

The Feminist Pioneers Making Provocative Art About Sex

By RACHEL CORBETT OCT. 31, 2017



Judith Bernstein in her New York studio. Dean Kaufman

THIS SUMMER IN LOS ANGELES, a hairy, phallic-looking screw painted by Judith Bernstein extended across 180 feet of the exterior of Venus gallery in Boyle Heights. This month at MoMA PS1 in Queens, men and women stripped down to their underwear and rubbed each other with raw fish in a video by Carolee Schneemann. And in London, pink double-headed phalluses bloomed from cacti in Renate Bertlmann's sculptures at the Frieze art fair.

X-rated art is, of course, nothing new. Depictions of sex have been accepted throughout history and across cultures, from Japan's 17th-century Shunga prints to Gustave Courbet's 1866 closeup portrait of a vagina, "The Origin of the World," or Picasso's 1907 "Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)." In the 1960s, Tom Wesselmann's flat, affectless paintings of hard-nipped, open-mouthed women lying on their backs were Pop Art pioneers. Andy Warhol's "Blue Movie," featuring extended sex scenes by the performers Viva and Louis Waldon, received theatrical release in America in 1969, blurring the line between art and erotica.

But though these works may have been greeted with varying levels of controversy — Courbet’s work remains so shocking that a book cover bearing its image was removed from shop windows by the French police in 1994 — what they shared was not only a dedication to redefining what was explicit for their respective ages and cultures, but a perspective as well: This was art about sex, but only as was made by, or erotic to, straight men. (Even “Blue Movie,” by the openly gay Warhol, did little more than legitimize pornography — its creation and consumption.) Now, though, some of the most revelatory art on sexual themes is being made by women like Bernstein, Betty Tompkins, Juanita McNeely and Joan Semmel, best known for their paintings, and multidisciplinary artists like Schneemann and Valie Export, among others, all of whom have been producing their work for decades to little notice — if not outright persecution — from critics, curators and audiences.

Like their male counterparts, their subject matter is also the body, but unlike some of their proto-feminist foremothers (Georgia O’Keeffe, Agnes Martin, Lee Krasner), they’re concerned not with vaginal flowers or redefining beauty, but with fluids, bulges and secretions. Fellow artists and critics have called them the “blood and guts club” or the “black sheep

Their latent recognition is both a reflection of the political moment and a response to it. At a time of renewed debates about consent and gender equality in the workplace as well as the rising power of nativist men’s rights activists — spurred by a president who has a morbid fascination with the visceral functions of the female body — Bernstein, Schneemann and an entire generation of nearly forgotten women who have fearlessly examined sex and gender in their art, whether anyone was paying attention or not, are suddenly more relevant than they’ve ever been.

