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## Q&A: Jenni Sorkin on “Revolution in the Making” at Hauser Wirth & Schimmel



To inaugurate its new 100,000-square-foot art center in Los Angeles, Hauser Wirth & Schimmel—directed by Paul Schimmel, former chief curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles—presents “Revolution in the Making,” an immense exhibition that opened March 13, focusing on postwar abstract sculpture made by women artists. Co-curated by Schimmel and Los Angeles–based art historian Jenni Sorkin (also formerly of MOCA L.A., now an assistant professor of art history at UC Santa Barbara), “Revolution in the Making” includes an international and multigenerational array of artists, from [Ruth Asawa](#), [Heidi](#)

[Bucher](#), and Gego to Shinique Smith, Kaari Upson, and [Karla Black](#). *Modern Painters* senior editor Thea Ballard spoke to Sorkin about the intersections of the feminine and the formal, the emotional experience of encountering sculpture, and celebrating a new wave of women working in L.A.

**Thea Ballard:** How did abstraction and formalism in women’s sculpture become the focus of this exhibition?

**Jenni Sorkin:** The idea was to try to revalue studio practice, to think about it expansively. In terms of making a sculpture show, it comes out of the space that Hauser Wirth & Schimmel is renovating in L.A., which is really massive and museum quality. It’s a former mill, a raw space that pairs naturally with large objects. I think it’s a natural fit to do a sculpture show—if you were to put 8-by-10 photographs on the wall, they would get sucked up.

**You contextualize the studio as a really important site in this exhibition. What were some details that stood out in the visits you did?**

One of the key studio visits for me was Ursula von Rydingsvard’s in Brooklyn. She’s somebody whose work I had admired for a long time. She has a multitude of spaces in which she works—she has a downstairs large-scale space with a lot of assistants making large cedar forms. But if you go upstairs, she has a completely process-based wall in a smaller individual studio space, and there’s a cot in the next room and a small bathroom. It’s clearly a “room of one’s own” kind of space, in which she’s working through her own investments and materiality in a small-scale way. That’s really interesting, to see the differentiation even within one gigantic studio space. She owns a building now. I think women artists in particular are really good at being able to go back and forth continuously. Part of that multitasking is going back and forth between small and big simultaneously—being able to visualize large-scale things, but working out your ideas by yourself. The

intimacy of studio work is a key idea that is missing from a lot of feminist art exhibitions produced in the last 10 or 15 years, which privileged text-heavy, conceptually driven, critique-based work. Women who work individually in their studios have been left out of that narrative. They're not making political work, in the vein of Barbara Kruger or Jenny Holzer. They're making things that are, for lack of a better word, more delicate or poetic, less narrative driven. We were interested in privileging that kind of experience in the studio, and I think sculpture is a really fraught subject because it's one of the most historically excluded fields for women.

**You're negotiating between collectivity and individuality, but maybe breaking off from the collective action that characterizes much of what we think of as feminist art history. But is there some collectivity represented in the labor that goes into making this large-scale sculptural work?**

Ursula tends to hire young women artists, to give them a chance to work with technique and train them in a skilled way, which is one of those things that's also lacking in the contemporary art-school experience—we're in a very de-skilled moment. I think there's a collectivity in teaching other women these skills. I also think of these larger practices where people drift between collaborating and then doing things on their own. We're showing a sculpture in the round by Abigail DeVille that's based on a Richard Serra work called *Intersection*. It's a reconstructed wooden work made from theater flats. It was made specifically for a performance in Brooklyn, a restaged Adrienne Kennedy play. Kennedy is a black playwright who does very direct, poignant work that critiques larger issues about race in culture. What I like about that DeVille piece is that there are so many layers to it. It becomes a collaborative work that she made to stage this play with a theater director; the playwright was involved because the play was written in '72 but hadn't been seen since; it was all done in concert, and yet the work stands alone

as a sculpture, too. There's a collaborative narrative backdrop to the piece, but it can also be a formal work. The formal work itself is based on her own rendition of poor art materials in the arced style of Richard Serra—it's fun as a woman artist to go after Serra.

**A recurring theme, I've noticed.**

He's an easy target. He's so canonical that he's a straw man. It doesn't matter what you do to him, because he's already been knocked down by New York City itself.

