

WOMAN'S ART JOURNAL

SPRING / SUMMER 2026 VOLUME 47, NUMBER 1 \$25.00





(Front cover) Adrienne Elise Tarver, *Three Graces* (2019), oil on canvas, 84" x 72".
Courtesy of the artist.

EDITORS

JOAN MARTER AND ALIZA RACHEL EDELMAN

BOOK REVIEWS EDITOR: MELISSA L. MEDNICOV

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS: ERIN DEVINE

INTERVIEWS EDITOR: HELENA SHASKEVICH

FOUNDING EDITORS: ELSA HONIG FINE
AND MARGARET BARLOW

EDITORIAL BOARD

NORMA BROUDE, CLAUDIA CALIRMAN, THERESE DOLAN,
BETSY FAHLMAN, MARY D. GARRARD, PIA GOTTSCHALLER,
SALOMON GRIMBERG, ANN SUTHERLAND HARRIS,
ELLEN G. LANDAU, NANCY MOWLL MATHEWS,
CRYSTAL AM NELSON, ROBERTA TARBELL, BÁRBARA TYNER,
MIDORI YOSHIMOTO, JUDITH ZILCZER

PRODUCTION, AND DESIGN SERVICES

OLD CITY PUBLISHING, INC.

Editorial Offices:

Woman's Art Journal
628 North 2nd Street
Philadelphia, PA 19123, USA
Web: womansartjournal.org
E-mail: waj@womansartjournal.org

Advertising and Subscriptions:

Guy Griffiths
Old City Publishing, Inc.
628 North Second St.
Philadelphia, PA 19123, USA
Phone: +1.215.925.4390
Fax: +1.215.925.4371
info@oldcitypublishing.com

Subscriptions Web:

<http://www.oldcitypublishing.com/journals/waj-home/>

© 2026 Rutgers University, Department of Art History and
Old City Publishing, Inc.,

Woman's Art Journal (ISSN 0270-7993) is published semiannually,
Spring/Summer and Fall/Winter by Old City Publishing, Inc., a
member of the Old City Publishing Group. All rights reserved.

Subscription rates \$52.00 per year for individuals and \$144.00 per year
for institutions. Issues are shipped in May and November. Missed
issues must be reported no later than three months after shipping date
or we cannot be responsible for replacements. All rights reserved.

Indexed in Bibliography of the History of Art (BHA), Art Bibliogra-
phies Modern, Arts and Humanities Citation Index (ISI) and Wilson
Full Text. The full text is also available through JSTOR's Arts &
Sciences III Collection, www.jstor.org.

Except as permitted under national laws or under the photocopy license
described below, no part of this publication may be reproduced or
transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying or otherwise, or stored in a retrieval system of any
nature, without the advance written permission of the publisher.

Rights and Permissions/Reprints of Individual Articles

This publication and all articles contained herein are protected by copy-
right. Permission to reproduce and/or translate material contained in
this journal must be obtained in writing from the publisher.

For permission to photocopy for internal use within your organization, or
to make copies for external or academic use please contact the Copyright
Clearance Center at 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923, USA;
telephone: +1 978-750-8400 or online at <http://www.copyright.com/>.

Any unauthorized reproduction, transmission, or storage may result
in civil or criminal liability.

WOMAN'S ART JOURNAL

SPRING / SUMMER 2026 VOLUME 47, NUMBER 1

2 PARALLEL PERSPECTIVES

By Joan Marter and Aliza Rachel Edelman

PORTTRAITS, ISSUES AND INSIGHTS

3 UTOPIC TROPICAL IMAGININGS:

THE BLACK SPECULATIVE UNDERCURRENTS IN THE ART OF FIRELEI BÁEZ
AND ADRIENNE ELISE TARVER

By Samantha A. Noël

15 ARTEMISIAN AFTERLIVES IN AMERICAN FEMINIST ART

By Jennifer S. Griffiths

27 "CATEGORIES ALWAYS LEAK": ZARINA BHIMJI'S INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE

By Allison K. Young

REVIEWS

38 *Women Artists in the Reign of Catherine the Great*

By Rosalind P. Blakesley Reviewed by Tori Champion

40 *Rachel Ruysch: Nature into Art* Edited by Robert Schindler,

Bernd Ebert, and Anna C. Knaap Reviewed by Oana Stan

43 *Sofonisba Anguissola* By Cecilia Gamberini; *Elisabetta Sirani*

By Adelina Modesti; *Artemisia Gentileschi and the Business of Art*
By Christopher R. Marshall Reviewed by Margaret M. Barnes

46 *Brilliant Exiles: American Women in Paris, 1900–1939*

By Robyn Asleson with contributions by Zakiya R. Adair,
Denean Sharpley-Whiting, Samuel N. Dorf, and Tirza True Latimer
Reviewed by Britta Dwyer

49 *A Room of Her Own: Women Artist-Activists in Britain, 1875–1945*

Edited by Alexis Goodwin Reviewed by Nancy E. Green

51 *Anita Steckel: The Feminist Art of Sexual Politics* Edited by Richard Meyer and Rachel Middleman; *Sexually Explicit Art, Feminist Theory,* *and Gender in the 1970s* By Christian Lclair Reviewed by Kalas Ke

54 *Inventing the Modern: Untold Stories of the Women Who Shaped the Museum of Modern Art* Edited by Ann Temkin and Romy Silver-Kohn Reviewed by Shannon Bewley

56 *Gertrude Abercrombie: The Whole World is a Mystery* Edited by Eric Crosby and Sarah Humphreville Reviewed by Anna E. Dobbins

57 *Undesirability and Her Sisters: Black Women's Visual Work and the Ethics of Representation* By Tiffany E. Barber Reviewed by Elizabeth Carmel Hamilton

60 *Charting the Afrofuturist Imaginary in African American Art: The Black Female Fantastic* By Elizabeth Carmel Hamilton Reviewed by Sarah Richter

62 *Gail Rebhan: About Time* By Sally Stein Reviewed by Sally Jane Brown

65 *Diana Al-Hadid: unbecoming* Edited by Rachel Winter and Molly Taylor Reviewed by Şeyma Müge İba

67 *Samia Halaby: Centers of Energy* Edited by Elliot Josephine Leila Reichert and Rachel Winter Reviewed by Roja Najafi

70 *Drawing (in) the Feminine: Bande Dessinée and Women* Edited by Margaret C. Flinn Reviewed by Natalie J. Swain

WAJ's Spring/Summer issue interrogates systems of knowledge that inform our ways of organizing societies, collections, and visual theories. The articles foreground strategies whereby artists transgress geographical and governed identities, or recast time-bound models of cultural and scientific inheritances. In their embrace of the polytemporal, formless, and unconstrained, the artists presented here disrupt, reject, and counter Western modalities of social order often derived from institutional, racial, and misogynistic forms of classifications and taxonomies.

The "tropical aesthetics" of Firelei Báez and Adrienne Elise Tarver are rooted in the exploitative "ecologies of racism" following the devastating effects of colonialism and slavery in the Caribbean and Southern US. Their "utopic" relations to worldmaking, argues Samantha A. Noël, propose freedoms beyond place and selfhood through Black speculative agency. Báez's folkloric *ciguapa* are "unclassifiable" and "unquantifiable" bodily and plant specimens measured against the legacies of taxonomy. Tarver's sub-tropical landscapes subsist outside the bounds of time, the viewer imbricated within the cultivated gaze of her unflinching Black female subjects. Encountering our cover's *Three Graces*, Tarver transfigures an historical yet dehumanizing ethnographic photograph into a monumental painting of uppermost Black self-possession.

Jennifer S. Griffiths chronicles Artemisia Gentileschi's afterlives in American art through models of "feminist time," kinship, and fandom. Drawing on the transhistorical thinking of Mary Garrard, Griffiths traces Artemisia's images as "floating feminist signifiers" and centrifugal forces of feminist consciousness that disrupt our linear reading of art history in favor of cyclical "waves and echoes," loops, or "women's time." Debates from the seventies surrounding *The Sister Chapel* and the Cooperativa Beato Angelico are discussed alongside more recent artist projects by Kathleen Gilje, Anna Ostoya, Betty Tompkins, and Lili Bernard. For Griffiths, Bernard's symbolic appropriation of Artemisia activates Afrofuturist "counter-histories that reweave connections between past, present, and future," concepts arising in Elizabeth Carmel Hamilton's *Charting the Afrofuturist Imaginary in African American Art*, reviewed in this issue.

Allison K. Young examines an understudied photographic body of works by Zarina Bhimji from the nineties that probe our complex subjective and bodily relationships to Western medicine and science and challenge the "classificatory modes" underpinning such institutional spaces and disciplines. Plumbing the pathologies of the "clinical gaze," Bhimji's carefully curated light boxes and vitrines of chemically preserved organic and human matter ultimately resist our desires for objectivity and compartmentalization and "liberate" her subjects intuitively, corporeally, and erotically.

The seventeen book reviews orchestrated by Melissa Mednicov and Erin Devine beckon today's lot of prodigious feminist publications. Tori Champion contextualizes the rich stories and political heft behind the strategic art patronage and commissions of Catherine the Great, who enlisted from her

orbit such prestigious women artists as Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun and Angelica Kauffman and amateur female members from the royal household. Oana Stan fields the "symphony of interpretations" in the first interdisciplinary study on the early Dutch modernist Rachel Ruysch, whose famed flower still lifes bridged botanical science, conservation, and experimental botany. In her extensive coverage of three monographs on Italian early modern women artists—Sofonisba Anguissola, Elisabetta Sirani, and Artemisia Gentileschi—Margaret M. Barnes skillfully reconstructs the fabric of their artistic, business, and social livelihoods in their native cities. Britta Dwyer channels the brilliant transatlantic activities of sixty expatriate modern women in avant-garde Paris, some as famous as master networker Gertrude Stein, others less known, such as the costume designer Winnifred de Wolfe, queer author Djuana Barnes, and Black sculptor Nancy Elizabeth Prophet. In Great Britain at the turn of the nineteenth century, Nancy E. Green marks the advancements and struggles for women's rights, particularly in marriage and property laws, a period that eventually saw the opening to women of royal academies, exhibition spaces, guilds, societies, and clubs.

