Women’s Art Is Every Kind of Art

Action painting, textiles, photography — any medium female artists have tried, they’ve excelled in. Now an exhibition in Boston is giving them credit.

Julianne McShane | 12 March 2020

An installation view of “Women Take the Floor,” from left: a video of Porsha Olayiwola reciting her poem “what is the suffrage movement to a blk womyn? an anthem”, Sylvia Sleigh’s “Rosemary Mayer,” 1978; Genevive Huston’s “Woman in Yellow,” 1940; Frida Kahlo’s “Dos mujeres [Salvadora y Herminia],” 1928; Andrea Bowers’s “Trans Liberation: Building a Movement [Cece McDonald],” 2016. Credit...Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
By 1973, Linda Nochlin was a famed feminist art historian, but a portrait of her from that year at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, highlights another, equally important role she held: as a mother.

In a painting by the American artist Alice Neel, full of broad brush strokes and vibrant colors, Nochlin looms large as a matriarch, her wide eyes confronting the viewer head-on, as she protectively envelops her daughter, Daisy, who — like her mother — stares out expectantly from the canvas.

The portrait is among the first visitors to the M.F.A. see when they enter “Women Take the Floor,” an exhibition, through May 3, 2021, that features 200 mixed-media works by more than 100 women over the past century. (The museum announced on Thursday that it was closing over concerns about the coronavirus.) It’s a fitting introduction to a show that interrogates the historic exclusion and devaluation of women in the art world — an appeal Nochlin put forth in her now-classic, 1971 essay that the exhibition cites: “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”

As Nonie Gadsden, the exhibition’s chief curator and the museum’s senior curator of decorative arts and sculpture, put it: “If we’re not showing them in our museum galleries, if we’re not teaching them in our classrooms, how are these names going to get to the point of being a Jackson Pollock that people want to come see?”

Underrepresentation of female artists is a problem many institutions share. Women account for only 13 percent of artists represented at 18 major museums across the country, including the M.F.A., according to a study published last year in the online journal PLOS One.

The M.F.A. has accepted women’s works into its collection since its founding 150 years ago, when the Arts and Crafts movement unfolded here. (Those pieces are the focus of “Boston Made: Arts and Crafts Jewelry and Metalwork,” through January.) But female-identifying artists have represented only 5 percent of the M.F.A.’s acquisitions in the last decade.

The seven galleries of “Women Take the Floor” — divided into themes like landscape and action painting, textiles, printmaking and photography and abstraction — were meant to fix this oversight. Works were pulled from the museum’s collection as well as private collections, the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Danforth Art Museum in Framingham, Mass.

Alice Neel’s “Linda Nochlin and Daisy,” 1973, oil on canvas. Credit...The Estate of Alice Neel; via David Zwirner; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Lois Mailou Jones’s “Ubi Girl from Tai Region,” 1972, Acrylic on canvas. Credit...Lois Mailou Jones Pierre-Noel Trust; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

“She,” photographs by Lorna Simpson, questions traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. Credit...Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

But creating a show that intertwined stories of women’s artistic omission and success proved to be more difficult than the team of eight curators expected, Ms. Gadsden said.
“It’s a great idea that comes with tons of baggage — the baggage being that not everyone agrees with separating women artists,” she said.

“Some people think it’s tokenism and implies that women can’t hold their own against their equivalent male artists, ” she added. “ Others say it’s a necessary corrective after years of gender discrimination in museums, the academy, the marketplace and galleries.”

Then there was the matter of perpetuating gender binaries by staging an exhibition with “women” in the title — just six months after the museum debuted “Gender Bending Fashion,” a show that featured clothing from designers who have upended the rules of dress.

But sly works like “She,” a 1992 piece by Lorna Simpson, question traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. While the title implies the subject is a woman, the four photographs crop out the face of the model, whose brown suit and body language — spread legs and hands splayed across the upper thighs — suggest the sitter is a man.

From left: Olga de Amaral’s “Strata II,” 2007; Sheila Hicks’s “Bamian,” 1968; Ruth Asawa’s “Untitled (S 407),” c. 1952; Kay Sekimachi’s “Amiyose V,” 1986.Credit...Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

In the photography gallery, rotating works by the Moroccan-born artist Lalla Essaydi incorporate Islamic calligraphy, a sacred art form dominated by men in part because of the training required to master it. In “Converging Territories #30,” currently on view, Essaydi inscribed it on her models’ clothing, bodies and surroundings with henna, a decorative dye traditionally applied by women. The four women and girls pictured are in a house where female
members of Essaydi’s family — including Essaydi — were locked in isolation, sometimes weeks at a time, for disobedient acts like entering spaces impermissible to women.

“These women ‘speak’ through the language of femininity to each other and to their house of confinement, just as my photographs have enabled me to speak,” Essaydi has written of the series.

The gallery “Beyond the Loom: Fiber as Sculpture” showcases artists like the German-born Anni Albers, who defied traditional notions of weaving as “women’s work,” using textiles as forms of resistance and modern art to create large-scale, sculptural pieces in the 1960s and ‘70s. Also included is the Colombian artist Olga de Amaral, whose 2007 piece, “Strata II,” puts a twist on her country’s indigenous weaving traditions. Composed of shimmering, cascading woven strips of linen painted with gold metal leaf, which evoke rays of sunlight, the piece looks as fit for Studio 54 as it does for a museum.

After World War II, action painting — also known as Abstract Expressionism — emerged as a radical new art form after a pair of leading New York art critics, Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, put the works of Jackson Pollock and his male contemporaries on the map. But in doing so, the critics and the artists overshadowed the contributions of female artists, according to Ms. Gadsden.

“Art was considered something that was a little more feminine — to sell the concept of this, these guys had to make it macho,” she said.

The “Women of Action” gallery attempts to fill in some of those omissions, featuring “Sunspots,” a 1963 painting by Lee Krasner, who was married to Pollock. Krasner painted the canvas with a broken arm — serving as proof of her artistic obsession, according to Ms. Gadsden — resulting in the small, thick yellow and brown dabs that distinguish the piece from the typically longer brush strokes that came to define Krasner’s style. When she wasn’t painting, Krasner promoted her husband’s career and didn’t receive recognition for her own work until after Pollock’s death in 1956, when she was in her 50s.
“Bacchus #46,” 1982, by Elaine de Kooning, acrylic on canvas. Credit: Elaine de Kooning Trust; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Carmen Herrera’s “Blanco y Verde (#1),” 1962, acrylic on canvas. Credit: Carmen Herrera; via Lisson Gallery; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
The same holds true for Elaine de Kooning, who was married to Dutch-American artist Willem de Kooning. Her 1982 painting, “Bacchus #46” — an interplay of broad strokes of blues and greens — is featured in the gallery, along with a text from de Kooning that reveals the pervasiveness of gender discrimination in the art world.

“I can remember as a student, [my teacher, painter Hans Hoffmann] coming up one day to whatever I had on the canvas, and his saying … 'This is so good you wouldn’t know a woman did it.' Well, I had to go deep down and think about that one,” she wrote.

The theme of women’s art being underappreciated until late in their lives or after their deaths emerged while Ms. Gadsden was curating the show. The Cuban abstract artist Carmen Herrera was 101 when she had her first major retrospective at the Whitney in 2016.

“There’s been this amazing consistency that we saw over and over again that a lot of women artists had to live really long to get recognition during their lifetimes,” Ms. Gadsden said. “People are now searching out to rectify these stories that were ignored for way too long.”