

BODY WORKS I : Serie Metamorphic Recollections XVI *photo on canvas* 20" x 42", 1991

GRETTA SARFATY

FOSTER GOLDSTROM GALLERY

BODY WORK II : photo on canvas
from the series Metamorphic Recollections

February 6 - March 3, 1993
New York City

JANSEN-PEREZ GALLERY

BODY WORK I : paintings, photo on canvas and drawings
THE PORTRAIT : paintings and drawings

February - March, 1993
Los Angeles, California

March - April, 1993
San Antonio, Texas

ESCRITÓRIO DE ARTE RENATO MAGALHÃES GOUVÊA

SOHO SCENES : paintings
THE PORTRAIT : paintings and drawings

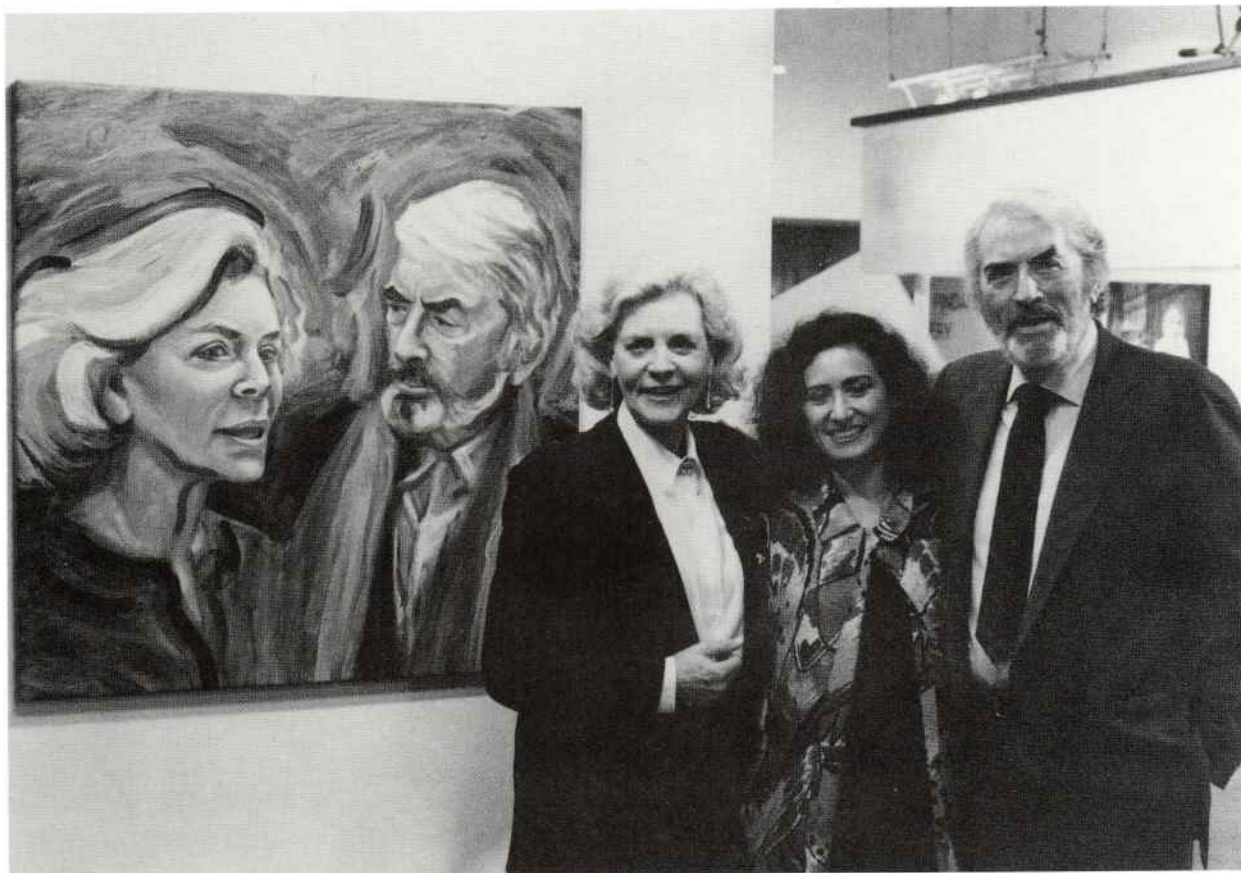
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Lauren Bacall, Gretta Sarfaty and Gregory Peck during the filming of THE PORTRAIT in North Carolina, April 1992

