Women’s Work

Mildred Lane
Kemper Art Museum

Arthur Greenberg Undergraduate Curatorial Fellowship

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Foreword

*Women’s Work* is the culmination of the 2020–2021 Arthur Greenberg Undergraduate Curatorial Fellowship, an ongoing initiative made possible through the generosity of James Cohan (AB ’82) and named in memory of Arthur Greenberg (AB ’82). As undergraduate students, these two art history majors curated an exhibition in what was then the Washington University Gallery of Art—an experience that launched both of them into career-long engagement with the visual arts. The fellowship is jointly sponsored by the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum in the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts and the Department of Art History & Archaeology in Arts & Sciences. It is a competitive program that offers outstanding undergraduate students in art history and related disciplines the opportunity to curate an exhibition in the Museum’s Teaching Gallery.

We congratulate the winning curatorial team for this year’s exhibition: Lydia McKelvie (AB ’22), Alice Nguyen (AB ’22), and Hannah Ward (AB ’21), all art history majors. Their ambitious project considers visual representations of women as laborers—in the home, the field, the factory—and the societal norms that prescribed these roles throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
We would also like to acknowledge the very real constraints that the pandemic has placed on the student curators this year. The Greenberg Fellowship is typically a hands-on experience, one in which students spend a significant portion of time at the Kemper Art Museum as part of a summer internship. For this iteration of the fellowship, all work was done remotely to comply with social distancing guidelines. In addition, the students had limited access to library resources and unexpected restrictions on the artworks they could request from partner institutions. This exhibition is a testament to the students’ focus, flexibility, and ability to collaborate virtually during ever-changing circumstances. As such, we celebrate that their efforts have been so successful, and we congratulate the curatorial team on a substantial accomplishment.

We are very grateful to Elizabeth Childs, Etta and Mark Steinberg Professor of Art History and chair, Department of Art History & Archaeology; and Sabine Eckmann, William T. Kemper Director & Chief Curator, Kemper Art Museum, for their dedication to this project and recognition of its educational value. Our sincere thanks also go to our colleagues at the D. B. Dowd Modern Graphic History Library, Washington University Libraries, Julian Edison Department of Special Collections; Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign; Missouri Historical Society; Saint Louis Art Museum; and David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, for their generosity in lending their artworks and in trusting and supporting these first-time curators. In addition, we would like to thank the Museum staff, in particular Kim Broker, associate registrar for collections, for her essential work in facilitating the loans and access to the Museum’s collection. We also extend gratitude to Jane Neidhardt, head of publications, and Holly Tasker, production editor, for their investment in guiding the students toward the successful implementation of this publication. Last but not least it is a pleasure to acknowledge the leadership of Carmon Colangelo, Ralph J. Nagel Dean of the Sam Fox School of Design & the Visual Arts; Feng Sheng Hu, dean, and Barbara Schaal, former dean, of the Faculty of Arts & Sciences; and Jennifer Smith, dean of the College of Arts & Sciences, and to express our appreciation for their ongoing fruitful collaborations.

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Women’s Work

Perhaps the best way to describe women’s work is with the adage “the more things change, the more things stay the same.” Despite tremendous developments in the social, political, and artistic spheres in much of Europe and North America, the same issues and conversations that trace back three hundred years form the through line of this exhibition. Women’s Work examines a variety of depictions of feminized labor, such as textile work, domestic chores, and caretaking roles, in the modern era. Inspired by artworks in the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum’s collection—constituting more than half of the exhibition—Women’s Work includes prints, drawings, photographs, sculpture, and videos. Rather than an exhaustive survey of the representation of women’s labor in modern and contemporary art, the exhibition unfolds in three thematic sections that explore agency, equity, and performance. The interwoven histories of feminism in the Western world have served as key points of reference for much of feminist scholarship.1 The concentration of visual culture centered on women’s labor in these countries during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries reflects parallel changes in gender roles and the labor market resulting from industrial revolutions, war mobilization, and the rise of women’s movements. Each section delineates salient forces shaping women’s work through a series of juxtapositions that shed light on notions of gendered labor and their impact on women’s lives.