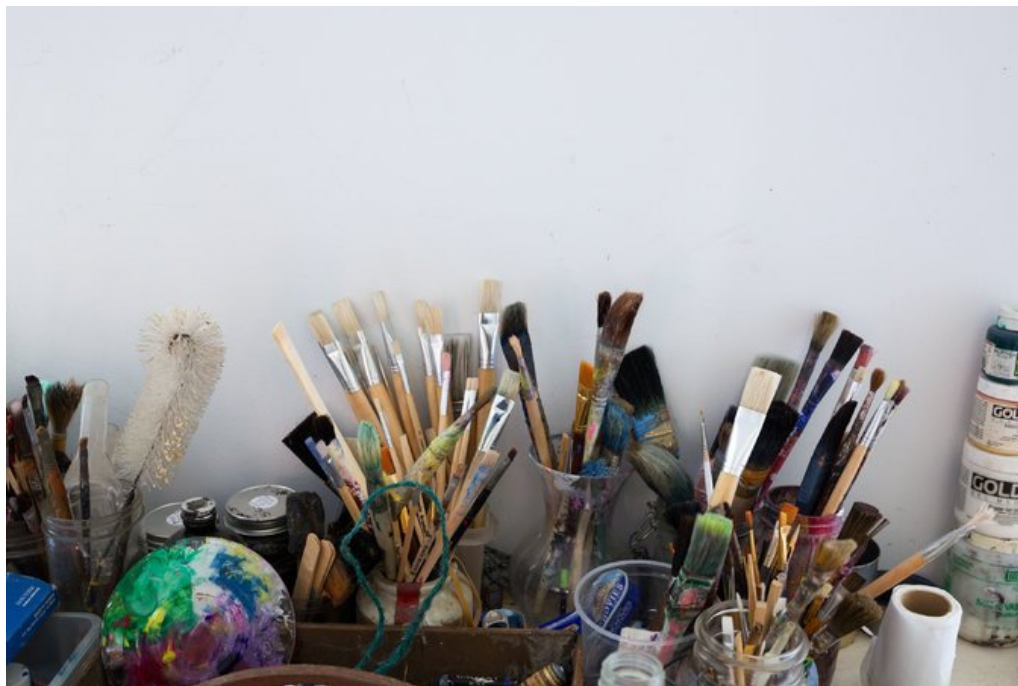


Betty Tompkins in her New York studio. Dean Kaufman

BETTY TOMPKINS, who was born in 1945, tells me, “I became an overnight success at 72.” Her New York studio is crowded with paintings in a long-running series that depict sexual penetrations rendered photorealistically and in extreme closeup — which she started making in 1969. For years, they were at best ignored as lurid curiosities, though the reception was occasionally more severe. In 1973, two of the paintings were seized by French customs when Tompkins was shipping them to Paris for a show. It was a career death sentence; even the bravest venues were reluctant — and arguably still are — to exhibit an artist who alienates patrons or the press. “I was a living nightmare for galleries after that: young, female and censored,” Tompkins says. Today, the [Centre Pompidou](#) in Paris has one of these censored works in its permanent collection, a closely cropped, between-the-thighs view of a woman straddling a penis.

Part of what makes Tompkins's work so enduringly potent today, and what made it too shocking for its time, is not just its frank sexuality: It's that the art of Tompkins, Bernstein and their peers seethes with lust, ego, wisecracks and profanity. While other feminists of their era were embracing "central core" imagery related to the womb or vulva and reclaiming traditionally female crafts like needlepoint, these artists demanded attention the way men did — through shock and awe.

Bernstein's colossal drawings of screws, which unambiguously resemble erect penises, provoked a kind of castration anxiety. "One dealer told me that my work made men of his age feel uncomfortable," she says. One of her works was censored from a show of women's art at the Museum of the Philadelphia Civic Center in 1974 after its director, John Pierron, claimed that it "offends me on behalf of the children of this city." In the late 1960s, a male dealer at Knoedler gallery, then the oldest commercial gallery in New York, told Juanita McNeely that the slides of her work she'd shown him — violent paintings of nude women bleeding — couldn't have been made by a woman. At another gallery, she brought the canvases to prove it, but as she unrolled them onto the floor the dealer kicked them out of his path and walked away. These artists' work, at the time and ever since, has been an act of announcement, of provocation by existence. They threatened to take up male territory, which museums and galleries then almost exclusively were.



Dean Kaufman

Although most of these women identified (and still do) as feminists, their work was too outré even for the radical feminism of the 1960s and '70s, which found its focus in the politics of sexual oppression, and its voice in people like the lawyer and activist Catharine MacKinnon, who argued that "all pornography is made under conditions of inequality." The artists of this generation didn't quite fit in with anyone — not women (MacKinnon's stance meant a brief, uneasy alliance between feminism and right-wing censors), not critics and not other artists: At the time that these so-called blood-and-guts artists were first appearing, minimalism, a nearly asexual style that championed form over feeling, was the dominant trend — leagues away from these women's lusty, leaky, fleshy aesthetic. Although most of these women identified (and still do) as feminists, their work was too outré even for the radical feminism of the 1960s and '70s, which found its focus in the politics of sexual oppression, and its voice in people like the lawyer and activist Catharine MacKinnon, who argued that "all pornography is made under conditions of inequality

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Especially scandalizing was the fact that many of the women — who are almost exclusively heterosexual — made men the objects of desire. When Sylvia Sleigh's 1975 portrait of a young nude man went on view at the Bronx Museum, then housed in a room of a courthouse, a judge complained about the "explicit male nudity in the corridor of a public courthouse." The curator wondered in response why he had never complained before about the "coily draped, bare-breasted females" that adorned the elevators of the same building.

