

If there have always been great women artists, where do we find them?

Review of the exhibition *Postwar Women. They Were Always Here*, curated by William Corwin, The Phyllis Harriman Gallery at The Art Students League of New York, November 4 – December 3, 2019

Entering this exhibition is like going back in time: the works are not exactly hung salon-style – there is just one row – but they are arranged very densely, with several sculptures placed on the school gallery's old floor boards. The layout conveys the spirit and the history of the venue. Works by forty three of many women who studied from 1945-65 at The Art Students League are shown where they drew, painted and talked some sixty years ago. The presence of only six of them at the opening reminds how timely this recognition is.

Just as the League has traditionally admitted students from all walks of life and provided them with varied instructors to choose from a constellation of autonomous studios, curator William Corwin cast his net wide: while the majority of the artists in the show are modernists and abstract painters and sculptors, abstract expressionists make up only one fourth of the artists, and pluralism – of styles, mediums, and cultural backgrounds – is a great merit of the show.

Postwar Women includes works by household names such as **Helen Frankenthaler**, **Grace Hartigan**, **Lee Krasner**, **Elaine de Kooning**, and **Maria Helena Vieira da Silva**, and by less known artists like **Perle Fine** who is represented not only by a 1952 oil, typical for her oeuvre, but also a bold collage abstracting letters and possibly aiming at the deconstruction of language (*Collage #2*, 1965). Among rarities is a delicate, sophisticated composition by Czech-born **Terry Haass** (*Untitled*, 1948, engraving) and intensely vivid impasto oil by Puerto Rican **Olga Albizu** (*Untitled*, 1971). Earlier, modernist paintings include a beautiful, large abstracted still-life by **Mercedes Matter** (*Table Top Still Life*, c. 1936), who in 1964 founded the New York Studio School and taught Joyce Pensato. The selection of abstract sculptures is particularly strong, with some by the most renowned artists (**Louise Nevelson** is represented by an assemblage) and those who are still known mostly to specialists – like Iranian **Monir Farmanfarmaian** (*Untitled*, 1976), **Dorothy Dehner**, **Regina Bogat** with her arresting post-minimalist sculpture (*Holy Terror*, 1970) and painting (*The Duty of King Agamemnon var.1*, 1966), both referencing Piet Mondrian's neoplasticism, and **Lynne Umlauf** with *254 February 5* (1988), made with thick pastes of paint applied to a shaped wire mesh.

Perhaps less expected at the League are works by artists representing directions that emerged in the second half of the 20th century, such as minimalism: **Eva Hesse's** urethane *Mold for Sans II* (1967), or **Kazuko Miyamoto's** striking *Hanging Paper Sculpture*, 1980-2017, centrally positioned in the gallery. Miyamoto, one of the founders of A.I.R. gallery and an assistant of Sol LeWitt, is mostly known for her optical, three-dimensional string compositions comprised of nails and thread, such as the one recently purchased by the Metropolitan Museum. Her paintings, performances, and later installations using ropes and twigs, like the one here, are less known.

Even more surprising is the strong presence of artists who not only worked with figure but whose practice was strictly feminist or political: from **Gwendolyn Knight's** painful *The Boudoir* of 1945 to works by **Vivian Browne** and **Elizabeth Catlett**, to artists working in as diverse idioms as **Louise Bourgeois**, **Marisol**, and **Joyce Pensato**. Standout works include **May Stevens'** highly contrasting paintings, a pink *War Room* (1968) from her iconic *Big Daddy* series, and *Forming the Fifth International* (1985), in which the artist represented her working-class mother with the Marxist philosopher and revolutionary socialist, Rosa Luxemburg, juxtaposing women's life paths: the private and the public. The revelation in the show are two magnificent small objects by **Faith Ringgold**. In one of them, *Lucy: The 3.5 Million Year Old Lady* (1977), Ringgold paid tribute to the then oldest most complete human fossils found in Ethiopia in 1974 – creating a fabric altar which could very well be an inspiration to Fred Wilson's *Friendly Natives* of 1991.

In his essay in the catalog accompanying exhibition, commissioned by The Art Students League for the centenary of women's suffrage, curator William Corwin commends the League for admitting women to school and its governing board since the League's incorporation (1878). It is a dialog with Linda Nochlin's groundbreaking essay epitomized in the exhibition subtitle, *They Were Always Here*. He chose to focus on artists who studied during the period of 1945-65 because it was "the time when working-class women began to have capability to be professional artists."