**The show's historical span covers a broad swath of time.**

There was a real impetus to go right up to the present, and there are a lot of people working in L.A. right now. It's an interesting, funky moment where there's a lot of movement and a lot of activity, and it's cheaper than being in New York, so there's a drift westward. Expanding into the present moment became a way to honor and mark this intensive and exciting energy. Also, at the end of the day, Hauser Wirth & Schimmel is a gallery, and they have a fantastic stable of pioneering women artists. If the opportunity presents itself to work with pieces by Eva Hesse and Louise Bourgeois, why not go for it? It's museum-quality, canonical work, and that's really hard, as an art historian, to pass up.

**Do you see a narrative coming out of this broad temporal arrangement? It seems as if there's an opportunity to present an alternative art history, some historical arc that hasn't been charted before.**

I think you're probably right, but I don't want to imply that it's a comprehensive show. For every artist here, there are five artists who weren't included simply

because there wasn't the space, and I think that becomes one of the issues in a group show of all women artists, the attention to who's in and who's out.

People aren't necessarily thinking of the '80s and '90s as a time to experiment in formalism, but we have Isa Genzken in the middle of the 1980s making these beautiful concrete works. It's at the height of the AIDS crisis, and that becomes a really interesting overlap. You have multiple jarring things happening at once. It's hard to hold that history together; narrative doesn't do justice to it. Everything is happening all at once. There is something larger at stake here in terms of making an alternative reading, though: women taking their rightful place in the history of sculpture that they haven't been previously accorded. Even up to the present, it's been a discipline that privileges male artists.

**In the first sentence of the catalogue, you talk about sculpture having emotional impact, which to me felt like a somewhat subversive framing idea. Can you speak to how emotion operates formally in these works?**

There's something overwhelmingly physical about seeing sculpture in person. It has a direct hit to your gut. When you see something beautiful, you're moved. One impetus for doing this show is to make a beautiful exhibition that is moving to people. There is this real impact in seeing work that takes up space and has a physical presence. That's very different, also, from wall-based work. People feel that way about painting, too, certainly, but I think being in the space with an object changes the way you interact with it. You circle the object, and it has a power. I like to think about objects bestowed with a presence. Part of this show is trying to reinvigorate that idea of presence in the space. Having a presence. That's a formalist concept, but it's a universal concept as well. There is the emotional impact of these works. It's nice to see them all in the same space together.

**The sculptor's body is an important component in these works—it's producing a sense of physicality. How might this kind of formalism operate as a feminist (or feminine) trope?**

I would say it's a profeminist trope, in many ways. In the '50s and early '60s, the body is present, but it's sublimated. It comes through certain kinds of biomorphic forms, like, for instance, [Ruth Asawa](#)'s curvaceous wire forms and Eva Hesse using latex as a kind of skin. It produces a fragmented idea of the body, which is one of these tropes of postmodern experience that's been theorized extensively, particularly in performance studies by feminists like Amelia Jones. The fragmented postmodern body is the only way that we can experience this refracted world. There's a pronounced femininity to some of the work, but it's all under the surface, hidden. Women could not talk about or articulate a female experience if they wanted to be part of this male-dominated sculptural world at that midcentury moment.

As time marches on in the exhibition, the body starts to have less of an impact because of these other kinds of forms, starting in the '70s, with feminist content being driven by the body; people are able to make performance art with their bodies, filming themselves half-naked on video, performing for the camera in the studio, playing with ideas of gender and identity. Meanwhile, in sculpture, women became free to do other kinds of work. They didn't have to work primarily with the body, although I think it still resonates with the idea of layering or binding—the bound logs of Jackie Winsor, for instance, where she's tightly bound these pieces of lumber. Women in the more contemporary section of the show are hinting at the body, but it goes in and out of consciousness. Jessica Stockholder, for example, is for me not an artist who is focused on the body. I think of her as dealing with architectural space and the tension between painting and sculpture and the wall and the floor, finding lots of objects to use in her work, thinking about *things*, stuff.

To me, that's a much more philosophical space of formalism. Certainly it's the body experiencing that, but it's not *about* the body anymore.