The emergence of nineteenth- and twentieth-century feminist movements, primarily in the United States and Britain but also in France, provides the political framework within which many of the works in this exhibition were created. What is now referred to as “First Wave Feminism” took place roughly from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century. Although best known for the campaign for women’s suffrage, the movement also emphasized women’s education and agency over their work. First Wave Feminism had a complex and constantly shifting relationship with other contemporaneous social movements, such as abolition in the early nineteenth century and labor movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While sometimes working in coordination with these movements when their goals aligned, First Wave Feminism was often restrictive in its participation due to an almost exclusive focus on the needs of upper-middle-class white women.2 The exhibition looks at images of women—especially laborers of the lower classes who were essentially excluded from the dominant narrative of this movement—both from within and against the backdrop of this history. In each section we see how feminized labor is both constructed and challenged, inviting us to consider who controls the narrative and who is excluded.
Second Wave Feminism emerged in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, largely in reaction to the post–World War II revival of the so-called cult of domesticity. Proclaiming “the personal is political,” Second Wave feminists problematized the home as a site of patriarchal oppression and encouraged women to find fulfillment outside of the domestic realm. Beginning with the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), a bestselling feminist text by Betty Friedan, the movement gained momentum with the formation in 1966 of the National Organization for Women (NOW), which called for equal pay, protection against discrimination and harassment, childcare reform, and contraceptive rights, among other demands. During this era feminist artists began creating works that often appropriated and transformed images of feminized labor into art, parodied standards of femininity, and undermined gender expectations. Taking inspiration from such pioneering figures as Martha Rosler and the Guerrilla Girls, this exhibition approaches women’s labor as consistently intertwined with feminism and the political sphere. In interrogating artistic and historical narratives of “women’s work” we seek to understand how these narratives were constructed and by whom, how visual culture participates in or challenges this, and which perspectives remain excluded.

**AGENCY**

“Agency” examines how notions of feminized labor have historically limited the choices available to women and the amount of autonomy they are able to wield over their work. This section presents art and visual culture produced in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries during the peak of First Wave Feminism, much of which depicts women in caretaking roles, textile work, domestic chores, and homemaking. During this period women’s education and media representations propagated images of women performing this work, which enforced such ideals of femininity.

James McNeill Whistler’s etching *The Kitchen* (1858), for instance, establishes the kitchen as a feminine space that envelops and defines the woman within it. *The Kitchen* was completed while the artist was visiting small country towns along the Rhine to capture images of quiet rural life. Whistler’s etching portrays a romanticized, seemingly apolitical depiction of domestic space. Within the etching the stark contrasts between shade and light render the woman as a slim silhouette against the bright window with her back turned to us. The artist depicts
her as being “absorbed in simple household tasks of a timeless nature,” which renders the figure oblivious to the viewer’s gaze and omits the hard realities of daily chores. With her silhouetted body defined by negative space, she is anonymized, dissolving into the background as just another kitchen instrument.

Class-based gender expectations often inform what agency in labor means for women. Childe Hassam’s watercolor *Maude Sewing* (1883) and Jean-François Millet’s etching *La cardeuse* (*Woman Carding Wool*; 1855–56) both depict women performing textile work. In *Maude Sewing* the upper-class woman (Hassam’s bride-to-be) participates in a socially prescribed “ladylike” craft. Hassam depicts her in the process of producing delicate embroidery from the comfort of her bed while she gazes away wistfully. This is clearly a leisurely endeavor for her, as her sewing likely served the purpose of ornamentation or charitable labor but was also a necessary activity for a wife to create a comfortable home for her husband. Captured in a passive, idle moment, she functions almost as ornamentally as her embroidery would. During this period, while voluntary labor was acceptable and even encouraged for women of the middle and upper classes, they were usually not allowed to participate in economic production. The issue with paid labor was not the labor but the pay, as a woman of this social status earning money violated strict Victorian norms.8

*Woman Carding Wool*, on the other hand, is an example of working-class labor typical of the type of social realism practiced by Millet, in which he depicted the hardship of lower-class laborers while also maintaining their dignity.9 The woman sits surrounded by textile production tools, including a spinning wheel and baskets of wool. Her expression and posture indicate the worker’s fatigue and the monotonous nature of the task. This was part of the cottage industry of textile production, an industry in which rural women of the working class in need of providing for their families were the primary laborers. “Out-work,” as it was called, was often exploitative, as the women workers received lower wages than their male counterparts, had little ability to organize, and were limited in their agency to choose other, better-paying jobs largely because out-work allowed them to work from home, where they
could also care for their children. Whereas *Maude Sewing* and *Woman Carding Wool* both depict women performing textile work, for one it was leisurely, genteel work, and for the other it meant survival.