Among Nochlin's arguments why there were so few great female artists was that women were not admitted to art academies. Corwin argues that the growing number of women in art schools in the 19th century had little effect since they ran head on into the misogyny of collectors, dealers and museums. He stresses that those rare women

who had professional careers came from upper and middle classes (notably, Académie Julian charged more for women's education than for that of men). In his view, the rejection of women was finally broken by federal rules in the U.S. in the 1930s by massive federally funded public works. What was crucial was the inclusion of women in government. The unusually high number of women assigned commissions, writes Corwin, was the effect of high concentration of women in leadership roles at WPA (Works Progress Administration), and the fact that a suffragette, Frances Perkins was the Secretary of Labor (the first woman to get a cabinet position). The demand for equality in art was Eleanor Roosevelt's personal effort on behalf of women – especially working class women.

The role of WPA commissions given to women artists was paramount even if progress turned out to be temporary. Among the exhibition artists who benefitted were Berenice Abbott, Elizabeth Catlett, Lee Krasner, Mercedes Matter, and I. Rice Pereira. WPA made it possible for them to work full-time as artists. Corwin points to the G.I. Bill which filled art schools with war veterans and the post-war "misogynistic pushback against American women in the workplace." One could claim that the huge disappointment of American women after World War II – the result G.I. Bill had on their emancipation – directly following their experience of having professional careers under WPA, was a motivating force for the next generation. Women were desperately looking for role models – trapped between being perceived as too feminine or too masculine, and generally thought of by male professors as not capable of becoming painters.

The Art Students League was not the first to accept women. What was missing in all schools until much later were women instructors. Well ahead of European schools, the oldest American art academy, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (PAFA, 1805) admitted the first women in 1844, and by 1874 – a year before the League was founded – granted them access to the same education that men had – including drawing from male nude models. The League gave women equal access to all classes from the start. In terms of governance, the League was revolutionary: since its incorporation in 1878, the Board of Control was divided equally: "two-vice presidents (one lady and one gentleman) and four other members (two ladies and two gentlemen)." "Despite this technical equality," notes Corwin, "the League did not have a woman president until 1968." While the student body was almost equally divided between men and women, there were few female instructors. PAFA had the first one in 1878; the League in 1895 and Mary Lawrence Tonetti was the only woman to teach there in the 19th century. In the first decade of the 20th century, of forty-two instructors only four were women, writes Corwin.

Just like feminist scholars, the curator argues that "there was no lack of women artists making work," which he certainly demonstrates with his exhibition. He argues that "the generation that had benefitted from the empowerment of the WPA [...] became the first nationally recognized generation of art stars, and the women who practiced Abstract Expressionism such as Helen Frankenthaler, Grace Hartigan, and Lee Krasner, became more well known [...] than any of their predecessors." But a major problem for women artists until today is that their recognition is not lasting. As for abstract expressionists, it did not last until the renewed interest as a result of feminism and the efforts of feminist art historians. It is still impossible to say that they finally achieved public success, as it took well beyond their lifespan to attract real interest in their works. The most expensive abstract works by men so far sold for \$300M and \$140M, while women's – at \$16.6M. The permanent collection rooms at MoMA did not have a single post-war abstraction by a woman until 2019. Will women's art of the 1940's and 1950's be recognized a hundred years from now?

There is certain risk in recent growth of interest in women artists; that after a few years, once a few token masters are established, things will go back "to normal." We need art history before 1968 that has women present across movements and periods, both among more and less renowned artists, feminists or not. It is not done based on a few examples and William Corwin knows it – his exhibition *Postwar Women* provides broad contextualization – artistic, historical, and sociological – of women's work. Importantly, it restores the presence of the many directions which artists were taking at the same time, especially before the consolidation of abstract expressionism.

William Corwin's important exhibition once again brings to the fore the enormous and urgent need for research, historical assessment and introducing women's work into the canon. His catalog essay is but an herald for a much fuller development. With its motto *Know your Foremothers*, the exhibition can be an example other institutions should follow to promote rewriting their history. Only being able to preserve and assess women's production, can we properly contextualize the work of star artists such as Louise Bourgeois or Joan Mitchell.

Monika Fabijanska

MONIKA FABIJANSKA is a New York-based art historian and independent curator who specializes in women's and feminist art. Her exhibition, *The Un-Heroic Act: Representations of Rape in Contemporary Women's Art in the U.S.* at John Jay College, CUNY, was ranked by *Hyperallergic* the fifth best NYC art show in 2018, and reviewed by *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Artforum*, *Art in America*, and *The Brooklyn Rail*. www.monikafabijanska.com