In a joint review by Kalas Ke, the sexually explicit photomontages of Anita Steckel, a virtuoso of humor, female pleasure, and freedom of expression, is presented alongside the erotic representations of Joan Semmel, Betty Tompkins, and Tee Corinne. Shannon Bewley identifies MoMA's women, the fourteen underrecognized and often uncredited female founders (donors, curators, collection managers, archivists, publicists, conservators) of the lauded twentieth-century art institution. Anna E. Dobbins unveils the illustrious figure of Gertrude Abercrombie whose salon and "bop" paintings took center stage amongst the music and art scene in Chicago. Elizabeth Carmel Hamilton's review determines how art refuses to serve as reparations for Black women in racist and patriarchal society, calling for "reproduction without futurity" and releasing expectations of positivity in favor of revulsion and disgust. Hamilton's own expansive critical framework of Afrofuturist aesthetics and the Black Female Fantastic is featured by Sarah Richter. The artistic trajectory of photographer Gail Rebhan, intimately focused on self-portraiture and the lived experiences of motherhood, reflecting a "beginning and ending with the self," is captured by Sally Jane Brown. Two decades of Diana Al-Hadid's sculptural production is analyzed by Şeyma Müge İba with an emphasis on the unresolvable and impermanent strategies of "becoming and unbecoming" that scaffold the artist's conceptual, material, and ritual experimentation. Roja Najafi maps the abstract entanglements and kinetic geometries throughout the six-decade career of Palestinian artist Samia Halaby. Women's contributions to the creative and racial diversity of the French and Belgian *bande dessinée* is sketched by Natalie J. Swain. •

Joan Marter and Aliza Rachel Edelman
Editors, *Woman's Art Journal*

UTOPIC TROPICAL IMAGININGS

THE BLACK SPECULATIVE UNDERCURRENTS IN THE ART

OF FIRELEI BÁEZ AND ADRIENNE ELISE TARVER

By Samantha A. Noël

Equatorial regions of the world have been plagued by histories of colonialism, the genocide of First Nations people, plantation systems, slavery, indenture, and other forms of labor exploitation. These institutions of social, political, spatial, and cultural oppression made possible systems of exploitation that impacted tropical and sub-tropical terrains in areas like the Caribbean and the Southern United States, with the extraction of natural resources leading to ecological destruction.¹ A long history of colonization that started in the fifteenth century made way for the restructuring of Caribbean geographies and ecologies, with tropical crops, seeds, and soil shipped across the globe. Indeed, the plantation-based economies of the colonial Caribbean were foundational to the development of industrialization, marking a shift that would eventually bring about the establishment of European modernity.² Such multifactorial conditions place the Caribbean at the center of today's capitalist-driven global market and position it as one of the most environmentally vulnerable regions of the world due to the devastating effects of the Anthropocene.

Volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and hurricanes have devastated parts of the Caribbean and the Southern US. Sociologist Mimi Sheller reminds us that "[C]ontemporary climate change originates in and exacerbates these conditions, with recent hurricane seasons laying bare the underlying social, political, and economic frailty of many Caribbean islands, whose vulnerabilities were already formed by conditions of coloniality and neo-liberal capitalism."³ Given the dire state of the climate, the environment, and its impact on the human condition, how does the visual arts aid in our capacity to come to terms with the impending uncertainties and devastating impact of the Anthropocene, and in what ways can art engender different modes of possibility and resolution?

In my book *Tropical Aesthetics of Black Modernism*, from 2021, I considered how early twentieth-century artists and performers defied conventional understandings of tropicality by re-presenting tropical terrains in new and radical ways.⁴

The tropics can be interpreted as a Western way of stating difference and unfamiliarity in cultural forms and the environment, for instance, in landscapes that are distinctly alien from the normality of the Northern temperate zone. Therefore, tropicality is a form of othering that encapsulates "an ambivalent body of ideas, representations, and experiences," all of which exist in mental juxtaposition to something else; or, simply stated, tropicality is a social construction rather than a material reality.⁵ In response to this viewing of tropical terrains, early twentieth-century Black Diasporan artists and performers employed what may be called "tropical aesthetics" in an effort to enact the *naming of place*. The Black Studies scholar Katherine McKittrick asserts that such naming, "regardless of expressive method and technique ... is also a process of self-assertion and humanization."⁶ In this vein, the tropical aesthetics utilized by artists and performers make attainable a "sayability" of geography that enables agency and "a grammar of liberation."⁷ Tropical aesthetics thus allowed these artists to visually articulate a different way of knowing and imagining the world.⁸

Contemporary artists Firelei Báez (b. 1981) and Adrienne Elise Tarver (b. 1985) deploy tropical aesthetics in their works in ways that determine and contemplate the Black speculative, an angle that will be expanded upon in this article.⁹ The term Black speculative emerged in the 1990s and has its roots in the genre of "speculative fiction," which served as a corrective to the issues plaguing the classification and origins of the term "science fiction." Its subgenre, Black science fiction, is often used interchangeably with Afrofuturism and refers to the exploration of Black Diasporic futuristic imaginings. The Black speculative broadens the temporal scope of Afrofuturism to include meditations on key historical moments of the past and present.¹⁰ For Performance Studies scholar Jayna Brown, the existence of Black speculation is "beyond life or death, about the ways we reach into the unknowable, outside the bounds of past, present, and future, of selfhood and other."¹¹ Questioning notions of time and calling for new paradigms, this utopia can come in many forms (physical, visual, spatial) and can surpass

Fig. 1. Firelei Báez,
*Ciguapa Habilis (After Carl
 Linnaeus)* (2010), gouache,
 watercolor, and ink on
 paper, 72" x 102".
 © Firelei Báez.
 Courtesy the artist and
 Hauser & Wirth.



the “juxtapositions of you and me, here and there, then and now.”¹² Anchored in the tropical landscape, the works of Báez and Tarver visually render narratives of the Black speculative closely tethered to the natural environment that are utopic all their own. Since geographies, materially and discursively, are never fully secure given the social production of three-dimensional space, their works manifest the idea that belonging to a place leads to sociospatial liberation, a construct seldom realized for Black people, and one ultimately, for Báez and Tarver, that leads to sociotemporal freedom.¹³

Undoubtedly, the art of Báez and Tarver reveal the ways by which Black Atlantic peoples find utopia in the here and now. Brown’s speculative methodology situates utopic subjectivity “outside a recognizable ontological framework, and modes of existence conceived of in unfamiliar epistemes. These (im)possibilities [for forms of subjectivity] open up where the human has abandoned us and onto a much bigger universe, when we jump into the unknowable.”¹⁴ Since Black people have been excluded from the category *human*, Brown notes the potentialities endemic in the unknowable via the development of different modes of being in natural and built environments, a kind of Black alternative worldmaking.¹⁵ Indeed, this worldmaking is driven by a speculative logic that provides opportunities for boldness and subversiveness in how Black folk envision their lived experiences.¹⁶ It is the antithesis of the world that they currently occupy, a position dependent on reasoning that permits them to be vastly imaginative and opens up other dimensions in their minds. Black speculation conjures experiences of prolonged delight and ultimately true liberation, what literary scholar Michelle D. Commander reminds us “is an investment in the unseen and precarious; it is a gamble.”¹⁷ Despite such risks, Tarver and Báez prove the benefits of speculative logic: with their artistic renderings of Black women

occupying spellbinding vistas of tropical terrains, their artworks catalyze the imaginations of Black viewers and may even elicit unfamiliar emotions and sensibilities that critically conjure new ways of seeing.

Much of Firelei Báez’s work deals with folklore and myth. These are essential means for her making inaccessible spaces accessible through fantasy, a tool of potentiality.¹⁸ Fundamental to understanding Báez’s art, folklore and myth must be interpreted within their historical, cultural, racial, and gendered contexts to better embrace their complexities, opacities, and multiplicities.¹⁹ Indeed, such intersectional approaches acknowledge the society from which folklore derives as a form of knowledge production, while also decentering imperialist logics of Western rationality.²⁰ Yet Báez’s art elaborates on and even upends established folklore. Such is the case for *La Ciguapa* of folklore from the Dominican Republic, Báez’s birthplace. A female trickster, the *ciguapa* lives in the mountains and preys upon men who dare to cross the hilltops of the rainforest. In encounters, she might appear beautiful or ghastly with floor-length tresses, bringing light or darkness to receiver’s eye.²¹ *Ciguapas* also have backward-pointing feet that make them virtually untraceable for those attempting their pursuit. At the same time, as Ginetta Candelario notes, the *ciguapa* “can be understood as embodying the simultaneously progressive and regressive sovereignty strategies and sentiments of a people whose ancestors were both colonizers and colonized, enslavers and enslaved, (im)migrants and native born.”²² However, Báez relishes their capricious ability to use power for good or evil, postures breaking generational, karmic loads. Furthermore, in Báez’s telling, the figure of the *ciguapa* acts as “visual/linguistic antonyms, to showcase the psychological and even

metaphysical defenses people before me had built against linguistic and cultural invasions.”²³

Starting in 2005, Báez pursued an ongoing aesthetic investigation of the ciguapa utilizing the series to examine issues pertaining to the landscape, womanhood, and race.²⁴ Artistic representations of the *ciguapa* have varied generally, since the mythological figure can be pleasing to the eye or appalling, and thus respectively angelic or evil; she is also of European, Taíno, or African descent, or a combination of all three racial groups. In evil renderings, the *ciguapa* often appears dark in complexion, interpreted, for example, by the Dominican modernist painter and writer Jaime Colson bearing horns on her head and claws for fingers. Báez’s *Ciguapa* series (2005–2022) seeks to trouble these racist and misogynist undertones in Dominican cultural values.²⁵ In *Ciguapa Habilis* (After Carl Linnaeus) (2010; Fig. 1 and Pl. 1), Báez presents a faceless and full-figured ciguapa covered in light brown hair or fur. The materials used to highlight these physical features, such as the feathery textures, are accentuated by the paper’s absorption of gouache, watercolor, and ink. Atop her head rests a diverse arrangement of tropical greenery and branches that weighs down and consumes the creature’s face to render it invisible. Her arms, positioned close to her body, feature more leaves and branches held in barely decipherable hands, including one cloistered under her left armpit. Emanating from her right hip is a long plait that could be perceived as starting from her head but recalls a tail. It gathers and coils on the ground and the ciguapa’s bowed head peers in its direction. Her pear-shaped body stands adjacent to this heap of hair, off-center toward the right of the picture plane, while one foot in a stiletto and the other shoeless on the ground anchor the mythological figure in the gaping white background.

