

Nancy Azara, Sculptor Who Created a Haven for Feminist Artists, Dies at 84

She helped establish the New York Feminist Art Institute. In her own work — monumental pieces carved from found lumber — she evoked ancient feminine imagery.



Nancy Azara in the early 1970s, when she and other like-minded feminist artists began to sketch out ways to support artists like themselves who were largely shut out of the contemporary (and very male) art world. Credit...via Nancy Azara Studio

By [Penelope Green](#)

Nancy Azara, a sculptor who evoked ancient feminine imagery in her carved and painted wood pieces, and who in 1979 was a founder of the New York Feminist Art Institute, a school run by and for women artists, died on June 27 in Manhattan. She was 84.

Her wife, Darla Bjork, a psychiatrist and artist, said the cause of her death, in a hospital, was congestive heart failure and complications of scleroderma, a rare autoimmune disease.

In the heyday of the women's movement — and of feminist consciousness-raising — in the early 1970s, Ms. Azara and other feminist artists began meeting in their downtown Manhattan lofts, to explore their approach to art making and to sketch out projects that would support women artists like themselves, who were largely shut out of the contemporary (and very male) art world.

On the West Coast, [Judy Chicago](#) and [Miriam Schapiro](#) had created a women's art program at the California Institute of the Arts, out of which they formed a collective called [Womanhouse](#) and presented a groundbreaking exhibition in an abandoned

Hollywood mansion. Inspired by its success, Ms. Azara and Ms. Schapiro, who had returned to the East Coast, began to conceive of an independent school at which art would be taught to women, by women.



Ms. Azara, front left (in a sweater), with her New York Feminist Art Institute co-founders, from left: Miriam Schapiro, Carol Stronghilos, Irene Peslikis and Lucille Lessane. The other founder, Selena Whitefeather, was not present. Credit...via Nancy Azara Studio

The institute began with great fanfare. Ronnie Eldridge, the feminist activist and politician who had worked for Mayor John V. Lindsay of New York, helped them to secure a space in the Port Authority building on Spring Street. The advisory board included, among others, the artists [Louise Nevelson](#) and [Faith Ringgold](#); the feminist author [Kate Millett](#); the art historian [Linda Nochlin](#); and the activist Gloria Steinem. At a fund-raising gala in the spring of 1979 at the World Trade Center, Ms. Nevelson was the guest of honor, introduced by Carol Bellamy, who was then the City Council president.

Ms. Schapiro dropped out of the institute early on; she and Ms. Azara had competing visions for it. But the other founders — the painters Carol Stronghilos and [Irene Peslikis](#); Selena Whitefeather, a video artist; and Lucille Lessane, an administrator who had worked for community organizations — stayed on.

By 1981, the institute had its own space on Franklin Street, in a building bought by Dr. Bjork. She was the only one of the group with a regular salary and a car, she said, which was helpful because she could ferry artists like Ms. Nevelson and, later, the sculptor [Louise Bourgeois](#) to events and help Ms. Azara distribute brochures and posters throughout the city.



Ms. Azara's "Maxi's Wall" (2006). She began to work in wood, she said in 2015, because "it has a history; it's more alive than canvas." Credit...Nick Ghis, via Nancy Azara Studio

In the early days, there were workshops led by Ms. Chicago, the painter [Elaine de Kooning](#) and [Ntozake Shange](#), author of the landmark theatrical work "For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf," who taught poetry. Ms. Azara led workshops in making what she called visual diaries, a technique she had begun in her consciousness-raising groups. At the time, she was trying to quit smoking and needed to do something with her hands, so she began to draw images illustrating the topics that the women around her were discussing. Realizing that it was a way to unlock the creative process, she worked to refine and teach the technique to others.

The school was promoted in Ms. magazine and The Village Voice, and women flocked to it. But with arts funding drying up, its finances were always precarious. Still, the women kept at it. The operating costs were defrayed somewhat by renting the first floor to the [Ceres Gallery](#), which was also devoted to feminist artwork.

