

Interview with Christiane Citron

Christiane Citron and James Tuten

September 20, 2012

Christiane Citron is the art executive of the art estate of her grandmother, Minna Citron. James Tuten is Associate Professor of History at Juniata College.

Christiane Citron is the granddaughter of the twentieth century artist Minna Citron. Through Christiane Citron's generosity, Associate Professor of Art History Jennifer Streb was able to curate the exhibit "Minna Citron: The Uncharted Course From Realism to Abstraction" at the Juniata College Museum of Art from September 20 to November 3, 2012. The show subsequently traveled to six other institutions.

James Tuten: Chris, what were Minna Citron's sources of inspiration?

Chris Citron: Yesterday I had a wonderful lunch with eight students who worked on putting this exhibit together. I was asked this by one of the students: where do you think Minna Citron gets her inspiration? The first thing I said was that she was very much a creature of New York City. She talked a lot about how the city inspired her. She said something along the lines of, "It's dirty, it's gritty and we love it." She was known for finding weird things on the street and incorporating them in her art. She was also artist in residence in Colorado and at many different museums ranging from Virginia to Florida, as well as in artists' colonies. So it wasn't that she couldn't function elsewhere, but she always lived in New York City. She was also a world traveler and lectured all over the world, especially in Latin America. In talking with the students, I said she certainly found inspiration in New York City. Her early work reflects that she was definitely part of the so-called later generation of the Ashcan School. She and a group of other artists living and working around Union Square were known as the Fourteenth Street School. They found inspiration on the street. There was definitely a lot of social commentary. She had a subtle wit and was noted for making comment about social situations. That defines her early work.

She would say she found her inspiration from the unconscious. She was deeply interested in psychology and psychoanalysis. In the video that plays here at the exhibit, she talks about how her social group was very absorbed with psychoanalysis and how she and her friends would discuss it. Obviously, from a very early stage, at least the early twenties, she was interested in the role of women. That resulted in her 1935 exhibit "Femininities" about the role of women. She was one of the first people in the twenties to receive Freudian analysis. I believe that it was her abiding interest in the unconscious that led her to become part of the first generation of abstract expressionists in New York. Unlike many of them, she lectured a lot about it: she went around the world lecturing about abstract art and the unconscious. She

talked about the role of the unconscious, which was a big part of abstract expressionism, where the idea was to express what was coming out of your unconscious.

She was also strongly influenced by the European émigré artists, having traveled to Europe a number of times. Many of the European abstract artists fled the war in Europe in World War II and settled in New York. She became part of this group, Atelier 17, with William Stanley Hayter. They were pioneering new printmaking techniques. She won a number of prizes for her innovative printmaking. With these European artists, including Salvador Dalí and Max Ernst, came the idea of automatism, of letting the unconscious that is channeling through you come out in painting. Minna used the words “letting it all spew out.” She then talked about how creating art is a great physic, or therapy. The students asked me about that in a way, too. They asked, “Why did she continue painting if she wasn’t necessarily getting great acclaim?” She had won many prizes and was well regarded in the art world, but she certainly wasn’t a household name. My response was that she just needed to do it, that she found it self-fulfilling. She did not want to be dictated by external fashions or trends; she wanted to do what she wanted to do. We talked about how some artists continue to do the same thing over and over all their life, but Minna didn’t want to do that and was resentful of that. She was adamant that she would continue to experiment. She said, “I’m a very experimental person.” So the unconscious was really what drove her.

She wrote an academic journal article in the *College Art Journal* in 1955 called “Communication Between Spectator and Artist.”¹ In it, she writes about how you look at a work of art and what it means. I was reading a passage from this to the students yesterday at lunch. I just want to note that it’s really been a great experience to get to share the art that I live with every day with students who were so enthusiastic and excited. The many-months-long process of getting this show together, installing it in the past few weeks, getting the walls ready and preparing labels is something most people have no idea about... maybe me included, though I have some insider knowledge about how labor-intensive this process is of getting an exhibit ready. I think the exhibition here is beautiful—I’m really thrilled.