The curvaceous body of the ciguapa in this series is similar to those portrayed in other works by Báez, such as in the *Geographic Delay* series (2010–2015). These presentations of physicality in her art stem from the artist’s high regard for women of color in urban communities populated by African Americans and people of the Caribbean Diaspora.²⁶ Báez recognizes that, due to their social environments, women develop strategies that allow them to transgress cultural boundaries and external restrictions imposed on them. Akin to a postmodern trickster, they “embrace the abject in the form of a celebration of the abundant female figure.”²⁷ Furthermore, the women’s visual portrayals go against the established norms of beauty, not to mention the cultural, racial, and sexual standards of decorum, and their bodies, while culturally abject, find belonging, desire, even fetishizing or othering at the periphery. The periphery, then, becomes a zone, a site where othered bodies matter.²⁸

The starkness of the white background in *Ciguapa Habilis* (After Carl Linnaeus) effectively isolates the ciguapa and presents her as a scientific specimen. For Báez, this arrangement references the visual tally of living beings and plant life endemic in taxonomy.²⁹ And the title of the piece includes the name of the father of modern taxonomy, Carl Linnaeus, in parenthesis, satirically attributing the

denomination of this ciguapa, *Ciguapa Habilis*, to the scientist’s system of binomial nomenclature. The merging of ciguapa with *habilis* establishes a connection between the mythological figure and the *Homo habilis*, one of the earliest organisms of the genus *Homo*.³⁰ In this work, the ciguapa becomes another being—at once commenting on the problematic legacy of taxonomy by presenting the anthropomorphic being as distinct and inferior in its unquantifiable nature yet akin to *Homo Sapiens*. Its speculative imaginings permit an alternative mode of being for Black people given their exclusion from the Human category. As Báez rightly stated, when recalling her childhood reaction to stories about the *ciguapa* that were told to her and to young Dominican girls as warnings to prevent them from being too wild, too independent: “There’s so much freedom in that, why would I not want to be that? Why would I not want to be untraceable and fearless?”³¹

This speculative approach is outside a recognizable ontological framework and tethered to nature. Indeed, the plant matter commingling with the *ciguapa* signifies a merging with the landscape, highlighting the primacy of the terrain in its folklore. Yet this convergence between *ciguapa* and vegetation inevitably recalls the historic eco-misogynistic ethos throughout the Americas that fueled the Imperial exploitation of the natural environment during the era of slavery. Via these “ecologies of racism,” enslaved African women, as well as women of mixed ancestry (African and European, for example), were situated in close proximity to nature with both being deemed as “dangerous, errant, threatening, and unruly.”³² Still, liminal spaces inspired by the Caribbean natural environment serve as sites where an unknowable, larger universe becomes plausible. Generations of enslaved Africans, particularly those who escaped slavery, recognized these qualities and created maroon societies in the dreaded forested areas of several Caribbean islands,³³ which became sacred spaces for practitioners of African-derived religions throughout the region. Báez’s imagery continues an articulation of this long-lasting philosophical stance by reminding us not only of the freedom embedded on the Caribbean landscape, but also of the redemption feasible in reclaiming one’s humanity amidst the exalted natural terrain.

Similar intimations are at play in *Untitled (Terra Nova)* of 2020. This *ciguapa*’s very long tresses are coiffed in stylized knots so large they obstruct any view of her torso, while her face is hidden by leafy fronds and red and yellow hued petals that intermingle with the *ciguapa*’s gigantic hairstyle.³⁴ Her squatted position, knees and thighs visible, is reminiscent of women of color portrayed on contemporary online videos, yet it is her placement on a 1541 engraved atlas map of the Americas, archivally printed on canvas, that complicates her posturing. Báez often incorporates pages of de-accessioned library books and places them in context with the Caribbean in order to disrupt predominant historical narratives.³⁵ Here, the North, Central, and South American continents are vaguely rendered, and parts of Great Britain and Europe observed on the right. Only a few islands of the Caribbean archipelago are visible, including Cuba (on which the Spanish flag is firmly



Fig. 2. Firelei Báez, *Elegant gathering in a secluded garden (or the many bridges we crossed)* (2018), acrylic on canvas, 108" x 192". The Studio Museum in Harlem; Museum purchase with funds provided by the Acquisition Committee 2018.28.

rooted), and part of *Hispañola*, the artist's birthplace, under which a Latin narrative describes the island's resources and Columbus as its "discoverer."³⁶

The palm imagery in *Terra Nova* is inspired by a line from Cuban poet and philosopher José Martí's poem that translates from Spanish as "The palms are like brides who await my return."³⁷ Its patriarchal and domineering tone here imparts the exploitative conditions of coloniality that reduced the natural environment to a source of wealth. Conveying sixteenth-century mapping strategies of the Americas, Báez poignantly illustrates how colonization contributed to the Anthropocene by effectively diminishing the biodiversity of the region.³⁸ Furthermore, she recognizes the violence inherent in the exilic language of Martí's poem and asserts that, here, the female body "needs to be activated," and given the *ciguapa*'s inherent self-possession, she can "easily ... move between spaces."³⁹ Vitality and freedom are evident in her work as the *ciguapa*, whose form commingles with flora, teeters at the edge of Báez's land of origin and looms over the cartography as a means to challenge it. Báez's inventive use of color and mark-making in *Terra Nova* and other works poetically captures the *ciguapa*'s energy and spirit, poignantly revealing their sensibility while claiming supremacy over the cartographic interpretation that surrounds her.⁴⁰

Themes of tenacity reverberate in Báez's ambitious series of murals, *Joy Out of Fire* (2018), which feature prolific Black women from different historical moments, such as Maya Angelou, Faith Ringgold, and Zora Neale Hurston (a total of forty-seven), from Africa, America, the Caribbean, and Latin America. Báez took full advantage of the collection of archives of photographs, notes, diaries, letters, and manuscripts at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, to aid her imagined conversations amongst the subjects on the canvases. Discussing her hopes for what the audience would grasp from the compositions, Báez explained:

The paintings are, in some ways, murals. They're physical, they're meant to be both experienced visually as well as read. In a way, the audience is following a similar process to mine when I accessed the archives, and I want to allow them to be able to pull these really rich threads for a deeper investigation of what each woman represents—just like I did with the archives.⁴¹

Their stunning and meticulous portraits truly convey their subjectivities in compelling ways, and for Báez, it was important for their "real and extraordinary selves to be ... in conversation with the viewer."⁴²



Fig. 3. Firelei Báez, installation view, *To breathe full and free, a declaration, a re-visioning, a correction* (19°36'16.9"N 72°13'07.0"W, 42°21'48.762"N 71°1'59.628"W (2021), ICA Watershed. Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan, New York. Photo by Chuck Choi. © Firelei Báez.

These constellations of women who personify Black female excellence are prominently featured in resplendent natural environments, creating an inevitable dialogue with Aaron Douglas's *Aspects of Negro Life* series housed at the Schomburg.⁴³ Douglas's murals also beautifully portray tropical terrains, including the semi-tropical landscape of the American South and topographies of sub-Saharan Africa, and his stylized tropical landscapes function as Black modernist representations that envisage tropicity as monumental and integral to early twentieth-century Black self-definition.⁴⁴ *Joy Out of Fire* was first exhibited at the Schomburg and, given its close proximity to Douglas in the reading rooms, Báez opined that it was critically important for her celebrations of Black women to balance the prevalence of Black men in Douglas's *Aspects of Negro Life*.⁴⁵ Like the Douglas murals, Báez's *Joy Out of Fire* pieces are large for a total immersion into the environment, and each color-filled canvas is punctuated by swells of various greenery that wonderfully parallel Douglas's color palettes and lush vegetation.

The dominant colors of *Joy Out of Fire* are sourced from the iconography of the Yoruba religion, specifically those colors associated with the deities Oya, Oshun, and Yemoja. Oya, the Orisha of death and rebirth, is known for her fiery spirit, and activists like Angela Davis are portrayed in the red painting, *To write fire until it is every breath* (2018). Yellows dominate *magnitude and bond* and *Untitled*, reflecting the love and

sensuality associated with the deity Oshun and the portrayal of artists, singers, and dancers, such as the spirited Josephine Baker and Katherine Dunham in the former painting. The blue *Elegant gathering in a secluded garden (or the many bridges we crossed)* (2018; Fig. 2 and Pl. 2) is inspired by Yemoja, the Orisha of motherhood and healing, and includes women who effect change in the public sphere, such as librarians, judges, and archivists.⁴⁶ Báez arranges the women against the limited blue-hued palette in interspersed clusters of twos and threes, using shades of blue, green, and red to render the women and the flora; detailed renderings closer to the foreground convey the subjects immersed in conversation with each other and with the viewer, some smiling, others laughing. Inspired by photographs found in the Schomburg archives, their blue portraits complement the framed greenery around which superimposed layers of handwritten text meander and intermingle, not unlike a heavenly atmosphere, signifying their intellectual affect over time in Black communities.

Another painting from this series, *Untitled*, is a plethora of warm yellows that dominates the environment of delicate white flowers and emanations of bright streams of light. Immersed in lively activity, the Black women, granted complementary brown skin tones, appear to be the creators of these yellow sparks and revolving circular forms, embodying the loving and creative spirit of Oshun, and inviting us into their scenic landscape. While not detectable, a landscape is

nonetheless implied as otherworldly and made for these actors, dancers, and writers.

