

ARTFORUM

“Let Power Take a Female Form”

THE BOX



View of “Let Power Take a Female Form,” 2015.

Among the underrecognized histories to emerge from the sweeping 2011–12 Getty exhibition series “Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945–1980” (PST) was that of the groundbreaking work done by a handful of women gallery owners in Los Angeles in the 1960s and ’70s to support Conceptual, performance, or otherwise nonconventional artistic practices. Contributing to this narrative was the 2012 “PST”-affiliated exhibition “Perpetual Conceptual: Echoes of Eugenia Butler.” An LA-based art dealer, Butler was notorious for the avant-garde artworks she exhibited at her eponymous gallery, as well as for the lively parties she and her husband hosted at their home. Curated by Butler’s granddaughter, artist Corazon del Sol, together with Los Angeles Nomadic Division director Shamim Momin, “Perpetual Conceptual” presented the gallery’s short-lived yet dynamic history from 1968 to 1971 through a presentation of artworks and ephemera related to shows Butler organized.



Del Sol's recent exhibition "Let Power Take a Female Form," cocurated with Box founder Mara McCarthy, extended and refracted Butler's legacy through a personal lens. An abridged selection of works exhibited in "Perpetual Conceptual" appeared alongside artworks by Eugenia P. Butler (Butler's daughter and del Sol's mother) and del Sol. Relics from the Eugenia Butler Gallery's storied past included a work from Ed Kienholz's 1969 "Watercolors" exhibition—also known as "The Barter Show"—in which specific prices and names of objects painted in watercolor were to be exchanged for the sums and items spelled out. Documentation of Dieter Roth's 1970 *Staple Cheese (A Race)*—for which thirty-seven cheese-filled suitcases were opened and left to rot in Butler's gallery—was here accompanied by a violation notice from the city's health department (which the gallerist's lawyer husband successfully contested in court). Works by James Lee Byars, a close friend of the Butlers, included a postcard series, a pair of oversize pink silk drawers (meant to be "worn" by two people at once), and a gold scroll and pentagonal announcement card for the 1969 exhibition "This Is the Ghost of James Lee Byars Calling."

Affinities appeared between these historical artworks and those by Eugenia P. Butler—which ranged from her Conceptual projects of the late '60s to her drawings and sculptures of the '80s and '90s—and by del Sol. The honey-covered linen sheet spotted with flies in *My Last Museum Piece, Again (Flies to Honey)*, 2015 (a re-creation of Eugenia P. Butler's 1969 *My Last Museum Piece*, originally produced for the exhibition "Prospect 69"), humorously recalled the health-department notice regarding Roth's rotting *Staple Cheese*, which directs the elder Butler to "maintain premises in such a manner so as not to permit the breeding or harboring therein or thereon of flies." The clouds of pale coral silk and geometric gold sculptures that appear in del Sol's installations and in her video-documented work—such as a performance in which the artist and a male companion, both naked, awkwardly squeeze in and out of a shared silk tube—brought to mind the pink and gold materials in Byars's ephemeral works as well as his "communal garments" series.

Resemblances exist between artworks by mother and daughter as well. In a gesture that evoked the series of conversations over dinner that constitute the younger Butler's 1993 *The Kitchen Table* (a "dialogic sculpture"), del Sol was on-site every Thursday evening, starting a few weeks after the opening, to give casual walk-throughs of the exhibition; a table spread with snacks and drinks was provided for visitors to enjoy. When asked about her family's history, del Sol spoke about the deeply ambivalent, at times hostile relationship between her mother and her grandmother. One especially striking anecdote: In 1972, Butler Sr., naked and riding a white horse, showed up in Kassel, where she impersonated Butler Jr., who was included in that year's Documenta, and tried to claim her daughter's work as her own. Del Sol also shared stories passed down to her about the artworks in the show and the artists who made them. Such tales—fragments of family memoir interwoven with historical documentary—lent the exhibition a confessional dimension. The show's title (taken from a 1990 drawing by the younger Butler) prompts the question: *What would* power look like if it took female form? The histories of the Butler women seem to offer an answer.

—*Kavior Moon*

