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Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Six Pioneering Feminist Artists Conquer New York

by Maura Reilly on April 30, 2015

With recent statistics showing that only 31% of the solo exhibitions at NYC galleries are devoted to women, it comes as a pleasant surprise that over a two-month period this spring there are several exhibitions simultaneously showcasing the work of second-generation feminist artists — namely Joyce Kozloff, Martha Wilson, Joan Semmel, Judith Bernstein, Joan Snyder, and Ida Applebroog. These six women have been continuously producing stellar work since the 1960s, and it's not only fabulous that they're receiving the attention they so deserve, but each exhibit is a tremendous visual treat as well.

Kozloff's two exhibitions, which closed this past weekend, were superb. *Maps + Patterns* at DC Moore Gallery featured a selection of mixed-media works, which demonstrated a continued adherence to the concerns of Pattern and Decoration, so integral to Kozloff's work since the movement's founding in the early 1970s. In this series the artist combined her love of decoration — in this instance, Islamic ornament — with her longstanding passion for cartography, so that interspersed throughout the works are maps of the Gaza strip, the Pale of Settlement (the territory within Imperial Russia restricted for Jews from 1835-1917, to which Kozloff traces her ancestry), as well as text references to the Tasman Sea, among other word fragments. The collaged element in all of the pieces is a recycling of Kozloff's own past art, "40 years of trial proofs and other works on paper," she told Hyperallergic. "My flat files are nearly empty. It was a kind of self-cannibalization."

Of particular note in the show was "If I Were a Botanist: The Journey" (2014), a mural-sized work based on one of Kozloff's artist's books from 1977, which she enlarged and then worked over with collage and paint. As she explains in the catalogue, "It's an attempt to come full circle and bring everything I've done together, a combination of mapping and patterning." It was a marvel to behold: vibrantly colored, kaleidoscopic star patterns stretching across a 30-foot wall. As Patrick Neal noted in Hyperallergic about Kozloff's new work, "What looks like stained glass cathedral windows morph into spirographs and dreamcatchers then into Moroccan and Islamic tiles and finally into crocheted quilts and doilies."

The show-stopper, however, was "The Tempest" (2014). The 10-by-10 foot painting is based on an 18th-century Chinese world map, onto which Kozloff adhered actual objects — tiny tchotchke globes, ashtrays, piggy banks, salt and pepper shakers, colored swatches, stickers, and cut-out images of cartographers (lifted from historical paintings and prints), soldiers, ships at sea, animals, as well as references to Captain Planet, Bart Simpson, Joan of Arc, Napoleon, and Mao. As the sum of its parts, "The Tempest" is a veiled yet humorous political commentary on, as Kozloff explains in the catalogue, "the way men (the cartographers and generals) explain the world to us, a world that is so much more vast, disparate, wacky, and unknowable than their pontifications."



Kozloff's exhibition at French Institute Alliance Française (FI AF), titled *Social Studies*, was equally outstanding. Comprised of 17 collaged prints dating to 2012–13, the series is based on a collection of vintage maps used in French schools during the 1950s, which she purchased at a flea market in Paris in 2011. After living with the images for a year, Kozloff began digitally layering new images, colors, and text onto scans of the maps. She later developed the physical surfaces and added more individualized content to the prints with paint and collage. Colorful, commanding, and detailed, the resulting maps tell histories not taught in classrooms, offering information about elections, history, native populations, natural resources, and war. For instance, "L'Afrique" has an insert map of the Scramble for Africa, which delineates the territories in Africa colonized by the French and British between 1880 and 1914, plus another outlining the "trends and levels of stunting" throughout the continent. In "Palestine," Kozloff divided the composition into a series of maps showing the loss of Palestinian land to the Israelis since the 1947 UN Partition Plan, the Israel War of Independence, and the movements of Palestinian Refugees, among others. Via her carefully chosen yet condemning content, Kozloff deflates the apolitical national mythologies portrayed in the original maps.

