

Sex and the art of radical feminism

Once blacklisted for exploring sexual imagery, these artists are making a comeback at the Frieze art fair



Betty Tompkins in her studio in New York © Yael Malka

SEPTEMBER 29, 2017 by **Julie L Belcove**

When Betty Tompkins moved to New York in 1969 after graduate school to paint, she regularly made the rounds of the galleries, then clustered within easy walking distance of each other on 57th Street and the Upper East Side. Very little of the art she saw impressed her. “Most of it, I’d walk in and walk out,” she says. “I’d say, ‘Jesus, this guy — it was always a guy — spent two years on this work, and I can’t stay two minutes.’” She harboured few illusions that her own paintings would one day find a spot on the gallery walls: dealers dismissed her summarily. “We don’t show women,” she recalls being told. “We have no market for women, and we’re not developing one.”

Nevertheless, she persisted — in the narrow space between the bed and the wall that served as her painting studio, if not at the commercial end of the art world. If she ever did get a chance to show, she decided, it would be work that was not just eye-catching but impossible to ignore. She turned to her then-husband’s illicit collection of pornography. “I thought, this has charge,” she says. “This is arresting. People want to look at this.”

Cropping the images tightly to create anatomical close-ups, so that at first glance her monumental, resolutely realist depictions of heterosexual intercourse can resemble abstractions, Tompkins made her ground-breaking “Fuck Paintings”, an exercise she found “liberating”. In 1973, some of the works were included in two group shows in New York, but then, on their way to an exhibition in Paris, the canvases were seized by French customs officials, who said they violated obscenity law. “That was the end,” Tompkins says. “No one would show them. I eventually took them off their stretchers, rolled them up and stuck them under the pool table, where they stayed for 30 years.”

Tompkins’ story mirrors those of a generation of radical feminist artists, whose defiant use of sexual imagery, both male and female, challenged gender stereotypes and the male hierarchies of the art world. Making such sexually explicit work in the 1960s and 1970s, they frequently found themselves censored — and blacklisted. If mainstream feminist artists thought they had it tough, their struggles were nothing compared to women such as Judith Bernstein, an American whose work was so transgressive that Kodak refused to reproduce her slides, or Penny Slinger, whose book of graphic tantric imagery and verse, *Mountain Ecstasy*, was seized and burned by British customs, or Natalia LL, a Polish artist whose films and photographs of women eating bananas, winkingly hinting at erotic acts, reportedly prompted the legendary New York

gallerist [Leo Castelli](#) to declare, “America is not ready for this”, which became the title of a 2012 documentary about her.

The 21st century, however, has been more embracing. A clutch of these women has been rediscovered, their careers resurrected by intrepid gallerists and curators. Collectors and institutions alike are taking a fresh look at artists who, though now in their seventies and eighties, are being viewed as if they were emerging artists decades younger.



Alison Gingeras, curator of 'Sex Work' at next month's Frieze London: 'I'm trying to write other art histories' © Yael Malka

Independent curator Alison Gingeras has assembled a special section for Frieze London, which opens in Regent's Park next week, devoted to the work of nine radical feminist artists. Cheekily titled *Sex Work: Feminist Art & Radical Politics*, the project celebrates the daring provocations of Tompkins, Bernstein, Slinger and Natalia LL, as well as Renate Bertlmann, Mary Beth Edelson, Dorothy Iannone, Birgit Jürgenssen and Marilyn Minter.

"The title is a play on words but it's very literal," says Gingeras, sipping coffee in the quiet garden of an LGBT community centre in New York's Greenwich Village, across the street from a church where she's installing an exhibit paying homage to writer and gay-liberation icon Oscar Wilde. "It's artists who make work that deals with sex. And it's sex in a broad sense, not just erotic art but also sex as a vehicle for political critique, women making work that is explicit and that challenges certain phobias within the women's movement about pornographic representation."

