

The Atlantic

An Era for Women Artists?

Nearly half a century ago, a feminist art historian asked why there had been no great female artists. A new wave of all-women exhibitions revives the question—and suggests a new answer.



Grace Hartigan in her studio, 1957

Gordon Parks / Getty

SARAH BOXER | DECEMBER 2016 ISSUE | CULTURE

IN A 1971 ARTICLE IN *ARTNEWS*, Linda Nochlin, a feminist art historian, asked a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad question: “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” Her question has been ringing in our collective ears ever since. And it’s ringing especially loudly this year.

Here is Nochlin’s killer line: “The fact, dear sisters, is that there *are* no women equivalents for Michelangelo or Rembrandt, Delacroix or Cézanne, Picasso or Matisse, or even, in very recent times, for de Kooning or Warhol.” She went on to explain why:

The fault, dear brothers, lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles or our empty internal spaces, but in our institutions and our education ... everything that happens to us from the moment we enter this world of meaningful symbols, signs and signals.

Our very idea of greatness, of genius, she argued, is bound up with manliness.

Nearly half a century has passed since Nochlin posed her question. Now we face it again, because this year, 2016, is once again the year of the woman artist—it happens roughly every decade—although *no one has formally declared it so*.

The wave of all-women exhibitions in the United States hit first in Florida this past winter. The Contemporary Arts Foundation in Miami showed “NO MAN’S LAND: Women Artists From the Rubell Family Collection” (now on display at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C.). The Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach displayed “O’Keeffe, Stettheimer, Torr, Zorach: Women Modernists in New York.” By early summer, the wave had moved west. At the Denver Art Museum, “Women of Abstract Expressionism” opened in June. Hauser Wirth & Schimmel, a new gallery in Los Angeles, made

its debut with “Revolution in the Making: Abstract Sculpture by Women, 1947–2016.” Sprüth Magers’s L.A. gallery showed the work of Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, Cindy Sherman, and Rosemarie Trockel in an exhibit called “Eau de Cologne.” The summer wrapped up with “The Female Gaze, Part Two: Women Look at Men,” at Cheim & Read in New York. (And I haven’t even counted up the solo exhibitions featuring women such as Diane Arbus, Cecily Brown, Carmen Herrera, Kruger, June Leaf, Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, Agnes Martin, Linn Meyers, Nasreen Mohamedi, Charlotte Moorman, Pipilotti Rist, Sherman, and Alma Thomas.)

But is this “woman artist” stuff a good thing? (Was Jackson Pollock a “man artist”?) Elaine de Kooning once recalled a party where she and another painter, Joan Mitchell, were asked, “What do you women artists think ... ?” Mitchell interrupted, “Elaine, let’s get the hell out of here.” That pretty much sums up some people’s feelings about all-women exhibitions. Let’s blow this ghetto! We can’t win here. Georgia O’Keeffe, by the way, once refused to participate in an all-women show co-curated by Nochlin. Still, there are plenty of people out there who think that women artists share certain qualities—and that this essence is worth capturing in a man-free exhibition.

Between these two positions lies a third one: the belief that all-women shows are like affirmative action, neither especially good nor bad in themselves but a necessary measure in a still-sexist art world. Helen Molesworth, the chief curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles—who has recently rehung the museum’s permanent collection to redress various inequities (not just gender, but race too)—summed it up like this: “The only way you get diversity is to actually do it.” That means “some of the dudes don’t get shows.”

Whatever your position, the stakes are high this year. Because a lot of women artists, especially those of the past half century, are now getting a showcase, the burden of proof is pushed back onto them and their art. Nochlin’s question might be asked with a hostile edge today: If the galleries, the museums, and the attitudes have changed and there are *still* no great women artists, then what?

LET ME KILL THE SUSPENSE. There are great women artists. They are not only “as good as the men,” as male critics used to say in the 1950s; some of them have altered the very terms of art, going where no man has gone before. To see what I mean, let’s walk through two starkly different all-women exhibitions: the one at the Denver Art Museum, featuring a dozen abstract-expressionist painters, curated by Gwen Chanzit, and the one at Hauser Wirth & Schimmel, featuring some three dozen modern and contemporary sculptors, curated by Jenni Sorkin and Paul Schimmel.

