These women are some of America’s greatest artists. Why don’t they get the respect they deserve?
Back in 2008, I asked a friend who worked as a senior conservator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art a simple question: “If you could see a big retrospective of any artist who hasn’t already been given one, who would it be?”

My friend didn’t hesitate.

“Marisol,” he said.

“Who?” I asked.

Marisol Escobar, he explained. A sculptor. Wood, mostly. She was big in the ’60s, a key figure at the beginning of pop art. Then she disappeared. She went by “Marisol.”

I had just moved to Boston from Sydney, and I had never heard of Marisol. But I made a point of finding out about her.

It wasn’t hard. I started seeing striking works by her in smaller local museums. The Currier Museum...
But at the most prestigious museum in New England, Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts, there was Marisol was still alive at that time. She was living in New York City.

For months, I checked to see whether any institution was planning a Marisol retrospective. The answer appeared to be no. But then someone told me that a curator at a museum in Memphis was working on a Marisol retrospective.

A museum in Memphis? Which one, I wondered, would that be?

It was the Memphis Brooks Art Museum. The curator was Marina Pacini, and the show was slated for 2014. I bided my time, and then got my newspaper, the Boston Globe, to send me to Memphis.

The show was good. Pacini’s thoroughly researched, beautifully written catalogue was — and is — indispensable, and her smart, sensitive work in getting the show organized was nothing short of heroic. The show even traveled, in trimmed-down form, to New York’s Museo el Barrio.

But overall, it felt like an appetizer rather than a full meal. It wasn’t backed by the resources, the big-time institutional heft, it required. There were no Marisol banners flapping along Manhattan’s Museum Mile. Marisol herself was too infirm to make it to Memphis. She was suffering from Alzheimer’s. She died two years later, in 2016.

There are reasons Marisol’s fame petered out, and they’re complicated. Many artists, both male and female, have suffered similar fates. For every Frank Stella, Jasper Johns or Robert Rauschenberg — artists who achieve renown early on and never lose it — there are many more who peak early or have to wait until they are dead before they are “rediscovered” and duly honored.
Why, given all this, weren’t museums falling over themselves to do a Marisol retrospective?

Things — there is no question — are beginning to change. One of the biggest stories in the art world in the past two or three years has been the rapidly growing number of female artists who are getting solo shows, career surveys and retrospectives at well-known museums.
But for women — historically, but also in recent times — the situation has been much, much worse. Male artists of a certain standing are commonly treated to retrospectives every 10 years or so, up to and after their deaths. Women continue to be overlooked.

When you consider how famous Marisol was in her prime, it’s odd, to say the least, that no major museum thought a Marisol show worth doing during her lifetime. In the 1960s, her shows were mobbed. Thousands lined up just to get into them. “She had more press and more visibility than Andy Warhol,” according to Pacini. She was written up by Gloria Steinem in Glamour magazine and by Grace Glueck in the New York Times Magazine. Along with John Updike, André Previn and Edward Albee, she was featured in Life magazine’s 1962 “A Red-Hot Hundred” list of young movers and shakers.

Born in Paris to Venezuelan parents, she was described as “a Latin Garbo.” She was given a solo show by Leo Castelli in 1957, before either Rauschenberg or Johns. She had an affair with Willem de Kooning. Warhol put her in two of his films.
But at America’s biggest and most prestigious museums, the pace of change can seem dismaying slow.

Which is making one question, in particular, feel more and more urgent: Will some of America’s most accomplished female artists live long enough to get the U.S. retrospectives they deserve? Or will their fates more closely resemble Marisol’s?

Honor roll of the overlooked

One lens through which to see what’s at stake is the #5womenartists campaign, organized by the National Museum of Women in the Arts. Last month, for the second year running, social media users were challenged by hundreds of participating museums during Women’s History Month to name five women artists.

The exercise was supposed to be upbeat, positive, consciousness-raising. But the notion that naming five (just five!) female artists would be a challenge to so many people is shocking. It’s a reminder that, although female artists have been getting more attention in the art world of late, their reputations, by and large, haven’t spread beyond it.

So what helps an artist’s reputation spread?
Few things have a bigger impact than a retrospective at a major museum. Retrospectives don’t just provide important, institutional validation. They bring with them publicity, deeper forms of critical consideration and a chance to become known beyond the confines of the art world. The decision by a respected institution to stake a claim on an artist almost always produces a copycat effect, as curators at other museums, as well as collectors, art advisers and auction houses, take note.

This year, the female artists, age 65 and older, who are getting retrospectives or career surveys include Carolee Schneemann (78), Howardena Pindell (75), Judy Dater (76), Adrian Piper (69),
Consider, for instance, Sheila Hicks.

