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FEATURES

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The Feminist Evolution

BY *Phoebe Hoban* POSTED 12/01/09

Museums are exhibiting an increased sensitivity to collecting and presenting works by women—through new acquisitions, solo shows, and a stronger focus on artists who were previously neglected. But true gender equality, critics maintain, remains elusive.

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Two thousand eight turned out to be a good year for women in the New York art world. Although women have historically been given far fewer solo shows than men have, it was the Louise Bourgeois retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum that won the International Association of Art Critics' award for Best Monographic Museum Show in New York City. And while the Bourgeois show was still drawing crowds, the Guggenheim mounted a major Catherine Opie photography exhibition. A New York museum was, for a change, exhibiting two women artists back to back—and it had nothing to do with feminism or gender issues.



Last year a group called the Brainstormers, in collaboration with the Guerrilla Girls, held demonstrations at both the Bronx Museum of the Arts, shown here, and in Chelsea.

ROB CARTER

In 2007, a flurry of feminist events and art shows focused on the impact of women on contemporary art. “WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution,” which originated at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, was an international survey of 1970s feminist art that traveled to the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C., before winding up at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in New York in February of last year. Connie Butler, now chief curator of drawings at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, curated the show.

In March 2007, the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art opened at the Brooklyn Museum, with the permanent installation of Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1974-79). The iconic feminist piece had finally found a home after nearly 30 years. “I hear women talking about how they have known this piece all their lives,” says the Sackler Center's curator, Catherine Morris, who points out that it has become a destination for visitors to the museum.

“There has been some sea change,” says Butler, “and not just because of 2007. I am thrilled to see that so many women who were not visible a few years ago are now having commercial exhibitions and retrospectives in Europe.” She adds, “A lot of artists I talk to from ‘WACK’—Lorraine O’Grady, Mary Beth Edelson, Mary Kelly, and Katharina

Sieverding—feel it too. At the Pompidou, they turned over their permanent-collection galleries to women artists. That would not have happened ten years ago.” (The exhibition “elles@centrepompidou” is on view through May 24.)

Even more important, Butler points out, “We are buying more and more work by women. I think it is on the institutional agenda in a way that it wasn’t a few years ago. Things have changed. Obama is president.” Recent acquisitions at MoMA include pieces by Atsuko Tanaka, Nasreen Mohamedi, Alina Szapocznikow, Mary Beth Edelson, and Charlotte Posenenske.

Whether 2007 was a turning point or things have finally reached critical mass, the outlook for women is improving. This coming year, many of the major museums will mount solo shows of women artists.

“I think things have changed radically,” observes Nancy Spector, the Guggenheim’s chief curator. “When I started here 20 years ago, the discourse about gender issues was not even present in the museum. Now our contemporary collections are just filled with women artists. We buy what we think is the best work, and it is very often by women.”

The Guggenheim is devoting a show (on view through January 6) to Berlin-based artist Kitty Kraus, who transforms objects such as blocks of ice using lightbulbs and other implements. That is being followed by a two-person exhibition from the museum’s permanent collection, “Paired, Gold: Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Roni Horn.”

“Is our exhibition calendar 50-50? Probably not,” Spector says. “There is no set law, but our curators are always thinking about the balance—not just men and women but color, race, and nationality.” In the works is a show addressing the impact of feminism on the Pictures Generation and beyond. “I think in a way, we want to pick up where ‘WACK’ ended,” Spector adds.

The Whitney Museum has mounted quite a few retrospectives of women artists in recent years. In 2007, there were solo shows of Kiki Smith and Lorna Simpson; Kara Walker was on exhibit from late 2007 to early last year, and Jenny Holzer had a major show this past spring. In September, a retrospective of the early abstractions of Georgia O’Keeffe opened (on view through January 17). Last month, the museum opened two more exhibitions of women’s work, both on view through January 24: a Roni Horn show and a retrospective of films by Alice Guy Blaché, the first woman movie director, who was also head of her own studio.

