Art in America

Feminism at 40
Recent overlapping exhibitions in New York and East Hampton explored first-generation feminist art and its legacy

by Casey Lovelace
May 2003

An important historical survey of what is arguably the late 20th century’s most significant art movement was mounted last summer and fall at Guild Hall Museum in East Hampton, in the leafy far reaches of Long Island. “Personal & Political: The Women’s Art Movement, 1969-1975” was but one of a cluster of shows that sprouted up seemingly out of nowhere, after 22 years of sparse coverage of first-generation feminist art. Also appearing on the summer scene was Galerie Lelong’s “Goddess” in Chelsea, followed in September by “Gloria: Another Look at Feminist Art of the 1970s” at White Columns in Greenwich Village; later in the fall, a sequel, “Regarding Gloria,” showed a selection of work by emerging women artists.

Guild Hall’s Simon Taylor and co-curator Natalie Ng gathered together 51 works, mostly paintings, sculptures and videos, by 34 artists, from the famous to the overlooked. The show was a noble attempt to deal with the complex web of issues surrounding this idealistic movement that changed the world and certainly art. (In a curious bit of timing, Taylor was fired toward the end of the exhibition’s run.)

Taylor’s dense, 22-page catalogue essay with 143 footnotes traces the history of women-centered political movements and how they played out in the art world, particularly on the East Coast. The exhibition itself, however, didn’t attempt a chronological display. Rather, it grouped work according to a few themes featuring key artists represented by one or two pieces. The birth of feminist art from 1960s anti-war activism was made evident, for example, by works such as May Stevens’ painting Top Man (1975), from the “Big Dady” series she began in the late 1960s. In this critique of U.S. imperialism, a fat, middle-aged power broker, his head shaped like a wrinkled penis, is wrapped in an American flag, a bulldog jutting phallicly from his lap.

A large gallery titled “Cultural Feminism” featured work by the era’s formative art activists. In the early 1970s, Taylor writes, women were breaking away from 1960s radical politics, attempting to integrate what was then known as Women’s Lib into mainstream culture. Likewise, artists were taking feminism’s innovations—the revalorization of women’s traditional crafts or the rediscovery of historic women of achievement—and merging these with standard art practices and subjects. In the first work of “femmage” by Miriam Schapiro, her canvas Lady Gaga’s Maze (1972), a large square of fabric seems to float in a hard-edge abstraction, like colorful invaders. Adjacent were Judy Chicago’s studies for 1973-74 lithographs inspired by historic females, Compressed Women Who Yearn to Be Butterflies.

Emblematic pieces by Faith Ringgold, Joyce Kozloff, Harmony Hammond, Joan Snyder and other central figures hung next to works selected by the curators to represent various groups or phenomena. Included were abstract paintings by Mary Grigorian, co-founder of A.I.R., the first all-woman co-op gallery; one of Michelle Stuart’s earth-rubbed scrolls, representing Post-Minimalism; Photorealist work by Audrey Flack; and Valerie Jaudon’s handsone acrylic painting featuring interlocking Celtic patterns, exemplifying the late-70s Pattern and Decoration movement.

Ng and Taylor, both born in the mid-1960s, are of age during second-generation feminism, which eschewed many of the pioneers’ ideas, branding them as “essentialist” (after the belief that female-
How should curators address once-raging debates such as whether feminist art can operate within a capitalist system, whether there is a "female aesthetic," whether institutions should become egalitarian and pluralistic? A second theme, "Reversing the Gaze," gave a nod to later deconstructive approaches stemming from French psychoanalytic theory, which became the vanguard in feminist thought in the mid-1980s. The works here were crafted in the innocent days before the power-wielding "masculine gaze" was widely recognized. In her "role reversal" paintings, Joan Semmel's uninhibited postcoital Intimacy/Intrusiveness (1974) depicts a couple lying in bed, as seen from the perspective of the woman gazing down a slight, alienating gap between their bodies. In Sylvia Stieglitz's art-historical switcheroo Philip Godin Reclining (1971), the painter depicts herself like Velázquez in the background recording a baroque nude, here a long-haired youth who regards himself in the mirror: a la Don Quixote.

The body, which became a focus of so much academic theorizing, was represented in works such as Carving: A Traditional Sculpture (1972) by Eleanor Antin, a photo sequence of the artist naked, at various stages of a diet. Shifting the terms of power to the "female gaze," women artists focused on the male anatomy, and at Guild Hall, penises were everywhere—limp, erect, attached to bodies or as solo subjects. On either side of an ornate fireplace, 12-ft high sculptures each bore a busy charcoal rendering of an immense, hairy screw thrusting upward. This was Judith Bernstein's witty Two Panel Vertical (1973). As (literal) "pendants" nearby, Louise Bourgeois's wicked, phallic cast-bronze sculptures simply hung by wire from the ceiling, the double-faced Janus Fleuri and Hanging Janus with Jacket (both 1969). Unrivaled, the architectural quality of the phallicases made one of the few exhibitions at Guild Hall to compete successfully against the sometimes intrusive personality of the building's vaulted ceilings and Beaux-Arts detailing.

