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FEMINIST ART

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FEMINIST GROUP SHOWS

Girls, Girls, Girls

Feminist art's phases and philosophies? Let me count the ways...

BY CAREY LOVELACE

The wave of solo exhibitions, group shows, surveys and museum projects of gynocentric art that has surged across the country in recent months is not a unified tide. These events are characterized by different levels of scholarship, ambition, scale and resources, not to mention quality. A good number are grounded in a 1970s agenda that simply sought to give exposure, thus in a way to empower those included, rather than to engage in any more sophisticated critique.

Feminist art, alas, continues to make many people uneasy, particularly those in the gallery world's upper echelons—not unlike the woman-oriented political movement with which it is associated. Several years ago, such cutting-edge figures as Judy Chicago, Arlene Raven and Maura Reilly (now curator of the Brooklyn Museum's Elizabeth A. Sackler Center), anticipating upcoming events like L.A. MOCA's long-awaited exhibition "WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution" and "Global Feminisms" at the Brooklyn Museum, mounted in conjunction with the permanent installation of Chicago's own *The Dinner Party* there, began forging a strategy under the aegis of the Feminist Art Project (<http://feministartproject.rutgers.edu/>). Aware that women's art events are often met with a wall of neglect built on a foundation of hostility, they decided to help create a host of activities that would generate excitement and discussion.

This critical mass has been achieved, although the discussion is not all positive. Many other venues staged their own satellite shows independent of the

Feminist Art Project. A sampling follows. [Also see Review of Exhibitions, this issue.]

Los Angeles Up Close and Personal

For decades, L.A. has had a vigorous art scene involving women. In part, it stems from the activist Woman's Building, which from 1973 to '91 pioneered socially minded installation and performance along with workshops and projects indescribably various. Even more, it grows out of a distinct Southern California esthetic, taking the strategies of modernism and conceptualism in a more decorative direction, losing, some argue, edginess or rigor while gaining playfulness and sensuality.

"Multiple Vantage Points: Southern California Women Artists, 1980-2006," conceived as a companion exhibition to "WACK!" was a friendly sprawl of a show, filling the spacious rooms of Barnsdall Park's Municipal Art Gallery on a Hollywood hilltop near Silver Lake. It paid tribute to the area's activist pioneers with, for example, video installations of historic performances by Barbara T. Smith and ecofeminist Rachel Rosenthal. Judith Baca, who initiated the famed *Great Wall of Los Angeles* mural project, a collaboration with Latino youngsters, was represented by her campy 1976 photo grid, *Judy as Pachuca*, in which she vamps as a cigarette-smoking floozy. One room charted connections between another figure who is especially important regionally, Betye Saar, and her art-making daughters Lezley and Alison. The elder Saar's hallmark social commentary

is channeled through found-object assemblages such as *Sunnyland (The Dark Side)*, 1998, an old-fashioned washboard crowned by a cutout of a mammy doing laundry; below, on the corrugated grate, is a stenciled image of a lynched African-American man. Lezley Saar embraced the use of vintage materials with an autobiographic twist in her folk-art-style paintings on books and textiles. In the weathered-looking *My Nature* (1994), a supine female, a tree growing out of her chest, is depicted on a floral-patterned ground. One of Alison Saar's noted rough-hewn wooden carvings occupied the room's center: in *Coup* (2006), a nearly life-size female figure is seated, her hair braid stretching backward, blending with a cargo rope that winds around a pile of old suitcases and trunks. She holds a large scissors.



Anita Steckel: *Pierced*, early 1970s, photomontage, 48 by 36 inches; at *Tabla Rasa*.

Among the younger artists was Carlee Fernandez, who creates strange, vivid "still life" sculptures using taxidermically altered animals—for example, a very white, very real-looking bunny merged with tangerine-tree branches. The occasions of wit were particularly welcome. Longtime social satirist Erika Rothenberg's tongue-in-cheek church message board listed meetings for abused spouses, AA and "parenting your clone" groups. Underneath was the 9 A.M. Sunday sermon: "Another Century of Progress."

Curator Dextra Frankel herself helped define the West Coast women's esthetic, starting with her 1972 show "21 Artists Visible/Invisible" at the Long Beach Museum. Many things in "Multiple Vantage Points" tended to stay skin-deep, however. Lita Albuquerque's installation of natural materials in a high-design setting consisted of a sleek transparent table surface on which honeycomb was shaped into continents; glass balls half-filled with amber liquid were placed on shelves against a dark wall and theatrically lit, giving them an iconic glow. Like much of the California art scene, it was good-looking and luscious—but a little sweet.