Gingeras, a highly regarded New York-based curator who has held posts at the Guggenheim Museum, the Pompidou Centre and heavyweight collector François Pinault's Palazzo Grassi in Venice, has carefully steered clear of commercial projects throughout her career and admits she was in no hurry to work for Frieze. When the fair approached her, she says she purposely proposed showing work so controversial that its market was extremely limited — not the typical strategy for a major fair. "I assumed they would say no," she says, with a small smile. "It's a business, it's not a not-for-profit. But they embraced it."

Jo Stella-Sawicka, artistic director of Frieze, says the decision was actually quite simple. "Her concept felt completely timely and relevant," she says. "The role women play is very much part of the news." And as for the works' content leaving little to the imagination, she notes that much of what was considered shockingly vulgar decades ago is no longer seen as such, thanks in large part to the internet. "We've all been exposed to so much more."

The radical feminists in *Sex Work* stand apart from their female peers because they were marginalised not only by the men in charge but by other women artists, who took a

more play-with-the-boys approach. Gingeras acknowledges she herself has had what she calls a “complicated relationship” with feminism. Although she has been involved in progressive political activism since she was in college in the 1990s, “I would never have worn the F on my chest because my generation was like spoiled children: we inherited second-wave feminism’s progresses, and we took them for granted,” she says. “As I got older, I started to question my own internalised misogyny. I wanted to do a book of my own writings, and I looked at books and essays I’d written. I found I’ve written about a lot of bad boys. I was never particularly attracted to what I was intuiting as a sort of canon of feminism.”

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BETTY TOMPKINS

The 2007 exhibition [*WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution*](#), mounted by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, also started her thinking — as much about “who was left out and why and what was the common denominator” as who was actually in it. Still excluded from receiving an institutional blessing were females who made heavy use of sexual iconography and challenged gender

roles. While careful to credit *WACK!* for being a milestone, Gingeras notes, “My own personal interest was attracted to why is sex so taboo still, and why is desire and sexual agency so taboo.” She turned her attention to “women who seized the power of sex” and eventually organised *Black Sheep Feminism: The Art of Sexual Politics*, a 2016 exhibition at Dallas Contemporary, a museum in Texas. She subsequently began writing a book that delves into radical feminist art, the research for which fed directly into *Sex Work*. “Feminism is not a monolith; it’s very plural,” she says. “I’m trying to write other art histories.”

Meanwhile, the election of President Donald Trump — and the [*misogyny*](#) that permeated his campaign — reawakened Gingeras’s penchant for protest. Moved to take action, she spearheaded the collaborative Instagram account [*@dear_ivanka*](#) in the nascent days of the resistance movement last November. Minter is one of her co-conspirators. The social media feed, taking the form of letters to Ivanka Trump, has mercilessly skewered the first daughter as a hypocritical, out-of-touch opportunist. One posting paired a photo of a smiling, immaculately turned-out Ivanka and her young daughter in front of the

Supreme Court with the query, “Do you want your daughter to know an unearned place at THIS table is what you call female empowerment?” Says Gingeras, “The psych-ops aspect of it is very good because we have, like, three psychoanalysts contributing. They are vicious.”



Judith Bernstein: 'Women have a great deal of anger and should own it' © Yael Malka

Her activism and her scholarly interests converged, she says, with *Sex Work*, a project that jettisons the focus-group feminism of Ivanka’s “Women Who Work” slogan in favour of authentic expressions about women’s place in the world. “We are trying to write a new manifesto in this age of corporatised usurpation of feminism by people like Ivanka,” Gingeras says.

Judith Bernstein, who has a show of anti-Trump drawings dubbed *Cabinet of Horrors* opening at the [Drawing Center in Lower Manhattan](#) on October 13, began to employ phalluses in her Vietnam War protest art back in the late 1960s. In “Vietnam Garden”, erect penises double as tombstones, American flags sticking out of their tips. “Union Jack-Off Flag” crosses two phalluses over the stars of an American flag. “My idea of feminist was observing men and using sexuality as a vehicle,” Bernstein says. “Feminists did not consider me one of the group because they had a very narrow definition of feminism.”