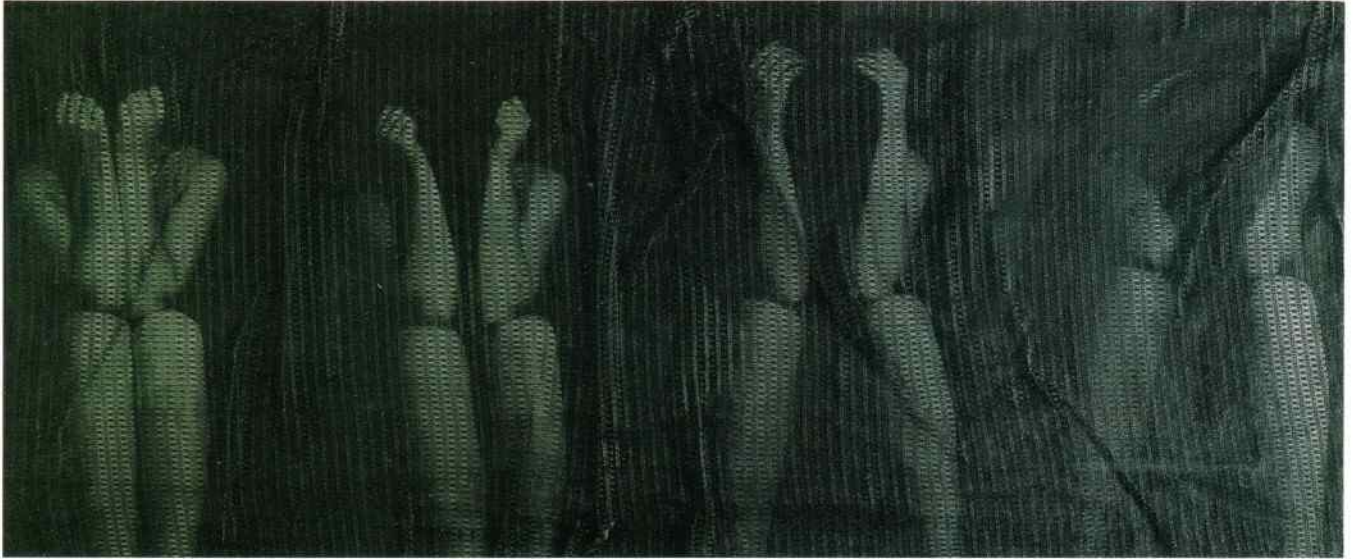
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BODY WORKS I : Serie Metamorphic Recollections XXXX *photo on canvas and collage* 19" x 46", 1991

