

Brigid Berlin's New York Life and Art, on Display

by Samuel Rutter
June 29, 2023



An installation view of "Brigid Berlin: The Heaviest," curated by Alison M. Gingeras. Credit... Courtesy Vito Schnabel Gallery. Photo: Argenis Apolinario

Brigid Berlin, a fixture of the downtown art world in the '60s and '70s, will be forever associated with Andy Warhol – the Factory superstar played Duchess, a version of herself as a lesbian drug dealer, in Warhol and Paul Morrissey's 1966 film "Chelsea Girls" – but three years after her death in 2020, a new exhibition considers Berlin's art in its own right. "Brigid really was an innovator when you think of the way she used persona as a medium," says Alison M. Gingeras, who has curated "Brigid Berlin: The Heaviest," at New York's Vito Schnabel Gallery, which examines the artist's life, from her tony uptown upbringing to her secluded later life, with the wild times in between. "For too long she has been pushed into the footnotes." In a room that features the same wallpaper as Berlin's Murray Hill apartment, visitors can peruse photos and letters from her childhood. (Berlin's mother, the socialite Honey Berlin, fed her daughter amphetamines to stave off weight gain, a moment the artist revisited later with a wry needlepoint cushion cover that reads: "It is about the weight.") There are plenty of "tit prints," painted with the artist's own breasts, along with the imprints of penises belonging to famous men from the scene at the nightclub Max's Kansas City. It's the influence of figures like Robert Rauschenberg, Willem de Kooning and Larry Rivers who give the show its title: From the outset, Gingeras says, they recognized Berlin's talent and bravura, according her a seat in the front room of the bar with the rest of the "heavies," even as she also held court in the back with Warhol. Leather-bound albums containing Polaroid portraits of these artists are accompanied by audio selections from the hundreds of cassettes that came from Berlin's habit of taking a tape recorder with her almost everywhere she went, leaving behind an archive of a vibrant moment in New York's history. "Brigid Berlin: The Heaviest," is on view through Aug. 18, vitoschnabel.com.