

# Feminist Postmodernism

## ART

### How American Women Artists Invented Postmodernism, 1970-75

**Where:** Mason Gross School of the Arts Galleries,  
33 Livingston Ave., New Brunswick

**When:** Through Jan. 27. 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Mondays-  
Fridays and by appointment

**How much:** Free. Call (732) 932-2222 ext. 838 or  
e-mail rcipp@rci.rutgers.edu.

BY DAN BISCHOFF  
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

In 1970, by and large, art was still a man's world, and the dominant style of the day was Minimalism, a kind of abstract formalism that demanded simple shapes, clean lines and, if possible, morphological repetition (that is, long rows of the same shape endlessly repeated).

That may sound boring to you, but it was an ideological line that was aggressively policed, and few art exhibitions that argued for a counter-aesthetic could find a major venue. (The Minimalist line is still enforced in architecture and memorial planning, as witnessed by all the chosen designs for a Ground Zero monument in Manhattan.)

But in that same year, a small number of women, most of them only recently self-christened "feminist" artists, began to question the dominance of Minimalism, even though that was all they were being taught in art school. Many of them

## Rutgers exhibit features women who rebelled against Minimalism

went on to win fame as feminist artists — Judy Chicago, Nancy Azara, Joyce Kozloff, Faith Ringgold, Betye Saar, Miriam Shapiro, Carolee Schneeman, Joan Semmel — and they, along with half a dozen other women artists, are all part of a new show at the Mason Gross School of the Arts Galleries at Rutgers University in New Brunswick. The show is modestly titled "How American Women Artists Invented Postmodernism, 1970-75."

"Postmodernism" is nowhere as easy to define as Minimalism. Essentially, it's a word coined to describe everything that's going on in contemporary galleries and museums — which is just about anything, from dripping paint to telling stories. The rise of Postmod art has been unusual in the sense that its victory did not mean the fall of Minimalism, or abstraction, or really anything. Postmod says, instead, that it's all good, and the real weakness of previous styles was their dogmatic, boy-like (No Girls Allowed) exclusivity.

First, of all, it meant a repudiation of abstract

tion itself, as in Miriam Shapiro's "Big Ox," a large painting in orange and silver marked by an X with a circle at the center (the feminist meaning, even in abstraction, is right in front of you). Similarly, Judy Chicago is represented by two abstract sprayed acrylic canvases from her "Great Ladies" series (one named "Christine of Sweden" and another rechristened "Elizabeth A. Sackler" for the patron who is endowing the Brooklyn Museum's new permanent display of Chicago's "Dinner Party").

But it also meant the return of the figure, and painter Joan Semmel is showing two paintings of nudes that defy the art tradition of a "male gaze" by being paintings of her own body (painted green and saffron, with the reddish figure of a man in "Antonio and I"). There's a Faith Ringgold fabric sculpture of "Wilt Chamberlain" and a Judy Baca painting in wood stain on paper of "Dead Homeboy Killed by a Placa," which memorializes a worker killed while putting up Baca's own "Great Wall" mural, a Los Angeles landmark.

Along with women came people of color, gays, even, ultimately, Outsiders (artists who never went to art school at all). There isn't space here to do justice to all the art in this show, which was curated by Judith Brodsky, former head of the Rutgers Center for Innovative Print & Paper, and Ferris Olin, art historian and head of the Margery Somers Foster Center at Rutgers' Mabel Smith Douglass Library.

It's one excellent '70s show.