Báez's fantastical environments are subliminal yet liminal. On the one hand, the works are inspired by the Caribbean terrain and vegetation; on the other, they are also otherworldly and polytemporal. To this end, the landscape functions as a converging axis at which Black women of different time periods assemble.⁴⁷ The Negro Actors Guild of America, founded in 1936 to provide African American actors with necessary institutional support, held performances on the Schomburg auditorium, a site where performances of all artistic disciplines occurred.⁴⁸ Drawing inspiration from this, Báez unites these women of disparate professions and time periods so that celebration and conviviality are manifested not only for the subjects but also for the viewers. Given the environmental crises in which many Black Atlantic peoples dwell, the *Joy Out of Fire* paintings collectively provide for their Black audiences and others much needed opportunities for moments of experiential immersion in realms both joyous and harmonious, especially due to the series' large size.⁴⁹ Again, Báez brings forth an ontological framework not necessarily recognizable to many Black people but one that could indeed be imaginable, driving the full effect of the Black speculative.⁵⁰ These panoramic and simulated natural environments render the Black speculative as conceivable because, as bell hooks recalled her childhood in the terrain of rural Kentucky, "[N]ature was the place of victory.... There dominator culture ... could not wield absolute power."⁵¹ For it is amongst the varied vegetation, the wildlife, and rolling mountains that one recognizes how an unspoiled natural world and the human desire for freedom are inexplicably tethered, and it is in nature that one fully engages in self-actualization, particularly given how crucial nature has always been for Black counterhegemony.⁵²

The speculative underpins Báez's ambitious installation, *To breathe full and free, a declaration, a re-visioning, a correction* (19°36'16.9"N 72°13'07.0"W, 42°21'48.762"N 71°1'59.628"W) of 2021 (Fig. 3). The title includes the longitudinal coordinates of the Sans-Souci palace, a site of historical and political significance in Haiti, and the hall of the exhibition site at the Institute of Contemporary Art's East Boston Watershed, located in the Boston Harbor, known for its fraught history embedded in the trans-Atlantic slave trade.⁵³ Boston Harbor was pivotal to the American Revolution where the Boston Tea Party of 1773 occurred; however, for two centuries, it was also a major shipment point in the trans-Atlantic slave trade when ships financed by the Boston elite transported human chattel and goods between the US, Africa, and the Caribbean.⁵⁴ From 1791 to 1804, on the French colony of Haiti, another revolution was underway whereby enslaved Africans defeated French armed forces and brought forth the first Black independent nation in the Americas. Following the success and political autonomy of the Haitian Revolution, the formerly enslaved Henri Christophe declared himself president of the State of Haiti in 1807, and then proclaimed himself King Henri I of the Kingdom of Haiti by 1811.⁵⁵ Christophe's kingdom came

to its demise in 1820.⁵⁶ Yet, his most enduring legacy to Haiti was building monuments of power and sovereignty. Renowned as the builder king, Sans-Souci was Christophe's largest palace and seat of power spanning almost thirty acres, a grand palace meaning "without a care" and named after a rival Haitian commander killed by him.⁵⁷ Báez was drawn to these parallel revolutionary histories of Haiti and the US that were incited due to the oppressive institution of colonialism and provided rich fodder for this artwork.⁵⁸

The installation, meant to mimic architectural ruins of the Sans-Souci palace, features a ceiling draped in blue tarp to recall engulfing ocean waves and the pull of currents, and the setting, painted blue walls and weather-beaten arches at 45-degree angles, an ocean bed. Given the ocean's ever-increasing water levels, the palace's complete submergence, simulated by Báez, is a reminder that water signifies one the Anthropocene's most urgent sites of political and ethical inquiry.⁵⁹ At the same time, as humans, we are interconnected with other organisms, since water sustains all living entities, and our 'watery relations' destabilizes the notion that the human is the "sole or primary site of embodiment."⁶⁰ The blue hue that consumes the space not only conjures how all living organisms are implicated in other beings; for Báez, it also recalls the Yoruba technique for indigo textile dyeing.⁶¹ Eventually, early in American history, indigo became a popular trade good created by enslaved Africans in the South, and Boston Harbor was one of the primary points of export via the sea for this natural resource.⁶² A closer look on the ruins reveals symbols and patterns of cultural significance throughout the African Diaspora. Báez incorporates a wallpaper pattern from the British designer William Morris who in turn borrowed from Mughal art. But one also sees the Afro comb, the raised fist of the Black Power movement, the pouncing feline of the Black Panther Party, as well as the sun symbol of the Biafra secession in Nigeria.⁶³ Since the building site was a US Immigration Station until the 1950s, hidden in the arches are speakers from which can be heard first-person stories of newly arrived immigrants to Boston.⁶⁴

A huge mural close to the installation's entrance sets the tone: surging ocean waves are superimposed by antique navigational charts and cartography. A *ciguapa* decked in bright and colorful foliage resides on the left of the composition, unscathed by the violent storm and effortlessly traversing the seascape on its surface.⁶⁵ Owing to the significance of the *ciguapa* in much of Báez's art, her inclusion in this piece is befitting given its speculative nature. The artist wanted to create a space for introspection and gleaned a space of healing from the concept of the ocean. In this regard, the Drexciya myth was a crucial source of inspiration that Báez utilized to create this hall as a tool of potentiality for Black Diasporic peoples.⁶⁶ An electronica band from Detroit, Drexciya produced a series of concept albums, *The Quest* of 1997 offering a germane cosmogony—What may have happened if the pregnant women thrown overboard during the trans-Atlantic journey of the Middle Passage, for being sick and disruptive cargo, survived and birthed their children underwater?⁶⁷ After surviving such horrors, perhaps they



Fig. 4. Adrienne Elise Tarver, installation view of *Secrets of Leaves* at Victori + Mo, New York, 2017. Courtesy of the artist.

recognized the possibility of breathing underwater, learning how to process air like marine mammals, and how to protect their collectives and even strengthen and shapeshift their physicality as needed, despite living in the oppressive conditions that humans have imposed on the oceans.⁶⁸ Taking the Drexciya myth as a point of departure, Báez presents us with an afterlife or a continuation of life of Sans-Souci and its symbolism of Black political autonomy in the Black Atlantic now thriving underwater. Such imaginings provide forms of resolution and a sense of a hopeful future for the enslaved Africans, full of anguish and dread in the bellies of the slave ships, as well as for the citizenry of the newly independent nation of Haiti who optimistically yearned that their country would thrive and become a symbol of Black sovereignty, pride, and prosperity.

The art of African American Adrienne Elise Tarver is fully bound to tropical and sub-tropical landscapes often associated with the Caribbean and the southern United States, respectively. The artist does not necessarily have a particular place in mind when depicting her vivid installations and paintings. It is the archetype of the tropics that is not a distinctive geographical location but rather, in Tarver's description, "specific to the mythology of the tropics that is

perpetuated by a Western narrative."⁶⁹ Since the fifteenth century, Europeans viewed equatorial zones as tropical paradises characterized by an exotic otherness, since, for them, the tropical world invoked images of the Garden of Eden and an abundance of nature. However, by the eighteenth century, perceptions of the tropics changed due to an association established between tropical climate and disease, and the term 'tropical' connoted negativity and darkness.⁷⁰ A similar perception emerged in the US where the semi-tropical environments of the rural South were characterized by swamps, jungles, and marshes. The nationalist romanticism once reserved for northern terrains slowly attenuated and was eventually replaced by escapist connotations, most notably with the sub-tropical locales of the South. In fact, it was the imagery of the swamp that captivated people's interest, and it was interpreted as an elusive environment. The American swamp was the domain of sin, death, decay, the locale for witchcraft as well as ferocious creatures.⁷¹

By the early twentieth century, for most Americans, the terrains of tropical regions in locations beyond the US were newly envisaged as natural environments. These landscapes undoubtedly contrasted with the "wild places on American soil" rather than replacing them, and they offered a reprieve from the overcivilization of industrialized cities and a means



Fig. 5. Adrienne Elise Tarver, *Untitled* (2017), ink and watercolor on paper, 7 1/2" x 7".
Courtesy of the artist.

of defying Western culture. According to Kelly Enright, Americans of this era consumed a variety of literary and visual sources that conveyed and ultimately interpreted tropical forests as abstract spaces, referred to as jungles. These spaces functioned as "a highly symbolic place unto which American goals and desires could be projected."⁷² While many Americans visit tropical locations today, they often still impose such projections onto these regions, and these evocations are the impetus for many works by Tarver, such as *Secrets of Leaves*.

An all-encompassing installation, *Secrets of Leaves* (2017; Fig. 4) transformed the empty white walls of Victori + Mo (now Dinner Gallery), in Brooklyn, NY, in 2017. Large murals, augmented by leafy, affixed, and interspersed sculptured forms, expertly rendered the contours of various impenetrable tropical foliage, cast against a bright blue sky recalling the vivid landscapes of French Post-Impressionist painter Henri Rousseau. Tarver also created wire-mesh structures in painted caulk of tropical leaves that recalled the iconography and plant-based ornamentation of Art Nouveau. There were also larger green sculpted formations placed strategically throughout the space. Collectively, these hangings and sculptures required the keen participation of viewers and encouraged them to duck under certain areas, meander around or pass through parts of the installation, thereby activating the space.⁷³ Navigating all of these elements steered

viewers to look at even smaller paintings hung against the mural: one depicting a brick wall somewhat visible through lush tropical foliage; the other featuring a partially nude bikini-clad woman seen sunbathing through numerous leaves obstructing the view (Pl. 3).⁷⁴

It is this peeking through the foliage by the viewer that is at the heart of *Secrets of Leaves*. For Tarver, "The focus is on the other. This idea that allowing yourself to look too long includes some sort of permission—in that permission you have created a divide, and though also a human, the object of your attention is seen as a different being, not like yourself."⁷⁵ Embodying the role of the voyeur, the viewer is implicated in a power dynamic wherein the person being looked at is the eroticized other. This relationship recalls the legacy of European colonialism and its concomitant and troubling hierarchy of the colonizer and the colonized; likewise, the landscape is rendered passive, objectifiable, and alluring. At the same time, Tarver's beautiful and intricate portrayal of the tropical, natural environment, coupled with the woman observed in the smaller painting, illuminates the important role seduction and mystery play in this endeavor. A parallel is established between the women and the landscape, and the viewer is seduced into exploring them as a unit by feeling a sense of entitlement to enter uninvited. By evincing an air of the erotic in the creation of *Secrets of*

Leaves, Tarver underscores how seduction serves as a strategy for the seemingly passive woman and the landscape to reassert their power and enact agency.⁷⁶ Such an ecofeminist bearing affirms the entanglement of environmental and social oppression shared by both, the same ideologies and systems of belief.⁷⁷ Ultimately, for the viewer, an ethical entrapment is at stake, and they must come to terms that their possessed power is futile.