### **What perspective on contemporary sculpture do we get from the show?**

There's a way in which it becomes very apparent that the earlier work is an influence on the later work; you see tropes that reoccur, like people working in wire. It's a material that Asawa uses, Lygia Pape uses, Marisa Merz uses, and it then recirculates in the work of Rachel Khedoori. The show provides a way to trace materiality across these artists, and by viewing Khedoori's work in context, we're able to see how these forms are preceded by these other formal histories or objects. Nobody makes work in a void. To be able to honor previous generations alongside the youngest artists in the show is a really important aspect for me.

L.A. is also a strong feature in our contemporary selections, which include works by Khedoori, Liz Larner, Lara Schnitger, and Kaari Upson. It's also a way to represent the site-specificity of being in Los Angeles—as opposed to New York.

### **Did any of these younger artists speak directly about this older generation as influences?**

I don't think they were thinking specifically about, say, Louise Nevelson, but if you start to mention those artists, they start to talk. Michelle Stuart, who is now in her 80s, spent a lot of time in Paris in the '50s as a young woman. She remembered seeing early Claire Falkenstein shows and wondering what Falkenstein's trajectory was—she was somebody who was influential to Stuart early on, but then Stuart lost track of her. There are very few people I've ever encountered who've *seen* Falkenstein's work installed in a gallery in person. That was a historically mind-blowing moment for me. Lara Schnitger, also, talked about being aware of textile-based sculpture as an art student, work by Sheila Hicks and

Magdalena Abakanowicz. She ended up stretching fabric in a really different way, but she was certainly influenced by seeing monumental fiber-based sculpture.

**Are there any historical works you got to interact with that were particularly exciting?**

Work by Falkenstein and Asawa. Falkenstein's work was in storage in L.A., and I got to meet Maren Henderson, who is a key historian of hers. It was also nice to meet a number of Asawa's children and see the work in situ in San Francisco, in the house that she owned, where her children grew up. Some of the work is still hanging there. I've spent a lot of time studying Black Mountain College, and Asawa's been a particularly important figure in that context, having attended the school. That she was a woman, a mother of six, a Japanese-American, that was all swept under the rug in her own conception of her history. She wanted her work first and foremost to be seen and thought of as formalist sculpture. That's important to me. Also, you never see more than one Asawa or Falkenstein at a time in a permanent collection. So to be able to show a number all at once is pretty amazing.

**You differentiate between the quality of something being feminine and something being feminist. Could talk about how you'd separate those two terms?**

Much of the work in this show could be regarded as feminine, not feminist. I think that feminist work has historically had a kind of agenda, a social and political one, as it should. I feel very supportive of that agenda, I have worked on artists who promote it, and I'm committed to those artists as well, but I think that in putting forth a feminist agenda, the *feminine* aspects of sculpture have been lost. Part of the goal of this show is to look at that much more subtle production that's about women working with materials in their studio space. And it's establishing a sphere



that for many years was a fight. Now that it's not a fight anymore, or it's less of a fight, what are women able to produce now that they're not carving out studio space in their kids' bedrooms (although there are people who still do that)? I think there is still a feminist agenda underlying the exhibition, I just don't think it's an explicitly politicized body of work that we've assembled.

### **What does this feminine quality look or feel like?**

I'm still influenced by Lucy Lippard's idea of eccentric abstraction. She takes descriptors that have to do with the body, the idea of the circular, the biomorphic, non hard edges, and I think there's a lot of work in here that resonates with those kinds of descriptions. I think we're still circling these notions that Lippard articulated early on, and I would say I feel very invested in that history, and thinking about how it translates to now. I think women have been emboldened by those ideas to the point of really literal representations of the body—Tracey Emin, for example.

This show is also a history of alternate materials—it's found objects, trash, detritus, yarn, fiber, wire, copper, ephemeral paper, latex. Things that are not traditionally used in sculpture but have been appropriated to become sculptural materials. I think that becomes highly influential in what people are now able to produce and call sculpture. Everything's fair game, but it took a long time to get to the point of not being hierarchical about materials. And for most of the period of this exhibition, from 1947 to, let's say, 1980, there is still a hierarchy of materials, and there are still arguments about what constitutes sculpture, what constitutes painting, and who's able to do what. It's much more rigid. I think those rigidities were enforced in the art world, and to work around them, women have been highly fluid and fluent in making, thinking, and expanding the dialogue and possibilities for sculpture.