Hicks is 83. A career survey of her ambitious, beautiful, groundbreaking work in textiles was organized by the Addison Gallery of American Art at Phillips Academy, Andover, Mass., in 2012. That show, which traveled to the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, marked the beginning of an overdue late-career revival.

Hicks was a star at the 2017 Venice Biennale, with a massive installation in the Arsenale, the Biennale’s most prestigious venue. She featured prominently at this year’s Armory Show. And she is currently the subject of major exhibitions at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris and the Museo Amparo in Puebla, Mexico.

Hicks has always been prominent in the art world, but she has never been given the full treatment by the Met, MoMA, the Whitney or the Guggenheim, nor by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Dallas Museum of Art, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, or any other truly top-flight U.S. museum.

Why not?

“I’m hesitant,” Hicks said in an email, “to go out on a limb with personal pronouncements about why I have not managed to have a large show in a major museum in the States.” But Sascha Feldman, a director at Hicks’s New York gallery, Sikkema Jenkins, is less diplomatic. She says the omission “reflects so badly on the priorities of U.S. institutions.” She’s right.
What about Joan Jonas?

In 2015, Jonas, for decades a leading light of video, performance and installation art, became the sixth woman to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale. She was the subject of a show the previous year at HangarBicocca, a major contemporary museum in Milan.

Tate Modern in London opened a Jonas retrospective this month. It will travel to Munich and Porto, but, so far, America’s biggest museums have looked the other way.

"I don’t have a real answer," said Jonas, 81, when I asked her why she thought this was so. “It’s a continuation of the fact that women have been marginalized. It makes me sad. I’d love to have my work shown in that way in my own country.”

And then there is Lynda Benglis, now 76. She has been known and admired in the art world for decades. She influenced Cindy Sherman. She invented dramatic, large-scale sculptures in surprising materials (including, most memorably, poured polyurethane foam with phosphorescent pigment) that can make the likes of Richard Serra, Anish Kapoor and Matthew Barney look timid. Like Hicks and Jonas, she has carved out a genuinely original idiom.

She was given a retrospective back in 2009–2010, that began in Dublin and ended up in Providence, R.I., at the RISD Museum of Art, and then New York’s New Museum, which organized it. Both RISD and the New Museum are respectable institutions, to be sure. But neither is quite on the level of MoMA, the Art Institute of Chicago, or LACMA.
Benglis sees the issue as “an old story.”

“I’ve tried to avoid complaints,” she says, “because they might slow down positive actions.” She looks forward to a world, she says, “that continues to increase recognitions based on talent and experience.”

Another figure to wonder about is Mary Heilmann, the great California painter — a phenomenal colorist, whose laconic work fizzes with ideas. The New Museum also organized a Heilmann retrospective in 2008, and it traveled to the Orange County Museum of Art. But that was 10 years ago. Heilmann is now 78 and still far from being a household name.

Perhaps she never will be. But as with Jonas and Hicks, her case suggests that, when it comes to recognizing the accomplishments of senior American female artists, Europe’s leading institutions are often ahead of major U.S. museums: London’s Whitechapel Gallery gave Heilmann a full-scale retrospective two years ago. Nothing comparable is in the works in the United States.
Why does any of this matter?

“It’s not that these women aren’t having important shows,” Andrea Schwan, a publicist who has worked on shows devoted to many of these figures, wrote in an email. “It’s that the titan institutions remain more or less inaccessible to them while they are still alive.”

Jonas is hopeful about prospects for women artists in the long term.

“When I went to art school, there were no female teachers,” she said. “People today are bending over backward to find female artists who were forgotten or neglected. So I do feel things are changing. But it’s very slow.”

Citing the argument of the late Linda Nochlin, a feminist art historian, in her landmark essay, “Why Are There No Great Women Artists?,” Jonas says the responsibility rests with art institutions. But even within art institutions, she says, “it comes down to what individual curators are interested in.”

Hicks concurs. Artists like her must rely, she says, on “individual, inspired curators” navigating their way “through the museum corridors” and persuading museum directors and boards to favor their projects. As much as gender, she thinks, it comes down to fashion. “Political message bearers,” she says, “are presently in favor.” (Her work is different.)

For any artist, a retrospective at a major institution still functions as a sort of apotheosis. It presents an opportunity to bask in one’s achievement, to reflect on obstacles overcome. And it brings with it more tangible rewards. Demand for an artist’s work inevitably increases in the wake of such shows — and after a lifetime of financial uncertainty, that can count for a lot.

That said, for those who are in their 70s or 80s, and who have been putting their whole creative being on the line for half a century or more — forging a new visual language, cultivating ideas, battling neglect, condescension, self-doubt and all the ordinary vexations of daily life — I suspect it probably isn’t about the money. It is about getting the recognition they merit, the homecoming they deserve.