Cornelia Field Maury’s pastel drawing *The Little Sister* (1895) depicts another intimate domestic scene: a sister taking care of a younger sibling. Childcare was a frequent subject in Maury’s work. As a woman she would have had ready access to these types of scenes. Caring for their younger siblings was a common component of girls’ household responsibilities from an early age. Childcare was considered part of an informal education for girls of the working class, and it often had a negative effect on their formal education, taking them out of the classroom to assist at home and thus perpetuating a cycle of gendered disenfranchisement.¹⁰

In the United States at this time, decades after chattel slavery was abolished, a significant portion of the care of white children was performed by Black women, employed as “domestics.”¹¹ In the photograph of an African American nurse holding a white child (c. 1900–1915) by an unknown photographer, the woman is possibly the child’s wet nurse and likely its primary caretaker. This type of portraiture stems from the tradition of commissioning enslaved nurse portraits, which were often used to signal wealth or status on part of the commissioner.¹² Photographs such as these would have likely been taken outside of the depicted women’s control and were often displayed in the house in which they labored, causing them to regularly encounter these images over which they had no agency.¹³ They were also meant to invoke a certain sentimental
response that served to legitimize enslavement, as was the white Southerners’ racist term “mammy” to refer to Black caretakers, reflecting the proscriptive white patriarchal construction of Black womanhood. As Emily West and R. J. Knight note, many white authors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries lamented the loss of this arrangement, alleging that the enslaved women held close bonds with the white children in their care. In reality, the work of these nurses was often done to the detriment of their own children’s care and with extreme negative physical and emotional consequences for the women themselves.

Following the end of World War II, the injustice and violence of the Jim Crow era of racial discrimination in the United States led to a nationwide reckoning. The Civil Rights Movement was already in full swing when Second Wave Feminism emerged, the former serving as a crucial inspiration and model in what historians call the sex/race analogy. Then referred to as the “women’s liberation movement,” supporters rallied around issues of equality and discrimination.

Much like its First Wave predecessor, however, the Second Wave was limited in that it spoke mostly to the struggles of white middle-class women rather than to those of all women. One of the most conspicuous problems had to do with the slogan “the personal is political.” For many Black women its underlying paradigm did not apply, as the home was as much a refuge from public oppression as it was a manifestation of a patriarchal order. Conversations about reproductive rights failed...
to address the fact that Black women had the highest maternal mortality rate. While white feminists struggled with the notion of femininity they felt was imposed upon them, Black women were denied femininity in the first place. The historian bell hooks points out in her book *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (first published in 1981) that Black women were excluded from both discussions of race and gender; they were effectively “socialized out of existence,” a critique echoed by fellow Black feminists in the 1980s and 1990s and beyond. Among those critics is the artist Howardena Pindell, who, in her seminal video *Free, White and 21* (1980), shares her experiences with racism in educational institutions, employment offices, and social situations in a series of personal accounts. Speaking in a deadpan tone, Pindell sits in front of the camera and recounts incidents where she had been refused opportunities, treated with disrespect, underestimated, and humiliated on the basis of her race and gender. The emotional restraint with which she delivers her stories makes them autobiographical rather than anecdotal, which she intended as a way to lend credibility to her stories. Pindell's monologues are periodically interjected by a white, blonde woman with dark sunglasses, a character the artist herself plays, who responds by calling her “paranoid” and “ungrateful,” emulating responses used by white feminists to silence Black voices. “You don't exist until we validate you,” the white character repeats. “We'll find other tokens.” In an essay about her video, Pindell wrote, “It was about domination and the erasure of experience, canceling and rewriting history in a way that made one group feel safe and not threatened.” *Free, White and 21* reclaims Black women's agency within a system that constantly silences and excludes them.

Kara Walker's three-part steel sculpture, *The Bush, Skinny, and De-boning* (2002), made more than twenty years after Pindell's video, grapples with the historical erasure of Black personhood and the degradation of Black female sexuality. Walker depicts three enslaved Black women carrying out routine chores: gardening, child-rearing, and preparing food. The two-dimensionality of the sculpture evokes the flatness of racial
stereotypes and reductionist approaches to Black history. As the total blackness of the painted stainless steel silhouettes erases the figures’ individualized identities, their labor becomes what defines them. Spanning the early 2000s to the present, Walker’s works fall within the timeframe of Third Wave Feminism, which distinguishes itself from the Second Wave with its emphasis on intersectionality, a term coined by critical race scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe the impact of multiple overlapping forces. Focusing on the intersection of gender, sexuality, race, and class, this approach takes a more nuanced look at the complexity of prejudices women face. 

