

'Women's Work' Exhibition at Lyndhurst Takes on Craft and Tradition Themes

May 24, 2022



Installation view. Courtesy Lyndhurst

A groundbreaking new exhibition of historic and contemporary works by women artists fills the Gothic Revival Lyndhurst Mansion and gallery in Tarrytown, New York, this summer. *Women's Work* includes more than 125 works of art in a variety of media by American women from diverse backgrounds utilizing artistic traditions that date back centuries. The exhibit, on view May 26 to Sept. 26, 2022, is installed throughout Lyndhurst's grand 19th-century interiors.

Tracking the continuing influence of the 18th and 19th century domestic handcraft tradition in the practice of contemporary women artists, the exhibition explores how this embrace of feminine domesticity as an expression of gender-specific artistic identity has prevailed as a practice for women artists from the 1970s and 1980s to the present. The exhibition was conceived by Lyndhurst director Howard Zar, and is co-curated by Nancy Carlisle, Senior Curator of Collections at Historic New England with consulting curator Rebecca R. Hart, the former Polly and Mark Addison curator of modern and contemporary art at the Denver Art Museum.



Cecilia Thaxter, Cup and Saucer, 19th century.



Cindy Sherman, Soup Tureen, 1990. Courtesy the artist.

“In *Women’s Work* we are placing artworks from different centuries in conversation side by side in the domestic setting for which the historic works were originally designed,” says Zar. “By showing influences across time, whether specific or subtle, the exhibition offers viewers an opportunity to interrogate their own attitudes about art by women and invites them to contemplate the distinctions art critics have drawn between “*craft*” and “*fine art*” based on materials, gender or practice, that have served to diminish the work of women artists.”

Women’s Work is presented jointly with Historic New England, which has provided artworks from the 18th and 19th centuries to be exhibited alongside contemporary works.

“Historic New England is delighted to be a part of this exhibition,” said Nancy Carlisle. “The juxtaposition of the historic contributions of women with contemporary women artists helps showcase the role women have had in the arts for centuries.”

A fully-illustrated catalog with essays by leading scholars and art historians, along with a symposium, on-line lectures and special guided tours accompany the exhibition.



Installation view. Courtesy Lyndhurst.

Prior to the 21st century, women were taught and expected to master a broad variety of arts, home decoration, sewing and craft, collectively known as, “women’s work,” at a time when women were not allowed to hold professions outside the home. These crafts could be practiced as both hobby and home-based money-making venture. Women passed down this handiwork tradition over generations but because this artistic tradition was practiced in the home by women, it was generally viewed as inferior to the artistic traditions of painting and sculpture practiced by men, as their career.

As women started to emerge and be recognized as contemporary artists during the 1960s and 1970s (as opposed to the generation of the 1940s and 1950s who often had to subjugate their careers to those of their artist husbands) this new generation of women artists often found themselves engaged in deep explorations of gender identity. They often rejected the formal training that they received from male artists and made the radical choice to incorporate artistic traditions and techniques known to their grandmothers. This use of so-called handcraft traditions by contemporary women artists also inadvertently led to female artists being seen by critics as inferior and less worthy of exhibition and their work less highly valued by curators and collectors.

As trailblazing artist Harmony Hammond states in her artist’s statement about the late 1960s and 1970s, “Paintings were shaped, unstretched, draped, woven, flocked, stitched, bejeweled, and grommeted. Slowly, painting was subjected to the force of gravity, taken out of the rectangle and off the wall, relaxed, collapsed, and reconfigured. Feminism brought a gendered content to this way of working.”



Strip Variation Quilt by Mozell Benson (1934 - 2012), Alabama, 1991. Courtesy American Folk Art Museum.

The influence of historic traditions on contemporary artists becomes more apparent through the design of the exhibition, which places historic precedents next to contemporary works, often through the rooms of Lyndhurst mansion for which the historic works were originally intended.

For example, a 19th century dome-covered flower display will be juxtaposed with a dome-covered glass flower display created by Kiki Smith, both placed on a center table in the Lyndhurst parlor, the type of room for which such lavish decorations were originally conceived in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Lyndhurst’s dining room has been set with examples of 19th century painted plates by Emily Cole, daughter of Hudson River painter Thomas Cole and by poet and artist Celia Thaxter displayed next to similar works by Judy Chicago and Cindy Sherman. Antique quilts are shown with quilts by Faith Ringgold, Dindga McCannon and Jane Kaufman. Vintage Lingerie embroidered with rap lyrics by Zoe Buckman and a nightgown embroidered by Maira Kalman are displayed with

similar embroidered vintage pieces that belonged to Lyndhurst’s female owners and are displayed on the Louis Vuitton “personals” trunk belonging to Anna Gould, Duchess of Talleyrand, Lyndhurst’s last owner.

The adoption of these techniques spans a surprisingly broad array. Works by Kara Walker using the medium of cut black paper silhouettes and Elaine Reichek’s use of early American samplers

are visually indistinguishable from historic precedents but with a completely different interpretive intent. Liza Lou's adoption of beadwork to create modern domestic objects and explore domesticity utilizes a medium historically practiced by both Native American and European-descended women but appear visually distinct from the historic precedents. Jenny Holzer's use of verbal platitudes as art is part of a long tradition but modernizes the medium from samplers, needlepointed pillows and watercolor fracturs to electronic LEDs.



Faith Ringgold, Feminist Series: Of My Two Handicaps #10, 1972. Courtesy the artist and Beth Rudin Dewoody Collection.

The exhibition is broadly representative, including 20th-century pioneers and artists who have become household names, mid- and late-career artists who have toiled for years with varied levels of public recognition, as well as younger artists. While the exhibition focuses almost exclusively on American artists, the participants include diverse races and religions.

The exhibition opens to the public on May 26, 2022 and continues through September 26, 2022. Lyndhurst is located along the Hudson River in Tarrytown, New York. Lyndhurst's grounds are open daily from 9:30 am to 4:30 pm. All visitors must adhere to current CDC and NY State Covid-19 guidelines in place at the time of visit. for more information and directions see www.lyndhurst.org



Catherine Opie, Self Portrait Nursing, 2019. Courtesy the artist.