A.I.R. Forceful

Since 1972, the trailblazing A.I.R. gallery in New York, the world's first women's art co-op, has provided quiet support for those operating outside the art world's market-obsessed precincts. For its 7th Biennial—the survey was initiated in 1994—Cornelia Butler, orga-

Carolee Schneemann: *Portrait Partials*, 1970/2004, giclée print, 44 inches square; not in show—a similar work was at *Galerie Lelong*. Courtesy P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York.



In A.I.R.'s 7th Biennial (culled from 9,000 works submitted in an open call) there was a refreshing absence of body art, theory, goddesses and other well-worn feminist-art themes.

nizer of "WACK!" did the jurying honors. (How did she find the time?) There was a distinctively cool temperature to this 59-artist selection culled from an open call attracting some 9,000 works—and a refreshing absence of body art, theory, goddesses and other well-worn feminist-art themes. (Perhaps Butler, recently appointed drawings curator at the Museum of Modern Art, where she also co-organized a "Feminist Future" conference in January [see "Front Page," Mar. '07], has wearied of the whole topic.)

Most selections were works on paper, with a focus on inventive use of materials. Françoise Duresse showed small-scale, strangely compelling renderings



Dianne Bowen: Finnigan Begin Again, 2006, oil, charcoal, marker on paper with guitar strings and eggshells, 24 by 50 1/2 inches; at A.I.R. Gallery, New York.

tion of the selection, often featuring figures in awkward frontal poses. In Naomi Harris's C-print *White Party Couple* (2005), a middle-aged pair proudly strut their stuff, voluptuously bursting out of their gleaming white polyester Vegas-style duds. Deadpan wit was offered through structure in Christine Gideon's *Gorky and His Mother* (2005), a blueprint drawing of the peasant woman and child rendered schematically from above. Gideon shows how easy it is to get a different overview of a classic work. Throughout the show, gender references, where they occurred, were oblique—innovative engagement with the female figure was gained through composition or materials rather than political or social critique. Dianne Bowen's horizontal wall piece *Finnigan Begin Again* (2006), one of the show's most effective works, featured brownish concentric swirls that brought to mind the rings of a tree or breasts or folding skin. Bits of guitar wire and seeds were applied to the surface and, in a reference to life cycles and reproduction, small brown birds' eggs were attached so that they seemed to float above the surface.

My Body, My Art Object

New York's Galerie Lelong has regularly supported women's art, one of the few high-profile galleries to do so. The title of its nuanced, connoisseurial "Role Play: Feminist Art Revisited 1960-1980" makes reference to a 1970s trend in which women explored a range of identities—precursors to what critical theory would later dub the "performance of gender identity." (This exhibition occurred independently of the Feminist Art Project.) For example, Adrian Piper dressed up like a black man and wandered the streets, a performance referred to here in a 1975 photograph of the artist with mustache and beard, bearing the legend "I Am Everything You Most Fear," scribbled with oil crayon.

Otherwise, this show, consisting primarily of black-and-white, small-format photographs, was not quite what the title indicated. The exhibition addressed another

trend: works in which women use their own bodies sculpturally, operating as both creator and object. In Ana Mendieta's 1972 *Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints—Face)*, the artist distorts her face by pressing it against a sheet of glass. Throughout the show, there is a nod to French theory about "writing" the body, as in a photo of Shigeko Kubota's 1965 *Vagina Painting*, in which the artist, observed by a Fluxus festival audience, squats over an expanse of paper on a spacious floor and leaves a trail of gestural marks via a paintbrush attached to her underwear. There were the usual body-art suspects (e.g., Valie Export in her famous 1969 *Action Pants/Genital Panic* photo, posing with a machine gun, a triangle cut out of the pubic region of her leather pants). Happily, there were also some "finds" that recent scholarship has unearthed. The Austrian