Minna talks about the kinesthetic, which is about how the viewer reacts to the art and grasping what the artist is trying to say. We’re talking about not having information given to you beforehand so you know how you are supposed to react, but instead just reacting to it. That’s really what she wanted. She wanted the experience to come out of the viewing. She explained in her article, “There is another aspect of functioning which we have only recently begun to understand and which plays a profound part in artistic creation. This is the unconscious.” This was published in 1955, but she had previously given this lecture in different versions and in different essays. For instance, in 1949, there was a groundbreaking event in Provincetown, Massachusetts, on the tip of Cape Cod, called Forum 49 that she was part of. The great pioneers of abstract expressionism were part of this, along with German-born American abstract expressionist Hans Hofmann. She gave a lecture in Provincetown where she discussed aspects of this.

In her article, she continues,

Unconscious needs and drives are expressed in art through automatism and symbolism; this is true of course of all the arts—It has been said one picture (symbol) is worth a thousand words. Into the unconscious we apparently store away those experiences which, for whatever reason, we do not wish to remember. But these experiences are not forgotten. They still live and retain their dynamic energy. ... Very often the artist seems to express something which is better than he knows, something which perhaps he did not intend to express when he started working, but which he finds, only when he has finished the work, that he has expressed.

It goes on like that. I think a lot of these pictures involve that.

Tuten: You've mentioned her sense of humor. Viewing her work in this chronological retrospective one repeatedly confronts her humor folded into her work.

Citron: I'm glad, I'm very glad that you felt that, because she really was a great wit.

Tuten: I would love to hear a little more about that, whether you experienced that and how it also comes out in her art.

Citron: The social commentary was characteristic of a lot of urban realist artists in the thirties because there were pressing social issues and it was a rather desperate time. People were very concerned with the iniquities and inequities and the plight of poor people. Artists tried to make comments about those issues in their work. So Minna did make that sort of comment through her work, but it was never ruthless. She was making pithy, witty insights into the situation and then, gradually, focusing particularly on women. That probably reflected her own life. She was a comfortable, well-to-do housewife. She was feeling stifled and didn't feel like she had enough going on. She got started in art training and began to really pursue that all the way.



Figure 1: *Dress Circle Carnegie Hall II*, 1977, photo-etching, 8 ½" x 13"

You can see her wit in the titles of some of these pictures in the gallery that we are looking at right here. *Dress Circle, Carnegie Hall* (figure 1) is really a crack-up and the social commentary is pretty direct. It shows very well-dressed, stuffed-shirt type people sitting in the front rows at this concert. These people in the expensive seats are absolutely bored and evidently not interested in the music. Then in the back, in the cheap seats, the people who have less money are following along the musical scores and libretto. They are in raptures of ecstasy with the music. It seemed pretty clear that the man depicted in the front row who seems to be playing with his keys and thinking, “When is this going to end?” is modeled on Minna’s soon-to-be ex-husband, my grandfather.

Tuten: I guess there’s a bit of humor in that itself.

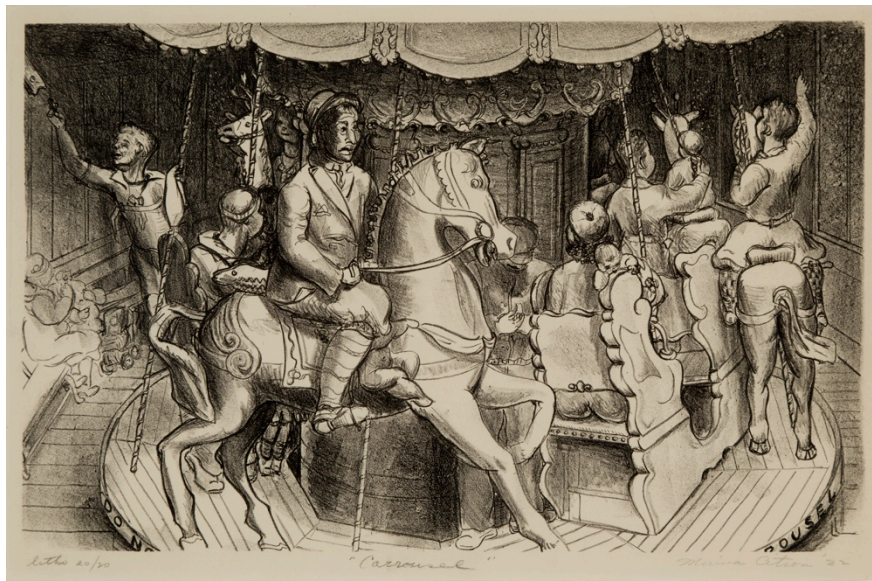


Figure 2: *Carrousel* [sic], 1932, lithograph, 10 ½" x 15"

