

Lighter and Wider

Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists? Linda Nochlin wrote in 1971. First published in "ARTnews", Nochlin's essay is considered to be one of the first major works of feminist art history and created a paradigm shift within the discipline of art history itself. Fifty years later, much has changed; it could be argued that women have more control over their own bodies than ever before. At the same time, women are still objectified and sexualized in visual culture and particular elements of the female body are still clouded in shame or hidden away. This exhibition, opening on International Women's Day, explores what it means to be a woman in the 21st century by looking at fourteen female artists.

Su Richardson is at the centre of the exhibition. A pioneer of the Feminist movement in Britain in the 1970s, Richardson works in crocheting and embroidery, skills traditionally seen as feminine and domestic. Yet as Roszika Parker wrote in her influential book *The Subversive Stitch* in 1984, women have always found ways to embed their art with controversy and meaning. Using crocheting and embroidery to render the female body, often with humourous undertones, Richardson has taken the 'subversive stitch' to new heights. A crocheted pillow in the form of a pregnant body, draped over a chair, cleverly merges sculptural elements with craft materials; a 'menopause mat' in the shape of a heart has ribbons attached on which are written the multitude of symptoms that accompany the menopause, another important transition in a women's lives. Fitting her practice around the different stages of the female body – menstruation, pregnancy, motherhood, menopause – and combining this with references to mundane domestic activities, Richardson's work not only elevates the female body as the prime focus of her practice but also fosters the emergence of craft as the dynamic and expanding medium it is today.

The combination of sculpture and craft is present in the works of other artists in the exhibition. Anna Perach's sculpture *Frida* is inspired by a pattern of the female torso and hips, but in place of the head are crocheted skulls; a red, phallic shape sticks out like a tongue. The piece is influenced by thoughts about the archetype of the woman/mother, a force that is associated with giving life but also with violence. Melania Toma's *Uterus Pumpkins* series embodies that same push and pull between creation and violence, the varnished pumpkins like a womb from which palm leaves spike out like threatening spheres. Małgorzata Markiewicz's series *Cobwebs* – a work in between object, performance and photography – documents a woman perched on the floor wearing a white, crocheted dress that drapes around her like a spider's web. It has connotations of temptation and entrapment; fear and power.

Other artists in the show use photography as a means to question the contemporary treatment of the female image. Anna Kutera's crumpled up, re-photographed images from glossy magazines expose the banality of mass media and the way that standardized templates of beauty have crept into the public consciousness. Agata Wiczorek's hyper-realistic series *Fetish of The Image* addresses 'cultural fetishes': taboos around sexuality and hidden desires that exist in our society. She shows us heterosexual men dressed up as women, their clothes and make-up a theatrical, almost grotesque expression of femininity. Güler Ates' and Anita Witek's photographs do not directly address mass media, instead taking inspiration from depictions of women in other cultures, times and media, playing with notions of absence and concealment.

Two photographic works deal with loss in a very moving way. Ellen Friedlander's layered photographs with multi-camera exposures convey the grief and anger she felt after learning of her husband's betrayal. Anna Kutera made her self-portrait after her husband of 30 years passed away. She shows us her ageing body, fragmented and in pieces, but ultimately coming together in a colourful, embryonic shape in the centre, a rebirth.

There are three films in the exhibition. Anna Baumgart's *Ecstatics, Hysterics and Other Saintly Ladies* includes staged scenes of self-aggression that refer to real-life stories and questions the possibility of redefining the notion of 'hysteria'. Joanna Rajkowska's film *The Light of the Lodge* responds to the

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Freemasons movement in Copenhagen in the 1600s, linking it to the present day lodge of the organisation through a women's march at night. Its choreography functions as a symbolic transmission of the power of reason and control to those who are excluded from the hierarchical and male freemasons' movement.

Alicja Rogalska's film *Nova* is more hopeful. In an intimate interaction between female figures with transparent, hand-drawn masks and soft, pink props that connect and build an imagined world, Rogalska proposes a future where gender equality is erased and replaced by a more open and emphatic approach. It emphasises universal human values. "My appearance is always plural", a masked figure proclaims. "I am lighter and wider", says another.

Ultimately, this exhibition is a celebration. It shows a three-dimensional, multi-faceted view of femininity and the female body in all its ambiguity and complexity. It leaves us with invaluable insights into what it means to be a woman today, and proposes a future that is "lighter and wider".

Sabine Casparie

Sabine Casparie is an art historian who teaches and writes about contemporary art. She regularly leads gallery tours in London and teaches classes on Zoom for adults and children. Sabine has a passion for art and health and is on the Development Committee of the charity Hospital Rooms.