Approaching the Denver Art Museum, I could see the banners announcing the women’s exhibition from a distance. WOMEN WOMEN WOMEN. It almost looked like they were announcing a striptease. As I got closer, I could read the fine print: WOMEN OF ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM. I laughed, a little. I was reminded of the landmark 2007 exhibition, “WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution,” at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, whose catalog cover—which was discussed as much as the show itself—featured a collage by Martha Rosler of images of naked women clipped from *Playboy*. “Sexy ladies inside!” the pictures seemed to call out.

Within the Denver museum was another kind of come-on. At the entrance to the show stood an impressively large, accordion-shaped kiosk with a youthful black-and-white photograph of each artist on one side and a detail of one of her paintings on the other. It wasn’t quite a chorus line, but still. Why emphasize how the artists looked when they were young? I thought of a remark by the painter Hedda Sterne (not in the show), the one woman in *Life* magazine’s famous 1951 group photograph of abstract expressionists: “I am known more for that darn photo than I am for 80 years of work.”

I entered the exhibit. The galleries were hushed, airy, and nearly empty. Each artist had a space—not quite a room of her own, but an alcove, a corner, or a wall. All

around me were bursts, sweeps, and slashes of color; crusty surfaces, lush surfaces, delicate surfaces. The scene was much brighter than the usual abstract-expressionist show. Right away, I saw two familiar names: Lee Krasner, the wife of Jackson Pollock, who was once described as trying to “tidy up” Pollock, and Elaine de Kooning, who was married to Willem de Kooning. I began to have a bad feeling. What if these painters had not been married to such famous men?

Would we know them? I wasn't sure. As Krasner observed (and her quote was placed at the beginning of the exhibition), “I'm always going to be Mrs. Jackson Pollock—that's a matter of fact—[but] I painted before Pollock, during Pollock, after Pollock.” Thank the good lord that at least one painter in the show, Joan Mitchell, stood easily and brilliantly on her own, and was far better known than her painter-partner, Jean-Paul Riopelle.

Walking farther in, I was cheered up by an array of paintings full of confidence and fireworks—paintings that I had never seen before, by artists whose names I barely knew: Mary Abbott (alive), Sonia Gechtoff (alive), Judith Godwin (alive), Perle Fine, Deborah Remington, and Ethel Schwabacher. Who are these painters? I felt sort of sad and bewildered, but also proud.

*Then the roller coaster dipped again. I realized that when I came across a painting I really liked by a painter I didn't know, I compared it to a work by a male painter I did know. Schwabacher's oil paintings, with their blobby shapes that seem to rise from the deep, reminded me of the abstract work Philip Guston was doing in the early '60s, but with a brighter palette. Godwin's bold, graphic wet and dry strokes, one sweeping layer obscuring the next, put me in mind of Franz Kline. Fine's loops of paint made me think of Brice Marden's *Cold Mountain* series, which began decades later. These thoughts, as I tried to get my bearings in this strange new world, did not please me. Was the problem mine or*

theirs?

I WAS RELIEVED TO FIND paintings by four artists whose work didn't remind me of any male painter's. These artists fell into two camps. First were those who worked within the all-over, nonfigurative language of abstract expressionism but made it their own—Joan Mitchell and Grace Hartigan. Although they both pushed abstract expressionism in idiosyncratic ways, both were also termed second-generation abstract expressionists, suggesting that, as great and original as they might be, they would never be kings like Pollock, Rothko, and de Kooning. They might just as well be dubbed second-sex abstract expressionists.

I loved Hartigan's scrappy, colorful paintings from the 1950s, when her works were still mostly abstract. There was *The King Is Dead* (1950)—a monumental riot of slashing wet and dry brushstrokes that was meant as a tribute to Pollock and a kiss-off to Picasso. (Hey, women can kill kings too!) And then I stopped at *The Massacre* (1952). The painting had a wonderfully irresolute look, as if it were undecided between gesture and figure. This look apparently matched Hartigan's feelings. According to a recent biography, she would be overjoyed on one day that her canvas was "in a state of juicy chaos," and on another day fret that it owed too much to her friend, the figurative painter Larry Rivers. You can feel the painting (and the painter) swinging between those poles. Her brash insecurity is breathtaking.

In the second camp were two artists who'd simply left abstract expressionism behind: Jay DeFeo, a San Francisco beatnik known for her thick, gritty black-and-white paintings, and her very opposite, Helen Frankenthaler, a well-heeled Manhattanite who worked in lyrical washes of color. DeFeo's *Incision*, a pasty, crusty thing, pulled me in, but it was Frankenthaler's "soak-stains," such as *Jacob's Ladder*, that really got me. Among all the artists in the show, she may have been the most original in Pollock's wake. Beginning in the early 1950s, she not only painted on the floor (as Pollock had), but also eschewed the brush and the stick as pouring aids (which he had not). She thinned her paints with turpentine, poured them onto unprimed canvas, and let them soak in.

