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Events & Exhibits

WOMEN ARTISTS IN WILLIAMSBURG BROOKLYN Celebrating Women's History Month

By James Baldwin Cohen

The "Women Forward" show in Brooklyn, NY is carefully put together with intelligence and fine aesthetic judgment. The curator of the show is Yuko Nii. Besides being a painter, she is also the Founder and Artistic Director of the Williamsburg Art & Historical Center (the "WAH Center"). She has developed the WAH Center over a period of some 12 years into what may become one of the major not-for profit art institutions in New York City.



The Center wall with Faith Ringgold and Judy Chicago's works

For "Women Forward," Yuko has chosen four internationally renowned artists as "special guest artists" to head the line-up of a total of 32 artists in this two part show. These guests include Judy Chicago, Faith Ringgold, Toshiko Takaezu and celebrity Yoko Ono, those artists "for whom I hold deep appreciation and respect for having paved the bright path for the younger generations of women artists" as Yuko stated in the catalogue essay. And she goes on to say, "in producing this show I hope to help wear down the continuing resistance to women artists." These four vanguards of established artists saw Yuko's clear and convincing vision of "a barrier-free world" in which men and women can appreciate each other's talents

Special Guest Artists



Judy Chicago : Caroline Herschel Test Plate (Early #2), 1975-78, China Paint on Porcelain, 14" diameter



Faith Ringgold : Jazz Stories: Mama Can Sing, Papa

regardless of gender, race and religious backgrounds, and they were willing to spearhead the support for her "Women Forward" show. The participating artists are of various ages from different cultural backgrounds, expressing their artistic visions with multiple media. Just as New York City offers a wide variety of international cuisine, this show offers a smorgasbord of women's art today with international scope - a timely demonstration of the current "globalization" concept being actualized in the New York art world. This unique show, I believe, is the first major initiative for women in the arts for this century



The left side of the gallery scene

Yuko divided the women artists into two parts, the Part 1 group (artists born before 1950) with their show running from March 7th to April 12th, and the Part 2 group (artists born after 1950) whose exhibit runs from April 25th through May 31st. The four "special guest artists" works are shown in both shows. Besides telling of her own personal experiences as a woman artist in pursuing her art career in the male dominated art world of the 60's and 70's, Yuko had each artist make their own statement in a very well articulated and beautiful 96 page full color catalogue. Her idea with these two groups was to compare the experiences and attitudes of two different generations of women artists. This informative read reveals that although the first group had to struggle with the hardships and barriers against women in the arts - they were discouraged and ignored as artists in both the art schools and in the gallery world - the younger generation is experiencing a more receptive circumstance, finding balance and fairness. However, as Yuko points out in the catalogue essay, women are still vastly underrepresented in collections in major museums, galleries and at art fairs, as the statistics show in New York Magazine's article "Where are all the Women?," November 26, 2007:

- MoMA: 5-8 % women artists , 92% -95% men on

Can Blow #5: You Put the Devil In Me, 2004, Acrylic on Canvas with fabric pieced border, 84" x 70"



Toshiko Takaezu : left - Anagama, 1996, Stoneware, 25"h x 12" diameter, middle- Untitled, n.d., Stoneware, 16.5"h x 7" diameter, right - Moon, n.d., Stoneware, 22" x 22"

From the Part 1 show



Janet Fish, Guacamole, 2006, Oil on canvas, 36" x 56"

view between 2004 to present.

- The Whitney Museum: 15% women, 85% men in the permanent collection.
- The Frick collection: 1% women, 99% men.
- The 2007 Venice Biennale: 24 % women, 76% men.
- Art Basel Miami: 27% women, 73 % men.

Judy Chicago who is a founder of the Feminist Art Movement in the 1970's has a number of great works in the show, including Serigraphs, Prismacolor on Black Arches, and Ceramic works. I especially liked the B/W work, "And She Vomited Up the Sun and the Moon and Then the Night Had Its Own Light." One of the ceramic pieces is a test plate for her famous 39 plate "Dinner Party," now on permanent display at the Brooklyn Museum's Sackler Center for Feminist Art.

Faith Ringgold is represented by a series of Serigraphs, acrylic on paper, and also one of her signature large painted story quilts displayed on the central wall in the gallery-- art that combines painting, quilted fabric and storytelling.

Then there is Toshiko Takaezu, long time personal friend and mentor of Yuko, whose spiritual and elegant ceramic work is a profound and quiet voice amidst the other artists, a counterpoint of Zen spirit.