EQUITY

“Equity” investigates the systemic mistreatment and misrepresentation of women who participate, or attempt to participate, in male-dominated work. Women in both Europe and the United States pushed against the labor status quo and demanded more equity of opportunity throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. In the nineteenth century, groups such as Les Bas Bleus, or The Blue Stockings, in France challenged gender-limited education by hosting intellectual salons and advocating for upper-middle-class women’s literacy. Les Bas Bleus insisted that women could simultaneously be well educated and run a household. Drawing on prominent feminist literature such as Olympe de Gouges’s Declaration of the Rights of Woman (1791) and Mary Wollstonecraft’s A Vindication of the Rights of Woman
(1792), the group advocated for a national education curriculum, which gave women rights to education and the ability to pursue their interests in the humanities. The fight for women's rights was frequently parodied in mid-nineteenth-century French magazines, such as *Le Charivari*, including in caricatures by the artists Honoré Daumier and Édouard de Beaumont, who were known for their political and societal satirical prints. In Daumier’s 1844 lithograph titled “*Une femme comme moi... remettre un bouton?...vous êtes fou!...*” (“A woman like me...sew a button?... you’re crazy!...”) we see a woman, refusing to complete her household tasks, angrily fling laundry at her confused husband. This print brings attention to an upper-middle-class fear of gender-role inversion and emasculation in Parisian homes. In Beaumont’s 1848 lithograph *Bas-bleu, en train de composer un volume sur les devoirs de la maternité* (*Blue-stocking, in the process of composing a volume on the duties of motherhood*) the women ignore a drowning infant as they concentrate on writing about motherhood, echoing the sentiment that liberation is not only emasculating but actually dangerous.

While these caricatures were mass produced and widely published, the French monarchy's strict censorship laws about political commentary may have also helped popularize these images in French society. During the July Monarchy, the restored Bourbon King Louis-Philippe knew his position was vulnerable, especially in the post-revolution era. In order to ensure his rule was not ridiculed in the press and to quell any revolutionary thought, the King censored the public distribution of political caricatures. Les Bas Bleus provided ample alternative subject matter, since they were not considered politically contentious. These images thus played a key role in perpetuating the denigration of women’s education, ensuring that the patriarchal status quo in French upper-class households was maintained.

From the 1840s into the early 1900s in Europe and the United States, despite some small progress on the part of First Wave feminists, the role of women in the workforce remained relatively static until the onset of World War I. As seen in Adolph Treidler’s propaganda poster *For Every Fighter a Woman Worker. Care for Her through the YWCA. United War Work Campaign* (c. 1914–18), a young American woman, wearing industrial clothing and holding ammunition to be used on the warfront, exemplifies how wartime circumstances led to women joining the previously male-dominated workforce. The Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), which worked in conjunction with the US government and widely distributed such
posters, was one of the largest women’s associations in the country in the twentieth century; they also helped women find wartime occupations that guaranteed fair pay and job security until the war’s end. The caption’s admonition to “care for her” directly addresses a male audience, enforcing their role as protector even though women were now supporting themselves. In keeping with that, at the end of the war many women lost their jobs to the men who returned from the front.

The issue of workplace equity, fleetingly tasted during World War I and then again in World War II (famously represented by the figure of Rosie the Riveter), later propelled Second Wave feminists to demand even broader changes in compensation and recognition. One area of focus was the art world itself. The Guerrilla Girls’ activism during the 1980s and Lenka Clayton’s project Artist Residency in Motherhood (2012–15) both convey a key message: the inequities that women artists confront come from both institutional practices and the private demands of the home. Both bodies of work address the relation of these two domains, making the personal political, per the Second Wave feminist mantra, in order to illuminate, acknowledge, and honor the unseen labor of women.

The Guerrilla Girls, a feminist art collective whose members remain anonymous under gorilla masks, is known for their posters, billboards, and public performances that expose sexism and racism in the art world. Their poster projects of the 1980s addressed the underrepresentation of
women artists in museums and commercial galleries. In their 1989 poster *The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist*, the group uses satire and humor, the same techniques employed by Daumier and Beaumont in their antifeminist political cartoons, to make incisive social commentary that serves a feminist agenda. In a humorous yet cutting voice, undermining the perception of the “humorless feminist,” the piece lists societal barriers and obstacles that women artists face. The Futura Condensed Extra Bold font type common to marketing, combined with the use of direct, simple language in list format, commands attention from viewers both in the gallery space and in the work’s originally intended site of the street. Many feminist artists at the time, notably Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger, similarly evoked the visual language of advertising in order to capture public attention. This stylistic choice adds an ironic dimension to the critique of the monetization and commodification of art, exemplified by art institutions run primarily by wealthy white men. *The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist* unapologetically exposes systemic inequities faced by women artists—their underrepresentation in the industry, a skewed perception of their art due to gender stereotypes, and the undue burden of tasks associated with, as the poster states, “having the opportunity to choose between career and motherhood.”

