



LUCID GESTURES

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An Exhibition of Barnard Alumnae



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The Problem of the Overlooked Female Artist: An Argument For Enlivening a Stale Model of Discussion

Ashton Cooper

Very recently I was told that a certain art magazine editor, who had edited the feminist critique out of a review I had written, “can only take so much feminism.” At the time, I was infuriated that someone who is hypothetically tasked with shaping the way art is discussed, would take such an explicit and condescending stance against gender equality. With art world professionals like him hoping that feminism would just go away, it feels necessary to be supportive of any museum exhibitions, gallery shows, market successes, or media attention given to women artists. However, even when it seems like we might be getting it right (4 out of 7 Tate solo exhibitions will go to women in 2015! The Hole devotes a show to “Future Feminism!” Tracey Emin’s *My Bed* sells for \$4.3 million!), something is still amiss.

As my first professional experience has been as a writer and editor for a company that owns two art magazines and an art-centric website, I can attest to the fact that art journalism is in no way immune from conventions that ostensibly champion women artists, but in fact perpetuate problematic narratives about them—tropes so prevalent, even I have found myself operating within them. In particular, I’m thinking of the widespread myth of the “overlooked,” “forgotten,” and/or “rediscovered” female artist.

Of course, much of my mindset as regards women’s places in art history I owe to my time at Barnard—and specifically, to two experiences that irrevocably shaped the way I understand the discipline’s inherent power structures. The first was at the beginning of my sophomore year, nine months in as the *Columbia Daily Spectator*’s Art Editor, when I did an interview with the Guerrilla Girls.¹ In my conversation with founding member Frida Kahlo (the Girls take pseudonymous names for anonymity), she taught me that the art world is not, nor has it ever been, a meritocracy. It seems rudimentary now, but realizing that the best artists do not simply rise to the top based on the high quality of their work—without any consideration, say, of their genitalia—was crucial to developing my critical stance toward art.

The second was Rosalyn Deutsche’s “Feminism and Postmodernism,” a class that showed me the connection between images and the maintenance of sexual difference—how masculinism suppresses otherness and elevates the concept of the heroic alienated (or, “Genius Male”) artist, and how feminist artists have tried to produce different kinds of images as a challenge to Phallogentrism. I haven’t used the word seminal since.

Yet, the myth of meritocracy is still widely perpetuated in writing and discussions

¹ Ashton Cooper, “Guerrilla Girls speak on social injustice, radical art,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, September 22, 2010, accessed August 15, 2014.

about art. When it comes to the everyday written materials we consume about artists (here I am thinking about my daily glut of press releases, artist profiles, articles, and promotional materials), again and again the social and political forces that marginalize women artists are ignored.

To illustrate the fable of the Overlooked Female Artist, here is a small sampling of headlines from the past year:

From *The Guardian*: “Marlow Moss: forgotten art maverick;”²

From *The Independent*: “The woman in black: Mira Schendel is finally bursting on to the British art scene;”³

From *The Huffington Post*: “10 Drawings By Female Artists Whom History Has Underestimated;”⁴

From *The Wall Street Journal* on Maria Lassnig: “Retrospective Is Part of Late-Career Resurgence for 94-Year-Old;”⁵

From *W*: “Ahead of her Time: Artist Sarah Charlesworth is experiencing something of a revival.”⁶

And the trend isn’t exclusive to artists. From *The Daily Beast* on a writer: “The Rediscovered Genius of Muriel Spark.”⁷

Whether on the occasion of a late career exhibition or a bump in sales, again and again I have seen an eerily similar story structure parroted:

At long last, senior (or deceased) female artist gets the recognition she has deserved all along. Overlooked by the establishment for her entire life, she never stopped prodigiously toiling in obscurity and is finally being given her due.

At first these recognitions might seem laudable, even a continuation of the efforts of the Women’s Movement to dig into history and pull out disregarded women who have achieved remarkable things. But after reading several of these stories, a troubling pattern starts to emerge: this type of article does not truly advocate for women artists, but rather belatedly elevates women or minorities to the canon, instead of questioning canonicity itself.

