

## Preface to *Women Artists Series Year Four* by Linda Nochlin

In 1971, the Douglass College Library pioneered the exhibition of women artists' work with a series of one-woman shows. This year, the fourth of these series will take place, giving the public of New Jersey and the vicinity the chance to become acquainted with a wide variety of styles and approaches in the visual arts united by a single but significant thread: all these varied works have been made by women. It is the combination of unity and diversity in these exhibitions that constitute their freshness and significance: unity in the sense that women artists present a united front of innovation and high quality; diversity in that this series makes it apparent that there is no such thing as a monolithic or stereotypical "feminine" style, but that each woman artist has found her own voice, created her own language of significant form.

"...To exhibit is for the artist the vital concern, the sine qua non;...to exhibit is to find friends and allies for the struggle." These words were said more than a hundred years ago by Edouard Manet, in the introduction to the catalog of a private exhibition in which he was forced to show his work when deprived of a chance to exhibit through official channels. His statement, while relevant to the predicament of all artists, seems particularly appropriate for the women artists of today, for they must in a sense make up for lost time, for hundreds of years of deprivation, in their struggle for public visibility. A chance to exhibit, even for artists of established reputation, is an essential concomitant of growth and decision: there it all is, personal seeking and finding transformed into public objecthood; how does it come off this time? For younger artists, those just beginning, exhibition is perhaps even more vital. It is the proving ground in which one's still private realm of craft and imagination at last makes contact with the outer space of judgment and evaluation. Some women may indeed wish to challenge established values with their work, but in order to do so, they must have the opportunity for confrontation afforded by exhibitions like this one.

In the four years since the first Douglass College Library exhibition of women's art took place, great strides have been made in providing opportunities for women in the arts. Along with other groups involved in the Women's Movement, women artists, critics, and museum personnel have taken matters into their own hands, insisting on equality of access to exhibition space. Shows of women artists, both individual and group, historical and contemporary, have taken place throughout the country. Many of these shows have been accompanied by lectures, symposia, and discussions designed to bring out the essential issues involved in the situation of women artists before the public, and to raise the consciousness of the art-audience in a variety of ways. Women artists have joined together to form their own co-operative galleries and exhibition spaces, reinforcing the notion of the coincidence of feminine gender and high quality; critics, male and female, are gradually paying more and more attention to the work of women artists. In short, the art-world is finally beginning to realize that women can no longer merely be "tolerated" with tokenism, but that they are becoming a major force in contemporary visual media; that the art-world, in face, consists to a significant degree-of women.

Political solidarity does not, of course, imply stylistic similarity. That an artist is a woman constitutes one of the many variables that shape artistic identity. Included in the women artists year 4 shows for 1974-75 are figural painters and abstract ones, makers of constructions and photographs, older, more established artists and younger, less experienced ones.

Sylvia Sleigh, a figurative artist, has been engaged in creating an erotic and invitingly contemporary imagery of the male nude, substituting portrait intimacy for the more usual distanced generalization of the nude model. May Stevens, working also in a representational mode, has defined her territory as what might best be designated as political metaphor, inventing, in her "Big Daddy" series, a highly personal, nightmarishly stereotyped iconography of American oppression.

Grace Graupe-Pillard created large-scale pastel-paintings of interwoven bands of luminous color. Reminiscent in their decorative, all-over patterning of Eastern carpets or New Mexican folk art. The impact of folk-art inspiration is evident also in Halina Rusak's brilliantly colored, biomorphic flower-scapes, although in this case, the folk-tradition is that of the artist's native Eastern Europe. In both cases, the original sources of inspiration have been completely transformed by the artists in question and simply linger on as a kind of evocative visual memory trace in the new pictorial structure.

Nancy Sirkis divides her attention among drawing, painting, and photography. The painting and drawings, while suggestive of, and based on, natural forms-fruit or vegetable-are ultimately abstract in their expressive impact; the photographs, on the contrary, are deeply concerned with the particularities of human appearance in highly specified social settings. Ronnie Reder's complex, witty constructions juxtapose loose, playful forms with strict, geometrical

ones; actual existence in space with illusory spatial existence; areas of ephemeral mirrored reflection with permanent shapes of brilliant color. In the work of Miriam Schapiro, the geometrically ordered and the spontaneously exuberant interact in a very different way. This artist, in her most recent works, has been reinventing the possibilities of collage, using scraps of fabric. Chintz, patchwork, and old lace merge with or contradict the limitations of painted boundaries in a language that is both formally daring and deeply evocative.

The final show in the series, appropriately enough, will be a group exhibition of New Jersey women artists. It will serve as a fitting climax to the general strategy of discovery, innovation, and openness inspiring the Douglass Library's Women Artists Series this year and in the past. For it is through exhibitions like these that women artists do indeed find each other and that the public discovers the strength, validity, and richness of women's art.

Linda Nochlin  
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