Her quiet innovation, *Mountains and Sea* (1952), so impressed Frankenthaler's boyfriend, the art critic Clement Greenberg, that he took two male painters, Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis, to her studio (in her absence) to show it to them. Louis, bowled over, began using her technique, creating fanlike rainbows of color. Thirteen years later, Michael Fried's landmark essay "Three American Painters" lauded Noland and Louis for having used staining to free painting from drawing. The technique, Fried wrote, made a painting look as if it had been created by "impersonal forces." What credit did Frankenthaler get? A passing mention from Fried—and from Louis, one of the great backhanded compliments of all time. He called her painting "a bridge between Pollock and what was possible." Perfect for walking over, he might have added.

Frankenthaler's breakthrough was palpable in the Denver show. Her work looked like that of no one else, man or woman. But focusing on her revolutionary soak-stains while shutting out all thoughts of credit and sex was hard.

Frankenthaler's reputation may have now eclipsed Louis's, but why did it take so long? Was it because her work was too delicate? Too figurative? Too tentative? Perhaps Nochlin was onto something when she noted, in *Women, Art, and Power* (1988), that "the whole art-historical apparatus"—from the museum to the classroom—might be contrived just to keep women "in their place."

Women artists have been put down in many ways over the years, but the basic technique boils down to this: A critic, a curator, a dealer, or an art historian describes how women paint differently from men, then declares this quality inferior. Women are pegged as controlled, tentative, personal. (For instance, Hartigan recalled in her diary that Clement Greenberg told her women painters were "too easily satisfied" and would make pictures that had a certain "polish.") Men, meanwhile, are seen as wild and sure, channeling outside forces. (Pollock famously declared, "I am nature.") In these matchups between alleged feminine and masculine essences, the man typically wins. Finished is not free. Personal is not universal. Nature does not doubt itself.

Greatness is a moving target designed to make women miss. It is no accident that "painting like a man" used to be dished out as a supremely delicious compliment.

Irving Sandler once asked Hartigan "if a male artist ever told her she painted as well as a man." She replied tartly, "Not twice."

'M HAPPY TO REPORT that I was not similarly tormented by "Revolution in the Making," the exhibition at Hauser Wirth & Schimmel devoted to abstract sculptors, living and dead, working between 1947 and now. This, I should point out, has nothing to do with the quality of the two shows, and everything to do with the very different situation of women sculptors. In abstract sculpture, women are recognized as revolutionaries. As the art historian Anne M. Wagner writes in the exhibition catalog,

There is no question that in the course of the twentieth century, women set sculpture alight, reshaping the terrain so sweepingly that art history is still taking account of the expansion ... Today painting remains painting, but sculpture is no longer "itself": it is no single thing, not necessarily even an object, nothing more (or less) than the inflection of material, place, and space.

The minute I set foot in the exhibition, I could see what she meant. No sculptor in the first gallery made me think of anyone else. It was an undiluted thrill to look around. And the word that kept springing to mind was *great*. Great. Great. Great.

The first objects I encountered were Louise Bourgeois' *Personages*. These abstract pieces of carefully hacked-up painted wood, made between the mid-'40s and the mid-'50s, stand up like and stand in for people. They are funny, touching, and lonely. You feel you could mingle with them, which is what Bourgeois intended (although that was not so easy here, where they were grouped on a pedestal). As Elizabeth A. T. Smith, the executive director of the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, writes in the catalog, Bourgeois made her "figures both abstract enough and individual enough to exist in imaginary relationships to one another, and to viewers." They have a tribal look in both senses of the word.

Moving around the gallery, I could see the works of Lee Bontecou jutting from the walls. These are so strange that I'd hesitate to call them sculptures. But they aren't really paintings, either. They are more like organs—mouths, orifices, jagged spaces—that project from the walls. Most of them are dark and vaguely threatening. They look like they might swallow you up if you get too close. Bontecou's method was quirky as well. "She adopted a manner of working that would become her signature style—welding lightweight steel frameworks, onto which she grafted fragments of canvas and cloth, tied in place by small pieces of twisted wire," Smith explains in the catalog. This changed the game of sculpture. Bontecou fused the industrial techniques of welding and building with softer techniques, such as sewing and tying. And whereas Pollock moved painting from the wall to the floor, Bontecou "moved sculpture from the floor to the wall," Smith observes, where it hovers "ambiguously between two and three dimensions."

