

October 11, 2002
ART REVIEW

ART REVIEW; Two Nods to Feminism, Long Snubbed by Curators

By HOLLAND COTTER

Most of the interesting American artists of the last 30 years are as interesting as they are in part because of the feminist art movement of the early 1970's. It changed everything.

It gave a new content to painting, sculpture and photography. It pushed performance, video and installation art to the fore. It smashed the barrier between high art and low art, and it put folk art, outsider art, non-Western art, not to mention so-called women's art (sewing, quilting, crafts of all kinds) center stage. What art in the next 30 years will look like I don't know, but feminist influences will be at its source.

All this should be obvious, but it needs to keep being resaid. Of the liberation movements for which the late 20th century will be remembered, few have been as disparaged as feminism, and that scorn extends to the women's art movement. Even presumably well-intentioned art-worldlings seem incapable of talking about it without condescension, as if it were some indiscreet adolescent episode best forgotten.

This attitude helps explain why no major museum has put together a comprehensive exhibition of the women's movement. We have career retrospectives of every market-approved minor "master" who comes down the pike, and group shows of hot young up-and-comers who in many cases owe their existence to the women's movement. But an all-out institutional consideration of how early feminist art took shape, who made it and why? Dream on.

So it's worth taking note that two modest surveys of such art are on view, one at an alternative space in Manhattan called White Columns, the other at the Guild Hall Museum in East Hampton on Long Island. Even with some overlap of artists, they're very different shows. And although between them they hold a fair amount of material, they only graze the surface of their huge subject.

The first thing to know about the women's art movement is the scope of its ambition. Basically its aim was to turn the existing social order upside down; to wipe out an entire cultural databank of corrupt images and replace it with new ones. In the late 1960's and early 70's many female artists didn't have studios, let alone galleries and careers. What they did have, in addition to talent and

drive, was histories, bodies and feelings, and these became the stuff of their art.

In some ways this was a magical time (as revolutionary moments can be) when people were thinking idealistically and acting audaciously. And in an American era of collectives, countercultures and consciousness raising, the women's movement went through changes, from political feminism to cultural feminism to many other feminisms built on racial, sexual and spiritual platforms.

A sense of this spirit, however tamed and cleaned up, can be found in "Personal and Political: The Women's Art Movement, 1969-1975" at Guild Hall. Organized by Simon Taylor and Natalie Ng, the show concentrates on what is usually identified as the first generation of feminist artists and includes a large amount of painting, a medium now not usually associated with feminist art.

But certain formative figures like Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, who organized the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts in 1972, were abstract painters looking for ways to cut loose from a male-dominated field without abandoning painting itself. For Ms. Schapiro this meant exploring non-Western decorative design, while Ms. Chicago combined mandalalike patterns and words to address the female body and psyche.

Painting by women took many directions. And the show points to some of them in anatomical close-ups by Eunice Golden and Joan Semmel, portraits by Alice Neel and Sylvia Sleigh, and language-based work of Louise Fishman and Nancy Spero. Betty Tompkins's formidable Photo Realist images of heterosexual intercourse, now on view at Mitchell Albus Gallery in Chelsea, could easily be included here. And given this diversity, the old cliché about the first wave of feminist art being "essentialist" and fixed on anatomical images seems like nonsense.

A smaller section of the show is given to performance and video, media that brought feminist thinking into the art world mainstream. Certain performances, like those by Carolee Schneemann, were done for live audiences. Others were created as documents, as in the case of Eleanor Antin's record of a weight-loss regime in the form of anthropology-style photographs, and a sound piece by Adrian Piper about social class and female solidarity, an issue that, along with race, the women's movement badly neglected.

As to video, Guild Hall's program is a help-yourself affair. The tapes are there; you play what you want. Without exception, they're worth watching. Hannah Wilke and Martha Wilson do riffs on physical self-transformation. Lynda Benglis explores the expanding art of female erotics. Hermine Freed and Martha Rosler tap deep resources of parody. Ms. Rosler's "Semiotics of the Kitchen," in which she plays a robotic killer-housewife, is one of the funniest and scariest videos of the period.

This film is also in "Gloria: Another Look at Feminist Art in the 1970's" at White Columns, which focuses on media and performance works. In an exhibition essay the curators, Catherine Morris and Ingrid Schaffner, explain that they made this choice because they sensed that for young artists today "looking back 30 years, ostensibly at one's parents, the issues and icons of feminist art may seem remote -- or worse, ridiculous."

However wry a view they take of this situation, what they've produced could still be considered an example of historical editing motivated by embarrassment at the past. And I suspect that many young artists would find the work of Ms. Semmel or Harmony Hammond or Faith Ringgold, all at Guild Hall, intensely intriguing and possibly inspiring. That said, "Gloria" is on its own terms a good show, and an apt counterweight to the one on Long Island.

Among other things, it gives a far more candid sense of how physically confrontational early feminist work could be. For her "Interior Scroll" performances, Ms. Schneemann pulled a text-covered paper scroll from her vagina and read the words aloud; one such scroll is in the show. Ms. Benglis is represented by a bronze cast of the dildo she brandished in a notorious 1974 Artforum advertisement. The Austrian-born Valie Export is seen on a poster in pants with a cut-away crotch, her customary attire for guerrilla-style public performances.

The presence of other artists who did other kinds of art, like Nancy Grossman, Joan Jonas and Mierle Laderman Ukeles, is a reminder of how many rich, seasoned careers still await full attention. Contributions from the 1970's by Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger and Cindy Sherman foretell some ways the feminist torch was carried forward in the theory-savvy 1980's and 90's.

And what about today? As Ms. Morris and Ms. Schaffner observe, a few fashionable young figures have been promoted in old-style feminist terms of women taking control of their own image. But in their case the argument too often sounds forced, too transparently an effort at star-making spin. At the same time, at least one area in which radical versions of feminism are still alive is barely touched on in either show.

I'm talking about work by lesbian artists, the "lavender menace" that Betty Friedan said would ruin the credibility of the feminist movement. These artists -- young, old, undefinably diverse -- have sustained something like the movement's original, paradigm-shifting impulse into the present, as is suggested by even a brief glance through Ms. Hammond's indispensable book, "Lesbian Art in America: A Contemporary History" (Rizzoli, 2000).

Clearly here's a subject that needs a full-fledged museum survey of its own. So does the topic of the countless male artists, gay and straight, whose work has been influenced, if not directly shaped, by three decades of feminist art. I trust that alert young curators, critics and art historians are already on the case. And maybe, in the process of getting history told right, they can reconnect feminism to its revolutionary roots.

"Personal and Political: The Women's Art Movement, 1969-1975" is at the Guild Hall Museum, 158 Main Street, East Hampton, N.Y., (631) 324-0806, through Oct. 20. "Gloria: Another Look at Feminist Art in the 1970's" is at White Columns, 320 West 13th Street, West Village, (212) 924-4212, through Oct. 20.

Photo: Works by Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Hannah Wilke and Martha Rosler at "Gloria: Another Look at Feminist Art in the 1970's." (White Columns)