Citron: The same with the picture next to it, *Carrousel* [sic] (figure 2), which is the carousel in Prospect Park in Brooklyn, New York, nearby where Minna lived. My grandfather would take his two sons, my father and his brother, to the carousel. As in the previous picture we were talking about, the central figure riding the horse, looking kind of bored, looks like my grandfather. Then there are all kinds of little subtexts in the picture. For instance, one of the carousel riders is reaching for the proverbial brass ring. I researched that expression “reach for the brass ring.” If you were able to grab the brass ring, then you would get a free ride. Then there are all these little psychodramas going on with other riders on the carousel. Both *Hope Springs Eternal* (figure 3), which is the cosmetics counter at S. Klein Department store in Union Square in New York, and *Beauty Culture?* (figure 4) are absolutely filled with these kind of pithy sub-plots.

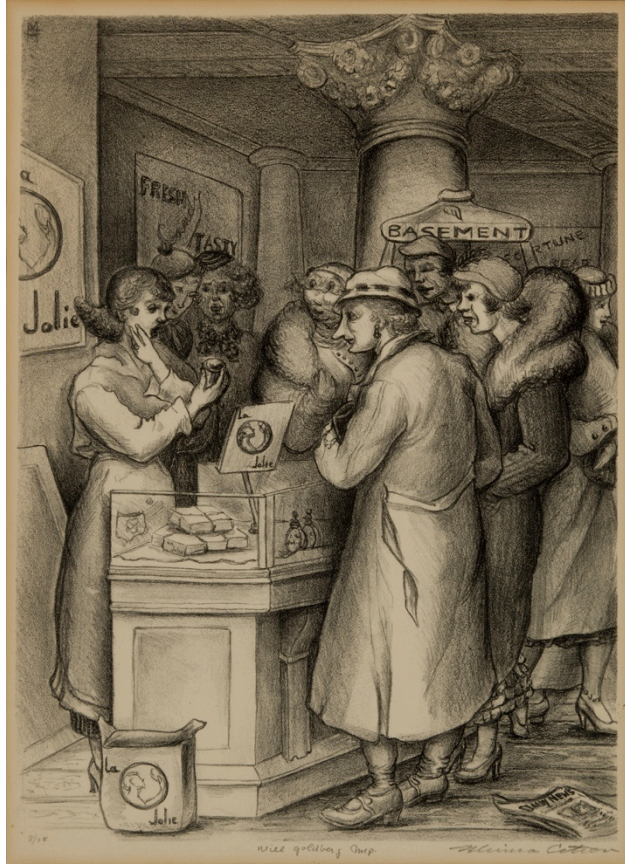


Figure 3: *Hope Springs Eternal, or Demonstration*, 1936, lithograph, 11 ¾" x 8 ½"



Figure 4: *Beauty Culture?*, 1933, lithograph, 8" x 11 ½"

I should point out also that the picture that I call *Hope Springs Eternal* had alternate titles. It is also called *Demonstration*, meaning it was a demonstration of how to put on makeup, or alternatively, *Bargain Basement* because it depicts the discount basement of a department store in Union Square, New York. Minna frequently gave an alternate title to a picture. She really put a huge amount of thought into titles, and they usually have some wit or some literary or mythological reference or cultural innuendo. A beautiful abstract picture in the other gallery is *L'Araignée* (figure 5), which is the French for spider web. The titles have interesting relevance. For instance, *Beauty Culture?* is set in a beauty salon, and you can read that the name of the salon is "Scalpners." I love that one of the ladies is sitting under the hair dryer reading a magazine and her eyes are wide with shock at the magazine she's reading, *Mental Hygiene*. That was a real magazine at the time, about this new science of psychology. At the time, many people were rather unnerved about what is that all about.



Figure 5: *L'Araignée*, 1963, intaglio, 23 ¾" x 13"

Tuten: You were talking about her sense of humor and you made the point that sometimes she turned her humor on herself. She wasn't only laughing at other people, she was both laughing with them and sometimes making fun of herself. The self-portraits hint at that, but also I was thinking about the Dorothy Parker quotes, speaking of wit. Parker has that wonderful line about the difference between wit and humor, that "wit has truth in it." I think "wit" is the right word for Minna.