Martha Wilson's exhibition, *Downtown*, at New York University's Fales Library, is a mini survey of the artist's five-decade career. As a performer and photographer, Wilson is best known for her role-playing self-portraits — as Jayne Wark explains in the *Martha Wilson Sourcebook* accompanying the exhibition, "Wilson's inquiry into identity formations aligns her early work with the broad impetus of 1970s feminist art to shake loose what were perceived as the imposed roles and restrictions upon women in patriarchy." Indeed, the exhibition features several of Wilson's photo-text series — including "Posturing" (1972), "Composure" (1972), and "A Portfolio of Models" (1974) — in which the artist masquerades as figures as diverse as a housewife, working girl, earth-mother, lesbian, and a man impersonating a woman. In one of the more profound works, a video titled "Deformation" (1974), viewers witness Wilson as she deforms her "make-upped" self by rubbing black-and-white grease pencil all over her face and through her hair.

In addition to numerous display cases showcasing Wilson's diaries and notebooks, there is a large photo-text piece titled "Tipper Gore's Advice for the 90s" (1994), in which the artist, in the guise of Mrs. Gore, advises viewers to let her judge their works of art according to "family values." The outcome? The risky stuff would sell like hotcakes, and Jesse Helms would be silenced forever. In another work, a video titled "Separated at Birth" (2003), Wilson-as-Barbara Bush discusses how George W. Bush and Saddam Hussein are fraternal twins. While the selections on view are superb, it leaves the viewer wanting more. Wilson's output since the 1960s is immense, rich, and layered. A few of her gender-based parodies, which prefigure Cindy Sherman's, are present, but it reminds one that this is an artist deserving of a major museum retrospective.

Joan Semmel's show at Alexander Gray Associates is also a mini survey spanning five decades of work, from 1964 to 2014. It features a dozen paintings, from early abstract works produced while the artist was living in Spain (1963-70) to the post-1970 figurative pieces for which she's most renowned. The former works, like "Perfil Infinito" (1966) and "Red Ground" (1967) are a divine revelation. Grand, luscious, colorful brushstrokes are arranged in puzzle-like compositions, revealing the artist's early interest in the tenets of Abstract Expressionism.

There are also examples from her *Sex Paintings* and *Erotic* series on view, including an untitled work (1971) depicting a woman receiving oral sex from a man — but from *her* perspective, which unseats the all-too-common male gaze. Semmel's preoccupation with the gaze itself as a mechanism of power is also evident in "Erotic Yellow" (1973), which portrays a reclining, embracing couple, the woman holding the man's testicles. The sharp color contrasts — a brown male body, a pink female body, both set against a bright yellow background — and the skewed perspective produce a stunning image of hetero-eroticism, and one in which the female is not solely the object of male desire but rather an equal participant. This work, like many others from the 1970s, is an autobiographical self-image testifying to a liberated female sexuality.



Since the late '80s, Semmel has shifted focus to meditate on the aging female body in a series of portraits that double, fragment, and dissolve her own naked self. "Transparent Mask" (2014), which presents an elderly female nude body (Semmel's) as both subject and object simultaneously, is a case in point. More spectacular, however, is "Centered," from the *With Camera* series (2002), which depicts the nude artist with camera poised, shooting a photograph in a mirror, which doubles as the painting's surface; Semmel is in fact photographing us (the viewers), thereby owning the (ostensibly male) gaze for herself.



Judith Bernstein, "Voyeur" (2015), oil on Canvas, 84 x 84 in (© Judith Bernstein, courtesy the artist and Mary Boone Gallery)

Judith Bernstein's exhibition *Voyeur*, curated by Piper Marshall, will open on May 7 at Mary Boone Gallery. It will include 11 new works (paintings and drawings), all with erotically charged content, as one would expect from Bernstein, whose now infamous "HORIZONTAL" (1973) — a charcoal drawing that depicts a large screw transforming into a penis — was long ago censored (1974) and more recently celebrated. (Bernstein's career has really taken off lately, with major museum surveys and gallery shows galore.)



