

Juanita McNeely

CAM x Counterpublic



Juanita McNeely, *Triskaidekaptych*, 1986, Oil on linen, 13 panels, overall: 72 × 624 inches. Installation view, James Fuentes, New York, 2020.

Juanita McNeely (1936–2023) was born in Ferguson, MO. As an artist, her lifelong dedication to figurative painting began during undergraduate studies at Washington University in St. Louis, where faculty introduced her to German Expressionism. Her focus on figuration continued during graduate work at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, and during her life as an artist living in New York City. Together with a presentation at the Saint Louis Art Museum, this project marks McNeely's first solo exhibition in her hometown.

The humans and animals who appear in McNeely's paintings and drawings seem pushed to their physical and psychological limits. States of pleasure and distress are heightened by McNeely's expressionistic, painterly approach. Eschewing realism, the contorted poses and

emotive responses of the bodies in McNeely's multi-panel painting *Triskaidekaptych* (1986) convey urgent feelings: pain, confusion, fright, and flight. Also on view are a selection of drawings for *Triskaidekaptych*, making it clear that McNeely can temper urgency and emotional rawness with reflectiveness and objective distance.

McNeely's visceral, feminist approach is informed by personal medical experiences: McNeely was treated for cancer as a young woman; sought an illegal abortion in the late 1960s when her cancer returned and treatment during a pregnancy was deemed life-threatening; and in 1982, when she suffered a fall that resulted in a debilitating spinal injury.

McNeely painted the cinematically-scaled *Triskaidekaptych* (1986) following an accident and spinal injury that left her confined to a wheelchair. At the time, her doctors suggested that continuing to create large scale paintings would be a challenge. As such, McNeely's dogged determination to complete this complex multipanel painting speaks to her lifelong dedication to the painting practice that sustained her, and helped her make sense of the world. Art historian Hall Rockefeller has noted that *Triskaidekaptych*'s 13 panel format feels deliberate, saying "It's a number large enough to make a point, and to say something about bad luck: it wasn't going to stop McNeely." McNeely's ability to distill personal experiences into painterly images is part of what makes her work so emotionally resonant, complex, challenging, and powerful.

Unfolding cinematically, the individual oil-on-canvas panels of *Triskaidekaptych* present scenes of agony and anxiety divorced from reason or resolution. At 52 feet long, the painting's outsize scale is impossible to take in at once. McNeely's work offers an encompassing space where her disorienting narrative unfolds. Human and animal bodies tumble through indistinct landscapes and architectures. Destabilization reigns: limbs contort at strange angles, figures appear upside down, and are hoisted into the air by chains; a horse balances precariously on stilts. For all of the emotional upheaval reflected in this artwork, a series of preparatory drawings exhibited in cases nearby demonstrate that McNeely carefully crafted this composition. She considered and adjusted connections between the panels, deliberately orchestrating its potent emotional punch. The final panel—depicting a shrieking monkey—clinches the work's emotional tenor: *Triskaidekaptych* is McNeely's visceral response to innermost pains.

Juanita McNeely is organized for the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis as a part of Counterpublic 2026: *Coyote Time* by Raphael Fonseca, Counterpublic 2026 co-curator, with assistance from Dean Daderko, Ferring Foundation Chief Curator.

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Juanita McNeely.

Born in St. Louis, **Juanita McNeely** moved to New York in 1967, where she became an active member of feminist artist collectives, including Fight Censorship (founded by Anita Steckel), alongside Louise Bourgeois, Joan Semmel, Hannah Wilke, Judith Bernstein, Martha Edelheit, and Eunice Golden; as well as Women Artists in Revolution (W.A.R.) and Redstockings. Her work is held in major collections, including the Whitney Museum of American Art, Minneapolis Institute of Art, Rubell Museum, Palacio de Bellas Artes (Mexico City), and the National Museum of History (Taipei), among others.

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