



Art

The Bad Boy Artists of the 1980s Owe a Debt to Their Feminist Predecessors

Alina Cohen Feb 28, 2019 8:19 pm



Julian Schnabel *Hope*, 1982

Whitney Museum of American Art

Throughout the 1980s, a new chapter of contemporary art began to take shape in Western art institutions, centered around a group of

vibrant, expressive paintings. At the beginning of the decade, British curator Norman Rosenthal co-organized two seminal exhibitions—“A New Spirit in Painting” at the Royal Academy of Arts in London (1981) and “Zeitgeist” at the Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin (1982)—that solidified this idea of novelty and resurgence. He grouped together a mix of representational and figurative works by artists such as David Salle, Eric Fischl, Francesco Clemente, and Julian Schnabel. His curation evidenced the feeling and subjectivity that was then re-entering painting after decades of Minimalism and Conceptual performance had posited art as a mostly cerebral or formal exercise. The high-profile shows earned this new swath of painters the moniker “Neo-Expressionist.”

If the best exhibitions offer such provocative frameworks to codify and understand contemporary art, the narratives they create are always subjective and open to revision. Ultimately, decade markers and movement names are slippery, largely arbitrary ways to shape coherent stories about human creativity and aesthetic progress—whatever that might mean.



Joan Semmel, *Mythologies and Me*, 1976. © Joan Semmel/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates, New York.

Rosenthal's conception of the early 1980s as the time when (male) artists forged a "return to painting" has persisted over the past 40 years, veering toward mythology. While many critics and curators have attempted to reconsider the era, they've neglected one crucial facet of 1980s Neo-Expressionist painting: the inspiration it took from a handful of figurative female painters and the second-wave feminist movement that took hold in the 1970s.

In recent years, a few shows have attempted to expand upon Rosenthal's ideas. The Whitney Museum of American Art's 2017 exhibition "Fast Forward: Painting from the 1980s" united works by the Neo-Expressionists with that by a number of female artists active around the same time. At Cheim & Read in 2013, Raphael Rubinstein curated

such as Elizabeth Murray and Carroll Dunham, whose biomorphic forms push toward representation). A 2012 show at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago and the Walker Art Center, “This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s,” offered a larger context for thinking about art from the decade. The show situated the era’s paintings among video art, sculpture, and works on paper. The curators also emphasized the political and economic issues that shaped the art. In a section called “Gender Trouble,” for instance, they began to address how 1970s feminism had influenced 1980s art, an effect that still remains woefully understudied.

Joan Semmel’s 1976 painting *Mythologies and Me* provides some of the clearest evidence of these unexplored connections. The triptych depicts three women’s nude bodies against a purple backdrop: a *Playboy* model, the artist, and a scribbly, abstracted woman that emulates the Abstract Expressionist style of Willem de Kooning’s *Woman 1* (1950–52). Semmel appropriated imagery from other artists, popular publications, and pornography to examine how such varied forms in painting—including abstraction—can be used to empower or objectify women.



David Salle *Melody Bubbles and the Critique of Reason*, 1988
 Mana Contemporary

The painting could be a prototype for works by David Salle, whose fragmented canvases, in which he “quotes” imagery from other sources, employ a similar aesthetic strategy. (Judith Linhares could also be seen as another precursor.) The work of Eric Fischl also shares a kinship with Semmel’s. His 1982 triptych *Inside Out* and 1984 diptych *Motel* unite pictures of sex, screens, and solitary nudes. Throughout the 1970s, Semmel painted from photographs of her own body, transforming them with vivid Fauvist colors. Her paintings are expressive and large-scale, but no one ever calls Semmel a Neo-Expressionist or shows her

Maria Lassnig, who lived in New York from 1968 through 1980 (she later moved to Vienna), also shared aesthetic affinities with these artists. Her 1974 painting *Double Self-Portrait with Camera* shows two versions of the artist. The Lassnig in the foreground, who has a blurred, angular head, sits on a chair in front of a painting of the other Lassnig, who points a camera towards the viewer. With vivid hues and distorted figures, Lassnig investigates the fractured self and the relationship between photography and painting.

Simultaneously, Betty Tompkins was making canvases depicting photorealistic close-ups of intercourse, which she titled “Fuck Paintings.” Sometimes leaving the grid visible beneath her paint, Tompkins connected photography, pornography, and painting in graphic, confrontational art. Occasionally, in her “Censored Grid” drawings (1974–ongoing), she stamped the word “CENSORSHIP” on top of her imagery—blunt commentary on the anti-pornography movement of the day.



Eric Fischl *Floating Islands #2 and #5, 1985*
Rago

In the late 1960s and mid-'70s, the Supreme Court determined in two landmark cases that the “right to privacy” protected American freedoms like the right to enjoy pornographic materials in one’s own home and the right to have an abortion. These linked issues didn’t just affect women, of course. To think that male painters coming of age at the same time were oblivious to such national decisions is naïve and reductive—any artist interested in sexuality and the body (and many of the Neo-Expressionists were) was responding, implicitly or explicitly, to a cultural climate that was litigating pornography and a woman’s right

for gender equality. It's notable, too, that in their engagement with photography and pornography, many female painters who exhibited throughout the 1970s preempted not only the Neo-Expressionists, but also the so-called "Pictures Generation" artists—Sherrie Levine, Cindy Sherman, and Robert Longo among them (Salle is often counted in this group). Yet few exhibitions depict such intergenerational linkages. One reason might be that all these connections form a tangled, imperfect web: It's easier to mount a show of 1980s work than extract the threads connecting the two decades.