Judith Bernstein, "Cuntfaces" (2015), oil on canvas, 84 x 84 in (© Judith Bernstein, courtesy the artist and Mary Boone Gallery)

The new paintings do not disappoint. "The Voyeur" (2015), a massive, seven-by-seven foot painting, shows an abstractly drawn, central cunt image, surrounded by caricatured penises, sperm, and testicles. In "Crying Cuntface" (2014), a cunt-faced figure with penis-head eyes cries; in "Cuntfaces" (2015), three bloody vagina dentatas are arranged side by side above a semen-spewing penis, and below three boxing speed bags.

"Now, I'm putting the cunt at the center with Big Bang-style explosive stokes of fluorescent and oil paint," Bernstein explained of this newest work. "It's a metaphor for women in power, today's ever-changing gender roles, and the related complexities. Memorable visual impact is my main priority." She certainly succeeds in this regard. Bernstein's work is unique in its explicitness, and radical in the truest sense of the word. While other feminist artists feature vaginas and penises (e.g. Hannah Wilke, Judy Chicago, Joan Semmel, Sylvia Sleigh, and others), Bernstein's is an in-your-face representation that not only inverts a male language but seizes ownership of it.

On May 9, Joan Snyder will open an exhibition titled *Sub Rosa* at Franklin Parrasch Gallery, which will feature all new work, including “Symphony VII” (2014), a glorious abstract landscape (with four large roses) demonstrating the artist’s signature bravura brushstrokes in pinks, purples, yellows, and reds, combined with paper mache, silk, berries, and dried sunflowers. Two other pieces, “Requiem” and “Lay of the Land” (both 2014), are equally stunning. In the former, Snyder has built up her oil and acrylic on canvas with paper mache, fabric, pastel, graphite, glitter, dirt, and straw, resulting in a three-dimensional impastoed surface that begs to be touched, and that features the word “requiem” (twice) in red paint and glitter; the latter features an all-over composition with lusciously applied pastel-colored paint in big, sweeping gestures, combined with repetitive circular and floral forms.

A week later, a large group of Snyder’s paintings and works on paper from the 1970s will be featured in the *Spotlight* series at Frieze New York, curated by Adriano Pedrosa. (Feminist artists Howardena Pindell, Carolee Schneeman, and Lynn Hershman Leeson will be featured in this series as well.) Snyder’s booth will include over a dozen works, including the important “Peace Poster” (1971), which deals with the 1968 My Lai massacre in Vietnam, when US Army soldiers were responsible for the killing of almost 500 unarmed civilians. It is a stain on American history, and the painting reveals, via text, the artist’s feelings about it: “I kept staring at the photographs of the My Lai Massacre ... I knew from the extreme anger inside of me that I could never make a peace poster.” Also on view will be a series of abstract landscape works showing Snyder’s early robust, short brushstroke technique.

Around the same time (May 14), Ida Applebroog’s exhibition *The Ethics of Desire* will open at Hauser and Wirth. On view will be a video from 1978, dozens of painted chairs, and a large series of recent works on mylar, including a 10-foot tall image of a man proudly sporting an enormous penis and a triptych depicting three crouching, nude, spread-legged women, all painted in Applebroog’s signature style of simplified human forms with bold outlines. For over five decades, Applebroog has been producing work that deals with the subtexts of gender politics, communication breakdowns, and socio-sexual dysfunction. Her multimedia works often make pointed social commentary in the form of beguiling, comic-like images, and this exhibition will most certainly not disappoint.

So, what can we make of the coincidence that there are several exhibitions right now featuring the work of second-generation feminist artists? This isn’t, of course, to say these women haven’t been showing all along — they have, just not at the same time. Are we experiencing a revival of interest in feminist art — or are galleries getting pressured to show more women? Is the art world just now catching on that these women are here and still producing stellar, and more importantly *prescient*, work — the golden age of the “overlooked female artist” — or is this a bad sign, given that the fall is reserved for the so-called heavy-hitting artists? I’m left to wonder why all these women are being squeezed into the end of spring and early summer, alongside group shows, when there is the least gallery traffic and very few sales. But maybe a coincidence is just a coincidence. Regardless, it’s bound to be revelatory for New York art audiences who haven’t had firsthand access to this work before. Let’s hope this is the first of many such coincidences — and that next time, it happens in the fall.