Figure 6: (left) *Men Seldom Make Passes...* (1st state), 1946, etching, 14 ½" x 9 ¼"
(right) *Men Seldom Make Passes...*, 1946, etching & aquatint, 14 ½" x 9 ¼"

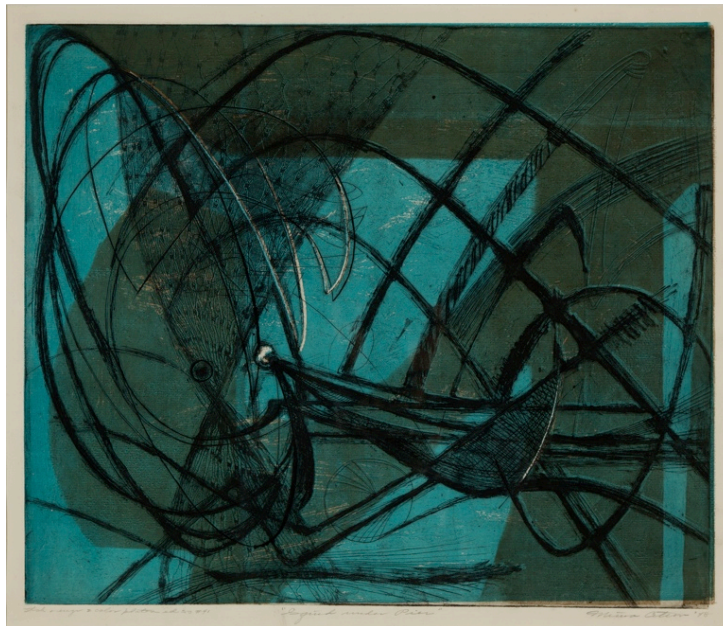


Figure 7: *Squid Under Pier*, 1948, soft-ground etching & engraving, 14 ¾" x 17 ¾"

Citron: That is a great observation. I don't know if I was familiar with that quote from Dorothy Parker. That is certainly the most appropriate reference. This picture in the exhibit here, which we all adore, is reproduced on the cover of the catalogue book for the exhibit, *Men Seldom Make Passes...* (figure 6). The famous quotation from Dorothy Parker is “Men seldom make passes at girls who wear glasses.” This picture has been one of Minna’s most acclaimed and popular prints. It is in just about every major museum collection. That, along with the one we are sitting in front of, *Squid Under Pier* (figure 7), those two are in so many collections, including the Library of Congress, British Museum, Smithsonian, Metropolitan, you name it. I can’t tell you offhand which prints in this exhibition are in which museum collections, but these two prints are among the most prominently collected.

Tuten: *Men Seldom Make Passes...* brings together a couple of qualities of hers. On the one hand, there is the dynamic piece of art that it is. In terms of the title, it also has that sense of wit and it also has a woman and women's experience as the subject.

Citron: Simply as a piece of visual art, it is so aesthetically pleasing that we keep wanting to reproduce it because it just so pretty. I was really pleased to be able to also include in this exhibition one of the early states for this print. A state is an impression made by a printmaker working toward arriving at what is deemed the final image. In this case, you can really see how the impression starts out way more figurative and representationally precise, and then becomes much looser and abstract. There were a couple of wonderful articles in the 1930s that relate to your comment about “Is she making fun of herself?” or “How is she representing herself?” In 1935, for her exhibit “Femininities”, there was a full-page review in *TIME* magazine and this very entertaining, big spread in the *New York World Telegram*. Both of these articles comment on her personal physical appearance. I don’t know what they were expecting. I think it was the *TIME* magazine review that virtually says, “she came in and she was very good looking. We were expecting someone who was going to be harsh, acerbic and abrasive, but actually she is a very attractive and friendly person.”

Tuten: I wonder if that’s in part because of the gentle self-mockery, but also because of her feminism. She’s among an early wave of feminists, especially in art.

Citron: Yes, she definitely was a feminist from the beginning, although they didn’t use those words. She was commenting on the perceived role of women in the 1930s, in her images of street scenes and in her courtroom series. She shows women now being able to serve on juries. She herself actually served on a jury, and a grand jury, too. She makes a point of showing women in new settings that they hadn’t been able to be in before. For instance, in her “New York in Wartime” series, she depicts women in military uniforms.