The contemporary artist Lenka Clayton, herself both mother and artist, follows the legacy of the Guerrilla Girls and others in her practice that critiques how the art world has deemed motherhood and being an artist as two incompatible roles. Her *Artist Residency in Motherhood* project was inspired by the fact that, as Clayton states, “many aspects of the professional art world are closed to artists with families.” To combat this, Clayton established a “residency” for herself in her home to display that motherhood and artistry need not compete but instead can “inform one another.” During this residency Clayton created a variety of projects that interlace her role as a mother and an artist, including the three-part series *The Distance I Can Be From My Son*. In three short videos the artist allows her toddler son to wander away until she instinctively runs after him.

If these works direct their critiques toward inequity in the contemporary art world, then Faith Ringgold’s lithograph *The Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles* (1996) questions the role of equity in historical and art historical canon formation. The depiction of quilting, a craft performed by enslaved Black women prior to its popularization as folk art, directly challenges
the traditional hierarchy of art forms. Labeled as craft as opposed to high art, quilting as a form of feminized labor was consistently undervalued in the art market and excluded from the art historical canon.\textsuperscript{33}

Beyond the pointed implications of Ringgold’s choice of subject matter, the artist honors eight heroines of African American history by imprinting on the quilt their names: Madame C. J. Walker, Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Fannie Lou Hamer, Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Ella Baker. The women are depicted in a fictional gathering in Arles, France, the temporary home of Vincent van Gogh (also depicted), where he painted many of his iconic sunflower paintings. This gesture—populating a canonical subject with Black women icons—is a form of political resistance against structural inequities in the shaping of majority white canons. Not solely a memorial to these pillars of Black excellence and leadership, the work is also a celebration of Black women’s labor, whose role in shaping American history has been consistently erased in white-controlled narratives of history.

**PERFORMANCE**

“Performance” grapples with the idea that women’s sexuality is inextricable from their identities, which makes their bodies the subject not only of sexual desire but also moral critiques. This is evident in images of women as sex workers and entertainers, but also in more traditional depictions of women as homemakers. This section draws on Judith...
Butler’s theories of gender as performance—gender as produced through the body and aggregated over time into a notion of identity that is instituted through what she calls a “stylized repetition of acts.” To perform femininity is to bodily reproduce, through dress, mannerism, or movement, standards of women’s sexuality.

The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century works exhibited here were produced in a historical context in which women’s overt sexuality was acceptable exclusively to an underclass of sex workers and entertainers. Such images as A Harlot’s Progress (1732) by William Hogarth represented a significant subculture of eighteenth-century prints depicting sex workers. Through the widely distributed medium of prints they circulated a moral critique of this category of women’s work. Modernization and industrialization in eighteenth-century England heralded the rise in popularity of, and the conservative backlash against, women participating in the urban professions of prostitution and entertainment, which were often associated with debauchery and social evils.

A Harlot’s Progress tells the fictional rise and fall of a young woman named Moll Hackabout, a naive country girl who is tricked into a life of sex work, from which she eventually contracts a venereal disease and dies. Over the course of six sequential prints based on original paintings by Hogarth, Moll is shown as innocence corrupted, duplicious mistress, and finally as a tragic fallen woman. This narrative is full of erotic potential. In the third plate, for instance, Moll is depicted as a prostitute in a brothel in a partial state of undress. The bottles of medicine around the room suggest that the small black spots on her face hide signs of syphilis. Across the prints Moll is not simply presented as the object of the erotic gaze, however, but also as an object of pity. In this sense, she represents less of a character and more of a microcosm of gender
and class anxieties regarding the emerging modern urban social order. Shown through the lens of a male viewer, she is seen as an agent of vice enacting a performance of sexually desirable womanhood, which is constructed as both disturbing and alluring and is perpetuated through the consumption and sale of these images.\textsuperscript{37} 