Similar to Hollywood’s Strong Female Character (who, for all her kickass prowess, is not actually all that empowering—see: *The Matrix*’s Trinity), these at-long-last-glorified women artists are being vaunted as emblems of inclusion and steps toward gender equality, when, in fact, the stories that are being told about them are keeping our understanding

² Charles Darwent, “Marlow Moss: forgotten art maverick,” *The Guardian*, August 25, 2014, accessed August 15, 2014.

³ Holly Williams, “The woman in black: Mira Schendel is finally bursting on to the British art scene,” *The Independent*, August 31, 2013, accessed August 15, 2014.

⁴ Priscilla Frank, “10 Drawings By Female Artists Whom History Has Underestimated,” *The Huffington Post*, February 15, 2014, accessed August 15, 2014.

⁵ Mary M. Lane, “MoMA PS1 Shows ‘Body Awareness’ Artist Maria Lassnig: Retrospective Is Part of Late-Career Resurgence for 94-Year-Old,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 6, 2014, accessed August 15, 2014.

⁶ Nancy MacDonnell, “Ahead of her Time,” *W Magazine*, April 28, 2014, accessed August 15, 2014.

⁷ Lucy Scholes, “The Rediscovered Genius of Muriel Spark,” *The Daily Beast*, July 29, 2014, accessed August 15, 2014.

of women artists firmly grounded in a safe and schematic narrative.⁸ Removing all blame from the (white, male) writers of history, these articles justify the delay of recognition as a matter of taste: their work just didn't "catch on."

Take these excerpts from a *Wall Street Journal* profile of Louise Bourgeois from May of this year:

She met American art critic Robert Goldwater in 1938. They married and moved to New York and had three sons. She continued her art studies and befriended Abstract Expressionists like Willem de Kooning and Barnett Newman. Like them, she was interested in making psychically charged art, but her sculptures didn't catch on as quickly.

After her husband died in 1973, [...] she coped, as ever, by making art into the night.

In 1980, Mr. Gorovoy said he was working in a gallery when he convinced her to let him exhibit some of her drawings. The show proved a hit and he became her assistant. Two years later, the Museum of Modern Art gave her a retrospective that amounted to her debut on the international art scene. She was 71.⁹

The rhetoric surrounding these "rediscovered" artists excludes too much about the specifics of their lives and the sociopolitical contexts that have perpetuated their exclusion—not simply from notoriety, but also from market success and a place in art education. Instead of acknowledging these forces, we often say women artists were too unorthodox for their times. "She refused to court trends in the art world, and weathered decades of rejection from the Establishment," reads an August 2014 *Telegraph* obituary of Maria Lassnig.¹⁰ "Ultimately, she would be rewarded for sticking to her guns."

Moreover, all too often the stories of women's lives are forced into the age-old paradigm of the Genius Male Artist. When the mainstream art industry (here I am thinking of the MoMAs, Gagosians, and Tates of the world) finally does bestow its interest upon the Overlooked Female Artist, it forces her to fit into a tired story. The "genius" artist has toiled away for years until she is finally *found* or *discovered* by the boys' club. Unsurprisingly, there is often no discussion of the forces of exclusion faced by the female artist.

Here's another familiar story from a March 2014 *Guardian* article on Phyllida Barlow:

She's taught everyone from Martin Creed to Rachel Whiteread, but it's only now, at 70, that Barlow is getting her dues as an artist.

Barlow, who turns 70 this week, has spent her adult life making sculpture, enjoying her greatest success by far over the last 10 years.

She went on to the Slade until 1966, and then began teaching, and having children;

⁸ There are several great articles on the subject. I would suggest reading Sophia McDougall's "I hate Strong Female Characters," Tasha Robinson's "We're losing all our Strong Female Characters to Trinity Syndrome," Carina Chocano's "Tough, Cold, Terse, Taciturn and Prone to Not Saying Goodbye When They Hang Up the Phone," and Mallory Ortberg's "A Day In the Life of an Empowered Female Heroine" as a primer.

⁹ Kelly Crow, "An Early Peek Inside Louise Bourgeois's Townhouse," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 29, 2014, accessed August 15, 2014.

¹⁰ "Maria Lassnig: 'Blokes are advised to bring a helmet,'" *The Telegraph*, August 31, 2014, accessed August 15, 2014.

she and Peake have five in all. [...] In those days, she was working in total isolation. Since she started being represented by the gallery Hauser & Wirth a few years ago, her work has been sold. [...]