We also have some of the Tennessee pictures in this exhibit and I wanted to mention the story behind that. She did some teaching in the 1930s in some New Deal art programs in New York. Then she

submitted a design for a post office mural in a blind competition. This is not the WPA [Works Progress Administration] where you got awarded based on your financial need. Instead, this was for the Treasury/Fine Arts section in which submissions were judged in a blind competition based on the anonymously submitted design. They didn't know who you were, or if you were a man or a woman. She won the commission to paint a post office mural in Newport, Tennessee. She was really thrilled and it was for a significant amount of money—I think it was \$650. This was a big deal! Anyway, this was significant in terms of the role of women in these programs, that she was getting paid to create this public art.

I made a pilgrimage to Newport to see that mural in 1976. It was very exciting. Sadly, some time after that the U.S. Postal Service announced they were going to modernize and get a bigger, better post-office. Luckily, because I had had that personal contact, I stayed in touch with the officials for about the next ten years because there was a question of what would happen to the mural. As we know, sadly, a number of murals from the 1930s have disappeared; they've gone into "storage" and were lost track of. But we stayed involved and ultimately, to condense the story, they built a small community center/community museum for the county in that town of Newport. They moved the mural to be the centerpiece of that new community museum. That's really wonderful.

There's also then a second Tennessee mural. On the strength of the first one, she got a second post office mural commission in Manchester, Tennessee. That one is still in a local post office. The original post office moved. They got professional art conservators who cleaned the mural and then it was reinstalled. I have a newspaper article about that. I brought a bunch of old catalogues and particularly some clippings that I would like to give to the Juniata library, so I'll be leaving those. This is a fun article from the *New York Post* in 1976, "Portrait of the Artist." There's a lot of funny stuff in here; she was a stitch. The article notes that Minna said, "I'm a very experimental person. That's what gives life zest for me. As for my present work, I'm certainly a printmaker and still involved in the abstract art." Then she talks about how she's experimenting. She observes that young people were asking her how she survived financially. She was resourceful and she explained, "I live on a lot of different piecemeal incomes. In fact, I got to be a grand juror because it earned me a little bit of extra money."

I brought some articles about the Tennessee murals. That's the Manchester mural; it's *Horse-Swapping Day*.

Tuten: Very Tennessee appropriate.

Citron: There are a lot of funny stories related to that. Minna became beloved in the community in Newport. She spent many months there. She didn't just fly in and fly out or take the train in and out. She really spent an extended period of time researching. Her mural was about the TVA [Tennessee Valley Authority] bringing progress to poor people.

Tuten: She had a ninetieth birthday retrospective at Rutgers. Am I right in thinking that this retrospective is one of the first since that one?

Citron: Yes, absolutely.

Tuten: What does that mean for you?

Citron: It's very exciting. We're all very pleased to be showing a lot of work from her last decade. She died in 1991 at the age of ninety-five and she had been painting until she was ninety-three. For instance, at ninety-one or ninety-two she went off to Southampton College to take a writing course. She was working on her memoirs. She was a dynamo. She was still doing all this work well into her nineties and that work has for the most part not been exhibited before. Many of those late pictures that I inherited had been in drawers and boxes. I had them framed for this exhibit. It's very satisfying, because these later pieces are strong, interesting, and thought-provoking. These are works that have never been exhibited before. So I am very pleased that they are getting to be seen now. I had a close relationship to Minna when I was growing up and it's been a privilege to get to work on this art. I had been involved with her for years as her agent and it's very gratifying to show some of the work that hasn't been shown before.

She was, in case you hadn't realized it, a real live wire! She'd ride up the Madison Avenue bus in New York City when she was in her late eighties and she was somewhat hard of hearing. So she'd be talking very loud and telling me some really off-color sex joke that the whole bus would be listening to and grinning, and I'd be overcome with embarrassment. I remember in 1977 there was the great blackout in New York. I was in New Orleans on work and I worried about her because she lived on the seventeenth floor of an apartment in Union Square. She lived most of her life in Greenwich Village. I was worried about how she'd be managing and I called and said, "Minna, are you all right?" And she said, "Well, of course. I was attending a play on Broadway and, well, they stopped the show and I took the bus back." So I said, "How did you get up to the apartment?" She said, "Oh, I walked up. They had a candle on every landing, it was fine."

That's when she was eighty-three.

Tuten: I think we'll stop on that fantastic story.

NOTES

1. Minna Citron, "Communication between Spectator and Artist," *College Art Journal*, 14 (Winter 1955): 147-153.