Betty Tompkins *I'm going to...*, 2018
P.P.O.W

All the labels floating around towards the end of the 1970s—Pictures Generation, feminist, Pattern and Decoration, Neo-Conceptualist, Neo-Expressionist—make the period particularly difficult to parse. In a 2013 article for *Art in America*, Rubinstein suggested that such pluralism was not amenable to critics, who felt they needed to choose sides, further segregating artists into unique camps instead of making more fruitful connections between their different approaches. The celebrated critic Hal Foster, for example, railed against the Neo-Expressionists, which, somewhat ironically, further solidified their status as a discrete group of male painters. (He also literally wrote an essay called “Against Pluralism.”)

New York-based painter Joan Snyder’s complaints against the entire misnomer, as there wasn’t anything new (“neo”) about it. She writes:

“At the height of the Pop and Minimal movements, we [women] were making other art—art that was personal, auto-biographical, expressionistic, narrative, and political—using word and photographs and as many other materials as we could get our hands on. This was called Feminist Art. This was the art of the 1980s was really about, appropriated by the most famous male artists of the decade.”



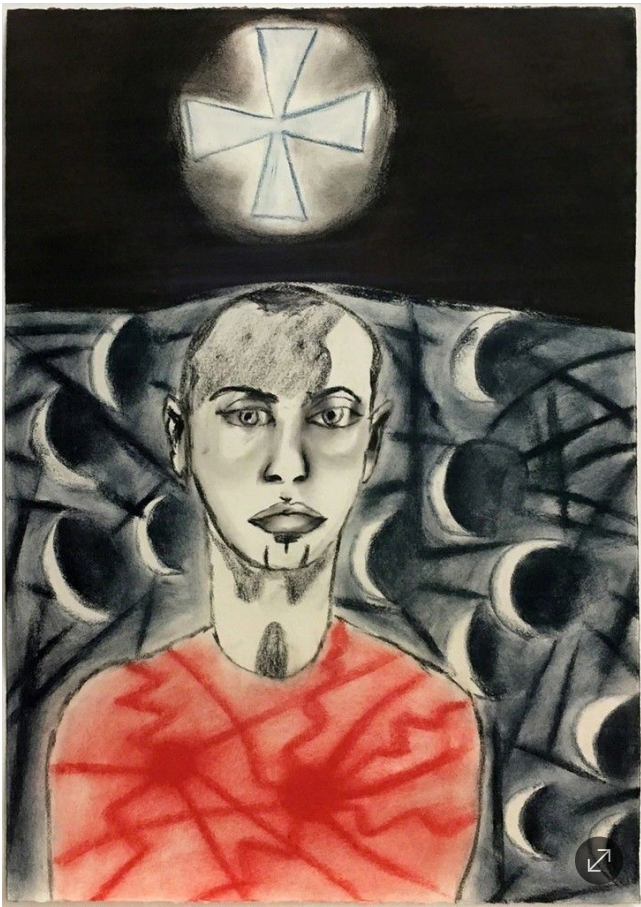
Judy Chicago *"The Dinner Party" Needlework Loft, 1977*
Brooklyn Museum

While critics lauded these men's works as heroic, they relegated work by Snyder and her cohort to the margins. These women's canvases did often critique traditional gender roles, but they also challenged the day's dictums about painting.



upon the work of their predecessors. All artists respond to what they see, inside and outside of the academy, museums, galleries, and their peers' studios. While artistic lineages are arbitrary, and influence itself is a nebulous concept (it's impossible to say, definitively, exactly which ideas and experiences weave their way into anyone's work), we're long overdue for a canon-challenging exhibition that unites feminist and Neo-Expressionist painting from the 1970s and '80s, placing these art-historical contributions into dialogue with one another.

In a major exhibition, curators might look beyond New York, too—the connections between the Neo-Expressionist and feminist movements extended coast to coast. Hammer Museum curator Connie Butler believes that the Feminist Art Program (FAP), spearheaded by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia between 1971 and 1976, attacked taboos about representing the figure and granted permission to future generations of artists to candidly address the realities of sex and the body.



Francesco Clemente *True*, 1989
 MARUANI MERCIER
 GALLERY



Maria Lassnig *Doppelselbstportrat*, 1974
 Belvedere 21

Notably, both Fischl and Salle attended CalArts in the early 1970s before moving to the East Coast. If FAP wasn't an explicit influence on their work, it's difficult to believe that such a radical project, right on their campus, didn't affect them. (It should be noted that Mira Schor, a FAP participant, became one of the most vocal detractors of Salle's work.)

Schapiro herself was a major figure of the Pattern and Decoration movement, which integrated traditional, female-coded craft elements and vibrant ornamentation into fine-art forms. Found fabrics and glitter adorn her paintings. Julian Schnabel, who became famous for shattering plates and affixing them to his canvases, was destroying functional ceramics in the service of his paintings—a violent inversion, then, of certain feminist aesthetic strategies of the 1970s.

Butler, however, is just as apt to attribute the segregation of feminist art and Neo-Expressionism to regional exceptionalism as she is to sexism. The standard New York-centric view of the 1980s painting scene hasn't previously allowed the radical ideas born on the West Coast to enter the conversation. Katy Siegel, senior programming and research curator at the Baltimore Museum of Art, offers a different, gender-specific perspective. “When women paint expressively, it's seen as feminine, or minor, or sweet or hysterical,” she told me recently. “When men do it, it's heroic, transgressive, and large-scale.”

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