure what influence really means. I think some people know they are being influenced, and some people are influenced subconsciously.

How about in your own experience, like the Bob Dylan poster by Milton Glaser, which is a very iconic image. He draws this rainbow emanating from Dylan's head, and it is very much like a drawing you once did.
I was staying at Milton's house in Woodstock one summer when I did that drawing, and then he did the Dylan poster four months later. I asked him to write something for my book, and I put that drawing next to his essay because that's where he got the idea for the Dylan poster. You know, it's not exact, but it's definitely an influence. I was happy that


DOGS

he did it, maybe not then, but it made people recognise my work in a whole other way, and I was thankful for that.

I hear you went out with Marc Bolan from T. Rex. How did you happen to meet him?
A very good friend of mine, Tony Visconti, was Marc Bolan's producer. I met Tony in 1965 in New York. He moved to London, and when he came back to town we would go to dinner. So he came to town with Marc, because Marc was playing at the Fillmore East in the East Village. I didn't even know who he was. I'd never heard his music. We felt an affinity for each other though, and it happened so quickly. I wasn't even thinking about having a boyfriend eight years younger than me.

It's funny because your silkscreen called *Star Girl Banded with Blue Wave*, which was done in 1966, really has a glam rock feel to it, predating that style which T. Rex was associated with.
Star Girl was done for George Beylerian, who had a design shop called Scarabaeus on 57th Street.

You are also known to have been an early user of computers to make art. Is that right?
In 1980 a man named Peter Spackman, from MIT, called me up. He was looking for artists to go to Boston and work on the computers. I had just got married and had two step-daughters, who were 11 and 15. Peter and I talked for about a year and a half, and during that time I learned about computers. In the end it didn't work out for MIT, but after a few years I heard from Time Inc., which had some secret enclave of computers. They must have had 50 people up there working on the first personal computers. I was allowed to go up at 5pm and work until 9am. I taught myself, and it was fascinating to me. It was an experiment and they couldn't make money with it, so after about two and a half years they closed down. I went up the night before and did a whole bunch of stuff before I had no more access.

What did you do once your access ended?
Well, by then Commodore computers had come out. A lot of people were very interested in what I was doing, and I had a lot of magazine jobs. I was the go-to person for computer art.

Do you still use computers for your work?
Yes, everything is integrated. If I need to use them I will, but I still work with the hand.

What advice would you give to a young illustrator working today?
I would say: focus on your work. Don't think about becoming famous, because fame is nothing. If you really do your work, you will be satisfied even if nobody ever knows who you are in the end. I'm really happy that I'm not an Andy Warhol or Gloria Steinem or any of my friends who are in the public eye, because I know that is not something I like. I like where I am; I wouldn't want to be anywhere else.