



# Art in America

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## FEMINIST ART

PLUS

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## Girls, Girls, Girls

*Feminist art's phases and philosophies? Let me count the ways . . .*

BY CAREY LOVELACE

The wave of solo exhibitions, group shows, surveys and museum projects of gynocentric art that has surged across the country in recent months is not a unified tide. These events are characterized by different levels of scholarship, ambition, scale and resources, not to mention quality. A good number are grounded in a 1970s agenda that simply sought to give exposure, thus in a way to empower those included, rather than to engage in any more sophisticated critique.

Feminist art, alas, continues to make many people uneasy, particularly those in the gallery world's upper echelons—not unlike the woman-oriented political movement with which it is associated. Several years ago, such cutting-edge figures as Judy Chicago, Arlene Raven and Maura Reilly (now curator of the Brooklyn Museum's Elizabeth A. Sackler Center), anticipating upcoming events like L.A. MOCA's long-awaited exhibition "WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution" and "Global Feminisms" at the Brooklyn Museum, mounted in conjunction with the permanent installation of Chicago's own *The Dinner Party* there, began forging a strategy under the aegis of the Feminist Art Project (<http://feministartproject.rutgers.edu/>). Aware that women's art events are often met with a wall of neglect built on a foundation of hostility, they decided to help create a host of activities that would generate excitement and discussion.

This critical mass has been achieved, although the discussion is not all positive. Many other venues staged their own satellite shows independent of the

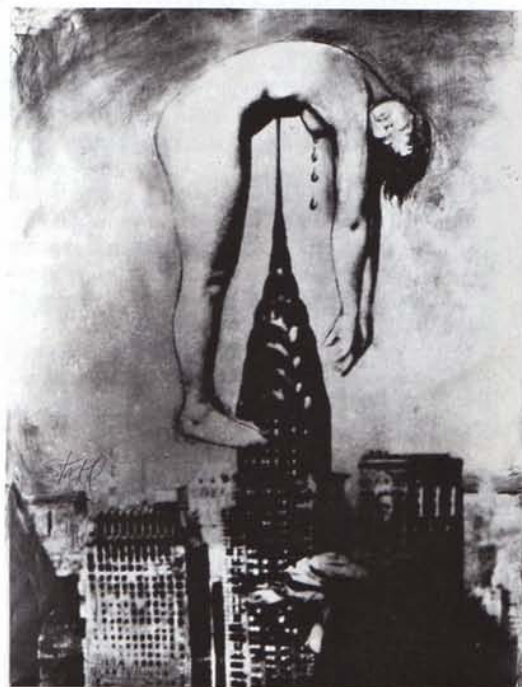
Feminist Art Project. A sampling follows. [Also see Review of Exhibitions, this issue.]

### Los Angeles Up Close and Personal

For decades, L.A. has had a vigorous art scene involving women. In part, it stems from the activist Woman's Building, which from 1973 to '91 pioneered socially minded installation and performance along with workshops and projects indescribably various. Even more, it grows out of a distinct Southern California esthetic, taking the strategies of modernism and conceptualism in a more decorative direction, losing, some argue, edginess or rigor while gaining playfulness and sensuality.

"Multiple Vantage Points: Southern California Women Artists, 1980-2006," conceived as a companion exhibition to "WACK!," was a friendly sprawl of a show, filling the spacious rooms of Barnsdall Park's Municipal Art Gallery on a Hollywood hilltop near Silver Lake. It paid tribute to the area's activist pioneers with, for example, video installations of historic performances by Barbara T. Smith and ecofeminist Rachel Rosenthal. Judith Baca, who initiated the famed *Great Wall of Los Angeles* mural project, a collaboration with Latino youngsters, was represented by her campy 1976 photo grid, *Judy as Pachuca*, in which she vamps as a cigarette-smoking floozy. One room charted connections between another figure who is especially important regionally, Betye Saar, and her art-making daughters Lezley and Alison. The elder Saar's hallmark social commentary is channeled through found-object assemblages such as

*Sunnyland (The Dark Side)*, 1998, an old-fashioned washboard crowned by a cutout of a mammy doing laundry; below, on the corrugated grate, is a stenciled image of a lynched African-American man. Lezley Saar embraced the use of vintage materials with an autobiographic twist in her folk-art-style paintings on books and textiles. In the weathered-looking *My Nature* (1994), a supine female, a tree growing out of her chest, is depicted on a floral-patterned ground. One of Alison Saar's noted rough-hewn wooden carvings occupied the room's center: in *Coup* (2006), a nearly life-size female figure is seated, her hair braid stretching backward, blending with a cargo rope that winds around a pile of old suitcases and trunks. She holds a large scissors.



Anita Steckel: *Pierced*, early 1970s, photomontage, 48 by 36 inches; at *Tabla Rasa*.

Among the younger artists was Carlee Fernandez, who creates strange, vivid "still life" sculptures using taxidermically altered animals—for example, a very white, very real-looking bunny merged with tangerine-tree branches. The occasions of wit were particularly welcome. Longtime social satirist Erika Rothenberg's tongue-in-cheek church message board listed meetings for abused spouses, AA and "parenting your clone" groups. Underneath was the 9 A.M. Sunday sermon: "Another Century of Progress."