In the early 1970s, she began a series of “[Screw](#)” charcoal drawings, so named because the enormous phalluses did double-duty as hardware. Bernstein’s wordplay considered “screwing” as a synonym for both sex and “getting screwed”, as in being on the raw end of a deal, a place she says women often found themselves. “Women have a great deal of anger and should own it,” says Bernstein. “Owning makes it more real and more contemporary. [Mainstream feminists] still had an impact, but they didn’t have the sledgehammer aggression and humour my work has.”

Not everyone was laughing. In 1974, one of her “Screw” drawings was deemed pornographic and removed from a museum show in Philadelphia. After that, Bernstein was virtually blacklisted. She went more than 20 years without a solo show. She lived off her income from teaching but, despite her MFA from Yale, could not get tenure anywhere.

Most mainstream feminists distanced themselves from the more provocative practitioners. Tompkins felt shunned. “Nobody ever invited me to a meeting,” she says. “Ever. They seemed to have a problem with my source material, the fact that I subscribed to the pleasure principle.”

Pornography was the great divide. To mainstream feminists, pornography was the epitome of the male gaze and the coercion of women into sex work; the objectification of women for men’s titillation. To radical feminists, appropriating pornography was an act of empowerment, a loud declaration that women, too, have strong sex drives and sexual fantasies. “You’d get expelled, like being thrown out as a heretic,” Gingeras says. There

was a clear line between the eroticism practiced by unofficial feminist ringleader [Joan Semmel](#), who painted far tamer pictures of straight, coital couples, and, say, Marilyn Minter's later canvases of women displaying their genitalia and engaged in sexual acts. "[Semmel] did not approve of [radical feminists] because she was categorically against pornography as an industry, and yet her work is very graphic. She was interested in a woman-authored eroticism." The radical camp, on the other hand, equated censorship with other forms of gender oppression and found liberation in reclaiming and celebrating their own sexuality.



'Don't Look at Me' (1969) by Penny Slinger

The pattern of incendiary female artists being silenced played out on both sides of the Atlantic, though British artist Penny Slinger found early recognition for her uniquely feminist take on surrealism. While at Chelsea College of Art, she created her first photo collage book, *50% The Visible Woman*, a sexually charged look at the way women are viewed in the culture. She found a mentor in [Sir Roland Penrose](#), co-founder of the Institute of Contemporary Arts, and immediately upon graduating in 1969 appeared in the Young and Fantastic show at the ICA. Making herself her muse and employing her

obvious beauty, Slinger explored the female psyche with photography, film and sculpture. “The feminist movement was more political, trying to get the same power men had,” she says, “whereas I was trying to look at the whole package of being a woman. I wanted to be subject as well as object. I wanted to own female sensuality and sexuality.”

But a series of setbacks left her reeling. First, for a 1973 exhibition featuring photographs in which she appeared as a hybrid of a bride and a wedding cake, her legs splayed to reveal a collaged flower or sky, she had planned a “happening”: an erotic wedding banquet in which guests were to come dressed as brides or grooms. The gallerist, fearing neighbours’ reactions, cancelled the event. Then, while installing a show of her work in which the rooms of a house served as metaphors for a woman’s interior life, another gallerist seemed to lose his nerve over the graphic content. Shortly after the opening, Slinger decided to re-mount the show herself, pulling the works from the gallery and reinstalling them in a space she rented.



"Consumer Art, Photography" (1974) by Natalia LL © Natalia LL

Drained from the experiences, Slinger quit the art world for the Caribbean, where she stayed for 15 years, then California, where she has lived since 1994. “Out of sight, out of mind,” she says. The Manchester Art Gallery’s 2009 *Angels of Anarchy* show of female surrealists reminded the art world of her contributions. (Excerpts from a new documentary, *Penny Slinger: Out of the Shadows*, will play at Frieze.)

