

# SLEEK

## The Rise of the Older Woman Artist: How A Generation of Female Artists Are Finally Getting Their Due

After decades of neglect, older female artists are finally getting the recognition they deserve, and shaking up the foundations of art history.



Move over boys, we are living in the era of the mature lady. Look at the facts: In 2013, Maria Lassnig won the Golden Lion at Venice at age 93. Elsewhere, artists such as 92 year-old Etal Adnan and 73 year-old Phyllida Barlow been given major institutional shows, as well as spots at documenta and the Whitney Biennial. In 2017, 62 year-old Lubaina Hamid won the Turner Prize. In response to a serious rise in interest from the art market, international galleries have begun adding older women to their rosters.

curators, collectors and critics suddenly taking notice of artists who have been largely ignored all their lives?

Rediscovery is a word many avoid when describing these artists, some of which have been working for decades. Older women live longer, have a lifetime of knowledge and have the back catalogue to prove it. Artists like Judith Bernstein, Geta Bratescu, Carmen Herrera, Dorothy Iannone, Joyce Pensato, Lynn Hershmann Leeson, Lillian Schwartz, Barbara T Smith and Betye Saar are just a few of the names that are changing the landscape of contemporary art. It has, however, taken decades for these women to be included in the narrative of art history. Without them, the traditional canon looks outdated, unrepresentative and untruthful.



Geta Bratescu, *Alterity*, 2002?11 series of nine b/w photographs 50x50cm each

## THE GALLERY

One driver for this change is the role of the private gallery. For some time, they have been promoting and investing in work by older women, primarily because they know it flourishes with a wide audience. Hauser and Wirth worked with the late Louise Bourgeois and Maria Lassnig, and continue to collaborate with their estates, as well as those of Eva Hesse and Lee Lozano. In 2009, they added Phyllida Barlow to their list after she retired from teaching at the Slade. Since then, her rise has been meteoric: she has taken over the Duveen Galleries at Tate Britain, been a nominee for the Hepworth Prize and represented the UK at this year's Venice Biennale. For Hauser, old ladies are their bread and butter. "We obviously feel like finally everyone else has woken up," notes its London director, Neil Wenman. "I think for us it comes out of the gallery's DNA. It comes out of the great beliefs of Ivan, Manuela and Ursula [Wirth]. Ursula particularly has been collecting female artists for many, many years."

Hauser's most recent signing is Geta Bratescu, the 91 year-old Romanian artist who showed at Documenta and represented Romania at the Venice Biennale this year alone. For Wenman that fact she is alive and producing is part of why older artists are so attractive. "They're still active. I think often it could be the best work they've made," he enthuses. Older female artists aren't just a trend. They have decades of proven work to justify their skill. Lisson Gallery, Roberts and Tilton, Magenta Plains and Alison Jacques are just some of the many galleries with older women on their exhibition list. Many of these women have been working, teaching and exhibiting steadily. The

difference is collectors, curators and the media are now paying attention. When Phyllida Barlow was teaching artists like Rachel Whiteread, no one was bothered by her exhibitions in highly unfashionable venues like London's Swiss Cottage Library. That has firmly changed.



Phyllida Barlow, Installation view, *folly*, British Pavilion, Venice, 2017

Why were these women being ignored? Sexism was undoubtedly part of it. They certainly weren't getting gallery representation. Even today, women count for only a third of those represented by galleries. The Pictures Generation that emerged in the late 70s brought some female names to the fore, including Sherrie Levine, Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman and Louise Lawler. In the Eighties, NYC gallery Metro Pictures was a notable pioneer, but even major female gallerists of the era such as Mary Boone and Marian Goodman did not show art by women until much later. There were financial constraints: white male artists sold and rents had to be paid. Female artists were making work but often exhibiting in B-list spots, if at all. The effect of this is still palpable in their sales figures.

As the New York Times reported, Abstract Expressionist Judith Godwin's 2006 auction high was \$26,000; in 2012, her pal Franz Kline clocked a \$40 million sale.