In many ways, the installation appears as a timeless fantasy that is disconnected from the everyday world, very much akin to the characterizations prescribed to tropical regions of the Global South. Such depictions undoubtedly recall the artworks of Rousseau and Paul Gauguin.⁷⁸ Rousseau's seminal painting, *The Dream* (1910), encapsulates the notion of the environmental other as fantasy, since it was not painted in the tropics but rather was inspired by the *Jardin des Plantes*, the botanical garden in Paris where Rousseau envisaged a tropical vision experiential at its core.⁷⁹ Gauguin's compositions that depicted Tahitian women in the Tahitian landscape necessitated his acquiring a 'primitivist gaze' that projected Western fantasies of the exotic other.⁸⁰ Tellingly, in his genre paintings, Gauguin's Tahitian Other is embedded as a performer in a world of ritual and superstition that appear outside the realm of real time.⁸¹

Secrets of Leaves considers these coded valences while also evoking Tarver's tendency to connect memory with

nonlinear approaches to temporality. One's experiences occur chronologically but can also exist non-chronologically through one's senses, especially those that may incite particular memories: "In your mind, your sense of smell, your sense of sight, everything you're experiencing is intermixed," Tarver offers.⁸² Given this phenomenon, conjuring a space and/or an experience through sensorially-connected visual imagery manifests a Black speculative indulgence—existing outside the bounds of time allows for a utopic means of enduring the here and now.⁸³ The artist expertly captures a remarkable tropical splendor that not only encourages a recollection of historical practices of colonization, objectification, and exploitation, but also makes tangible an awareness of freedom and determination in one's relationship to nature.

Modern-day romantic significations of the tropics are often affixed to the trope of the idyllic white-sand beach and aqua-blue ocean waters. Tarver investigates the Western fascination of such picturesque localities in the series *Escape* (2020). This ambitious compilation of paintings and collages possesses what the artist refers to as the dualities of escape—escaping slavery and escaping to a vacation—the connotations of which unfold as one considers each work.⁸⁴ The first set of works feature Vera Otis, a character seen in a number of Tarver's pieces inspired by an old black-and-white portrait of a Black woman that she found in a thrift store.⁸⁵

The diminutive ink and watercolor, *Untitled* (2017; Fig. 5), at seven by seven inches, features Vera in a white bikini swimming in a pool, outlined and superimposed onto a lush tropical landscape and visibly bright sun. The artist wanted Vera to have a moment in her own pool, situated in her own backyard, having her own moment of escapism.

Yet the portrayal of Vera's landscape setting, similarly utilized in *Escape* (2019) and *Untitled (Tropical Landscape)* of 2020, both large paintings from the series, signify the associated stereotype linking Black and Brown bodies to tropicality. According to the logic of late nineteenth-century environmental determinism, the characteristics of a land's inhabitants are largely determined by their physical environment. As a result, Europeans have historically viewed tropical terrains to be alien to their own and a major contributing factor to the supposed degeneracy and savagery of alien peoples.⁸⁶ Despite the pseudo-scientific claims of environmental determinism that the tropical climate elicited physical laxity and relaxed moral fiber, thus deeming these parts of the world and their inhabitants as inferior to those occupying temperate zones and lands, Tarver challenges the ongoing legacies of these myths by portraying Vera as a woman of leisure who has every right to

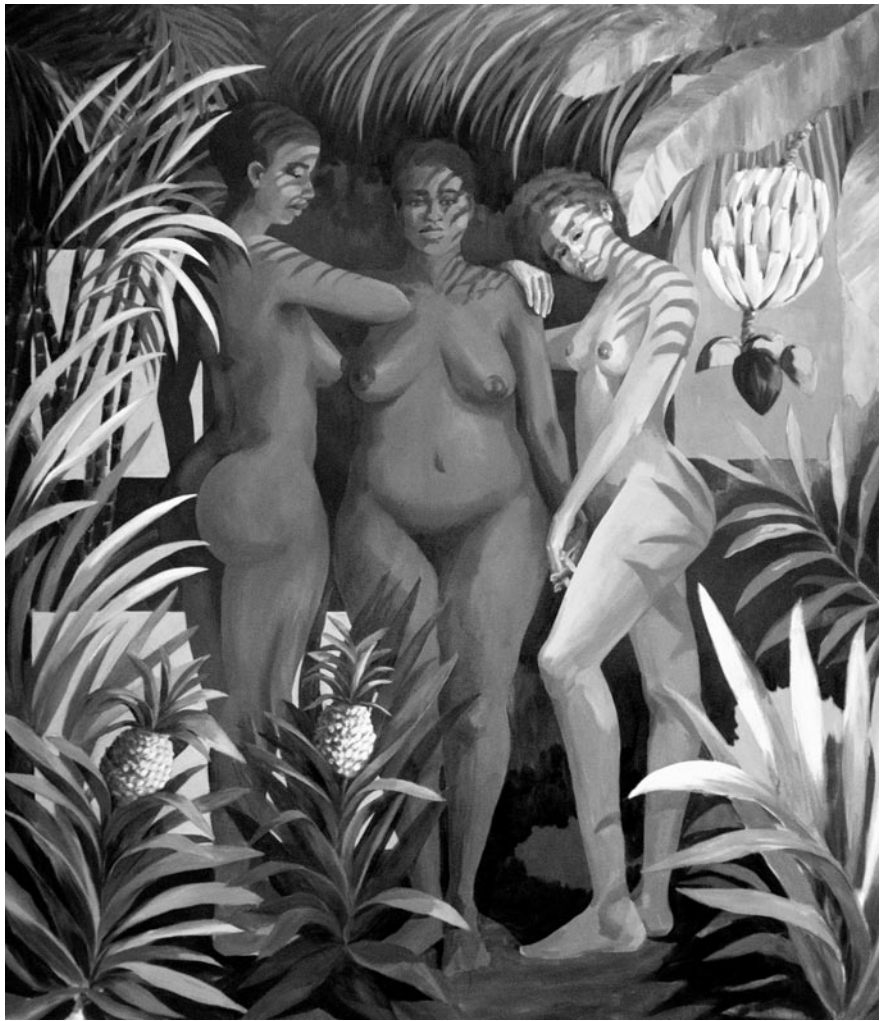


Fig. 6. Adrienne Elise Tarver, *Three Graces* (2019), oil on canvas, 84" x 72". Courtesy of the artist.

enjoy a tropical vacation just as much as her white counterparts. Each rendering shows Vera immersed in activity, thoroughly enjoying the elements of nature.

In significant contrast to the sophistication of Vera Otis, the large painting *Three Graces* (2019; Fig. 6 and front cover) depicts three nude Black women surrounded by tropical flora standing elegantly and embracing each other. Tarver was inspired by a photographic portrait of these women on display in an ethnological exhibit. Human zoos, as they were sometimes called, were major features of world expositions and colonial exhibits and placed people from European colonies of the Global South in simulated environments of their "natural habitat." They served as markers of Western hegemony that forced non-white people to become spectacles in an effort to highlight their social, cultural, and racial difference, thereby justifying colonialism and Western imperialism.⁸⁷ *Three Graces* places this dehumanizing historical tradition within the context of equatorial regions of the world whose popular cultural representations are romantic and void of these complicated truths. At eighty-four by seventy-two inches, it grants these "graces" the power, space, and gravity the artist desired for them to possess.⁸⁸ Furthermore, Tarver

presents them on a human scale, so that the viewer connects to their humanity intersubjectively.

Historically, artistic representations of tropical regions such as the Caribbean archipelago were often executed in watercolor. The American nineteenth-century painter and illustrator Winslow Homer created numerous watercolor compositions of landscapes and seascapes of the Caribbean where human subjects of African descent are depicted “in such an impressionistic fashion that they became parts of the representation of nature,” as Krista Thompson argues.⁸⁹ Tarver’s aesthetic in the series *Escape* and in others is similar in appearance to the Impressionist tendencies of Homer’s art; she even incorporates the banana tree, an emblematic motif in nationalist Caribbean art in the early twentieth century, in a few paintings from this series.⁹⁰ However, it was most important for Tarver to render an archetype of the tropics, not the representation of a true lived experience, as such stereotypical and romanticized aesthetics reconcile the fact that even her own experience of tropical localities is the same as that of a tourist.⁹¹

This notion permeates in the work *Head Above Water* (2017; Pl. 4). Drawn from a highly foreshortened perspective, Vera’s long legs dangle in sunlit water in her swimming pool. The painting’s ephemeral quality makes it hard to determine the space and time being captured. Again, Vera’s white bikini is identifiable at the top of the picture plane, but the subliminal surrounding water places her in a potentially perilous situation. In many ways, it recalls the series *Autobiography* by Howardena Pindell (b. 1943), particularly her *Water/Ancestors/Middle Passage/Family Ghosts* (1988), that features an abstract and textural rendering of the ocean with interesting silhouettes of the human form; a central figure from which emerges a half-dozen arms; and a negative shape of a slave ship as well as other body parts referencing the bodies of enslaved people. Without question, the body of water represented is the Atlantic Ocean through which many slave ships engaged in the trans-Atlantic slave trade otherwise known as the Middle Passage. Although Tarver’s *Head Above Water* does not explicitly reference the past, its aqueous quality implicates the Black speculative, especially since Vera often surpasses time and space given that the artist rarely places her in a specific time or geographic location or explicitly shows her visage.⁹²

In the installation of the series *Escape*, in 2020, the Middle Passage reverberates in the slide projection of images from various vacations of the 1960s and 1970s, sourced from eBay, and photographs from her parents’ honeymoon in the Bahamas.⁹³ Collectively, this imagery encapsulates the sense of nostalgia attached to personal memories from these places.⁹⁴ Interspersed with the photographs are collages that juxtapose images from iconic movies, popular travel advertisements with images of enslaved laborers on plantations, and slave ships. Yet, the various representations seemingly mirror each other, given the archetypal compositions of vacation photography often referenced consciously or unconsciously. Such pictorial commingling of disparate subject matter provides a dynamic means for the viewer to come to terms with the complex histories of slavery and colonialism, not to

mention the ongoing impact of the Anthropocene on the ecologies, waterways, and various species of a region that solely signifies, for many, utopic and Edenic fantasies.