“We are definitely having a season of women,” says the Whitney’s chief curator and associate director of programming, Donna de Salvo. “I think that things are improving. But what’s important is where and how. Working in a museum, I feel very strongly about the long-term impact in terms of who one collects. If you are not there, you cannot be discovered or rediscovered. There’s been an ongoing sensitivity to collecting and representing women. We already have very rich holdings in Cindy Sherman, Kiki Smith, Georgia O’Keeffe, Jay DeFeo, and Eva Hesse. We are also adding to them. You don’t have to go out of your way to find phenomenal women artists.”

The museum has recently acquired pieces by Ellen Gallagher, Diane Arbus, Nancy Spero, Lynda Benglis, Sherrie Levine, and Horn. And the number of women in the Whitney Biennial has dramatically increased, to 40 percent last year, from 29 percent in 2006.

This February, a site-specific Kiki Smith installation designed to fit the space that also holds *The Dinner Party* will open at the Sackler Center. Inspired by needlework by an 18th-century Connecticut woman named Prudence Punderson, the piece consists of sculptures and drawings that explore cradle-to-grave issues related to women. A series of stained-glass windows, also riffing on the needlework, will be at the PaceWildenstein gallery in March.

While gender is not usually an issue in her work, Smith says, “I don’t mind working at projects that are gender specific. I think there is still enormous inequity, but I guess I am optimistic. I see tremendous change within my lifetime—I feel like I am evidence of that change. There are just endless quantities of good women artists. But it would not have happened without the struggles of previous generations: Nancy Spero, Mary Beth Edelson, the women who founded the A.I.R. gallery, Womanhouse.” Smith feels she has marked her territory as an artist: “I’ve peed in these different parameters of the universe.”

At MoMA, the Modern Women’s Fund, founded by the philanthropist Sarah Peter, has been engaged since 2005 in a cross-departmental curatorial project to examine the museum’s permanent collection from a feminist perspective. This May, the museum will publish the result, a 500-page book tentatively titled “Individuals: Women Artists in the Collection of the Museum of Modern Art,” edited by Butler and MoMA curator Alexandra Schwartz. The museum describes the book as “the first effort by a major North American museum to examine its collection in light of the feminist scholarship of the past three decades.”

With essays by MoMA curators and outside experts, such as feminist art historians Griselda Pollock and Carole Armstrong, the book places works from the collection in context. For example, Deborah Wye, MoMA’s chief curator of prints and illustrated books, has written an essay on the hand-sewn Louise Bourgeois book *Ode to Forgetting*. “It’s made from linen guest towels in her trousseau,” explains Wye. “It’s the most poignant thing—it’s stained and scorched from ironing.”

Juliet Kinchin, an architecture and design curator at MoMA, contributes an essay on the “Frankfurt Kitchen,” designed in 1926 by Austrian architect Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky and built by Ernst May between 1926 and 1930. An extraordinary example of innovative and efficient design, the kitchen was acquired by MoMA early this year.

Recently, MoMA organized some memorable solo exhibitions of women artists. Last year it presented the first midcareer retrospective of Marlene Dumas. And this March, it is mounting Marina Abramović’s first major American museum retrospective. In October, the film department presented Joan Braderman’s *The Heretics* (2009), about the feminist art collective Heresies, and scheduled for next year is Lynn Hershman Leeson’s *Women Art Revolution* (2007), which documents the feminist art movement from 1968 through the present. This spring, the museum will open an exhibition on the history of photography, featuring only the work of women photographers.

Art critic Jerry Saltz, who writes for *New York* magazine, nonetheless created a furor on Facebook this past May, when he counted the pieces by women in MoMA’s painting and sculpture galleries. He accused the museum of practicing “a form of gender-based apartheid,” noting that “of the 383 works currently installed on the 4th and 5th floors of the permanent collection, only 19 are by women; that’s 4%. There are 135 different artists installed on these floors; only nine of them are women; that’s 6%. MoMA is telling a story of modernism that only it believes.”

