

Who Are the Great Women Artists?

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Thirty years ago, *ARTnews* published an essay arguing that social forces had impeded women artists from becoming as great as the male masters. We asked experts if the consensus has changed—and how
by Ann Landi

In January 1971, in the pages of this magazine, art historian Linda Nochlin published an essay titled "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" It was a provocative, lengthy, and wide-ranging examination of women's status, past and present, which commenced with the author's "open-minded wonderment that women, despite so many years of near-equality . . . have still not achieved anything of exceptional significance in the visual arts." There "are no equivalents for Michelangelo or Rembrandt, Delacroix or Cézanne, Picasso or Matisse, or even in very recent times, for de Kooning or Warhol." In the course of her critique, Nochlin examined what she called "a vast dark bulk of shaky *idées reçues* about the nature of art"—including the notion that women's art making is somehow different from men's—and ascribed these to the conditions under which women trained until the end of the 19th century, the romantic idea of genius, and "the fairy tale of the Boy Wonder." Her underlying plea was for a closer evaluation of the social structures surrounding the production of art, "be they art academies, systems of patronage, mythologies of the divine creator, artist as he-man or social outcast."



Cindy Sherman is a standout for most critics. Here she poses in *Untitled Film Still #7, 1978*, characteristically appropriating characters and narratives.

Courtesy Metro Pictures, New York

The essay became something of an instant classic, widely read and argued, and it remains, as the *Nation's* art critic Arthur Danto notes, "beautifully well reasoned—Linda wrote like a philosopher." Perhaps it was not the single well-aimed shot that touched off a revolution in art history, museum exhibitions, and art criticism, as well as in the number of significant women artists working today, but like Tom Paine's *Common Sense* during the American Revolution, it became a seminal document for its times.

Now, more than 30 years later, we wondered how many of Nochlin's observations remained valid and how they influenced the discourse on art in the academy, in the museums, and in the marketplace. Given the kind of full-scale museum showcases granted major women artists in recent years—Louise Bourgeois, Artemisia Gentileschi, Berthe Morisot, Mary Cassatt, Joan Mitchell, and currently at the Frick Collection, Ann Vallayer-Coster—is it time to reconsider Nochlin's verdict on greatness? What changes have taken place in the way we think about art history since her essay was published? And is it possible to point to some Girl Wonders in our present moment? Among the curators, critics, and art historians interviewed, there was, naturally, a diversity of opinion, but also a consensus that the essay remains an important historic contribution, still capable of stirring up fervent passions. (Nochlin herself declined to comment for this story.)

"By choosing to say there were no great women artists, Nochlin provoked us all to look again, to reexamine, and to reevaluate, and with every justification, include those women artists that we had overlooked," comments Ruth Appelhof, director of the Guild Hall Museum in East Hampton, New York, site of a recent exhibition of art from the heyday of feminism.

And yet, "even when you pay more attention to those careers that shouldn't have been lost in the great shuffle of art history, it doesn't necessarily mean that our estimation of the work increases," notes Marla Prather, curator of postwar art at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Have our opinions of the "greatness" of Gentileschi, Morisot, or Mitchell changed since they received the red-carpet treatment at major institutions? Some emphatically say no; others aren't so sure. "Maybe Morisot is elevated a few notches, but she's not Manet," says Prather. "However much one might have admired Artemisia Gentileschi," says Colin C. Bailey, chief curator at the Frick Collection, "I thought the exhibition at the Metropolitan showed conclusively that she was nowhere near as good as her father, and nowhere near as good as Caravaggio or Rubens, who were painting at the same moment."

At a certain level in the debate the choices can become intensely idiosyncratic. "Just talking over these issues with female colleagues, it's interesting to see how personal it all is," says Prather. For Anne Dawson, a professor of art history at Eastern Connecticut State University, artists like Morisot and Gentileschi belong right up there in the pantheon. "Artemisia was, in my opinion, an absolutely great painter and, in fact, her *Judith Decapitating Holofernes* of 1620 is even greater than Caravaggio's," she maintains. "If you put Morisot beside Manet, her painting was much more radical, but it was talked about in different terms." One way of addressing (or perhaps graciously evading) the issue of such judgments in present times, notes Prather, lies in the simple practical allocation of square footage in the temples of art. At the Whitney, "we advocate Joan Mitchell the way we advocate the work of Sol LeWitt, and give them the same amount of space."