Yoko Ono : Imagine Peace with 24 black & white buttons with "imagine peace" in 24 different languages forming the circular PEACE symbol

Yoko Ono's world famous "Imagine Peace" is displayed on a white fabric on the first floor and another on a black fabric in the 2nd floor gallery. On both are a printed placard saying "Imagine Peace" along with 24 black and white round buttons with the words 'imagine peace' in 24 different languages forming the circular **peace** symbol.

Janet Fish's paintings have a transparent lucidity that



Samia Halaby, Mother of Palestine, Women of Palestine Series, 2005, Acrylic on canvas, 85" x 72"



Kunie Sugiura, <after "Electric Dress" Bp>, 2001 Gelatin silver photograph, 69" x 44.75"

From the Part 2 show

make one think of stained glass. Her landscapes and still other landscapist, to my mind, can duplicate.

Samia Halaby, a Palestinian artist, makes a bold blast of color and dynamic form in her work. It stands out as a work of intellect and spiritual strength.

Kunie Sugiura's large black and white photographic work is isolated in the small gallery away from the main gallery. This is appropriately so because her work invites quiet meditation. The "modified" photos speak about beauty and life, woman and nature. My first reaction to the work was that this was contemporary **Sumie** brush painting, and I was surprised to discover that they were actually photos. The most moving piece is a full-length figure of a woman entwined with lights, light streaming through her body. She is a chrysalis metamorphosing into that glorious thing, not a woman and a human being, but an angel of light and beauty.

The show contains innovative applications of media as with Cyntiha Winika's use of mushrooms, Carol Quint's unthinkable use for chicken bones to create expressive small sculpture pieces, Gloria Kennedy's stoneware for the geometrical "Kent Strip" tiles and elegant representations of Ashanti Royalty's body motifs, and finally Liz Biddle's "primal and organic" ceramic pieces.

A traditional media artist, Donna Moran's Serigraph is modernist/abstract. The Serigraph is normally good for achieving a flat surface. However, her work looks more like abstract expressionist painting, creating great depth and dynamic movements by applying many layers of colored ink with agitated brush-like gestural strokes. Another traditional media artist, Regina Granne's oil painting looks more like color pencil drawing. One of her works is a large oil painting appearing to be a collage on grey paper - the subject matter being about WAR Games, telling the story of our current age.

Hildy Burns creates various "book art" works, some being three dimensional pop-ups and some being bound folding books with multitudinous pages of collage works with provocative images cut from magazines or photographs. Some works use quiet, peaceful abstract images.

Carmen Porfido's exquisite and painstaking embroidery works are charming, delightful and colorful storytelling pictures.

Amy Greenfield, the highly regarded award winning independent film maker, presented several excellent

life's remarkably emanate light in a way that no



Rodriguez Calero (RoCa), Free Style, 2006, Collage, 11.25" x 14.25"



Alexandra Limpert. I, 2006 (detail),, Steel & electromechanics, 69" x 21" x 29"



Olek 100% Acrylic 06.03.06,, 2006, Mixed-media installation/performance art

short films in both B/W and color spanning 35 years of her career. The cinematic effect in both "Element" and "Tides" are simply superb. In one, images of woman struggling in wet mud reminded me of the old Japanese film "Woman in the Dunes." That film was juxtaposed with another film of a woman surrendering to natural laws of ocean waves.

When I saw Part 2, the show of the younger generation, I was astounded that both shows, Part 1 and Part 2, are of equally superb quality.

The first thing you see when you walk into the main gallery is a big splat of color in the middle of the room. Yes, the younger generation has struck, youthful and energetic. That big blast of color is the work of Olek, a young Polish conceptual artist who has used what is traditionally a woman's craft, crocheting, to knit coverings over furniture, people, pets, TV's and ...GET OUT OF THE WAY, or she might start knitting over you! It is like the unstoppable, incredible BLOB eating everything in sight. On the TV Screen we see a video of a person covered in knitted net, a drama of the creature struggling - virtual soap opera...stayed tuned until tomorrow and see if he or she can get out of the situation...conceptually off the wall and up the spout.

Equally energetic are the collage social statements of Puerto Rican artist Rodriguez Calero (RoCa). These collages depict energetic free-style urban youth as distorted juxtaposed figures dancing wildly or flying up into the air to loud Rap music. Contrasting with her collage works, there are two "acollage paintings," with depressing grey and dark colored backgrounds with stiff and still human figures, evoking psychological fear of imprisonment where no escape is possible.

Israeli sculptress Nivi Alroy's juxtaposed wood contraptions are metaphorical statements about our crazy world. They demand attention, saying "things constantly change and transform, nothing is stable."

An Iranian artist, Bahar Behbahani's large painting of purplish gray tones looks like "Monet's water lilies meets Whistler's ocean storm." But the message is a dark one with faceless human figures, sitting together on a couch, having lost human communication.