The arrival of queer art in the early '70s forced the discussion of art and sex — who got to depict it, what it should look like — into the culture at large. Conservatives and the Christian right turned their attention toward gay male artists like Robert Mapplethorpe and David Wojnarowicz, both of whom depicted male desire in their work, and both of whom had been censored by museums. There was a philosophical kinship between these phallic feminists and this first major generation of queer artists, who were all representing anatomy in abrasive ways.



Juanita McNeely in her NYC studio, surrounded by recent work. Dean Kaufman

But while queer art became a cause for museums and galleries — Mapplethorpe and Wojnarowicz were anointed figureheads in a battle between progressive and conservative values, which ultimately exposed their work to wider audiences — these women artists remained obscure. Mapplethorpe's solo show featuring photographs of male nudes at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., was canceled in 1990 after pressure from members of Congress, but the exhibition was quickly moved to the Washington Project for the Arts. Crowds lined up to see it, and America's near-return to the 1950s seemed to have been at least temporarily thwarted.

feminist theory; and there is a diversity, and plurality, of young women artists who have made sex, and the female body, their primary subject, and who have found recognition doing so: 27-year-old Darja Bajagic, who collages hardcore porn with images of murdered women, or 28-year-old Amalia Ulman, whose fictional Instagram personas post selfies in bras and thongs, or 25-year-old Emma Sulkowicz, whose 2014 performance, in which she marched around the campus of Columbia University lugging the mattress on which she was allegedly raped by a fellow student, quickly became an emblem of the current debate surrounding campus sexual assault.

But the sudden popularity of Tompkins and Bernstein is not just about the abundance and easy accessibility of explicit material to which we have all become desensitized. Young women today face some of the same battles that were fought by their mothers and grandmothers at a time when these artists were just beginning their careers. January's Women's March was a kind of communion of the previous generations of feminism, a present-tense call to action, but it was also an acknowledgment of the past. The signs carried by protesters contained all the iconography that these artists once traded in and still do — all the explicit depictions of male and female anatomy and bodily functions that had once alienated them had become, over time, the symbols of an age of resistance.



Schneemann in her New Paltz, N.Y., studio. Dean Kaufman

And while these artists' shamelessness as young women was outrageous, their shamelessness as old women is revolutionary. What's perhaps most astonishing is that they never stopped making their work, despite years of disregard: There is something radical about their very stubbornness, their dogged persistence. "In the 1960s and early '70s, every gallery rejected my work," says the 78-year-old Carolee Schneemann, who won a lifetime achievement award at this year's Venice Biennale and is the subject of a retrospective currently on view at PS1. The show was a long time coming. At a notorious 1975 performance at a women's art festival in East Hampton, Schneemann unrolled a scroll from her vagina and read from it. (The text was about a male "structuralist filmmaker" who criticized the "diaristic indulgence" of her art.) She, like her peers, has bittersweet feelings about their recent recognition. On the one hand, they're enjoying the success — "Oh my god, it's fabulous," Bernstein says. "I take cabs everywhere" — but they're skeptical of the forces that enabled it.

There is a perpetual cycle in the art world of women not being taken seriously until they are old or dead: This was the case with Louise Bourgeois, who only had her first retrospective in 1982, after she turned 70, or the painter Carmen Herrera, who recently had her retrospective at the Whitney ... at the age of 101. These women's work might be as uncompromising as it ever was, but age, they know, has also neutralized them in men's eyes, removed some of their sting and danger. Now that they're postmenopausal, their sexual disobedience doesn't matter as much to men, who "don't want to sleep with us anymore," Schneemann says. "We're not as threatening as younger women," says Bernstein.

Other things, though, haven't changed. Bernstein still lives and works in the same Chinatown studio she's had since 1967, cluttered with a collection of stuffed animals and toys for her two Persian cats. It used to be crammed with decades of unsold paintings, but now that she can finally afford storage space, the only work present on a recent visit was her new series of fluorescent black-light paintings of testicle-headed Donald Trumps and vagina-faced Hillary Clintons, which are now on view at the Drawing Center in downtown Manhattan. Her signature, prominently scrawled in black cursive letters, appears throughout these works. "I want to make sure they know who did it," she says