

Jersey Women Artists Now:
**Contemporary
Visions**

Exhibition Dates:

March 6 - April 19, 2014

Allison Leigh, Curator

K.S.
Ernst

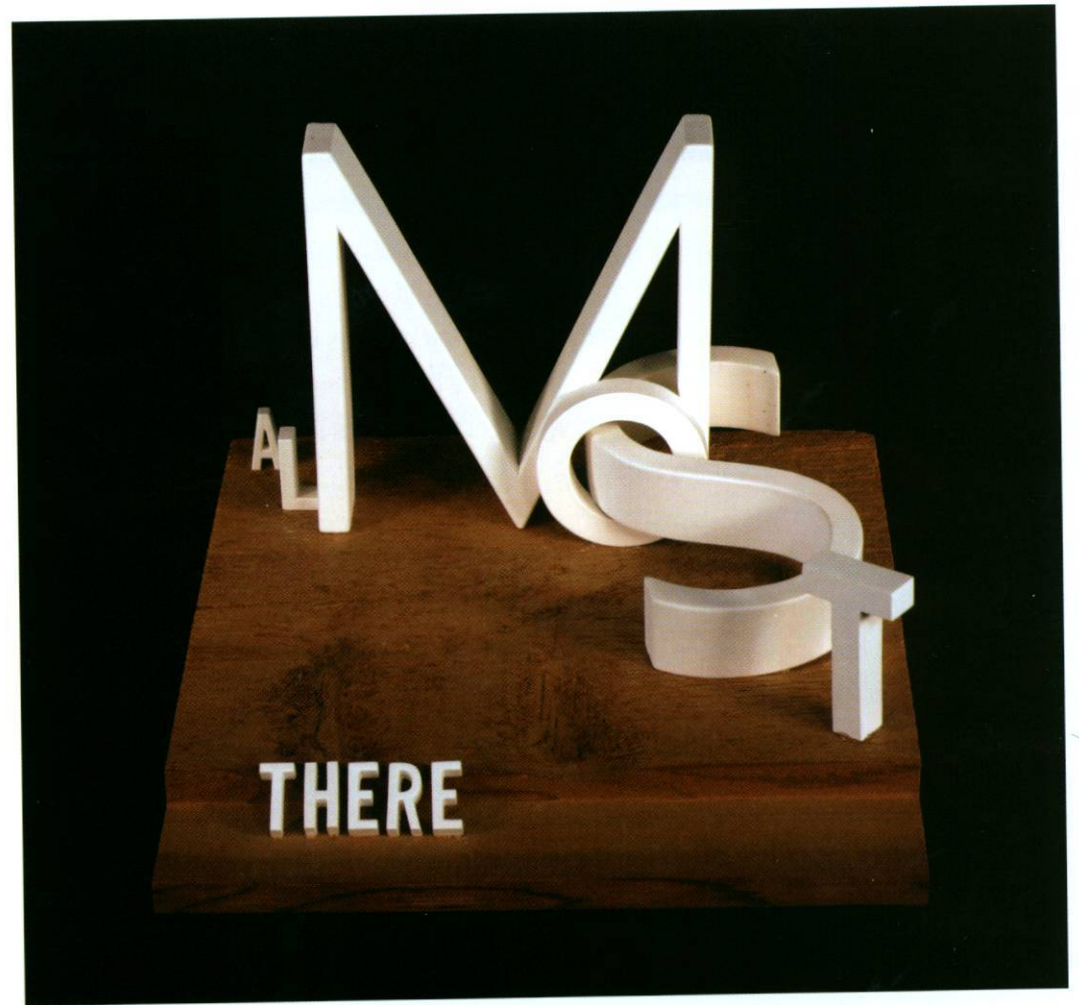
Almost there

1986

wood and ceramic letters

8" w x 6" h x 9" d

courtesy of K.S. Ernst



Almost
There

Jersey Women Artists Now

Allison Leigh, Guest Curator

"We are talking about a society in which there will be no roles other than those chosen or those earned.

We are really talking about humanism."

—Gloria Steinem¹

"Let us hope for the best and it may come, is my motto."

—Lilly Martin Spencer²

Questioning

How far have we come in the art world over the last 30 years? Did the developments brought about by feminism fundamentally change the situation for women artists in America? Or is there still work to be done in bringing about equality in the arts? In 1971 Linda Nochlin posited an incendiary question as the title to a now famous essay—"Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?"—and in so doing, she ushered in a new era in art history.³ Questions like these can be found in many of the leading catalogs, anthologies, and essays on art from the past several decades. The discipline of art history is now characterized by lines of feminist and gender-based inquiry and has undergone a wholesale shift in terms of methodological approaches to the examination of art works past and present. In many ways the feminist art revolution has been a process characterized by the continual asking of difficult questions and the opening of new areas of discourse and dialogue. Twentieth-century feminism acted as the great harbinger of query into the darkest recesses of society's unconscious tendencies; it forced stereotypes, injustices, and entrenched ideological boundaries and binaries out for examination and often destruction.

I open this essay with a series of questions in order to continue this lineage of feminist inquiry, because trying to answer these is vital to understanding the difficulties that face artists, academics, curators, dealers, and critics in the new millennium. In the wake of the previous century's feminist revolution, we have been left with both a series of fresh responsibilities and unprecedented opportunities. The art world currently stands at a moral and intellectual precipice. The question now facing our generation is—where do we go from here? A spate of news articles emerged in the first days of 2014 seeking to address the hinge position at which art now stands.⁴ Critics and market analysts alike turned introspective as they pondered the illicit tendencies coming to rule the art world and its champions. All this serves as recognition that we stand at an important nexus at this moment. This essay and the exhibition of women artists it accompanies serve to highlight the questions facing art today and ensure that the ideological shifts fought for by women in the generations that preceded ours are not taken for granted. We have come a long way, but our success is by no means guaranteed or stable.

I would be remiss, however, if I did not in this introductory section also clearly articulate that the questions I ask, and on a larger level this essay as a whole and the show it accompanies, bear the many signs of my own personal concerns both in terms of art and feminism. I make no claims to objectivity, but instead hope that viewers and readers will broadly search for my social and political agenda in the works I've chosen and the way I write about them—and use this as a springboard for examination of their own critical perspectives. I believe that my background and experiences as a woman, and in particular as a young woman in both academia and the art world, give me a dually privileged and problematic viewpoint for the issues this show examines. I have long espoused self-conscious moral rigor as a method of conducting art historical analysis—one that both engages with the poststructuralist trend within the humanities from the last 50 years to examine the underlying assumptions and power mechanisms within all levels of social discourse and that parallels feminism's own goal of uncovering hierarchies, stereotypes, and