Deeper in the gallery were delicate, lanternlike objects resembling giant dangly earrings, suspended from the ceiling. When I got close, I could see that they were crafted of black wire knitted together, and that some orbs in the chain had smaller orbs within them. These were the works of Ruth Asawa, an artist who was interned in a camp for Japanese Americans during World War II and later went to Black Mountain College, in North Carolina, to learn drawing, painting, and design. While she was there, she traveled to Mexico, where she learned how to “knit with wire” by watching basket makers and later became fascinated, Smith writes, by “how the space around an object shapes a viewer’s experience of it.” Her aim, she once said, was to “define the air ... while letting the air remain air.”

All of these works—by Bourgeois, Bontecou, and Asawa—have certain qualities that abstract paintings by women are often criticized for. They are quasi-figurative, carefully crafted, and very personal. But for some reason, these qualities lose their negative valence when associated with sculpture. The weaknesses of painters are the strengths of sculptors. Starting in the 1970s, while many female abstract painters were being forgotten, a number of female sculptors were being called innovators. Some of them even started to sell work at male prices.

WANDERED HAPPILY THROUGH these galleries, making sweeping generalizations. Women sculptors are funnier than men sculptors. (Lynda Benglis’s gloppy *Wing*, sticking boldly out of a wall, made me laugh.) They use more cloth, rubber, and fur than men do. (Of course, there are men—Richard Serra, Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman—who used such materials, but they moved on.) One of the galleries, a spacious warehouse devoted to contemporary women sculptors, was a veritable fun house of cloth, hair, furniture, lingerie, and general fuzziness.

I continued my merry list. Women are more likely to pile their objects up: Bourgeois (wood), Jessica Stockholder (spools of wool and thread), Isa Genzken (concrete blocks), Sheila Hicks (skeins of wool and linen), Liz Larner (rings of cast polyurethane), Anna Maria Maiolino (rolls of molded cement). They also like to bind things together: Phyllida Barlow and Shinique Smith (fabric), Jackie Winsor (trees).

They don't mind being repetitive (Yayoi Kusama, Louise Nevelson, Bourgeois, Gego, Genzken, Marisa Merz, Hannah Wilke, Michelle Stuart, Mira Schendel, Hicks, Françoise Grossen, Larner, Ursula von Rydingsvard) or absurd (Benglis, Kusama, Bourgeois), or sometimes both at the same time. In 1967, the postminimalist sculptor Eva Hesse—one of whose works in this show is *Augment*, made of sheets of latex-covered canvas lying one on top of the other—noted that repetition can make the absurd more absurd: “Series, serial, serial art, is another way of repeating absurdity.”

Jenni Sorkin, one of the curators of “Revolution in the Making,” added to my list of generalizations during a gallery talk. *Women are more likely to use found or reclaimed objects.* (Nevelson, for instance, reclaimed wood, crates, and things she found on the street.) They often make impermanent things. And unlike generations of men who went through shop class and therefore know how to weld and build, women tend to use the arts they learned in home economics—sewing, knitting, weaving. (Asawa, for instance, used her knowledge of crocheting to make her looped-wire work.)

Women sculptors are funnier than men sculptors.

Apparently I wasn't the only one mentally ticking off attributes typical of women artists. The painter Joan Snyder once bragged that she could tell women's art from men's because "women tend to be more autobiographical." In a 1973 group discussion titled "What Is Female Imagery?," the critic Lucy Lippard said that women seem to work more with fragments, implying "a certain antilogical, antilinear approach." This championing of female essence, which has always been contested, did not come easily. So what happened?

In the dark ages of the early 1970s, before feminism had taken hold, some art historians and critics, among them women, found the homely ways of women artists something of a shock. For instance, in the winter of 1970, when Lippard visited various women's studios across the United States, she saw women working "in corners of men's studios, in bedrooms and children's rooms, even in kitchens." And, she added, many of them "were confused, unsure of themselves."

But rather than seeing this as a weakness—as a sign that these artists without spaces, with their doubts on their sleeves, were not true artists—she believed that they had founded a new aesthetic. Partly because of lack of space, partly due to temperament, partly by choice, partly because of their insecurity, they made art that was "personal and associative," more transient and unfinished, more open, more entwined with "their experience, their lives," more tinged with uncertainty and anxiety.

