

# MannAboutTown

MARCH 2008

## Gail Shamchenko He(art) Of The Matter

by Camille Tibaldeo

**I**t's the opening night of "Autodidactica: Works by Self-Taught Artists" at Manhattan's Fountain Gallery, and art lovers have turned out in force to view more than 40 original pieces, including Gail Shamchenko's whimsical *Happy Head*. For more than 25 years Gail chose not to part with this work, created using felt-tipped markers, but by evening's end she will experience an artist's ultimate sweet parting when *Happy Head* is sold to a young South African businessman living in New York City.

"It's wonderful when someone buys my work," says Gail, "but I never make art with the intention of trying to figure out what might sell. I paint to please myself. I love art, but the trappings of the art world baffle me. My art is all about creating the work, and if it's hanging on the wall, then I'm at the opening whether or not I am physically present. But here I am."

Gail muses on the path that brought her to Fountain Gallery, a not-for-profit cooperative now representing more than 40 artists living and working with mental illness. "I learned about Fountain House in 2001 and wanted to become a member," she says, referring to the Gallery's parent organization, which since 1948 has provided resources for adults living with mental illness and of which all Fountain Gallery artists are members. "Someone suggested that I visit the Gallery, and the first time I walked in I met Esther."

"Esther" was Esther Montanez, instrumental in establishing Fountain Gallery in 2000 and a tireless advocate for people with mental illness during her more than 40 years with Fountain House. "She was wearing overalls and a baseball cap, and when I looked into her eyes and saw her

smile I knew that I had encountered an extraordinary person," Gail remembers. "She encouraged me to become a Gallery volunteer, even though I wouldn't be able to show my art until I became a member. I have never met anyone with such a talent for getting people to work without minding it."

On that day began a relationship Gail describes as "one of the most significant of my life. Esther was a rare soul, and knowing her was a blessing. She was friend, mentor, champion, mother, and sister. We had conversations without speaking." The conversations continued until Esther's death in 2006 at age 70, and "I still miss her," Gail says. Gail became a member of Fountain House in 2003 and since then has exhibited at Fountain Gallery, whose artists run the gamut from highly trained to self-taught. (Gail is one of 16 self-taught artists represented in "Autodidactica," so named after the word *autodidact*, defined as "one who is self-taught.") Her work has been showcased in numerous group exhibitions at the Gallery and was spotlighted in the two-person show "Serendipitous."

Born in Kew Gardens, Gail has lived in various parts of Queens for virtually her entire life and now resides in the borough's Jamaica area. Family lore has it that "I began to draw before I could hold a cup," she says. "The impulse to make art was always there." As a child, she was an enthusiastic fingerpainter and also was fascinated by building with simple wood blocks.

"I wasn't interested in dolls," she laughs. "Even then I wanted to make something or build something."

The daughter of a Jewish father and a mother who converted to Judaism, Gail recalls that her happiest childhood memories are of family visits to her Aunt Helen, who lived on New York's Lower East Side. "I remember the pickle barrels out on the street, but what I cherish is that Aunt Helen listened to me." Gail's mother was not supportive of the budding painter's interest in art. "She wanted me to study more 'practical' things and marry a doctor or a lawyer, but that was not my road. She was a difficult woman and a sublime cook and baker. I could never figure out how such a big *challah* came out of such a small oven."

Gail would be 26 years old and a mother herself before receiving her high school diploma. (As a teenager, she had been shy a few credits needed for graduation and was not informed of this until it was too late to make them up.) Eventually she went on to receive an Associate's degree from LaGuardia Community College. She had given birth to daughter Lorelei at age 22, and Gail and her husband Andrew divorced not long after. He took his own life while Lorelei was still a child, and Gail was left to raise the little girl on her own. And there was more to come: At 33, Gail was diagnosed with schizophrenia, resulting in several hospitalizations. (Her maternal grandmother had the same illness.)

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Gail Shamchenko



Happy Head, 1982

No matter what has come her way, through it all Gail has continued to create. Her primary medium is oil paint, and “while I’m working I feel blissful,” she says. “When I’m happy with what I’ve done, I’m ecstatic. When I don’t like it, I can always do another piece.” She has had more time to paint since 2005, when she left her longtime position with a housing program she had helped to develop for adults with mental illness. She has completed writing a book begun in 1986, which she describes as “a psychological, spiritual, very real” memoir with 28 illustrations. The title (her daughter suggested it) is *The Unknown Artist*, and Gail hopes to see it published.

An accomplished cook, Gail finds all manner of exotic fixings in the ethnic food markets of Queens (current favorite

shopping neighborhood: Elmhurst) and loves experimenting with different cuisines. “I do Indian, Asian, Italian—you name it,” she says. “And I make a mean chicken soup.” Talk of cooking brings a smile to her face as she recalls Esther’s expression as she dug into a plate of Gail’s meatballs: “She looked completely happy,” Gail says, “and that brought me joy. It still does.”

Early in 2008, Gail celebrated a milestone: her 65<sup>th</sup> birthday. She spent the day with those who, along with her art, hold a big place in her heart: her daughter and her grandchildren. Daughter Lorelei (her middle name is Love) is the mother of Joshua and Mikey, and Gail’s pride and love are apparent when she speaks of them. “My grandsons seem to reflect different aspects of my personal-

ity, so I can communicate with each of them in a different way,” she says. The family wined and dined her, and she was thrilled with their gift to her: canvases and brushes. In the movie *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, Marilyn Monroe’s Lorelei Lee sang that diamonds are a girl’s best friend. But Gail’s Lorelei knows that to her mother the artist, art supplies are a girl’s best friend.

Memo to Gail Shamchenko: Throw a pot of chicken soup on to simmer, grab some oil paints, and get busy with those canvases and brushes. As always, your art is waiting. **M**

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