Saltz posted a list of 57 women artists that MoMA does not exhibit, out of the 75 women artists whose work the museum owns. Pieces not hanging include works by Alice Neel, Georgia O’Keeffe, Florine Stettin, Bridget Riley, Joan Mitchell, Hannah Höch, Louise Nevelson, Elaine de Kooning, Adrian Piper, Dorothea Rockburne, Pat Steir, and Sylvia Sleigh.

Saltz wrote a letter to MoMA’s chief curator of painting and sculpture, Ann Temkin, which he posted on his Facebook page. “I think that the Story of Modernism is told primarily on these two all-important floors,” he wrote, referring to the galleries on the fourth and fifth floors. He added, “This has nothing to do with ‘quotas’ or ‘fairness,’ but rather honesty, openness, and experimentation.”

Temkin met with Saltz, who later summarized their discussion on his Facebook page. He disagreed with Temkin's argument that, by focusing on the painting and sculpture floors, he had perpetuated a flawed "masculine" prejudice about the history of modern art. Women, Temkin pointed out in the meeting, are in fact well represented in the drawing, design, printmaking, and photography departments. Saltz did credit Temkin with acknowledging "how important it is to change the perception of these two floors."

Says Connie Butler, "Ann is making a big effort to put this subject front and center, and to put women artists out as much and as intelligently as possible. It's a subject we talk about all the time."

Still, lack of parity in the art world remains a sore point. Elaine Kaufmann, a member of the Brainstormers group, founded in 2005 in reaction to what it saw as the gender inequities of the P.S.1 "Greater New York" show, says, "I think what is really important was that we were representative of a new generation of artists, coming after the Guerrilla Girls, and we were still seeing the same kind of gender discrimination happening in our generation and felt compelled to do something."

The Brainstormers counted the number of solo exhibitions in Chelsea and the Lower East Side that were up this past September. They found that of 134 shows, 70 percent were by men and 30 percent by women. According to the Brainstormers, there are at least half a dozen New York galleries that are now close to 50-50, including Galerie Lelong, D'Amelio Terras, 303, and PPOW. Lombard-Freid's September show, "The Girl Effect," featured work by seven international women artists.

And in Europe, the Pompidou Center's ambitious exhibition of women artists from the beginning of the 20th century to the present, "elles@centrepompidou," has been creating considerable buzz. For many, this represents a milestone.

Says Pompidou curator Camille Morineau, who organized the exhibition, "The question of equality is not asked that frequently in France. That's why I decided to do the show. It's a little taboo. By putting women at the center, the question of marginalization disappears; you can rewrite history in the way you present the show."

As Stephanie Barron, senior curator of modern art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, told the *Los Angeles Times*, "When you have an institution of the scale and prestige of the Pompidou devoting its entire hang of its collection thematically to women artists, it's making a very serious statement."

Chicago, whose organization, Through the Flower, has created a curriculum for teaching *The Dinner Party* in schools, says, "Yes, more women are showing. Yes, more women are represented in collections. But they still fit into a meta-male narrative. One of our goals is to integrate women's history into the mainstream, so it is no longer a separate, minor phenomenon. There is still an institutional lag and an insistence on a male Eurocentric narrative. We are trying to change the future: to get girls and boys to realize that women's art is not an exception—it's a normal part of art history."

Guerrilla Girl Kathe Kollwitz thinks progress has been considerable, but she believes there is still some distance to go. "Right before 'WACK,' MoMA held a symposium, 'Feminist Future,' and that was when the museum really started to count its collection and when they decided to do a book. Two days of feminism and one book—that's kind of where we are at right now," she says.

Nevertheless, even the Guerrilla Girls have lightened up. Their most recent New York action was a satirical picketing of the Bronx Museum of the Arts, in collaboration with the Brainstormers, during an all-women show in May of last

year. Explains Guerrilla Girl Frida Kahlo, “We created MAN (Male Art Now) and picketed with signs that said ‘Bronx Museum unfair to men!’ and ‘Museums cave in to radical feminists!’” Funny or not, staging such a parody would have been unthinkable even five years ago.

Phoebe Hoban is the author of Basquiat: A Quick Killing in Art (Viking/Penguin 1998). Her biography of Alice Neel will be published by St. Martin’s Press next September.

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