Two figures, both of whom loom large in the L.A. sculpture show, spring to mind. Eva Hesse, who was pretty well known when she died in 1970, at 34, always saw doubts (“I get distrustful of myself, renege, cancel out”) and anxiety (“Everything for me is glossed with anxiety”) as key to her work. As for

Bourgeois, sculpture was always partly autobiographical. Those *Personages* were personal. But how did an artist who might have once looked like a crazy lady making voodoo dolls and setting them up for a rooftop cocktail party come to be viewed as staging a new and “vivid psychodynamics of viewing,” to quote the art historian Alex Potts?

Of course, the fates of these women sculptors could have turned out otherwise. Hesse, Bourgeois, Nevelson, Asawa, and Bontecou could easily have slipped through the cracks of history. Some of them nearly did. Bourgeois didn't have her first major retrospective until she was 70. Nevelson was not in a major art show until she was 60, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1959.

“Women have to outlive their peer group in order to become recognized,” Jenni Sorkin said. Sometimes they aren't so lucky. Asawa, who in 1956 was described by *ARTnews* as creating “‘domestic’ sculptures in a feminine, handiwork mode,” is just getting her due now; she has been dead for three years.

PART OF WOMEN SCULPTORS' success is probably due to the fact that abstract sculpture's moment in the spotlight came later. But something more than that must be at work. What is it?

In a 2001 essay, “‘Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?’ Thirty Years After,” Nochlin looked back at the wake of her own article. She noted that part of the change in women artists' reputations was thanks to a new “crop of critical discourse by mostly theory-based women writers,” including Rosalind Krauss, Mignon Nixon, Anne Wagner, Griselda Pollock, Mieke Bal, and Briony Fer. They began applauding qualities other than formal structure—“the abject, the viscous, the formless, or the polyform”—that certain women sculptors, with

their love of fur and rubber, entropy and repetition, fun and bad taste, seem to excel at. Somehow, the critics did for the sculptors what could not be done for the painters.

The weaknesses of women painters are the strengths of women sculptors.

But let's get back to Nochlin's question. Have there ever been any great women artists? In taking on her own challenge in that 2001 essay, Nochlin noted that the writer Louis Menand had drawn attention to the one word that makes literary critics sound like dinosaurs: *greatness*. Nochlin observed, "There is less and less emphasis on the masterpiece, more on the piece." We live, she suggested, in a post-greatness world.

I don't exactly agree.

Not long after my immersion in the tide of all-women shows, I went to the new Met Breuer exhibition "Unfinished: Thoughts Left Visible." There, in a show that mixed women and men, painters and sculptors, and living and dead generations going back to the Renaissance, it seemed that the art world had finally not only embraced certain women artists, including Eva Hesse, Yayoi Kusama, and Gego—but also endorsed an aesthetic that was once denigrated as rather feminine. At

its core are anxiety, doubt, and the repetitiveness and never-finished sensibility that come of uncertainty.

Those aspects of painting and sculpture have always existed, but now they're being cheered.

On display in "Unfinished" was a work by Piet Mondrian in which he had crisscrossed the canvas with colored tape, marking out where the painted lines might or might not go. You could see Joan Snyder's *Heart On*, a canvas that she had cut into and sewed back together like wounds in her flesh, inscribing her biography into it. There was Janine Antoni's *Lick and Lather*, a series of sculptures of her head, some made of chocolate, which she licks to erode, and some made of soap, which she bathes with to erode, all forever unfinished. You could see Gego's obsessively repetitive *Reticulárea* and one of Hesse's seemingly cast-off, impermanent objects. You could see Medardo Rosso's sculptures, in which the rough parts are part of the work. And there were unfinished portraits by Leonardo, Rubens, Cézanne, Manet, Picasso, and Lucian Freud that expose what Pliny the Elder called "the artists' actual thoughts."

In many of the pieces in the exhibition, the artists' worries and doubts about what they were trying to do are there for anyone to see. And this very anxiety is what, at least to contemporary eyes, makes them great. In a 1945 essay titled "Cézanne's Doubts," Maurice Merleau-Ponty celebrated that uncertainty: "What we call his work was, for him, an attempt, an approach to painting." He wasn't the first or the last. De Kooning had his doubts. And Picasso before him.

And Rubens. And Leonardo. Thanks to the likes of Hartigan and Hesse, who didn't manage to hide their thoughts or second thoughts, their repetitions or reworkings, we can see, once again, the greatness in anxiety. And, you know, that's kind of great.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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