In Báez’s and Tarver’s artworks, there is no effort to deny history or even the tradition of countermemory; instead, as British-Ghanaian theorist Kodwo Eshun elucidates in his considerations of Afrofuturism, there is a desire to prolong the tradition of countermemory “by reorienting the intercultural vectors of Black Atlantic temporality towards the proleptic as much as the retrospective.”⁹⁵ By doing so, the speculative articulations become plausible and ultimately exist in realms cognitively or subconsciously tapped into by Black people. The contemplative air in both artists’ respective oeuvres allows for a recalling of the past and a pondering of the future, conjuring possibilities for the present moment. While Báez’s artistic creations unearth built and natural environments from centuries past that are propelled into the future as well as render anthropomorphic beings that encourage viewers to reconstitute their positionality as human beings, Tarver’s expressive compositions are anchored in the physical world yet largely influenced by tropical flora and fauna in an effort to trouble the impact of environmental determinism on African descended peoples. At the same time, the topography portrayed in their art are undergirded by a sense of urgency about the Anthropocene’s impact along with an optimism tethered to the future. Their utopic imaginings undoubtedly make possible the freedom Black Atlantic people aspire to attain. •

Samantha A. Noël is associate professor of art history and the Hawkins Ferry Endowed Chair in Modern and Contemporary Art at Wayne State University.

Notes

1. Mimi Sheller, *Island Futures: Caribbean Survival in the Anthropocene* (Duke University Press, 2020), 8.
2. See Eric E. Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Russell and Russell, 1961), and Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: from the Baroque to the Modern, 1492–1800* (Verso, 2010).
3. Sheller, *Island Futures*, 11.
4. Samantha A. Noël, *Tropical Aesthetics of Black Modernism* (Duke University Press, 2021).
5. David Arnold, *The Problem of Nature: Environment, Culture and European Expansion* (Blackwell, 1996), 141–43.
6. Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xxii.
7. McKittrick, xxiii.
8. McKittrick, xxvi.
9. Given the significance of Hélio Oiticica’s Tropicália art movement in 1960s and 1970s Brazil, it is important to acknowledge its positionality, having emerged at least fifty years before the works of the artists examined in this article. For Oiticica, “The concept of Tropicália ... came directly from this fundamental need to characterize a Brazilian condition.... Tropicália is the very first conscious, objective attempt to impose an obviously Brazilian image upon the current context of the avant-garde and national art manifestations.” Oiticica, “Tropicália,” in Hélio Oiticica, Susanne

- Gaensheimer, Max Jorge Hinder Cruz et al., *Hélio Oiticica: The Great Labyrinth* (Museum Für Moderne Kunst, 2013), 227. Tropicália is distinct from the tropical aesthetics explicated in *Tropical Aesthetics of Black Modernism*, and in this article, since the latter refers to the ways early twentieth- and twenty-first-century artists re-present tropical terrains in new and radical ways as a means of self-assertion to enable agency.
10. Esther L. Jones, "Speculative Fiction," *Oxford Bibliographies*, 28 June, 2016, DOI: 10.1093/OBO/9780190280024-0030.
 11. Jayna Brown, *Black Utopias: Speculative Life and the Music of Other Worlds* (Duke University Press, 2021), 1.
 12. Brown, 7–8.
 13. McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xi, xiii, xx.
 14. Brown, *Black Utopias*, 6.
 15. Brown, 7.
 16. The term "speculative logic" is borrowed from Phillip Brian Harper who poignantly considers its importance to Black queer subjecthood when navigating everyday life. See Harper, "The Evidence of Felt Intuition: Minority Experience, Everyday Life, and Critical Speculative Knowledge," *GLQ* 6, no. 4 (2000): 652. Cited in Michelle D. Commander, *Afro-Atlantic Flight: Speculative Returns and the Black Fantastic* (Duke University Press, 2017), 235, n11.
 17. Commander, *Afro-Atlantic Flight*, 6.
 18. Karen Rosenberg, "Firelei Báez on Creating Space for Caribbean History Along the Boston Waterfront," *Artful Jaunts* (July 2021), <https://www.artfuljaunts.com/magazine/firelei-bez-on-creating-space-for-caribbean-history-along-the-boston-waterfront>.
 19. Solimar Otero and Mintzi Auanda Martínez-Rivera, eds., "Introduction: How Does Folklore Find Its Voice in the Twenty-First Century? And Offering/Invitation from the Margins," in *Theorizing Folklore from the Margins: Critical and Ethical Approaches* (Indiana University Press, 2021), 7.
 20. Rachel V. González-Martin, "White Traditioning and Bruja Epistemologies: Rebuilding the House of US American Folklore Studies," in *Theorizing Folklore from the Margins*, 22.
 21. María Elena Ortiz, "A Future Yet to Be Unfolded," in Ortiz et al., *Firelei Báez: Bloodlines* (Pérez Art Museum, 2015), 12.
 22. Ginetta E. B. Candelario, "La ciguapa y el ciguapeo: Dominican Myth, Metaphor and Method," *Small Axe* 20, no. 3 (November 2016): 102.
 23. "Firelei Báez: In Conversation with Naima J. Keith," in *Firelei Báez: Bloodlines*, 23.
 24. Ortiz, "A Future Yet to Be Unfolded," 12.
 25. Ortiz, 12.
 26. Báez aptly notes that online videos capturing these women are often consumed with a false sense of intimacy. See "Firelei Báez: In Conversation with Naima J. Keith," 26.
 27. Rocío Aranda-Alvarado, "Bodies of Color: Images of Women in the Works of Firelei Báez and Rachelle Mozman," *Small Axe* 21, no. 1 (March 2017): 58–59.
 28. Aranda-Alvarado, 58–59.
 29. Angie Cruz, "Firelei Báez on Generosity and Freedom in Art," *Asterix Journal* (July 2017), <https://asterixjournal.com/firelei-baez/>.
 30. Leticia Alvarado, "Flora and Fauna Otherwise: Black and Brown Aesthetics of Relation in Firelei Báez and Wangechi Mutu," *Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture* 1, no. 3 (January 2021): 17.
 31. Firelei Báez with Hồng-Ân Trương, "Art In Conversation," *The Brooklyn Rail* (November 2018), <https://brooklynrail.org/2018/11/art/FIRELEI-BEZ-with-HNG-N-TRNG>.
 32. Christine M. Battista and Melissa R. Sande, *Literary Feminist Ecologies of American and Caribbean Expansionism: Errand into the Wilderness* (Routledge, 2024), 22–24.
 33. Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), 5–9.
 34. The commingling of the ciguapa's body along with the long coiffure and attached flora recall Hélio Oiticica's *parangolés* that called for the physical activation of the participant who wore overlapping layers of colored textiles while dancing to music. See *Hélio Oiticica: The Great Labyrinth*.
 35. See "Firelei Báez: In Conversation with Naima J. Keith," 25.
 36. "Untitled (Terra Nova)," 2020, James Cohan Gallery Viewing Room: <https://jamescohan.viewingrooms.com/content/feature/111/artworks-22359-firelei-baez-untitled-terra-nova-2020/>.
 37. "Untitled (Terra Nova)," 2020.
 38. Margaret Lock, "Toxic Life in the Anthropocene," in Jeremy MacClancy, ed., *Exotic No More: Anthropology for the Contemporary World* (University of Chicago Press, 2019), 224.
 39. "Untitled (Terra Nova)," 2020.
 40. Báez with Hồng-Ân Trương, "Art In Conversation."
 41. "Firelei Báez in Conversation with Hallie Ringle" in *Firelei Báez: Joy Out of Fire Exhibition Guide* (Studio Museum in Harlem, 2018), 8.
 42. Báez with Hồng-Ân Trương.
 43. Báez with Hồng-Ân Trương.
 44. For more on the tropicity of Aaron Douglas's art, see the first chapter in Noël, *Tropical Aesthetics of Black Modernism*.
 45. Báez with Hồng-Ân Trương.
 46. Báez with Hồng-Ân Trương. For more on the Yoruba orishas in a Caribbean context, see Rómulo Lachatañeré, *Afro-Cuban Myths: Yemayá and Other Orishas*, trans. Christine Ayorinde (M. Wiener Publishers, 2003); and Migene González-Wippler, *Powers of the Orishas: Santería and the Worship of Saints* (Original Publications, 1992).
 47. Báez with Hồng-Ân Trương.
 48. Laurie A. Woodard provides a compelling discussion of the significance of the Negro Actors Guild in "'A Free America for All Peoples ...': Fredi Washington, the Negro Actors Guild, and the Voice of the People," *The Journal of African American History* 105, no. 3 (June 2020): 452–78.
 49. At the Schomburg, the hexagonal exhibition space made this kind of immersion conceivable, where the large compositions allowed for an intersubjective exchange between viewers and the subjects of the artworks, not to mention between subjects amongst the various works in the series.
 50. Brown, *Black Utopias*, 6.
 51. bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (Routledge, 2008), 8.
 52. bell hooks, 8.
 53. Siddhartha Mitter, "In Boston, Art That Rises From the Deep," *New York Times*, July 2, 2021, 3, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/02/arts/design/28firelei-baez-ica-boston.html>; and Murray Whyte, "At the ICA Watershed, Artist Firelei Báez Draws History from the Deep," *Boston Globe*, July 8, 2021, 1, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2021/07/08/arts/ica-watershed-artist-firelei-bez-draws-history-deep/>.
 54. Mitter, 3; and Whyte, "At the ICA Watershed," 5.
 55. J. Cameron Monroe explains that after the assassination of Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the founding father of the first independent Haitian state, "Haiti was pulled apart by civil war, resulting in two states that experimented with divergent political models. In the southern half of the country, the Republic of Haiti (1807–) espoused the principles of representational democracy," while in the northern

