



America's News

A woman's touch Exhibit at Montclair gallery spotlights work of female artists

Star-Ledger, The (Newark, NJ) - Thursday, April 17, 2014

Readability: 11-12 grade level (Lexile: 1270L)

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Guest curator Allison Leigh started her look at "Jersey Women Artists Now: Contemporary Visions," an exhibition of 19 female artists at the George Segal Gallery at Montclair State University, with Linda Nochlin's 1971 essay, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?"

And that is certainly the beginning.

The '70s are when feminism gained momentum, and Nochlin's essay launched a hunt through history for counter-examples, from Artemisia Gentileschi to Paula Modersohn-Becker. But let's face it, Nochlin's essay was as much an accusation as it was a question.

We are supposed to assume the answer, and to recognize that the problem persists, for all the progress of the past half century. Leah K. Tomaino paints trees, for example, and one of the pieces she shows here is a tree painted on top of a canvas papered over with rejection letters from art galleries (one of them signed off with a ballpoint pen reading "NO TREES"). It's titled "Dear Artist" (2007).

New Jersey does have a strong claim to being an incubator of feminist art. The Mary H. Dana Women Artists Series at Douglass College on the New Brunswick campus of Rutgers University, for example, was founded by expressionist painter Joan Snyder in 1971 as one of the first exclusively female exhibition opportunities in the country, and it's still an annual feature. And Snyder is still a leading feminist painter and printmaker, represented here by a distinctive portrait of a flower-like womb labeled as if it were a diagram and inscribed with the words "My Work Has Been Absolutely Faithful To Me."

The collective consciousness feminism introduced helped dethrone a sense of creative individuality that was peculiarly male and increasingly out of date. Its place was taken by art that spoke to shared values, not personal conviction, extending to a new appreciation for arts that once were dismissed as "decorative," like quilting and pattern-making.

And yet, as the movement matured, strong personalities emerged, almost inevitably. Of the artists included in "Jersey Women Artists Now," perhaps Grace Graupe-Pillard is the most familiar on the exhibition circuit, largely for her computer-enhanced oils like "Darfur/Sudan." Lately she's been doing nude self-portraits, such as "Self Portrait as a Blonde" (2013), standing in profile and naked except for her sunglasses. Graupe-Pillard could give male artists lessons in forcefulness.

Leigh chose "Jersey Women Artists Now" with an eye toward this growing diversity of individual talents. Photography (such as Roslyn Rose's "Closed," a digital montage that looks like a store window filled with severed dolls' heads), assemblage sculpture (like Nancy Cohen's creepy agglomerations of melted glass pipettes and wire), even romantic realism (Lauren Ennist's oil portraits

of young women) all make an appearance. It's almost as if female artists have been freed to be themselves after all.

So the question seems to flip around in your mind like a fish: Besides the very real disparities in income and professional advancement that still linger around gender issues, what is it about the work we see here and in other shows devoted to women that is distinctively female?

Men can paint meticulous photorealist oils, such as Gina Minichino's "Wonder Bread," a picture of a loaf on a shelf, or abstract gestures such as Lizz Andronaco's "Venus." Some men have been known to be as witty as word sculptor K.S. Ernst's "Almost There," which spells itself out with wooden and ceramic letters of varying sizes.

"Feminism isn't reduced to just the fact that we make what, 70 cents to the dollar of what men make," Leigh says. "There are still body issues, beauty issues, that still linger, too. And there are intra-feminine issues"--like Princeton marriage mom advice from Susan Patton, or child care advice from "Tiger Mom" Amy Chua--"that are very relevant.

"The distinction between political feminism and women artists is real," Leigh says. "I think women of my generation don't necessarily think of themselves as feminists. They do think of themselves as artists. That's why it's called 'Jersey Women Artists '-- I think some women might not have participated if it were called 'Feminist Art.' I'm not even sure if it moves from a collective vision to an individual one. The exhibition was supposed to let all these women artists and their work help sort these things out for you, not give a definitive answer."

Think of Pat Feeney Murrell's wet-paper constructions of human figures, empty shapes that remind you of Pompeian body casts. They hold their shape even when the body is gone, though they're fragile as paper can be.

Dan Bischoff: dbischoff@starledger.com Jersey Women Artists Now: Contemporary Visions Where: George Segal Gallery, Montclair State University, off the fourth floor deck of the Red Hawk parking garage, 1 Normal Ave., Montclair When: Through Saturday. Open Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; and Thursdays, 12:30 to 7:30 p.m. How much: Free. Call (973) 655-3382 or visit montclair.edu/arts/galleries. "Closed" by Roslyn Rose, top, is in the "Jersey Women Artists Now" exhibit at the George Segal Gallery at Montclair State University. Above, from left, are details from "Dear Artist" by Leah K. Tomaino, "Remains" by Pat Feeney Murrell and "My Work Has Been Absolutely Faithful To Me" by Joan Snyder.

Caption: 1. this is "Remains" by Pat Feeney Murrell, part of "Jersey Women Artists Now" 2. braun 3. braun newark NJ 000-000-0000 1. this is "My Work Has Been Absolutely Faithful To Me" by Joan Snyder 2. braun 3. braun newark NJ 000-000-0000 1. this is "Closed" by Roslyn Rose, a part of "Jersey Women Artists Now." 2. braun 3. braun newark NJ 000-000-0000 OLYMPUS DIGITAL CAMERA 1. this is "dear artist" by Leah K. Tomaino, part of "Jersey Women Artists Now." 2. braun 3. braun newark NJ 000-000-0000

Edition: State/ROP

Section: Today

Page: 041

Record Number: sl2014534f7f8192

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