Nonetheless, the New York Feminist Art Institute closed in 1990.

“It changed my life completely,” said the sculptor [Phyllis Rosser](#), who had been working as a contributing writer for Ms. when she began attending Ms. Azara’s workshops and sculpture classes. “We all thought this would become a big movement in art and feminism, to have women taught by women artists who were feminists. But it got harder and harder to raise money as feminism was attacked politically.

“It didn’t become the great movement we thought it would be,” she added, “but it did help a lot of women.”



“Passages,” Ms. Azara’s 1999 assemblage of wood carvings painted with gold, aluminum leaf and rich reds — “the color of blood, of sacrifice, of death, and of rebirth,” in the words of Phyllis Chesler, the feminist psychologist and author. Credit...via Nancy Azara Studio

Annunciata Jean Azara was born on Oct. 13, 1939, in the Dyker Heights section of Brooklyn, and named after her mother, Annunciata (Como) Azara. Her father, Joseph Azara, owned an air-conditioning company.

She studied fashion design at Finch College, a women’s liberal arts college in Manhattan, and received an associate degree. That was a hard sell for her conservative Roman Catholic parents, because they did not believe in educating women. (She convinced them that Finch was socially appropriate.)

They were even more disapproving when Ms. Azara left home and moved, alone, to Forsyth Street on the Lower East Side. She worked as a costume designer in the theater and on the side made hats that were sold at Bonwit Teller, the Fifth Avenue department store. But she knew she wanted to be an artist, and she went on to study painting at the Art Students League of New York. She remained determined to earn a bachelor’s degree, however, and did so, in 1974, from Empire State University.

She married Maximilian Olivas, a trumpet player, in 1966, and they moved to a loft on Mercer Street. They separated in the late 1970s and divorced in 1992. Ms. Azara met her future wife in 1979, when Dr. Bjork took a sculpture class that Ms. Azara was teaching at the Brooklyn Museum.

“It took me two years to convince Nancy to have a fling,” Dr. Bjork said. “She said she didn’t want to ruin a friendship.” Together since 1981, they married in 2011, when same-sex marriage became legal in New York.

In addition to Dr. Bjork, Ms. Azara is survived by her siblings, Victoria and Joseph Azara; her daughter, [Nana Olivas, an artist](#); her stepson, Maximilian Mark Olivas; and a granddaughter.



Ms. Azara in 2018. Women flocked to the art school, by and for women, that she helped create in 1979. But its finances were always precarious, and it closed in 1990. Credit...Grace Roselli, via Nancy Azara Studio

Though she trained as a painter, Ms. Azara began working in wood because, she said “it has a history; it’s more alive than canvas.”

Ms. Azara was interested in primitive archetypes and ancient spiritual traditions, and she at first made rough-hewn pieces of plump, bulbous shapes meant to evoke early goddess imagery; other works resembled totems and religious relics. Her pieces were massive, using found lumber — planks harvested from her Manhattan neighborhood, fallen trees

from her house in Woodstock, N.Y. Later, she began to work with gold and aluminum leaf and egg tempera in rich reds and blues, often charring the wood, too.

Ms. Azara's "deep magentas," the feminist psychologist and author Phyllis Chesler said, "are the color of blood, of sacrifice, of death and of rebirth." Ms. Azara, she said, "resurrected a more pagan archetype of the Great Mother for the mother-starved daughters of patriarchy."

The critic Holland Cotter, [reviewing](#) Ms. Azara's 2000 show at the Donahue/Sosinski Gallery in SoHo for The New York Times, wrote that her gilded pieces had a "Byzantine or South Asian splendor."

[In an interview for](#) the International Foundation for Women Artists in 2015, Ms. Azara said: "I used to find the most brutal battered piece of wood, and then once you carve into that piece of wood it just opens up. I just love that part of it."

She added: "I use wood that speaks to me; in other words, there's something about it I feel an affinity for. One could explain it's similar to meeting a person for the first time that you feel like you might have known before or you feel definitely you want to be this person's friend. So the wood and I decide we could kind of be friends."