- half, Christophe established a kingdom, in "Sovereignty after Slavery: Universal Liberty and the Practice of Authority in Postrevolutionary Haiti," *Current Anthropology* 61, supplement 22 (October 2020): 234.
56. This was due to enduring conflicts between Henri Christophe's kingdom and the southern republic, the imposition of economic embargos by several powerful foreign nations, and ultimately by his suicide.
 57. Monroe, "Sovereignty after Slavery," 234–36. Devastated by an earthquake in 1842, the architecture at Sans-Souci was exemplary of a Baroque Classicist aesthetic. The royal complex included individual residences for Christophe, the queen, and the heir apparent; and a military garrison, residences for state officials, and two extensive gardens. It is believed that Germain Boffrand's Palais de la Malgrange, in Lorrain, France, served as its inspiration. See Mitter, "In Boston, Art That Rises From the Deep," 3.
 58. Whyte, "At the ICA Watershed," 4.
 59. Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 20.
 60. Neimanis, 2. In their book, Neimanis recognizes water embodiment as challenging anthropocentrism, which is based on a humanist understanding of corporeality, 3.
 61. Mitter, "In Boston, Art That Rises From the Deep," 4.
 62. Whyte, "At the ICA Watershed," 6–7.
 63. Mitter, "In Boston, Art That Rises From the Deep," 4; Whyte, 6.
 64. Whyte, 5.
 65. Mitter, "In Boston, Art That Rises From the Deep," 3; Whyte, 4.
 66. Rosenberg, "Firelei Báez on Creating Space for Caribbean History Along the Boston Waterfront," 4–5.
 67. Katherine McKittrick explains that these Drexciyans, the band members speculate, also created an advanced underwater civilization and live not only in the Atlantic Ocean but also along the Gulf of Mexico, the Mississippi River, and even the Great Lakes of Michigan. McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories* (Duke University Press, 2021), 52–55.
 68. Alexis Pauline Gumbs reminds us of the immense knowledge taught to us by humans' aquatic cousins in her book, *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals* (AK Press, 2020), 22–23.
 69. Adrienne Elise Tarver, personal communication with the author, March 16, 2022.
 70. Arnold, *The Problem of Nature: Environment, Culture and European Expansion*, 150–52; Charlotte Rogers, *Jungle Fever: Exploring Madness and Medicine in Twentieth-Century Tropical Narratives* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2012), 85–88.
 71. Anthony Wilson, *Shadow and Shelter: The Swamp in Southern Culture* (University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 4–12; David C. Miller, *Dark Eden: the Swamp in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 1–3.
 72. Kelly Enright, *The Maximum of Wilderness: The Jungle in the American Imagination* (University of Virginia, 2012), 3–4.
 73. Press release, *Secrets of Leaves* by Adrienne Elise Tarver, February 17–March 19, 2017, Dinner Gallery, <https://dinnergallery.com/secrets-of-leaves>.
 74. The immersive environment that *Secrets of Leaves* offers is reminiscent of Hélio Oiticica's installation *Tropicália* (1967), a *penetrables* featuring sand, tropical plants, and live parrots, which ultimately lent its name to Brazil's pan-cultural movement. Oiticica's *penetrables* were spaces that could be physically entered that allowed the viewer to be immersed in color, space, time and music (Hélio Oiticica: *The Great Labyrinth*, 24).
 75. Press release, *Secrets of Leaves*.
 76. Tarver, personal communication with the author, March 16, 2022.
 77. Chaone Mallory, "What's in a Name? In Defense of Ecofeminism (Not Ecological Feminisms, Feminist Ecology, or Gender and the Environment): Or 'Why Ecofeminism Need Not be Ecofeminine—But So What If It Is?,'" *Ethics and the Environment* 23, no. 2 (October 2018): 11–35, <https://doi.org/10.2979/ethicsenviro.23.2.03>.
 78. Benjamin Sutton, "Peeping Through a Painted, Sculpted Jungle," *Hyperallergic* (March 2017), <https://hyperallergic.com/364451/peeping-through-a-painted-sculpted-jungle/>.
 79. Krista A. Thompson, *An Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque* (Duke University Press), 20–21.
 80. Ruud Welten, "Paul Gauguin and the Complexity of the Primitivist Gaze," *Journal of Art Historiography* 12 (June 2015): 1–14.
 81. Edward D. Powers, "From Eternity to Here: Paul Gauguin and The Word Made Flesh," *Oxford Art Journal* 25, no. 2 (2002): 90.
 82. Tarver, personal communication with the author.
 83. Brown, *Black Utopias*, 1.
 84. Celine Mo, "Escape by Adrienne Elise Tarver," (2020): <https://vimeo.com/389993937>.
 85. Kristina Adduci, "Voyeurism & Stories of Shadows with Artist Adrienne Elise Tarver," *Art Zealous* (December 2016), <http://www.adriennetarver.com/press-1/2017/2/25/voyeurism-stories-of-shadows-with-artist-adrienne-elise-tarver-art-zealous>.
 86. Rogers, *Jungle Fever*, 5–17; Arnold, *The Problem of Nature*, 142.
 87. Walter Putnam, "Please Don't Feed the Natives: Human Zoos, Colonial Desire, and Bodies on Display," *French Literature Series* 39 (2012): 55–68; Robert Bogda, "When the Exotic Becomes a Show," in Pascal Blanchard, Gilles Boetsch, Eric Deroo, and Sandrine Lemaire, eds., *Human Zoos: Science and Spectacle in the Age of Colonial Empires* (Liverpool University Press, 2008), 103–127.
 88. Mo, "Escape by Adrienne Elise Tarver."
 89. Thompson, *An Eye for the Tropics*, 106–9.
 90. Veerle Poupeye, *Caribbean Art* (Thames and Hudson, 1998), 51–54.
 91. Tarver, personal communication with the author.
 92. Tarver.
 93. Adrienne Elise Tarver, *Escape*, on view at Victori + Mo Gallery (now Dinner Gallery), <http://www.adriennetarver.com/escape>.
 94. Tarver, personal communication with the author; Mo, "Escape by Adrienne Elise Tarver."
 95. Kodwo Eshun, "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism," *CR: The Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 289.

ARTEMISIAN AFTERLIVES IN AMERICAN FEMINIST ART

By Jennifer S. Griffiths

*Memory runs her needle in and out,
up and down, hither and thither.*

—Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*

“**T**here are no women equivalents for Michelangelo,” Linda Nochlin wrote in her 1971 essay, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” Yet many subsequent scholars rejected Nochlin’s concession and devoted their careers to uncovering and exploring women artists that might claim that crown of greatness. Chief among them was the Italian painter Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1653), hereafter Artemisia.¹ Recuperated for the history of art by Roberto Longhi in 1916,² reborn in Anna Banti’s semi-autobiographical novel, *Artemisia*, of 1947,³ championed in 1989 by Mary Garrard in the first academic monograph on the artist,⁴ and the subject of a controversial biopic from 1997 directed by Agnès Merlet, she has since been the focus of three more novels,⁵ several plays,⁶ a television documentary,⁷ internet memes, and even a comic book,⁸ all of which seem to indicate that she occupies pole position as the ‘Magnificent Exception’ in Germaine Greer’s *Obstacle Race*.⁹

Like many other successful women artists in early modern Europe, Artemisia was the daughter of an artist. Her mother, Prudenzia Montone, died in childbirth, and her father took it upon himself to teach his highly gifted only girl. She was undoubtably a strong woman. After her infamous sexual assault and trial, she built a successful career in a field controlled by men while mostly living as a single mother. She negotiated with patrons and famously advocated for herself in those oft-repeated quotations from letters to patron Don Antonio Ruffo: “I will show your most Illustrious Lordship what a woman can do,” and “You will find the spirit of Caesar in this soul of a woman.”¹⁰ She was the only female follower of Caravaggio, and she made history paintings about powerful biblical and historical heroines. For all these reasons, she has attracted the attention of feminist critics, popular feminisms, and contemporary women artists.

In her most recent book on the Baroque painter, Garrard called for more transhistorical thinking within feminisms: “If we do not recognize feminism as a continuum that has evolved over time, from the fourteenth century to the present,” she writes, “we risk separating women from our history, and minimizing feminism’s significance in history writ large.”¹¹ Garrard paints a picture of an Artemisia who was not only in conversation with feminist ideas of her time, but who still speaks directly to our own. Lost to posterity for two hundred years before being rediscovered at the beginning of the twentieth century, she has been speaking to the feminist imagination ever since.

Pictures, as explored below via the scholarship of Aby Warburg and Julia Kristeva, are worth much more than a thousand words insofar as they speak across linguistic barriers and skip through time to be perennially reborn. Just as “feminist movement” has often had to wrestle with the traditions of written and spoken language to invent new terminology that can adequately express women’s experience of the world, it has often manipulated visual language, reinterpreting and reinventing symbols or images from the past in the service of evolving feminist ends.¹²

How Artemisia has been speaking to us is the topic of this essay, which explores ways in which her story and visual legacy were mediated by recent feminists who reshaped her image to our own current demands. In the literary arts, Banti conversed with the artist across time and space, presciently understanding the possibilities of intertwining fact and fantasy to confront the experiences of uncertain, conflicted, and divided subjectivities that early modern and modern women share.¹³ There has been an occasional scholar who objected to reading Artemisia’s painting anachronistically through modern feminist eyes,¹⁴ but this essay does not attempt to make sense of how she or her patrons saw the paintings. Rather, it considers temporalities and appropriative techniques in a feminist light, focusing on the afterlives of Artemisia’s paintings in twentieth-century American feminist art and placing her as a floating feminist signifier around which a collective feminist consciousness gravitates.

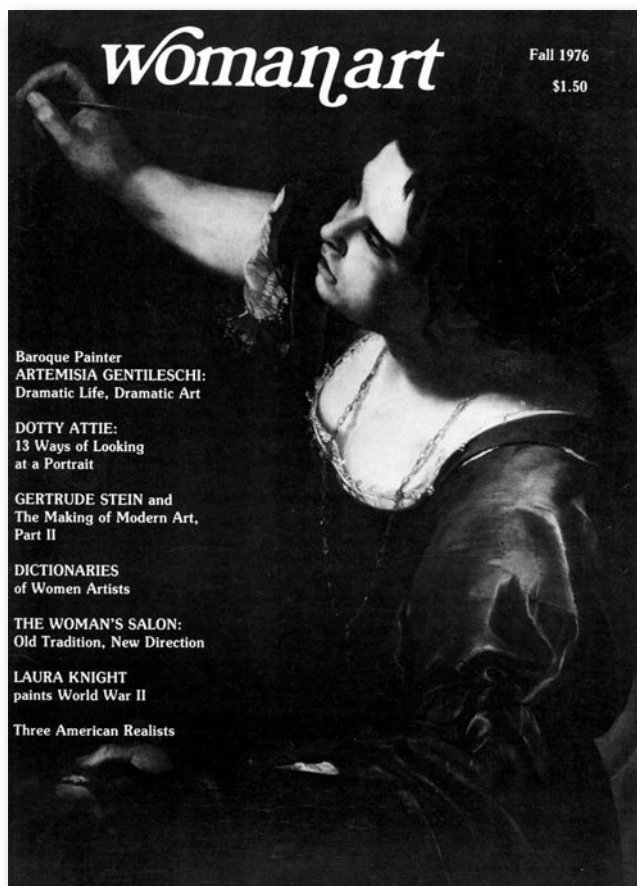


Fig. 1. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* (1638–39), featured on the cover of first issue of *Womanart*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Summer 1976).