Like sex workers, women dancers and entertainers frequently encountered moral critiques and age-old objectification of their bodies. While these separate industries occupied different realms of legality and social acceptability, both involved the monetization of women's bodies, and the women who performed these types of work were treated with similar disdain. While some women who participated in these fields were doing it under exploitative circumstances, their work was also generally seen as an expression of women's sexual agency and therefore largely unacceptable.\textsuperscript{38} These critiques were evident in depictions of women entertainers and dancers in nineteenth-century Third Republic Parisian nightlife, as seen in Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's \textit{Jane Avril au Jardin de Paris} (1893) and Edgar Degas's \textit{Sur la scène (On Stage III; 1877)}. The popularity of these performances call attention to the rising differentiation between business and pleasure for the expanding Parisian middle class due to modern urbanization. The women entertainers publicly performed for both Paris's middle and upper classes, often before an
In the US, the post–World War II reaction to the enlarged role women had in the workforce during the war constituted a similar backlash. The term “nuclear family,” now regarded as a heteronormative standard, was widely circulated in the 1950s as the model family unit and the foundation for stability and social order. Concurrently, the rise of consumerism saturated American visual culture with magazine and TV advertisements, exclusively male audience. Jane Avril's cabaret shows were among the most popular in the Parisian entertainment scene, and she actively embraced her celebrity status. Avril herself commissioned Toulouse-Lautrec to create this cartoon-like print of her in the midst of a suggestive cancan kick to advertise her upcoming show. In contrast, the ballet dancers in Degas's *Sur la scène* remain anonymous and seem to be copies of the same young, innocent female figure subjected to the scrutiny of the male gaze. Both Degas's and Toulouse-Lautrec's performance images allow the viewer to watch the depicted show from the perspective of the orchestra box near the front of the venue. Degas's dancers fade into the stage background, whereas Jane Avril stands out, indicative of the varying levels of power these performers held in the creation of their images, and while Toulouse-Lautrec's depiction displayed Avril's performance identity to the Parisian entertainment sector, Degas focused less on the performer and more on the atmosphere of performance. What these works have in common is that they all reflect conservative sentiments toward women's increasingly public roles and the larger social anxieties surrounding them.
many of which featured women promoting household appliances and other domestic items. Alfred Charles Parker’s illustration *I Can Hardly Wait*, featured in the women’s magazine *Good Housekeeping* (1957), depicts an idealized housewife meant to serve as a model for the magazine’s female readership. The image shows a young, blond, well-dressed woman in various poses with a broom, presumably anticipating, as the title implies, her husband’s return. One of the poses portrays his homecoming, in which he embraces her from behind as she drops her broom. The sexuality on display is presented, and largely perceived, as virtuous and socially appropriate, conforming to the heteronormative standards for a white, middle-class, married woman. She is performing femininity not only through her labor but also through her sexual desirability, which is disseminated to readers as the performance they should recreate.

It is in response to these proscriptive social norms that Eleanor Antin’s and Martha Rosler’s feminist art overtly subverts ideals of femininity and the gender binary, with both artists using the same medium of performance through which those norms were constituted and reinforced. In her video *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), Rosler presents herself as the antithesis of the so-called perfect housewife. As she operates various kitchen utensils in imitation of a cooking television show host, Rosler violently slams them on the table, stabs the air with her knives, and occasionally slings her tools back and forth in jagged, mechanical motions, all of which demonstrate frustration and anger. Her robotic gestures and deadpan expression parody the repetitive nature of housework. Her impression of a 1960s cooking show host is entirely satirical, an exaggerated contrast to a happy, heartwarming figure of domesticity. Her plain clothing and unstyled hair also point to a satire on feminine appearance and sexual appeal. The plasticity of the performance, evident in the artifice of the background and the absence of actual food, further mocks the patriarchal standards of femininity and domesticity exemplified in *I Can Hardly Wait* and similar depictions of women in the 1950s and 1960s.

