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ART REVIEW

ART REVIEW; Feminist Art, 1962 Until Tomorrow Morning and International

By HOLLAND COTTER

Why have there been there no great historical shows of feminist art? The work is there, 30 rich years of it since the woman's movement caught fire, but no major museum has yet been willing to take up the challenge and tell the story.

Instead, the task falls piecemeal to smaller institutions short on money and space, and the results are mixed. One of the most ambitious attempts, just by virtue of collecting dozens of feminist artists under one roof, was last year's "Bad Girls" at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in SoHo. But its curatorial decision to have what amounted to a feel-good party rather than to trace a genealogy was a disappointment.

"Division of Labor" at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, with Lydia Yee as curator, is also far from perfect, but it is heading in the right direction. Although with 35 artists it is smaller than the New Museum show, it tries to be international in scope and is chronologically comprehensive, with work ranging from the phallus-covered overcoats of the Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama, dated 1962, to the young German artist Regina Frank's dressmaking in progress.

Within any exhibition devoted to so vast a field, there are always subsidiary shows struggling to emerge -- several in this case -- and crucial topics that end up on the cutting room floor. In "Division of Labor," for example, one finds little evidence of politically confrontational work or of innovative feminist performance art from Carolee Schneemann to Karen Finley. Both areas cry out for full treatment elsewhere.

What Ms. Yee focuses on is a far-reaching early feminist theme: domestic imagery and traditional "women's work" crafts like quilting, clothes making and cooking as a new subject for art. And she has chosen an often superb group of artists to explore its racial, sexual and socioeconomic implications.

Among them are several of the pioneering figures who created "Womanhouse" in Los Angeles in 1971-72, when a group of students led by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro transformed a dilapidated building into a walk-in feminist environment.

A few components of that site have been reconstituted here. Ms. Chicago's "Menstruation Bathroom," overstocked with feminine hygiene products, still packs a punch, and her early concentration on bodily imagery finds an echo in younger artists like Kiki Smith, who is also in the show. Faith Wilding's recreated "Womb Room," a domed enclosure of open-work weaving, also offers interesting connections to recent art (Ava Gerber and Lisa Hoke, who aren't in the show, come to mind) as well as to the stunning, ground-breaking fiber work of Lenore Tawney in the early 1960's.

Although the Bronx version of "Womanhouse" is the merest shadow of that collaborative effort, important individual artists from the early 70's have a distinctive presence. Harmony Hammond is one of them, her spiraling rag rugs the antithesis of Minimalism's technological bias. (Jim Isermann's recent Op shag-rug pieces in the show make an apt counterpoint to her work.) Another is Faith Ringgold, represented by embroidered family portraits based in part on African craft traditions. And in an up-to-date collaboration, Ms. Ringgold's daughter, Michelle Wallace, an art historian, contributes an essay to the exhibition's catalogue.

Motherhood, long considered a biological imperative that kept women from becoming artists, is one of the show's several potential spinoff themes. Mimi Smith's do-it-yourself "Knit Baby Kit" (1968) is an exercise in instant parenthood with a dark twist. ("The baby is dead," the hand-written instructions announce.) In Joyce Scott's sculpture "No Mommy Me II" (1991), a small black woman is dwarfed by the white baby she's carrying, while her own child sits neglected. And Mary Kelly's extensive "Post-Partum Document" (1974), a record of the infancy of her own child told through framed feeding charts soiled with vomit and feces, turns the matter of maternity itself into the substance of art.

During the period that Ms. Kelly's Conceptual work was under way, the Pattern and Decoration movement was enjoying its heyday, exemplified here by Robert Kushner's lovely painting that doubles as a cloak and by Joyce Kozloff's tiled wall arch bright with arabesques. Islamic motifs on both pieces suggests this movement's wide cultural reach, which continues in the sumptuous fabric collage titled "Portrait" (1991) by the Korean artist Soo-Ja Kim and in Xenobia Bailey's spectacular Yoruban-influenced ensemble, "Sistah Paradise's Crown of Flight" (1994-95).

The meeting of cultures is not always celebratory. In "Polka Dot Blackfoot With Children" (1990), Elaine Reichek, who has been putting together an impressively textured body of work since the early 80's, transforms an archival photograph of an American Indian family into a knitted sack hanging limp and empty on the gallery wall. And Lynne Yamamoto inscribes the biography of her Chinese grandmother, a laundress, on nails hammered into the wall, each labeled with a single tiny word: "rinse," "clean," "whisper," "starch" (1993).

Clothing-as-metaphor is yet another mini-show waiting to happen (and it actually has, fairly recently, in Nina Felshin's traveling show). Here it ranges from Sherry Brody's "Lingerie Pillows" (1972) to works by several contemporary male artists, including Charles LeDray's doll-size clothes strung forlornly into floor-to-ceiling nets and Hiram Rodriguez-Mora's patches of men's striped

dress shirts sewn together to suggest both geometric abstraction and the intimacy of lovers.

If to these artists one adds such maverick pieces as Pat Lasch's family photographs framed in exquisite filigrees of paint resembling cake frosting (her father was a baker), and the witty, urbane needlepoint Pop pictures of Nicholas Moufarrege (1947-1985), "Division of Labor" is not only conceptually generous but also visually enchanting.

Ms. Yee is to be congratulated for all this, as well as for leaving the very idea of feminism refreshingly open-ended. The work of artists like Ms. Reichel and Mr. Kushner, for example, are not strictly or even primarily feminist in the terms defined by "Womanhouse," and among several of the younger artists for whom feminist thinking has, largely through a trickle-down effect, become second nature, the validity of strongly defined sexual roles is questioned.

At the same time, "Division of Labor" is just a bare-bones sketch of a single aspect of an evolving ideology and its art. What is needed is the sheer institutional weight -- the technical and financial resources, the plain vote of confidence that comes with commitment -- of one of the major museums to show this history in all its complexity. It is a daunting and essential task, and it is time one of them took it on.

"Division of Labor: 'Women's Work' in Contemporary Art" remains at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, 1040 Grand Concourse, at 165th Street, Morrisania, the Bronx, through June 11.

Photo: "No Mommy Me II" (1991), by Joyce Scott, from "Division of Labor." (Kanji Takeno/Bronx Museum of the Arts)