Other art historians say Nochlin's judgments still apply. "I have very high standards for great artists," says Robert Rosenblum, professor of modern European art at New York University and a curator at the Guggenheim. "Every historical survey I've done has had a lot of women artists in it, but none of them is great the way Picasso is great, the way Cézanne is great. And that is true of the majority of men artists." Adds Danto: "Linda's overall point is right. She was talking about the history of art, the history of the representational tradition, when the great figures basically emerged. Yet even in the 20th century, when greatness is not dependent on anatomical proficiency, there was no female Picasso, or even a female Jackson Pollock."

Younger art historians, of what might be considered a more politically correct bent, are in favor of relaxing admission to the the canon. "I never talk about artists being great," says Frances K. Pohl, a professor of art history at Pomona College in Claremont, California, and the author of a survey of American art, *Framing America*. "Because in the post-Nochlin years, we've been sensitized to this notion of what constitutes greatness—how do you define it, how do you justify it?" Part of the problem seems to lie in the judgments of what critic Robert Hughes once dubbed "the pale penis people," white males with a bias toward European culture. "If men are defining greatness, it's less likely that female painters are going to fit the bill," notes Dawson.

And defining "greatness"—and its indispensable sidekick, "genius"—goes to the heart of the issue. Nochlin sidestepped explanation in her essay, noting only that "genius . . . is thought of as an atemporal and mysterious power somehow embedded in the person of the Great Artist." For Danto, greatness has almost the force of a "religious disclosure. It's not totally easy to define, but you know you're in the presence of something powerful being opened up."

The constant reshuffling of art history makes greatness all the more difficult to pinpoint, and the present moment leaves some in a pessimistic mood. "Of course, I think Cindy Sherman is a great artist," says critic and writer Dave Hickey. "But I don't think that's a matter of much cultural consequence, because, well, we judge greatness by its consequences, and the art of the last 40 years has no consequences.

"You can probably assign some very serious consequences to Cubism or to Abstract Expressionism or to Pop art," Hickey continues, "but in general, it's not a very serious endeavor at the moment. Why worry about greatness when we purportedly have abolished the meritocracy?"

Nochlin claimed that women's failure to have attained greatness lay "not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles or our empty internal spaces, but in our institutions and our educations—education understood to include everything that happens to us from the moment we enter this world of meaningful symbols, signs and signals."

Speaking of her own period of expertise, the Renaissance, Rutgers University art historian Rona Goffen notes that it was virtually impossible for a female Michelangelo to emerge: "Women did not have the opportunity to be trained as artists or to apprentice with a master," she explains. And this situation prevailed—if not through systems of apprenticeship, then through limited access to art classes in general and life drawing in particular—through the end of the 19th century.

As for equality today, Hickey points out that while "in academia, in museums, and everywhere, the playing field is relatively flat, it is *not* flat at the top—the level of department chairs, deans, museum directors. That's still the old-time boys' club, with very few exceptions," and that clearly affects women's stature.

Nevertheless, says Nancy Spector, curator of contemporary art at the Guggenheim, "on the whole, women's presence in the art world is much healthier than it was 30 years ago." She adds, "I don't know whether resuscitating people like Berthe Morisot matters as much as showing artists like Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, and Adrian Piper, who have done breakthrough work. There are so many excellent women who have risen to the top." Prather wonders, "Do women here in New York have the

same kind of access that men do? It's hard to argue that they don't." And yet, she notes, in terms of acquisitions and exhibitions and auction prices, male artists can still claim the lead.