In her 1974 performance *My Kingdom Is the Right Size*, Antin explores the reductive and oppressive power of gender constructs through her fictional persona “The King.” Although wearing men’s clothing and an overtly fake beard, The King appears as gender nonconforming with the figure’s breasts, a coded marker of femininity, still visible. The King
traverses his kingdom of Solana Beach in a dignified and noble manner, stopping occasionally to converse with his “subjects.” The photographs documenting the performance depict The King in various social settings, conducting such day-to-day activities. In one, The King waits in line at a grocery store; neither the employees nor the other customers in line appear bothered by his presence—they are engaged in conversation and focused on the task at hand. In another photograph The King sits among a group of friends, his body turned toward one person as if about to talk to him. Two other people in the group turn their attention to The King, but the fourth ignores him and gazes off in another direction. Both of those photographs depict Antin trying to blend into her environment by following social codes and conventions, such as staying in line and not speaking out of turn, so much so that she becomes virtually invisible despite her conspicuous costume. Using her own female-coded body as material, Antin’s performance invites viewers to question the performativity of their own daily lives—the labor of dressing, working, and being a “woman” or “man”—which is often more burdensome on women than men and which can perpetuate the white cisnormative configuration that underlies notions of gendered labor.
This exhibition takes into account the fact that the historical narrative of women's labor is largely shaped by omissions and distortions. In this text we deliberately use the word “work” instead of “professions” or “jobs” as a way to acknowledge the unseen and unrecognized—the types of labor that are neither compensated nor awarded medals of excellence—and to open up future possibilities.

We recognize that while progress has been made in some areas over the last two centuries, negative stereotypes and systemic inequities still persist. Social movements advocating the needs of women continue to center upper-middle-class white women at the expense of women of color and lower socioeconomic status. There remains much work to be done to unearth these untold histories. The images in this exhibition offer a glimpse into such absences while opening a gateway to greater understanding of the lived experiences of women in history.

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Notes


2 First Wave Feminism also employed a binary notion of gender and identity. As the writer and curator Legacy Russell stated, “As a movement, the language of feminism...has in large part been codependent on the existence of gender binary, working for change only within an existing social order.” See Legacy Russell, Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto (London: Verso, 2020), 31. Russell argues for a form of liberation found in the fissures between gender, technology, and the body.

3 This term was used in the nineteenth century to describe a new social paradigm in which women became the center of the family, and domestic labor was portrayed as uplifting and virtuous. This norm was revived in the 1950s along with the concept of the “nuclear family.” See Catherine J. Lavender, “Notes on The Cult of Domesticity and True Womanhood,” prepared for students in the course “HST 386: Women in the City,” Department of History, College of Staten Island/CUNY (1998), http://www.gshapush.com/uploads/8/0/6/2/80629020/cult_of_domesticity.pdf.

4 The movement’s mantra comes from Carol Hanisch’s 1969 essay of the same name, published in Notes from the Second Year: Women’s Liberation (1970). Originally written as an informal memo, this text is Hanisch’s response to the popular male perception of consciousness-raising groups as “personal therapy,” rather than political action, by asserting that personal problems stem from political causes and therefore require collective political action rather than personal solutions.


7 Ibid., 42.


10 Levine, Victorian Feminism, 83.


13 Ibid., 11.


15 Ibid., 42–43.

16 Both radical and mainstream feminists invoked the Black liberation movement in their arguments. The National Organization for Women, which was synonymous with mainstream feminism during the Second Wave, explicitly drew parallels between racism and sexism to legitimize women’s liberation, though the same strategy was also used by mainstream media to trivialize the feminist movement. See Allison Portman, “Feminists in the Wasteland Fight Back: The National Organization for Women and Media Reform,” in Public Interests: Media Advocacy and Struggles over U.S. Television (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 65–93, https://www.jstor.org/stable/ct:1dxS9R.


18 Ibid.


21 Rebecca Walker coined the term “Third Wave” in her Ms. magazine article, “Becoming the Third Wave” (January 1992). In addition to the literature on the intersectionality of Third Wave Feminism, there is also a wealth of scholarship on Walker’s work in relation to history and the legacy of slavery. Nancy Wellington Bookhart, for instance, in “The Inoculation of History in the Censorship of Kara Walker’s Work at Newark Library” argues that Walker’s work “de-sancitifies” the image of history and brings viewers into direct confrontation with the “original scene of trauma,” which challenges the palatable mainstream narrative that slavery is in the past and that it has been overcome (paper, College Art Association Annual Conference, online, February 10, 2021).


26 Powell and Childs, Femmes d’esprit, 89.


28 Ibid.


30 Images of Rosie the Riveter were created for a marketing campaign calling women to work for the war effort, one of the most famous of them being Norman Rockwell’s cover of the Saturday Evening Post, May 29, 1943. See https://www.nrm.org/rosie-the-riveter/.