A Korean installation artist, Soojung Hyun's conceptual work stands out with their original use of materials. One uses women's high heel shoes spraying out lights by means of optical fiber, and another is a standing white box filled with white flowers. Looking carefully, one discovers that these delicate daffodil-like white flowers are made with sanitary napkins for petals and small lit yellow colored light bulbs for the stamens. The small mixed-media drawings are also remarkable.

A Venezuelan sculptress, Leonor Mendoza's work stands as solid craftsmanship and well thought out concept. She is an artist who understands her tools and knows how to use surprisingly unthinkable materials combining steel, resin, wood and thread and otherwise seemingly incompatible materials.

The works of Chinese artist Fei Cui and Argentinian artist Andrea Cukier are placed alongside each other in the gallery. The works of both are quiet meditations. Yes, the young can be spiritual too, it seems, contradicting what we sometimes think of the younger generation. Fei's work is conceptually innovative, using things like tendrils, dry twigs, pins and thorns on rice paper, which appear to be hieroglyphs or Chinese characters, writing a language of elegance and simplicity. Andréa's work is a traditional medium, watercolor,



Kumi Yamashita, Seated Woman 2008, Light, wood, shadow, the wooden object on the wall, lit from below, casts a silhouette of a figure 48"h x 36" w X4" d

somewhat abstract, yet clearly representing ponds and gardens most eloquently, using just a few colors amidst a dominating green. One almost feels the moistness in the air, sitting quietly near a pond or river and one can hear the ever-quiet sound of water running. One is in tune with nature. Yes, it is "Perfect Tranquility." Not everything has to be innovative to be great. Great artists also work in traditional ways. That is something the art world has to come to accept and appreciate.

Yupin Pramotepipop from Thailand is the traditional master sculptress in the show with her magnificent life-size, classically posed figures made of Hydrocal. Standing across from Yupin's work are the full-scale futurist electro-mechanized steel framework figures of American sculptress Alexandra Limpert. Like something out of Isaac Asimov's "I, Robot," Limpert's "mechanized men" stare across Olek's colorful knitted field at the meditative classical human figures of Yupin.

Shan Shan Sheng's gigantic glasswork is striking. They have pure deep-blue, green and yellow colors against the light from the window and are impressive. She uses the forms of the ancient Chinese traditional music bell or the small Chinese drinking cup, enlarging the sizes to make them monumental.

An American painter, Irene Harwicke Olivieri's work shows another innovative unique use of material. She paints on found objects like large wooden rising bowls and chopping boards. Irene writes out entire stories in the artwork to accompany her pictures of birds, insects and also a person.

In the small gallery with black curtains on the window and the entrance, making the entire room dark, we find the work of Japanese artist Kumi Yamashita. Her work is magical and mysterious. By cutting a jagged abstract hole in a piece of wood and projecting light from beneath it, a shadow figure appears on the wall of a young girl sitting. This makes me think of Plato's theory that we are all reflections of perfect ideas. Another work is a portrait made by wrapping one continuous black thread around brads. I have seen nothing like it. Her creative work makes me wonder what kind of brain this artist has, how she views the world, and from where she gets the inspiration to achieve the final product.

A French artist, Elodie Lauten, a multimedia artist, is a creative force in several dimensions. She not only writes music (including avant garde opera), but also orchestrates the entire production of those operas. Additionally she makes installations, drawings, collages, video animations and digital art. Samples of her genius are in this show and are very exciting to see. Elodie's highly sophisticated use of today's advanced technology has opened a new dimension in the art world. Her curious and alert mind restlessly searches for a new language for art.

Another American filmmaker, Elle Burchill, shows five videos on the first floor. Her work is so intriguing that you will want to sit through the films at least twice. One film, "Demolition" is a surreal nightmare in which a seemingly monumental apartment building, having served families for many years, is being destroyed by a monstrous and brutal machine. Yes, nothing is permanent; sadly we are here for only a brief time. Contrasting with the dusty demolition scene, the "Mother Daughter" film takes place at the bottom of a swimming pool. And Burchill's Coney Island "Wonder Lust" entertains us with fascinating and exciting kinetic effects.



The right side of the gallery scene

I admire Yuko Nii's ability to select excellent works of art in many media, both large and small scale, and with a variety of styles and expressions. She installed them beautifully allowing each work enough breathing space to be felt and understood without competing with other works. For, each artists work is a testimony and statement that must be considered on its individual merits.

The show "Women forward" is an artistic and intellectual triumph, convincingly stating that women in the arts cannot be ignored. This show will be remembered.

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