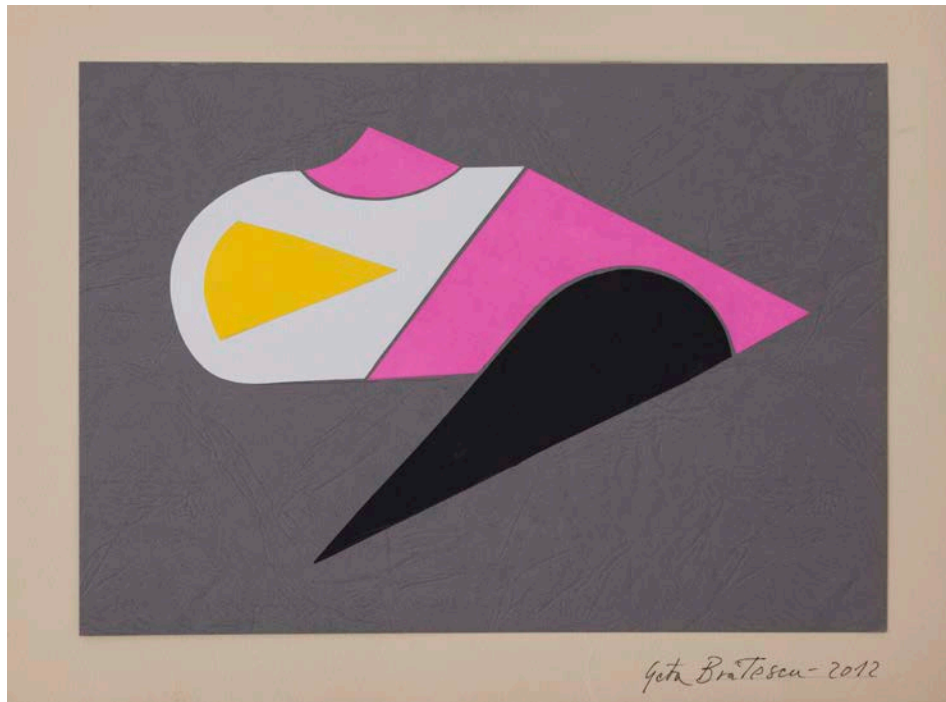
A decade ago, Mara McCarthy opened The Box in LA and began countering this situation. Since then, her gallery has represented such luminaries as Barbara T Smith, Judith Bernstein, Simone Forti and Eugenia Butler. Part of her success is due to her intimate knowledge of the LA art scene (her father is California-based artist, Paul McCarthy), but much of it has sprung from artists, such as Smith, whose interdisciplinary works have a message. "[Her output] has so many interesting connections to feminist issues, spirituality, political issues, body conscious issues and things that were interesting to me personally as a young woman developing the programme." McCarthy says. "Barbara's work has that beautiful personal connection, even though it is also often addressing bigger cultural issues."



Betty Tompkins, *Pussy Painting #8*, 2011 Acrylic on canvas, 40.5 × 40.5 cm

## THE INSTITUTION

Today's art historians were brought up on literature by female authors championing their gender's creativity, such as Linda Nochlin, Rosalind Krauss and Griselda Pollock. The legacy of feminism is strong in contemporary art academia, and new research is highlighting the gaping holes in museum and private collections. Betye Saar, for example, is a 90 year-old LA-based artist, who has had a solo show at Milan's Fondazione Prada last year, and was in recent group shows at the Brooklyn Museum and Tate Modern. Her objects fuse race politics, the esoteric and the autobiographical. Without research by curators who brought her work to an international audience, it might still be stored in her garage in Laurel Canyon.



Geta Bratescu, *Game of Forms*, 2012 series of seven collages on paper  
26.5 x 35.5 cm each

Curator and author Alison Gingeras is curating a section at this autumn's Frieze Art Fair devoted to feminist artists like Natalia LL, Penny Slinger, Betty Tompkins and Joan Semmel. "I was very attracted to figures that were left out of encyclopaedic shows of feminism," Gingeras explains. "They were pushed to the margins for the sexual content of the work. I think a lot of women of my generation took the legacy of feminism for granted." The rise of new millennial feminism has also created a groundswell of support for older artists. As Gingeras notes, "In pop culture, there has been a shift in the attitude to explicit sexuality and women's agency in pornography. There is a need to show where it came from." In this year's Documenta, an entire room in Kassel was devoted to the work of Annie Sprinkle, the sexual activist who 15 years ago was seen as fodder for exploitation TV such as Eurotrash. Cosey Fanni Tutti's work in the world of pornography in the 1970s was on display in Manifesta11, and her autobiography released this

April, “Art Sex Music”, was a surprise hit on the art circuit. There is now an eager, younger, audience searching for artwork where politics is at the forefront. These female artists are presenting possibilities on how to create artwork that changes perceptions in real ways.



Betty Tompkins, *Fuck painting #7*, 1973, Acrylic on canvas  
213.5 × 152.5 cm



A new, younger, curious audience also follows women working outside traditional mediums. Lynn Hershmann Leeson was one of the first artists to work with the intersection between technology and sculpture, electronics and the body, feminist politics and post-humanism. It was only after European survey shows in ZKM in Germany in 2014 that the world woke up to her work. “In the Eighties, people didn’t recognise the precedents of the generation before. Over time this slowly got corrected and it seemed obvious there was this historical gap. People realised this whole generation was invisible,” Hershmann Leeson observes. “I showed for the first time in 1971 in Berkeley. They took my show down, and said it wasn’t art and didn’t belong in an art museum. I started to show in store fronts and so forth, because institutions could not admit that using sound and video were an art form.”

“Lynn says that her audience was finally born,” suggests Hershmann Leeson’s New York gallerist Bridget Donahue, wryly. “Representation of women and feminist theories have always been embedded in Lynn’s work. The characters are complex, the metaphors have become real, as the ongoing surveillance and anatomical assessment of women’s bodies doesn’t stop.”



Betye Saar, *Rainbow Mojo*, 1972 Acrylic on leather, Paul-Michael diMeglio,  
New York

The presence of older female artists is a sign of a changing art world. There are now more female directors of major museums, more women writers and editors than ever before – a trend that’s shown in art consumption. Frieze, for instance, has recently begun devoting an entire section of their art fair to older female artists – a decision that was undoubtedly the result of buyer interest. There are collectors, such as Valeria Napoleone and Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, who have clearly made female artists the focus of their collections. The Rubell Collection in Miami devoted their 2015/ 2016 show, “No Man’s Land”, solely to female artists.