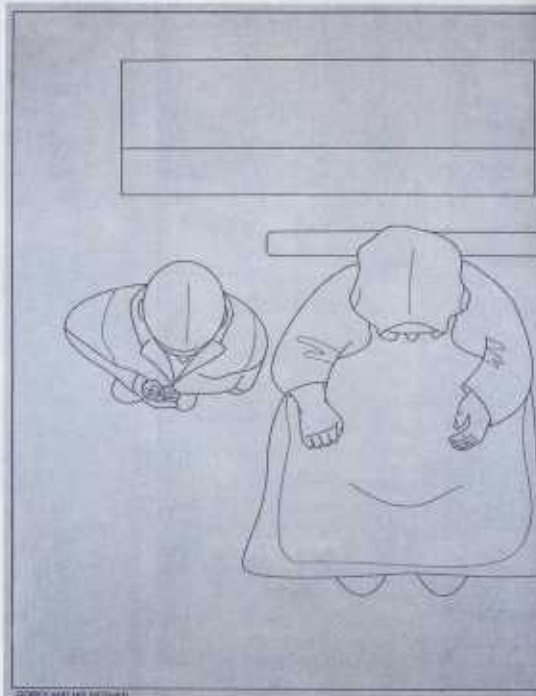


Naomi Harris: White Party Couple, 2005, C-print, 25 by 20 inches; at A.I.R.

of female heads topped by a kind of headdress or sculpted hair flaring upward, composed of minuscule ink loops (2006). The complex, colored, waxy-textured surface seems to be a coalescence of small repeated images. There is a tension between obsessiveness and elegance. Jelena Berenc's *Limited View of a Self-Portrait* (2004) consisted of a kilometer-long, 2 1/2-inch-wide piece extracted from a loosely rendered ink and pastel drawing. It was presented on film reels you could scroll through to find recognizable portions such as eyes or forehead and nose.

Large-format photos were a considerable propor-

Christine Gideon: Gorky and His Mother, 2005, blueprint drawing, 24 by 22 inches; at A.I.R.





Joyce Kozloff: *After Gerhard Richter, 2003, pencil, collage, marker, image 17 1/2 by 25 1/2 inches; at St. John's University, Queens. Courtesy DC Moore Gallery, New York.*

Birgit Jürgenssen posed in small photographs dated 1977 as *Untitled (Self with Fur)*: a fox pelt tumbles down from the pixieish artist's own hair to cover the top part of her face. Likewise, Senga Nengudi, in photos from her ca. 1978/79 *Masked Taping* performance, applied long pieces of light-colored tape to her body. She is caught in a blur of motion, the tape almost giving the impression that she is on fire.

On Message in the Outer Boroughs

The modest "From the Inside Out: Feminist Art Then & Now," at St. John's University in the far reaches of Queens, answered the question "what is feminist art?" (which seems to bedevil many exhibition organizers). Curator Claudia Sbrissa demonstrated, in this thoughtful gathering of quietly effective works, that it is gender-based art

with a political edge. In Jessica Plattner's realist painting *Kid Gloves* (2005), a woman, her hands protectively sheathed, holds a baby; her slightly alarmed expression conveys clearly mixed feelings about motherhood. In a 2003 work, Joyce Kozloff recast a Gerhard Richter timeline graphing major artists' lifespans, replacing his all-male roster with women's names. Indeed, so nuanced is each work in reference to the topic at hand, there is ammunition for a seminar. Mira Schor's charmingly primitivist painting *Goodbye Cal Arts* (1972) poses a mix of female figures in a formal landscape of cypresses and a pond—with penguins. (Class, discuss the California Institute of the Arts's early Feminist Art Program and the role it played in generating the work in the current exhibition.)

Subtexts about gender and power that would be subdued in other contexts were made obvious here—say, in Barbara Zucker's 1977 brass-and-conduit *Table Ruffle*. Composed of hardware parts, it conveys the vulnerability of a daisylike form on a wilting 10-inch stem. Intended as an intergenerational musing, the show presented numbers of younger artists doing original projects using new approaches. Tiffany Ludwig and Renee Piechocki, who call themselves Two Girls Working, hoping to stimulate discussion of feminist ideas without using the "f" word, travel nationwide interviewing women about what clothes make them feel powerful. (A sampling of answers was accessible on an audiotrack via cellphone.) Cheryl Yun's articles of "girlie" lingerie on hangers look tie-dyed and frivolous. Upon scrutiny, they reveal themselves to be topical: gampi tissue decorated with tiny inkjet images from politically tinged newspaper articles such as "U.S. Troops Get a Thank You from President Bush."