In New York, one haven during feminism's lean years was [A.I.R. Gallery](#), a non-profit collective Bernstein co-founded in 1972 with 19 other women and which remains in operation today. Mary Beth Edelson, perhaps best known for "[Some Living American Women Artists/Last Supper](#)" (1972), in which she appropriated the Leonardo da Vinci masterpiece and collaged Georgia O'Keeffe's and other female artists' faces over those of Jesus and the apostles, also showed at A.I.R. Being able to present their work publicly, Bernstein says, was essential for A.I.R.'s members: it didn't sell art but provided a chance to be part of the conversation. "At the time, there was no other option," she says. "In a way, you could copyright the work you did. It gave you a sense of having a career, even if you were on the fringe."

A.I.R.'s import was such that Gingeras is paying homage to the gallery at Frieze with a 12-metre wall adorned with ephemera from its exhibition history and a timeline giving context to this strain of art. "I wanted to make a nod to the difficult history that women have had with the art market," she explains. "That's really where this whole history is rooted."



'Plush #7' (2014) by Marilyn Minter

Gingeras also gives a nod to the commercial galleries that, she says, are most responsible for resuscitating these women's careers. [Mitchell Alkus](#), a high school science teacher-cum-art dealer, revived both Bernstein's and Tompkins' reputations by giving them solo shows in the 2000s. In Tompkins' case, she finally unrolled and re-stretched her "Fuck

Paintings” for her 2002 exhibition. Albus’s first sale there was to the celebrated artists Robert Gober and Donald Moffett, and the show led to Tompkins’ acclaimed turn in the 2003 Lyon Biennale, which led to the Pompidou’s acquiring one of the canvases — no small feat. Notes Gingeras, “It’s incredibly difficult to get material like this through. I used to work at the Pompidou, and I can’t believe they bought a Betty Tompkins painting.”

London-based dealer Richard Saltoun, whose Frieze stand will spotlight German artist Renate Bertlmann, says there is a solid market for radical feminists, who make up 60 to 70 per cent of his gallery business. Their prices are roughly half those of their male contemporaries, but their artworks are highly sought after by female collectors from the US, Europe and South America. “There are still lots of men who shy away from this kind of tough art,” he says. “Women understand it. Some older ones, you can tell, have lived through some of the issues these artists are expressing. They identify with it very quickly and without explanation. It’s not for me to explain to a woman what it’s like to be a woman.”

Though *Sex Work* is ostensibly a historical show — the works are mostly from the 1960s and 1970s — Gingeras marvels at how fresh they all look. “This is contemporary,” she says. “Arguably all of these women are having their influence now. Every time Betty has an opening, I see nothing but young artists. Same for Judith. Even a late-blooming career is better than things disappearing entirely.”

Their thread through the past five decades is undeniable. Whether through teaching — the late, fearless British artist Helen Chadwick, for instance, taught the similarly transgressive Tracey Emin — or second-hand books, they made their voices heard. “Women artists of younger generations have always searched out women artists of older generations,” Saltoun says. “They’re part of the whole awakening of gender issues in all walks of life we read about daily.”

To be sure, the women in *Sex Work* feel vindicated. Slinger, turning 70 this month, is again using her own naked body for life casts and, following a roughly 30-year absence, is pleased “not to be swept under the carpet of history”. Says Bernstein, “There’s always residue anger. I’m not saying there’s not. But I feel generosity toward the world because I’ve been validated.”

'Sex Work: Feminist Art & Radical Politics', curated by Alison M Gingeras, is at Frieze London, October 5-8; [frieze.com](https://www.frieze.com)

Portraits by Yael Malka

Photographs: Courtesy of Marilyn Minter, Baldwin Gallery, Aspen, Regen Projects, Los Angeles and Salon 94, New York; Penny Slinger courtesy of Blum & Poe gallery