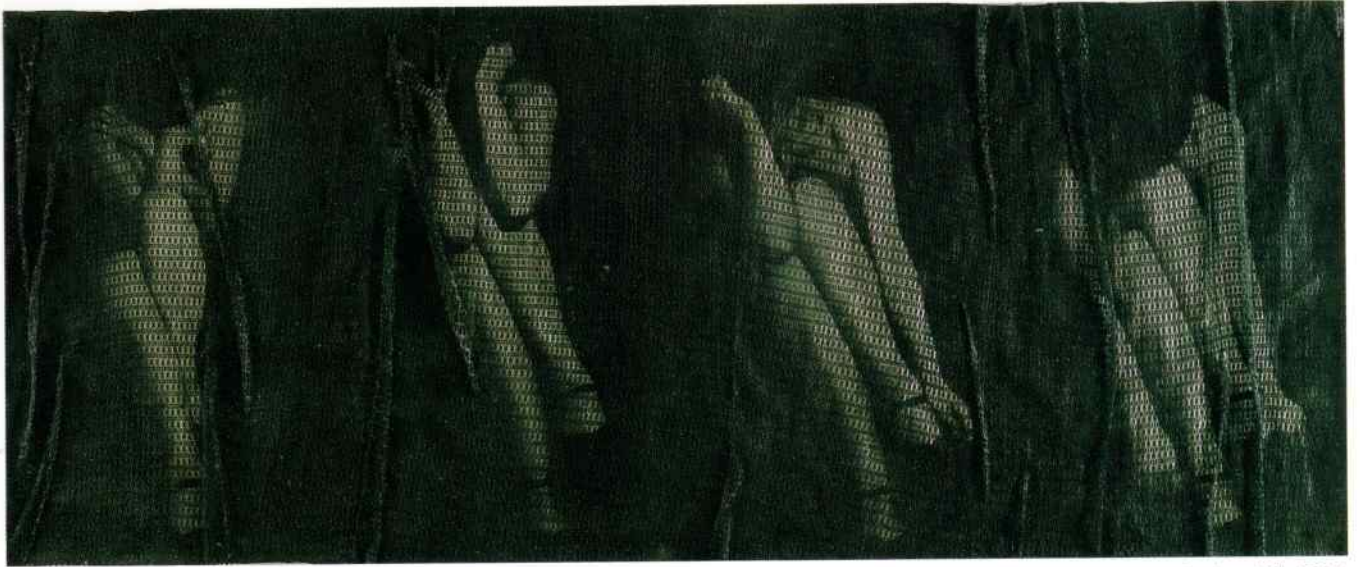
BODY WORKS

The many meanings of the word **metaphor** - of being an allegory, a figure an image, a parable or a symbol - was recently redefined. Encapsulated in a single sentence, metaphor was reduced to a sort of procedure, a way of labeling something that already exists with the name of something else. This procedure offers a variety of options. First, it has the power to present something in an unexpected way. Second, with this new **definition**, metaphor also means to re-name and re-contextualize. By reforming and restating a set of ideas, theories and prejudices, this new way to understand metaphor unfolds and provokes imagination.

Photography became the perfect media to transmit this novel conception of metaphor, not only by its technical possibilities, with a wide range of options on how to convey the message and to display the idea, but also because photography now can **lie**. Images and objects can be manipulated for the effect wanted. They do not need portrait reality exclusively; they can create metaphor.

What does this new understanding of metaphor have to do with Sarfaty's work which shows photos of her body through layers of printing techniques and cultural connections and presented in surprising manner — covered by lace. Recombining feminine stereotypes and a well-established desire for ornamentation, she assaults the meaning of the picture. After photographing herself, she continuously imprints the photos on a piece of canvas, subverting the woman simply as model with no active role. In fact, the same strategy is encountered in her paintings where she obsessively depicts her body. Being both author and subject, she photographs (or paints) her body in the way she wants. The lace over it is her way of expressing femininity, since traditional adornments like lace and netting are both part of the women's world. Today there exists a complex world of symbols where the concept of "woman" and the "feminine" is located in opposition to the common coolness towards the established cultural order - an order created by the principles of the Enlightenment ideal.

Since its invention, photography has been related to recollection and memory as well as to collective and private history. As a fairly accurate medium to reproduce disjointed instances of the past, the photographic image requires a sense of the past and familiarity. It was thought that when working together, the



BODY WORKS I : Serie Metamorphic Recollections XXXVIII photo on canvas and collage 18 1/2" x 44", 1991

two senses, the past and familiarity, could underwrite the desirable exactness of an image and induce the necessary "feeling of truth" when the unknown was considered much more dangerous than it is now. Our time is not necessarily concerned either with "fixed images" or with sharpness of focus. Images need not be real. Released from nature, history or the past, the photograph could commit itself to imagination and adventure. There is no longer a need for an eyewitness.

Traditionally, photography is the remembering of a real object, since by premise, photography must start from something that already exists. Photography has always depicted something, and since it records natural and personal history, photography is a fairly accurate medium to reproduce disjoined instants of the past. Sarfaty's photographs (and paints) of her nudity/femininity describe neither a situation, nor suggest past, present or future. "What instant of time is frozen?"—becomes then, a pertinent question when looking at Sarfaty's images. It is not frozen time but a sort of continuous time, documenting the duration of her awakening from dependency to autonomy.