Mira Schor: *Goodbye Cal Arts, 1972, gouache on paper, approx. 22 by 30 inches; at St. John's University.*





Barbara Zucker: *Table Ruffle (detail)*, 1977, brass and conduit, 7 3/4 by 15 1/2 by 10 inches; at St. John's University.

dered with outlines of longhaired couples frolicking among birds and bees.

The show, then, seemed to be looking back at early ideas. However, this retrospective view was thrown off track by pieces such as a large 1992 "Intra-Venus" diptych by Hannah Wilke, which occupied pride of place at the gallery's far end. Here the artist, in two stages of advanced cancer treatment, stares out at the viewer. Perhaps unintentionally, the tone of this powerful piece drew out an undercurrent of physical suffering in adjacent works such as Audrey Flack's bronze quasi-realist goddess, *Amor Vincit Omnia*, with a tear rolling down her face, who gazed at the viewer from almost the same vantage point. The juxtaposition made the figure seem to be in distress. The same was true of Eleanor Antin's photograph *Alice's Dream*, from her 2004 "Roman Allegories" series. In a kind of fairy tale, a little Alice-in-Wonderland girl sits amid the spreading boughs of a tree. From branches around her, six women in Roman garb hang like fruits—by the neck. At the same time, Wilke's

A 20-artist show at Brooklyn's Tabla Rasa, curated by veteran advocate Cindy Nemser, recuperated many early figures, such as German refugee Lil Picard and satirist Anita Steckel.

focus on the body's dysfunction and Antin's on post-modern fictions seemed out of keeping with the early approaches to societal critique, empowerment and even abstraction and materials put forth by the other works—and indeed, seemed more up-to-date than the "new" works by a handful of "younger" (under 60) artists. In short, the whole was confusing.

Years ago, feminist art was often denigrated as

Greatest Hits and Ms's

In the 1970s, Cindy Nemser's landmark *Feminist Art Journal* was the site of debate about the hot topics of women's art—for example, whether there was a distinct female sensibility. (Decidedly not, Nemser held.) Recently, she has reemerged as a passionate advocate for the preservation of feminist art's early history.

At Brooklyn's Tabla Rasa Gallery, she organized "Women's Work: Homage to Feminism," a 20-artist show with a conservative grounding, recuperating many very early figures, such as German refugee Lil Picard, who was a kind of eminence grise for the downtown community. (Sylvia Goldsmith's fascinating 16mm film about Picard's life was on view during the show.) Picard's 1965 *Cosmetic Sculpture*, a boudoir tray on which lotion bottles overflow with a calcified-looking white-icing plaster, was witty but seemed unintentionally dried out and crusted over. Long overlooked, the wickedly satiric collagist Anita Steckel was represented by a huge 1970 photomontage, *Pierced*, of a woman impaled on the Chrysler building. Nemser also included somewhat younger women favoring the same representational strategies as the early feminists, such as 35-year-old Orly Cogan, with her lighthearted bedspread colorfully embroi-



Eleanor Antin: *The Banquet from the Last Days of Pompeii*, 2001, chromogenic print, 35 1/2 by 58 1/2 inches; at Barnsdall Park. Collection Jeffrey and Catharine Soros, courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

Karen Carson: *Recoil and Advance*, 1990-91, mixed mediums on wood, 97 1/4 by 156 by 5 inches; at Barnsdall Park. Courtesy Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Santa Monica.



second rate; in the 1990s the problem was, according to some critics, that it was "victim art." After all this time, this phenomenon now involves so many phases, and so many philosophical groundings, theoretical and otherwise, that it's hard to keep track of it; it implicates over half the art world's population. While each new exhibition makes a contribution, the successes in particular demonstrate the need for first-rate curatorial minds to make sense of the whole massive thing. □

"Multiple Vantage Points: Southern California Women Artists" was on view at the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, Barnsdall Park, Los Angeles [Feb. 25-Apr. 15]; the 7th Biennial was presented at A.L.R. Gallery, New York [Mar. 6-31]; "Role Play: Feminist Art Revisited 1960-1980" was organized by Galerie Lelong, New York [Mar. 15-Apr. 28]; "From the Inside Out: Feminist Art Then & Now" was shown at St. John's University, Queens [Feb. 22-Apr. 21]; and "Women's Work: Homage to Feminist Art" was seen at Tabla Rasa Gallery, Brooklyn [Mar. 28-May 13].

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