Reframing Feminism: Visualizing Women, Gender & Sexuality

The question “Why have there been no great women artists?” is simply the top tenth of an iceberg of misinterpretation and misconception.... While the “women problem” as such may be a pseudo-issue, the misconceptions involved in the question... point to major areas of intellectual obfuscation beyond the specific political and ideological issues involved in the subjection of women. Basic to the question are many naive, distorted, uncritical assumptions about the making of art in general, as well as the making of great art.

- Linda Nochlin, 1971

This Teaching Gallery exhibition—on view September 8, 2017, to January 8, 2018—is curated by Trevor Joy Sangrey, lecturer in the Department of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and assistant dean in the College of Arts & Sciences, in conjunction with the course “Introduction to Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies,” offered in fall 2017.

Reframing the art historian Linda Nochlin’s pioneering question to think not only about women artists but about art engaging with feminist philosophies, this Teaching Gallery exhibition considers the role art plays in the development of feminist activism. Specifically, Reframing Feminism: Visualizing Women, Gender & Sexuality pulls together a selection of artworks from the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum’s permanent collection to consider how women’s bodies, sexuality, and feminist activism have been central themes for artists in the United States and beyond. What characterizes a feminist art practice, and how does it relate to social movement activism? Some artists, such as Valie Export, Barbara Kruger, Martha Rosler, and Hannah Wilke, are explicitly committed to feminist practice, while others, such as Gran Fury and Andy Warhol, are less overtly feminist yet also offer important interventions against sexism and heteropatriarchy.

The term feminist art is most often used as a rubric for discussing art made by women, and by some men, that is consciously aligned with the politics of the women’s rights movement and feminist theory as they emerged in the “second wave” of feminism in the late 1960s through the early 1980s. Therefore, at issue are both the political and conceptual involvement of the artist.
and the core ideas and ideals of this period of social, cultural, and political activism. Rather than focusing explicitly on what is and what isn’t feminist art, this exhibition and publication continue to offer artworks to consider central themes of, as well as continuities and discontinuities in, feminist struggle. Indeed, the prints, photographs, videos, and mixed-media works collected in the course related to this exhibition, including the history of US women’s movements, global feminisms, masculinity, sexuality, racialization, and intersectionality.

Bodies

The selected works invite viewers to reflect on what images of women and women’s bodies they expect to see, and are comfortable seeing, both in art and in public spaces. Many artworks trouble the archetype of the naked woman’s body and critique common art practices of representing women through the male gaze, and as beautiful objects to be looked at, often using such techniques as abstraction and defamiliarization. Lauren Lesko’s ‘Fur Muff’ (1993) sits politely, taking a traditional accessory of upper-class femininity and making it a playful sexual pun of the heavy fur of the coat and the small cat’s playful sex act. Hannah Wilke pulls her face toward the grotesque in Gestures (1974), and Jeanne Dunning’s study for The Extra Nipple (1994) imagines reconfiguring the body in ways that muddle pleasure and utility, rendering the body strange and unfamiliar. As a counterpoint, Roy Lichtenstein’s Crying Girl (1963) and Mel Ramos’s Coney (1968) are two Pop art engagements that make looking at women’s bodies easy by presenting them in ways that are familiar, comfortable, and knowable to the viewer.

Valie Export’s performance Touch Cinema (1968) confronts both the objectification and commodification of women’s bodies by inviting the public to engage (literally) with a real woman’s body rather than with images on a canvas or a screen. Part a retort to rampant consumerism and part a response to Barbora Kruger’s imaginative yet at times disingenuous work discussed in the course, Export’s exhibition presents insights for feminist activists and artists. Howardena Pindell’s and Kara Walker’s works speak to the long history of the struggle against racism in the United States. The presentation of Bush, Skinny, De-boning (2002), as in much of the artist’s other work, focuses on the history of American slavery and the attendant gender and sexual violence on which that “peculiar institution” thrived. Her visual engagement with violence and racialized behavior is echoed in Pindell’s video work, as both pieces force the viewer to grapple with history of slavery and a lack of reparations that is often publically ignored or misrepresented. Pindell, who was twenty-one years old during the Civil War, uses a situation that is on both the second wave of the women’s movement and the civil rights and black power movements in her video Free, White and 27 (1980). In this searing work Pindell plays both herself and a nude, insecure white woman from midcentury reflecting on race; the performance demonstrates various privileges white people, particularly white women, gain from white supremacy. It also heralds an important counterweight to Peggy McIntosh’s canonized text “White Privilege and Male Privilege” by offering insight into the impact of structural racism while remarketing the discussion on race as a discussion of people, color, and culture. Viewers might find fruitful a cross-reading of Pindell’s video with either the almost-contemporary Combahee River Collective Statement (1977) or bell hooks’s “Black Women’s Bodies easy pow” (1970), both of which contextualize criticism of white-centered feminism and the bourgeoning black feminist critique.

Adrian Piper’s evocative Let’s Talk (1992) comes from her Mythic Being performance project, begun in 1973, in which she transforms herself into a racialized, masculine figure by donning an Afro wig, mustache, and sunglasses. This work, which frequently photographs men as active and women as static. Warhol also inverts the typical portrayal of the nude, capturing parts of male bodies for the viewer and challenging expected heterosexual viewing patterns. In her painting of the House (1980) she fills an apron-clad housewife reciting the inventory of her kitchen, a parody of stereotypical female domesticity. Exploring the formative link between identity and representation, these works further reflect on the malleable and unstable nature of identities and the social structures within which they develop.

The works in this gallery can be explored through some of the themes suggested above, or by geographic location of the artist, or chronologically in relation to unfolding histories. One could trace, for example, the development of women’s and feminist art from the 1960s into the early 1990s. However viewed, the artworks prompt us to reconsider many of the familiar tenets of feminism and ponder just what makes a feminist art practice, which makes feminist art, and what role art plays for and within feminist movements.

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References


