WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution

WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution looks so at home at P.S.1 that it's hard to imagine what it could have been like at its point of origin—the cavernous Geffen Contemporary outpost of Los Angeles' Museum of Contemporary Art—or its previous toper at Washington's National Museum of Women in the Arts. Connie Butler, the exhibition's curator, and Antoine Guerrero, P.S.1's Director of Operations and Exhibitions Design, have arranged it into a non-hierarchical narrative that feels borne of the museum's maze of thick brick walls and multiple staircases—a crucifying complexity of themes, motivations and principles echoing the institution's own history as an alternative space.

Feminist art during the fifteen-year period covered by the exhibition (1965-1980) encompassed an unprecedented diversity of media, and Butler and Guerrero have afforded equal weight to film, video, performance, installation, collage, photography, painting, and sculpture, while clearly articulating subcategories like text and sound. The pieces in the large galleries highlight the shared sensitivities that made the movement into a community, and the smaller rooms are outfitted with inspired specificity, concentrating space around single works like Carollee Schnemann's flickering Memm Flies (1964-1967), or on a subliminal curatorial connection, as in the chamber featuring Ana Mendieta's self-immolating videos and Nancy Spero's translucent works on paper, a pairing that coaxes a tremulous vulnerability out of their arrent defiance.

Much has already been written about the show in its three incarnations, most of it focusing on feminist art's wide-ranging influence and the remarkable freshness of most of the work. In fact, the selection seems predicated on strength and variety first and historical documentation second, with a subtext that positions this art against its historical context—late Abstract Expressionism, Pop, Minimalism and Conceptualism—while simultaneously projecting it forward onto the trends that followed. The parallels between then and now are enough to induce a disquieting sense of cultural stasis, the feeling that little has been done over the past three decades that these artists hadn't anticipated and outdone.

It's not enough simply to note that Mary Heilmann's hot abstractions prefigure Peter Halley's Neo-Geo neon cells, or that Martha Rosler's Vietnam-era photo-collages eclipse the war porn of Thomas Hirschhorn, or that Cosey Fanni Tutti turned herself an object of erotic fascination/repulsion eighteen years before Jeff Koons, or that the paintings of Marisa Losini, an Austrian born in 1919, look like the first coming of Dana Schutz, or that Lynda Benglis' poured latex "Odalisque (Hey, Hey Frankenthaler)" from 1969 was reincarnated in Elisheva Levy's pools of spray paint on the floor of Jack the Pelican last fall.

What sets the earlier work apart is the sui generis character of its inquiry. Every thought and emotion was cast upon a blank slate, and whichever medium best fit the subject was the one that stuck. Thus, artists such as Benglis, Rosler, Mendieta, Schneemann, Howardena Pindell, and Hannah Wilke are represented by multiple formats (video, performance, painting, photography, collage), while others pull together diverse approaches and materials into a single work (Adrian Piper's Concrete Infinity Documentation Piece, 1970; Suzanne Lacy's Prostitution Notes, 1975; Mary Kelly's Post-Partum Document, 1973-1977) that bores so deeply into the personal that it pops a wormhole to the universal.

In an inversion of the aesthetic and social structures of their male counterparts (fractioned individuals who clustered into stylistic galaxies while mavericks disappeared off the event horizon), feminist artists developed a mutually supportive network that offered both a sense of purpose and a protected emotional space for experiment and play. No one seems to be guarding her turf here. The artworks read as contributions to a moveable feast, freely given and freely taken. The ideas that are exchanged—about war, exploitation, sexuality, childhood, and race—are too far-reaching to be encapsulated by a single artist's vision. While this phenomenon is the wellspring of pluralism, to box it into a stylistic dichotomy—modernism versus postmodernism—would be missing the point. This work gets its hands dirty in the real world and, by pleading itself to the grubbiness and paradoxes of reality, dismutes the notion of the summative masterpiece as a preening male fantasy. Instead of presuming that nature and fate can be wrestled into a frame on the wall, it seeks an alternative path toward well-grounded but humbler truths. Its power lies in its denial of power.

Wack! has generated a fair amount of controversy (parsed by Mira Schor in the February Rail) over whose art was chosen and whose wasn't, and whether it was a mistake to include private meditations like Heilmann's under the category of feminist art. But take a moment once again to compare Heilmann with Halley: the former seems improvisational, warm and open, while the latter comes off as calculated, airless and hermetic. If there is a single common sensibility among feminist artists as defined by this exhibition, it's this quality of expansiveness and the social context it implies, even in the absence of representational imagery. One work after another—Louise Bourgeois' wearable sculpture designed to turn a man into a multi-breasted woman; Lygia Clark's "Collective Head," a participatory compendium of written notes, chunks of food and strips of clothing; Louise Fishman's wall of funny, ferocious drawings, each asserting feminist outrage: "Angry Yvonne," "Angry Jane," "Angry Jenny"—reinforces the notion that we're all in this together. Think of what a departure that is. For the better part of their millennia-long history, artists have traded on their Shamanic ability to strike fear and inspire awe, be it with elaborate guardian figures, loaded brushwork or overwhelming intellectuality. The feminist revolution broke that chain with a body of work that sought not to overpower, but to embrace. Forty years gone, yet still sinking in.

—Thomas Mitchelli