These images represent Sarfaty's expansion as a woman — one among many who have been working and trying to piece together their divided personal and cultural identities. Her background goes back to Spain before the Inquisition. In the fifteenth century her family emigrated to Greece, where she was born. In 1954 they immigrated again, this time to São Paulo, Brazil, where she was raised, got married and had children. With her grandparents she would talk **Ladino**, the medieval Spanish spoken by the Jews before the Inquisition. Because of her phonetic familiarity with Spanish, it was easy for her to learn Portuguese. Later she obtained Brazilian citizenship and adopted that country as her own.

In the mid-seventies, when she was connected to "Body Art," she would distort her own face through facial exercises and then photograph them, as a modern Medusa with many heads. She was saying that a **deformed** woman is still a woman. Later, the distortions were done in the dark-room. By shifting the photographic paper, she would transform her face into the many other faces of her multi-coated identity, formed as it was by many traditions and cultures.

At that time, she was already talking against the **objectification** of woman. Protesting against women as "articles" with a "perfect face" and preferably having a subdued concupiscent expression. Showing the face and the body separately, she still feared to represent womaness explicitly. She was still keeping herself tied to the scheme of divided imagery conceived by Western philosophy to represent **man** and **women**. Essentially, this scheme conveyed a very popular image depicting man as "the complete representative of the species" standing out in the foreground, and having for his background, a woman and her femininity.

Like other artists during the 80s, Sarfaty abandoned her connections with the 70s "avant-garde" ideas — body art, video, performance and conceptual art — to concentrate in painting. Her figurative work of last decade got attention and she even worked for Hollywood creating the paintings actress Cecilia Peck does of her parents in the movie **THE PORTRAIT**. Directed by Arthur Penn, the film talks about the relationship of a young artist with her parents, played by Lauren Bacall and her father Gregory Peck — a plot which Sarfaty identifies in many instances with her own life.

It is certainly interesting to see Sarfaty back in her own theme: her own body. It is even better to see that she is not repeating it, but expanding and unfolding what she already had started expressing. This group of work, ranging from 1978 to the present, is also a sort of story-board, an enlargement, of her emancipation not only as a woman but as an artist. The language, the techniques, the intentions were elaborated over the last decade, when once more, she emigrated, this time from Brazil to New York where she currently lives. She is now talking not only about herself, but also about other women, addressing questions of how to represent women's nature and their attempt to find a more holistic-self identity. Erasing subjectivity — "it's not my body anymore but every women's body"— her viewpoint is clearly feminine, though she is aware of others perspectives and ways to represent women, their bodies, their sexuality and character. In fact, for more than a decade, the contemporary theoretical discourse on feminism, identity, gender and post-structuralism has talked about these themes, but they are important here only in a tangential manner. Sarfaty's takes her own stands, and unlike many other feminist works depicting women, she exposes them mysteriously and serenely, showing that she is, at least for the moment, at peace with herself.

If it is true that changes in the ways women view and represent themselves are only possible through changes occurring on the level of their personal and artistic consciousness, this body of work is a proof of her release. Although shaded by lace, which also can be seen as a recollection of the Brazilian **cortinado** that protects from being bit by mosquitos in rural areas, she also reaffirms that times have changed. As already said, "What is a woman's has become their — the others — question, not ours"— and, as the new metaphor, a woman can be represented in many unexpected ways.

Berta Sichel, New York, December 1992

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Berta Sichel is a writer and an independent curator from Brazil living in New York. In Brazil she worked as a curator for the São Paulo International Biennial and for the Museum of Modern Art. Currently she is organizing the traveling exhibition "Unfaithful Realities: Six artists from Brazil" and "ABC: Contemporary Art from Argentina, Brazil and Colombia," which opens next March in New York. She teaches at The New School for Social Research. She was the Guest Editor for the Latin American issue of *New Observations*, published in the Spring 1992.