32 Ibid.


37 Carter, Purchasing Power, 68.

38 Ibid., 75.


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<th>AGENCY</th>
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| Childe Hassam (American, 1859–1935)  
Maud Sewing, 1883  
Watercolor and graphite, 13 1/4 x 9 1/8 in.  
Saint Louis Art Museum  
Bequest of Marie Setz Hertslet | Édouard de Beaumont (French, 1821–1888)  
Bos-bleu, en train de composer un volume sur les devoirs de la maternité (Blue-stocking, in the process of composing a volume on the duties of motherhood), from the series Fariboles (Froth of suds), published December 27, 1848  
Lithograph, 13 1/4 x 9 1/8 in.  
Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis  
Gift of Eric G. Carlson in honor of Professor Elizabeth C. Childs, 2000 | Eleanor Antin (American, b. 1935)  
My Kingdom Is the Right Size, from The King of Solana Beach, 1974  
8 black-and-white photographs mounted on board and 1 text panel, 6 x 9 in. each  
University purchase, Art Acquisition Fund and Charles H. Yalem Art Fund, 2000  
Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis |
| Cornelia Field Maury (American, 1866–1942)  
The Little Sister, 1895  
Pastel and graphite, 18 x 14 in.  
Saint Louis Art Museum  
Gift of Mrs. Halsey C. Ives | Lenka Clayton (British, b. 1977)  
The Distance I Can Be From My Son (Park), 2013  
The Distance I Can Be From My Son (Supermarket), 2013  
The Distance I Can Be From My Son (Back Alley), 2013  
3 digital videos with sound, 1:43, 0:52, and 1:53 min. (looped)  
Courtesy of the artist | Edgar Degas (French, 1834–1917)  
Sur la scène (On Stage III), 1877  
Etching, 5 7/8 x 8 3/16 in.  
Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis  
University purchase, Yalem Fund, 2005 |
| Jean-François Millet (French, 1814–1875)  
La cardeuse (Woman Carding Wool), 1855–56  
Etching, 12 1/4 x 8 1/2 in.  
Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis  
University purchase, Bixby Fund, 2012 | Howardena Pindell (American, b. 1943)  
Free, White and 21, 1980  
Color video with sound, 12:15 min.  
Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis  
University purchase, Bixby Fund, 2012  
Studio portrait of a nurse and child, c. 1900–1915  
Black-and-white photograph mounted on postcard, 5 7/8 x 3 7/8 in.  
Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis | Alfred Charles Parker (American, 1906–1985)  
I Can Hardly Wait, 1957  
Gouache on board, 16 x 22 1/4 in.  
and reproduction in Good Housekeeping, published August 1957  
D. B. Dowd Modern Graphic History Library, Washington University Libraries, Julian Edison Department of Special Collections |
| Kara Walker (American, b. 1969)  
The Bush, Skinny, and De-boning, from Edition No. 19, 2002  
Painted stainless steel in 3 parts, 29 1/50, 5 7/8 x 8 1/2 x 1 1/4 in., 4 1/2 x 4 1/4 x 3/8 in., and 5 1/2 x 6 1/4 in.  
Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis  
Gift of Peter Norton, 2015 | Guerrilla Girls (American artists, active since 1985)  
Digital print, 12 8/10, 17 x 22 in.  
Kranzert Art Museum, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign  
Museum purchase through Art Acquisition Fund | Martha Rosler (American, b. 1943)  
Semiotics of the Kitchen, 1975  
Black-and-white video with sound, 6:09 min.  
Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis  
University purchase, Bixby Fund, 2013 |
| James McNeill Whistler (American, 1834–1903)  
The Kitchen, 1858  
Etching, 9 1/4 x 6 1/4 in.  
Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis  
Gift of Dr. Malvern B. Clopton, 1930 | Faith Ringgold (American, b. 1930)  
The Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles, 1996  
Lithograph, 59/100, 22 3/4 x 30 in. (sheet)  
The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago  
Purchase, Unrestricted Acquisitions Fund | Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (French, 1864–1900)  
Jane Avril au Jardin de Paris, 1893  
Lithograph, 51 7/16 x 37 in.  
Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis  
Gift of John F. Lesser in memory of Jenny Nathan Strauss, 2000 |

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Support is provided by the Arthur Greenberg Exhibition Program Fund, the Mark Weil Tribute Fund, and members of the Mildred Lane Kemper Museum.

Related Event

In Conversation: Women’s Work
April 28, 2021, 5 pm
Online; register at kemperartmuseum.wustl.edu
Lydia McKelvie, Alice Nguyen, and Hannah Ward
Arthur Greenberg Undergraduate Curatorial Fellows