Curator Dextra Frankel herself helped define the West Coast women's esthetic, starting with her 1972 show "21 Artists Visible/Invisible" at the Long Beach Museum. Many things in "Multiple Vantage Points" tended to stay skin-deep, however. Lita Albuquerque's installation of natural materials in a high-design setting consisted of a sleek transparent table surface on which honeycomb was shaped into continents; glass balls half-filled with amber liquid were placed on shelves against a dark wall and theatrically lit, giving them an iconic glow. Like much of the California art scene, it was good-looking and luscious—but a little sweet.

### A.I.R. Forceful

Since 1972, the trailblazing A.I.R. gallery in New York, the world's first women's art co-op, has provided quiet support for those operating outside the art world's market-obsessed precincts. For its 7th Biennial—the survey was initiated in 1994—Cornelia Butler, orga-

Carolee Schneemann: *Portrait Partials*, 1970/2004, giclée print, 44 inches square; not in show—a similar work was at *Galerie Lelong*. Courtesy P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York.



**In A.I.R.'s 7th Biennial (culled from 9,000 works submitted in an open call) there was a refreshing absence of body art, theory, goddesses and other well-worn feminist-art themes.**

nizer of "WACK!", did the jurying honors. (How did she find the time?) There was a distinctively cool temperature to this 59-artist selection culled from an open call attracting some 9,000 works—and a refreshing absence of body art, theory, goddesses and other well-worn feminist-art themes. (Perhaps Butler, recently appointed drawings curator at the Museum of Modern Art, where she also co-organized a "Feminist Future" conference in January [see "Front Page," Mar. '07], has wearied of the whole topic.)

Most selections were works on paper, with a focus on inventive use of materials. Françoise Duresse showed small-scale, strangely compelling renderings



Naomi Harris: *White Party Couple*, 2005, C-print, 25 by 20 inches; at A.I.R.

of female heads topped by a kind of headdress or sculpted hair flaring upward, composed of minuscule ink loops (2006). The complex, colored, waxy-textured surface seems to be a coalescence of small repeated images. There is a tension between obsessiveness and elegance. Jelena Berenc's *Limited View of a Self-Portrait* (2004) consisted of a kilometer-long, 2½-inch-wide piece extracted from a loosely rendered ink and pastel drawing. It was presented on film reels you could scroll through to find recognizable portions such as eyes or forehead and nose.

Large-format photos were a considerable propor-



Dianne Bowen: *Finnigan Begin Again*, 2006, oil, charcoal, marker on paper with guitar strings and eggshells, 24 by 50½ inches; at A.I.R. Gallery, New York.

tion of the selection, often featuring figures in awkward frontal poses. In Naomi Harris's C-print *White Party Couple* (2005), a middle-aged pair proudly strut their stuff, voluptuously bursting out of their gleaming white polyester Vegas-style duds. Deadpan wit was offered through structure in Christine Gideon's *Gorky and His Mother* (2005), a blueprint drawing of the peasant woman and child rendered schematically from above. Gideon shows how easy it is to get a different overview of a classic work. Throughout the show, gender references, where they occurred, were oblique—innovative engagement with the female figure was gained through composition or materials rather than political or social critique. Dianne Bowen's horizontal wall piece *Finnigan Begin Again* (2006), one of the show's most effective works, featured brownish concentric swirls that brought to mind the rings of a tree or breasts or folding skin. Bits of guitar wire and seeds were applied to the surface and, in a reference to life cycles and reproduction, small brown birds' eggs were attached so that they seemed to float above the surface.

### My Body, My Art Object

New York's Galerie Lelong has regularly supported women's art, one of the few high-profile galleries to do so. The title of its nuanced, connoisseurial "Role Play: Feminist Art Revisited 1960-1980" makes reference to a 1970s trend in which women explored a range of identities—precursors to what critical theory would later dub the "performance of gender identity." (This exhibition occurred independently of the Feminist Art Project.) For example, Adrian Piper dressed up like a black man and wandered the streets, a performance referred to here in a 1975 photograph of the artist with mustache and beard, bearing the legend "I Am Everything You Most Fear," scribbled with oil crayon.

Otherwise, this show, consisting primarily of black-and-white, small-format photographs, was not quite what the title indicated. The exhibition addressed another

trend: works in which women use their own bodies sculpturally, operating as both creator and object. In Ana Mendieta's 1972 *Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints—Face)*, the artist distorts her face by pressing it against a sheet of glass. Throughout the show, there is a nod to French theory about "writing" the body, as in a photo of Shigeko Kubota's 1965 *Vagina Painting*, in which the artist, observed by a Fluxus festival audience, squats over an expanse of paper on a spacious floor and leaves a trail of gestural marks via a paintbrush attached to her underwear. There were the usual body-art suspects (e.g., Valie Export in her famous 1969 *Action Pants/Genital Panic* photo, posing with a machine gun, a triangle cut out of the pubic region of her leather pants). Happily, there were also some "finds" that recent scholarship has unearthed. The Austrian

Christine Gideon: *Gorky and His Mother*, 2005, blueprint drawing, 24 by 22 inches; at A.I.R.