Barlow has weathered the fallow times, to be celebrated as one of the country's greatest sculptors, her career built on resilience, curiosity and commitment.¹¹

Not only does this narrative ignore that women were frequently raising children during their professional prime (hence a reason for "working in total isolation"), but it also fails to take into account that an artist must have some level of economic security in order to work in obscurity for years. Even an exclusionary narrative manages to only admit mostly white, upper- and middle-class women.

When it comes to perpetuating these stories, the official line put out by institutions and the articles written by the media go hand in hand. In just one example of a great many, here's MoMA on their upcoming Sturtevant retrospective:

As a woman making versions of the work of better-known male artists, she has passed almost unnoticed through the hierarchies of mid-century modernism and postmodernism, at once absent from these histories while nevertheless articulating their structures.

This exhibition is the first comprehensive survey in America of Sturtevant's 50-year career, and the only institutional presentation of her work organized in the United States since her solo show at the Everson Museum of Art in 1973.¹²

What infuriates me most about this press release is that MoMA at once shirks any culpability for allowing such an artist to pass "almost unnoticed" at the same time that the museum pats itself on the back for having the insight to give her a long overdue exhibition. Nor does MoMA address how an avant-garde-hungry market has seeped into museum programming and forced institutions to go back and find some women to glorify.

A quick perusal of the materials for the Tate's 2015 programming, which was praised by the Art Newspaper for putting "women artists first and foremost,"¹³ shows the same pitfalls. According to museum materials, Barbara Hepworth's retrospective will emphasize her "overlooked prominence in the international art world"¹⁴ and an Agnes Martin exhibition will "cover the full breadth of Martin's practice, reasserting her position as a key figure in the traditionally male-dominated fields of 1950s and 1960s abstraction."¹⁵

My intention here is not to call out museums or simplistic writing, but to point out the ways in which institutions and publications – both major and minor – are guilty of perpetuating a schematic and damaging narrative about the lives of women artists. These paradigms of understanding are stale caricatures of these artists' lives.

Part of the issue is the way that art journalism works. A hook must quickly be established

¹¹ Kira Cochrane, "Phyllida Barlow: 'Just going to art school doesn't make you famous,'" *The Guardian*, March 30, 2014, accessed August 15, 2014.

¹² "Sturtevant: Double Trouble." Museum of Modern Art, accessed August 15, 2014, <http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/1497>.

¹³ Gareth Harris, "Tate will put women artists first and foremost," *The Art Newspaper*, July 31, 2014, accessed August 15, 2014.

¹⁴ "Barbara Hepworth." The Tate, accessed August 15, 2014, <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/barbara-hepworth>.

¹⁵ "Agnes Martin." The Tate, accessed August 15, 2014. <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/agnes-martin>.

to make a story seem timely, and often with women artists, the supposed “breakthrough” moment is the easiest one to reach for. One of the major consequences of this discovery narrative, however, is that it essentializes an artist’s practice and oversimplifies her achievements. We don’t look at the ways that an artist’s work changed over time or the ways in which she influenced her better-known peers. Major early milestones like exhibitions or acquisitions are left out of the story in order to foreground the triumphal moment of recognition, which leads to a monolithic understanding of what women’s artmaking looks like.

Did you know that Judy Chicago was part of the landmark minimalism show “Primary Structures” before she made *The Dinner Party*? That, before her MoMA retrospective, Isa Genzken was in the 1982 Venice Biennale? That Sarah Charlesworth was in the 1985 Whitney Biennial before she was included in the 2014 edition? It takes decades to become an overnight success.

It is essential that we complicate these stories. Writers, along with collectors, dealers, and curators, are all part of an ecosystem that is constantly forming and unforming art history. So instead of focusing on the moment when these women were finally “found”—and by extension, on the institution that was gracious enough to do so—I propose we talk more about that period where she was toiling away in obscurity. What was she doing then? Where was she showing? Who was she in community with? How did her practice change? What forces of exclusion did she face?

Instead of the tired story where a masculinist force deigns to *discover*, *find*, or *recognize* female artists, what if we tried to also understand the material realities of these women’s lives? Ultimately, we would not be so dependent on the recognition of the art world’s skewed mainstream if we used these histories as case studies to define different kinds of success.

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