A small room was devoted to video and documentation of performances. In general, it would seem that images were selected mainly from books. But all in all, this brave little show set a benchmark for the future.

In the entry to White Columns's quietly brilliant, lighthearted "Gloria!" was a monitor playing vintage video featuring Linda Carter undergoing a "torture" that transforms her again and again from a workaday female to a third-breasted, sequin-clad superwoman. Dara Birnbaum's Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman (1978), a loop edited from TV clips, witlfiilly spoofed the aspiration at the heart of Women's Lib to unleash the inner Amazon, to repel bullets and charise with unwavering speed (and perhaps to look sexy in the process).

"Gloria!" was gleefully revisionist. The exhibition title referred amusingly to Gloria Steinem, the liberal daughter Gloria Stieglitz in "All in the Family," Patti Smith's version of "Gloria," and a John Cassavetes film of the same name. This information was noted in a curator's statement in the index of the show; a catalogue that accompanied the show; the catalogue, fashioned after the flashy alternative publications of the counterculture era, included statements by "feminists and critics about what they think of today's feminism.

Curators trying to present an overview of 1970s feminism face thorny issues. Early activists rebelled against notions of quality, holding that such rankings were used by the dominant culture to exclude; thus works that have historical relevance within the movement are not necessarily the most aesthetically successful, and vice versa. Women have worried, and still do, often bitterly, over what art qualifies as "feminist." Categories abound and contradict one another. How should curators address once-raging debates such as whether feminist art can operate within a capitalist system, whether there is a "female aesthetic," whether institutions should abandon all hierarchy to be egalitarian and pluralistic?

Guest curators Catherine Morris and Ingrid Schaffner assembled an unusual collection of works, mostly performative or on paper, by 33 artists, some of whom, like Yoko Ono, Barbara Kruger, Jean Jonas and Cindy Sherman, are not normally associated with feminist art. Assembled here were some very good works that are a lot of
fun to look at and that simultaneously show how the movement laid the groundwork for many subsequent trends.

Vitrines displayed an array of fascinating ephemera from early political groups such as New York’s Ad Hoc Committee and Women Artists in Revolution (WAR) and from alternative institutions like the Los Angeles Women’s Building. There were announcement cards, playbills and copies of magazines such as Chronicles and Heresies. The material was drawn from the Women’s Art Registry Collection of Rutgers University, which houses critic Lucy Lippard’s personal archives.

Ironically, it appears that 1970s feminist art’s most enduring legacies aren’t the things it labored so hard at—vaginal iconography, nonhierarchical modes of collaboration, alternative art-world power structures. One legacy is surely the jokes, visual one-liners and parodies—tactics that, as later perfected by the Guerrilla Girls, made feminism’s bitter pill go down more smoothly. In her deadpan video Semiotics of the Kitchen (1976), a knife-wielding Martha Rosler presents, one by one, a litany of alarmingly lethal kitchen implements, handling each with delicious implications of violence. In Zerle Ludeman Ukeles’s series of dictums framing housework in the heightened rhetoric of workers’ rights, her Manifesto for Maintenance Art (1980), there is a brilliant condensation of Groucho and Karl Marx: “After the Revolution, who will pick up the garbage?” (Ukeles went on to address the garbage question in her many works with the New York Sanitation Department.)

Hannah Wilke was never a participant in the movement, but she has since been adopted as a feminist hero. In So Help Me Hannah (1976), six posters show the late, great body artist, with her sleepy bedroom eyes, in black-and-white photo images of faux chase scenes—running naked over a steam-engine contraption, holding a toy gun, seemingly emerged—each image with an authoritative quote over it. In one, where she is surrounded by bathtub toys and fake ray guns, her legs spread open, the overlying text queries, “What does this represent? What do you represent?”

A number of women besides Wilke were looking for their personal beat. Carolee Schneemann is photographed crouching nude as she extracts the long, snake-like Interior Scroll (1975) from her vagina; the famous image is captured in a large, urine-and-beet-juice-stained 40-by-77-inch print. And from a far room flowered the leather-clad, spiky-haired, machine-gun-toting Valie Export, wearing her Action Piece: Gestalt Panic (1968/2001)—leather trousers with the crotch cut out.

In an alcove was a veritable shrine’s worth of artifacts commemorating Lynda Benglis’s notorious November 1974 Artforum ad in which, her tanned body oil-slicked in the manner of porno pics, she posed nude sporting a huge fake penis in order to (among other things) spoof gallery ads featuring male artists in macho poses. (A vitrine offered an outraged letter from several of Arforum’s associate editors decrying the “brutalizing” nature and “extreme vulgarity” of the image.)

There were many other instances of women utilizarizing sexuality like a well-aimed weapon. Indeed, Wilke and Benglis, both seen as politically incorrect in their day, are the spiritual parents to postfeminist artists such as Tracey Emin, her art text decorated with the names of Everybody I've Ever Slept With, and Vanessa Beecroft, with her humiliazied-looking battalions of whipped-thin naked females standing on display.