And what of female "geniuses" emerging in our own midst? Most observers are reluctant to name names. Says Prather, "We can't ask that question today of contemporaries. It's not legitimate with careers that aren't done." But a few women artists do crop up repeatedly in dancing around the notion: most notably Bourgeois, Sherman, and Maya Lin. Says Rosenblum: "I would put my hand in the fire for Jenny Saville, Mariko Mori, and Cindy Sherman." Spector believes that if Eva Hesse had lived longer, "we'd be talking about her the way we talk about Bruce Nauman today."

Ultimately Nochlin's essay and the work of other art historians have sparked broad revisions in scholarship and teaching. "Survey books now include women artists who simply weren't recognized before," says Goffen. "So there's a whole new curriculum." And the museums have not been slow to take note.

On the contemporary front, conditions seem to have evolved to the point where a worthy woman artist has as much access as a man. As Laura Hoptman, curator of contemporary art at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, observes, the situation is "provable in museum exhibitions, acquisitions, and also in the publishing record of contemporary art—that is, the monographs that are generated by women and about women. Those are conventional temperature-taking devices, empirical statistics that you can check."

But, Hoptman emphasizes, the change in women's status also "has to do with the very changed ways we look at our field, not as a monolithic story that has to be told and retold, but as a series of stories. You look at the object in the context of the moment in which it is produced—not only who produced it and what she was thinking, but where she lived, who she was hanging out with, what schools she went to, whether she was rich or poor, whether she was making work for her boudoir or was going to sell it, whether it was a commission—all of those wonderful things that are now necessary to think about when you look at art."

Hoptman, who, with Lynn Zelevansky, curated a 1998–99 exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art on Yayoi Kusama, explains how working with Kusama was so much about "seeing a Japanese woman artist in the most macho culture possible—New York, circa 1960." She recalls how "Kusama used her craziness to scare the pants off everybody, and that was enormously important. She was excised from the history of art, and of course now she's been reinserted." Besides Kusama, whom she calls "a great,

great artist," Hoptman mentions Lee Bontecou, noting that she's having a major retrospective at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art, opening in February 2004, as well as Hesse. Alanna Heiss, pioneering founder and director of New York's P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, explains how she tried to think of different "structural ways" to consider the status of women today and how to evaluate it. "One was through financial power and one was through social clusters—those were two factors. Not what proportion of women are artists," she points out.

The economic issue involves not just how much people earn for their work but how much they pay to make their art. "I've put together a list," Heiss says, that "is not only about artists who make good work but women who are blue-chip." She includes here "Marina Abramovic (because of the cost involved in production of her pieces—she's able to command sums to produce pieces that would not have been thinkable in the 1970s), Cindy Sherman, Ann Hamilton, Kiki Smith, Annette Messager, Pipilotti Rist, Caterina Severding (who's hugely influential and valuable in Europe), Cecily Brown, Rachel Whiteread, and Elizabeth Murray." She then adds to this "blue-chip" list Nan Goldin, Susan Rothenberg, Pat Steir, Sam Taylor-Wood, and Bourgeois. "We're talking about people who have an active command of financial resources in the art community."

Another way to look at success, Heiss notes, is in terms of gangs. "My theory," Heiss says, "about the ability to gain exhibition possibilities and access to a larger audience has a lot to do with gangs—clusters of people who spend time together, work together, exchange ideas, exhibit together." She notes two or three such groups that have been controlled by women in the last 20 years: the British gang, which includes Sarah Lucas, Whiteread, Taylor-Wood, Tracey Emin, and Mona Hatoum ("And think how powerful that gang is," she says); and another, little, gang, "not a prime-time gang," consisting of artists like Rineke Dijkstra and Anna Gaskell. "There was a New York branch and a British branch—girls taking photographs of girls, generally in adolescence," Heiss observes. "But then you look at the original Great Girl artists who were completely nongang-related and you have Bourgeois and Kusama."

So on every front—in the academy and the marketplace, the studios and the museums—it seems we are approaching a level playing field. But as Nancy Spector reminds us, "There are generations of younger women artists who don't necessarily recognize or understand the struggles that previous generations fought." Clearly, we've come a long way.

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