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Sex Work: a riot of body fluids, condom balloons and Day-Glo dick aliens

The anti-war phalluses and photorealist porn of feminist artists were shunned by collectors and banned from galleries. Can a bold new show at Frieze art fair change all that?

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Sheela's Secret Weapon from Mary Beth Edelson's The Woman Rising series, 1973.

It would be impossible to look at the drawings of weaponised monster phalluses or gigantic photorealist paintings of genitalia cropped from hardcore porn, and not be poleaxed by the ferocious energy. The sheer ballsiness of the enterprise, if you like. These frank exhibits belong to Sex Work, a special section at this week's Frieze art fair masterminded by American curator Alison Gingeras to promote nine disparate artists who came of age in the 1960s and 70s and have struggled against all kinds of censorship to find an audience. Of course, explicit material in itself isn't anything to be surprised about at a contemporary fair.

What gives this work an edge within Frieze's lineup is that the creators, who hail from the first wave of feminist art, are seizing a main stage in a hyper-commercial context. Sidetracked by art history, it seems that their riotous visions are finally getting their dues.

Dogged by a reputation for an essentialist vision of woman – undistinguished by epoch, economics or culture – or for a jarring bashing of “oppressive” heterosexual desire, art from the original women’s movement has typically been written off as irrelevant in the face of today’s sex-positive, pluralistic feminism. Yet what’s in *Sex Work* feels a world away from the assumed clichés, with its curator looking beyond the established feminist canon to its unruly outer fringes. “It’s not just Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party*,” Gingeras says, citing the leading American artist’s fantasy chow-down for historical grandes dames.

Perhaps the most direct reversals of the stereotype are those immense airbrushed photorealist depictions of sex, *Fuck Paintings*, made by the American artist Betty Tompkins between 1969 and 74. These are based on hardcore porn, posted from the far east to a mailbox in Canada and illegally brought into the US by her husband. “The photos were why I made the paintings in the first place and what I’d been looking for – beautiful, edgy and an attention-grabber,” says the artist. “I often get the ‘look, look away, look back’ response. At heart my paintings are very slow. You don’t get it right away.” They are also disconcertingly affectless, with no obvious polemic. “I’m not interested in judging, that’s not why I’m an artist,” she says.

Another New Yorker, Judith Bernstein, uses phallic imagery to quite different ends. Her charcoal drawings satirise massive dicks as patriarchal weapons and often directly reference the Vietnam war. On show are dicks created with dense hatched lines suggesting manically whirring screws, penises splurged across the stars and stripes with anti-war graffiti, and what look like DayGlo dick-aliens cut loose in an unhinged libidinal cosmos.

While the politics come from another era, Gingeras feels the artists’ uncompromising, abrasive stance has much to say to our own time. “It’s a counter-narrative to the corporatised feminism of Ivanka Trump and Sheryl Sandberg, or the mainstream feminism of the Women’s March, saying we’re all feminists in these bubblegum pink pussyhats, but it’s so unthreatening,” she says. “Feminism is not just the history of Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem. It’s much more complicated. It’s plural, it has isms.”

Sex Work really highlights this breadth. The Viennese artist Renate Bertlmann’s photographs of coloured condom balloons, suggesting both breasts and phalluses, or her sculptures where cacti sprout bright pink double dildos, are creepy and comic, like a clown’s psychosexual nightmare. Meanwhile, Natalia LL, who is Polish, jauntily satirises from behind the iron curtain a whole culture based on stimulating consumer hunger. Her photographs, derived from her multichannel film *Consumer Art*, feature a blonde bombshell knowingly simulating oral sex with her fingers and food. The oldest artist included, Dorothy Iannone, creates hippyish paintings that celebrate lovers with willies and enlarged vulvas merrily exposed, against ecstatic mosaics of rainbow colour.

If anything unites this wayward mob, it’s their desire to set the world on fire and have fun while they’re at it. Sometimes, as with Bertlmann and another great provocateur of the Vienna scene, the late Birgit Jürgensen, the artists worked alongside other feminists. Often though they weren’t “joiners”, as Tompkins puts it. For the British artist Penny Slinger this had its advantages: “I was honestly not really aware of other visual artists working in a feminist mode or with female sexuality per se, in that period in England, so I felt I was creating my own genre.”

Slinger’s photo-collages rethinking surrealist Max Ernst’s dark dreamscapes from a woman’s perspective, are hugely seductive. Many of the collages at Frieze come from her early book *An Exorcism*, where suggestive lips, flowers and eyes erupt all over the place as the artist has a series of erotic encounters within a spooky country house, and her body starts to merge with its architecture. Then there’s her takedown of the sexual subtext of marriage rituals, *Bride’s Cake*, with Slinger posed naked, legs spread, inside a wedding cake. When the series was shown in 1973 it earned her headlines like “art is just a piece of cake”.

A major turning point for feminist art's reappraisal came in 2007 with LA Moca's survey WACK! Only one of Gingeras' artists made the cut – Mary Beth Edelson – but as she points out, “you can't write the history in one go”. What has grown, slowly, in the decade since is the number of museum surveys reinstating feminist work in broader art narratives while increasing numbers of overlooked pioneers are securing gallery representation.

Given the art market's chronic lack of women at the top and the wider battle around the gender pay gap, Frieze's seal of approval is arguably a significant and positive step. “There's always this endless hunger for underrated historical material,” Gingeras says. “Feminist art is the perfect form. It's something that the museum and commercial world has finally figured out. What's in *Sex Work* is a strain that has really not been looked at art-historically.”

The ways in which these artists have had prohibitions placed on them in one way or another are numerous. Betty Tompkins' paintings were detained by customs officials in France in 1973. Bertlmann recalls how she had a series selected for the landmark show *Magna Feminismus* by her peer, the now celebrated performance artist VALIE EXPORT. Yet its delicate lines and white polystyrene eggs suggesting a bum and balls seen from below, were rejected by the male director at the gallery where it was to be staged. Furthermore, in 1970s Vienna the censorship Bertlmann faced wasn't restricted to the male establishment. “Even feminist critics and artists accused me of being phallus-addicted and not really feminist, because I did not restrict myself to developing a new image of female, but investigating a new image of the male by the female.”

“Feminist art has been in the ghetto for a long time and in some ways feminist artists put themselves in that ghetto,” says Gingeras. “There was a lot of puritanical ideology.” Judith Bernstein remembers how the names on a petition calling for her monumental screw drawing, *Horizontal*, to be removed from an exhibition included “Lawrence Alloway, Clement Greenberg, Lucy Lippard, Alice Neel, Sylvia Sleigh, Linda Nochlin, Louise Bourgeois – among others”.

Bernstein was a member of *Fight Censorship*, a collective of women artists who used phallic imagery in their work, but even they didn't invite Betty Tompkins to join them. “There was a red line that was crossed because she was using source material from the pornographic industry – violent – against women,” says Gingeras. Tompkins didn't secure gallery representation and her paintings spent three decades rolled up under her pool table until they were rediscovered by the dealer Mitchell Algu in the early 2000s. As late as 1994, the photographer and painter Marilyn Minter whose output included translating porn into canvases that drip with body fluids and lurid colour, had work turned away from *Bad Girls*, a survey meant to embrace feminism's contradictions.

For Gingeras, though, these frictions are crucial to the story of feminist art. “The point is actually to look at all of that pain and complicated, controversial history associated with the work,” she says. “It's not about making it palatable. Some rich collector can walk into Frieze and buy this thing and put it into his or her living room, but it will never be normalised.”

Frieze London will be in Regent's Park from 4-8 October.