In fact, the show coherently demonstrated connections to an overwhelming amount of later work. Schneemann’s extraction of her internal text, for example, brought to mind Kiki Smith’s sculptures involving extrusions of fluids from bodily orifices. Robert Gober’s body art also falls into this lineage. In addition, the critical impulse in 1970s women’s art—its desire to poke fun, decede sexist messages, challenge the canon—laid the groundwork for the more theoretical and deconstructive antiauthoritarian postmodern critiques (including Sherrie Levine’s and Allan McCullom’s), which subsequently dominated the art world.

Near White Column’s entrance hung two of Nancy Spero’s enigmatic Codex Artaud scrolls, XXVII A and B (1972), tiny hieroglyphics fusing male and female figures. These pieces signify how society silences artists, as it did the “Ostertal” Artaud; it’s an allegory, too, for how women are mistimed.

In three early (1978–79) Sherman “film stills,”...
The image contains a page from a document with text and some photographs. The text is not fully transcribed due to the nature of the images and the quality of the scan. However, it appears to discuss art installations and artworks by Mary Beth Edelson and David Lewis, mentioning a tape featuring Yoko Ono and John Lennon's 'Red Peace,' a sculpture by Sol LeWitt, and a group of Tennessee lassies hanging together. The text touches on themes of feminism, art, and social commentary.
Many 1970s women artists wielded sexuality like a well-aimed weapon. Wilke and Benglis, both seen as politically incorrect in their time, are spiritual parents to today’s more polished provocateurs.

Lila Katzen, Lee Xamper, Louise Nevelson, One, M.C. Richards, Alma Thomas and Jane Wayne. The border features 67 other headshots of women artists, with a caption below naming them.

Another strong inclusion was a 1980 photograph from Ana Mendieta’s landmark “silueta” series, in which she traced her outline in beds of earth, sometimes using spectacular means such as gunpowder or fire. In the image at Leleng, the form resembled a homunculus bulging from a clay bank, a root running through it like an artery. Bourgeois was shown in a 1975 photograph wearing a many-breasted latex costume she made to evoke Diana of Ephesus.

While the goddess movement was often criticized for appropriating imagery from primal cultures, Leleng’s younger generation, concerned with identity politics, made race very much an issue in the contemplation of the mythic goddess. In Tracey Rose’s Lambda photograph, a naked Venus Boartman (2001) is seen crouching in the cloud-covered African bush. She represents the 19th-century “Hottentot Venus,” who was displayed as a curio throughout Europe because of her enormous hips; after her death, her genitals were exhibited in a bottle of formaldehyde in Paris’s Musée de l’Homme. An alternative view of the goddess was provided by a pair of male artists the gallery chose to include: Lyle Ashton Harris, in collaboration with his brother, Thomas Allen Harris, showed a handsome 1998 Cibachrome, Untitled (Mother). A female model is posed like a mythic goddess, skin glowing copper against a golden sunset, a parrot on her shoulder.

Ingrid Mwangi, child of a German father and Kenyan mother, in her video installation Neger—Don’t Call Me (2000), images her anguish at being labeled white in Kenya and black in Germany as she fashions her own, kinky hair into strange geometries over and around her face, in configurations that she conceives as masks.

The ironic stance of these latter works is much more polished and cosmopolitan than their earnest and self-searching precursors—and safer, too, for so much more is known. The pioneers were starting from nowhere, groping in the dark, and their work often has the feel of experiments. Yet the work of Leleng’s younger artists is, too, the direct progeny of the Women’s Movement, extending all the way back to the very first 1970 tap sessions of Judy Chicago and her Cal State Fresno students. The primitive psychodramas they staged explored how they felt when men whistled at them on the street. That was the first time consciousness-raising fused with art. Even though in
revisit it may appear simplistic, that particular mix of psychological inquiry, politics and art is only one of the gifts that first-generation feminism has left: it is a legacy that deserves future in-depth exhibitions.


2. Other instances of the new attention to feminist art last fall were Judy Chicago's retrospective at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C. [Oct. 11, 2002-Feb. 1, 2003], and an exhibition of her multimedia "The Dinner Party" [Sept. 20, 2002-Feb. 8, 2003] at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, where it will have a permanent home starting in 2004 [see article on p. 62]. Looking forward, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, is organizing an exhibition of international feminist art, curated by Connie Butler, to open in fall 2003.


5. "Feminage" devoted "feminist collage," often textiles on canvas, as Schapiro's experience with the landmark 1972 Womanhouse in L.A., when she, Judy Chicago and other artists converted a dilapidated Hollywood mansion into a Dadaesque "female environment."

6. Although its roots lay in the 1970s, with essays by Lucy Lippard, Barbara Kruger, and other scholars, the "goddess movement," another early strategy of empowerment, turned to the misty past and recast history in a hopeful light: perhaps a Neo-Lithic matriarchy predated the Iron Age patriarchy.


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