Warburg systematically investigated how antique visual traces resurfaced in Renaissance art. He showed us that “the time of the image is not the time of history in general.”¹⁵ If Nochlin has often been referred to as the mother of feminist art history, then Warburg has sometimes been called the founding father of iconography. Both questioned the boundaries of the art historical discipline.¹⁶ Reflecting on art and feminism for *Artforum*, Nochlin described an encounter with Warburg’s concept of the “Nachleben,” or afterlife of the image. She was taken, she said, not by the notion of influence or appropriation, but by the idea that aspects of European tradition could find “new meaning in the work of women artists who use them as both continuity and critique in the representation of women.”¹⁷ Warburg’s theories, said Georges Didi-Huberman, are about “making historical time more complex, recognizing specific, non-natural temporalities in the cultural world.”¹⁸ Artemisia’s works have been repeatedly referenced and reused by feminist artists. As we trace the shadows, residues, and ruins of past images by women through contemporary feminist imaginary, we can begin to discover that these histories are nonlinear and best understood in terms of waves, echoes, or mysterious quantum particles that appear, disappear, and reappear in unexpected places.

In Steven Jay Gould’s 1987 historiography of geology, *Time’s Arrow, Time’s Cycle*, the arrow and circle epitomize how European scientists of the Enlightenment began to conceptualize cyclical deep time, as opposed to the arrow of linear progressivism, which had long been the primary metaphor of biblical history underpinning European thinking. He concludes that, “Arrows and cycles need each other if we ever hope to grasp the meaning of history. Arrows and cycles are ‘eternal metaphors.’”¹⁹ Feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva had earlier also pondered these two shapes or metaphors of time in her 1979 essay, “Women’s Time.” But she had a specific interest in how the linear temporalities of European histories were at odds with ‘cyclical’ temporalities of the cosmos historically linked to women. She described her essay as an attempt to “situate the problematic of women in Europe within an inquiry on time: that time which the feminist movement both inherits and modifies.”²⁰ Considering modern European feminism’s relationship to time, she proposed three distinct phases: an egalitarian phase demanding women’s insertion into linear history; a more radical phase marked by almost total refusal of linear temporality; and a third phase that would permit “the parallel existence of all three in the same historical time, or even that they be interwoven with one another.”²¹ This distinctly Hegelian arrangement of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis did not necessarily draw out direct implications for the iconography of feminist art, but Kristeva opens up the role of the symbolic in defining cultural parameters, and thereby introduces the possibility of conceiving time in complex and multidirectional ways. If a “female sensibility emerged a century ago,” she writes, “by introducing its own notion of time,” it will seek out “its own trans-European temporality.”²²

Building on Kristeva’s openings, Victoria Browne recently made a case for *polytemporal* feminist readings of history “generated through the intersection of various times and temporalities.”²³ While we have recently been subjected to lines of postfeminist discourse that highlight the various failures of feminism,²⁴ Browne offers a tantalizing strand of optimism:

[T]hinking about feminism in terms of a “temporality of struggle” encourages us to take up the unfinishedness and continuing promise of past feminisms, while also critically engaging with the more problematic ways in which the past continues to repeat itself in the present. It can help us to understand feminism as polytemporal, nonlinear, and internally complex, and to develop a historiography that does justice to the vibrancy and variation of feminist histories and temporalities. By unlocking our feminist pasts and presents, we may yet bring about feminist futures.²⁵

At a moment when institutions in the United States are rolling back egalitarian reforms of the 1970s, nonlinear readings allow us to take heart in those continued promises of feminist movement.



Fig. 2. Kathleen Gilje, *Susanna and the Elders, Restored* (1998), oil on linen and fifteen sheets of X-ray film mounted on plexiglass, 67" x 47". Collection of Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts. Courtesy of the artist.

Two other studies have recently explored polytemporal or nonlinear readings in feminist art history. Time, says Elizabeth Hamilton in *Charting the Afrofuturist Imaginary in African American Art*, has become "a subject, method, and medium" in Afrofuturist visual language, wherein "manipulating time is a way of addressing that haunting mirror."²⁶ Through various temporal complications, Afrofuturism permits the productive spaces of what she calls the "black female fantastic." Catherine Grant's recent book, *A Time of One's Own*, shows how feminist art from the early 2000s through the late 2010s has been creatively revisiting feminism of the second wave, producing new meanings and "creating a time of their own by bringing together a cast of both historical moments and characters for us to use in the present."²⁷ Her ideas draw on several notions of temporality developed by queer theorists, including Carolyn Dinshaw and Elizabeth Freeman. Grant describes these contemporary feminist episodes as using "disruptive, looping temporalities" to understand the present and speculate empowering feminist futures.²⁸

Creative appropriations of Artemisia can be read from these multiple perspectives as polytemporal, fantastical, and

looping engagements with women's time. Feminist memory runs its needle up and down, stitching together a fabric made from ideas and images from different places and times. If contemporary feminist art arises from such a patchwork imaginary, the quilt is a metaphor with particular resonance for women's experiences of collective creativity and reuse in the Americas. The vastness of such a potential subset of images, those that have been echoed, referenced, or reused across a century of feminisms, is beyond the scope of the current essay. For this reason, focus is drawn to a subset of images by and about Artemisia that make the looping temporalities of feminist art strikingly apparent: installations of the 1970s and painted appropriations of the late 1990s and early 2000s.

During the second wave of feminism, women were consciously exploring the intersections of social politics and art. As Norma Broude and Mary Garrard argue in their introduction to *The Power of Feminist Art*, the problem for women artists of the seventies was finding an authentic voice; only by broadly exploring the shared, collective experiences of

women, could individuals understand themselves. They shifted the question away from *Who Am I?* toward *Who Are We?*²⁹ For many feminist artists this led to an intense engagement with women's history.

"Nobody's art is an immaculate conception," insisted Lucy Lippard in 1976, "but in aesthetics, parthenogenesis is possible; women can now begin to work from the embryonic history of other women's art."³⁰ In the wake of Nochlin's essay, at the time Lippard wrote this, Artemisia had come to the fore as a major source of inspiration among American feminists. She became the eponym of one of America's earliest cooperative exhibition spaces for women: Artemisia Gallery, in Chicago.³¹ Artemisia's *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* (1638–39) appeared on the cover of the second issue of *Womanart* magazine in 1976 (Fig. 1), which included a biographical feature by critic Barbara Cavaliere. Founding editors bemoaned a lack of venues for discussing women's art and dedicated the publication, firstly, to "analysis of the work of contemporary women artists," and, secondly, to "discussion of women's art in history."³² Inspired by Nochlin's article, Artemisia was the heroine that May Stevens (1924–2019), Lippard's friend and prominent '70s feminist artist, chose to commemorate, in 1976, for a painting included in *The Sister Chapel* (Pl. 5). This collaborative project and installation, which debuted on January 15, 1978, at P.S. 1 (now MoMA PS 1) in Queens, NY, was conceived in 1974 by Ilise Greenstein (b. 1928), who enlisted the participation of twelve women artists, including Stevens, and offered a woman-centered alternative to the most famous image of the Christian creation myth.³³ If *The Dinner Party* (1974–79) by Judy Chicago (b. 1939) relied on the audience's familiarity with Leonardo's *Last Supper* (1495–98), *The Sister Chapel* relied on the iconicity of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling (1508–12). Both projects constructed alternative iconographies to make women's missing histories visible; they did so by warping expectations of aesthetic time and space. Chicago rejected the linear arrangement of the conventional *Last Supper* in favor of the triangle to evoke female anatomy, creativity, and force. Her choice aligned with imagery of the moment, as the pubic triangle had appeared on the cover of *Per una espressione nuova* (Towards New Expression), an artist book from 1974 by Italian-American Suzanne Santoro (b. 1946), and on the cover of the Spring 1978 issue of *Heresies* dedicated to "The Great Goddess."³⁴ *The Sister Chapel* opted for a circular painterly arrangement of chosen matriarchs experienced in close up, a dramatic departure from the linear narrative of untouchable patriarchs on the Sistine ceiling. These cooperative enterprises were intentional ripostes to the art historical tradition of isolated Renaissance geniuses.

The year 1976 also marked the opening of the Cooperativa Beato Angelico (CBA), an all-women cooperative and collaborative exhibition space and gallery co-founded in Rome by eleven Italian feminist artists, critics, and art historians. According to Maria Bremer, the practice of interrogating the apparent neutrality of linear history—by interweaving past and present in non-linear ways—fundamentally underlined the cooperative's initiative and closely aligned its activities with much wider feminist debates.³⁵ In her aforementioned

book, *Towards New Expression*, Santoro, one of the CBA's key members, had juxtaposed details of classical, archaic, and prehistoric statuary with photos of female anatomy and genitalia to rethink time-honored images in terms of radical feminist consciousness. (That year, its presentation and censorship by the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, had an international resonance.) While Santoro had been a member of the radical Roman feminist group Rivolta Femminile (Women's Revolt), she and artist Carla Accardi (1924–2014) broke ranks with fellow art critic Carla Lonzi (1931–1982), the group's co-founder, because neither would renounce working in the male-dominated art world rejected by Lonzi. Over its short two-year lifespan, from 1976 to 1978, the ten exhibitions mounted by the Beato Angelico Cooperative, some retrospectives, alternated showing women of the past with those of the present, putting them into conversation: Gentileschi and Elisabetta Sirani (1638–65) were juxtaposed with Santoro, Accardi, Regina Cassolo Bracchi (Futurist painter, 1894–1974), Silvia Truppi (n.d., act. twentieth-century), Nedda Guidi (1927–2015), Anna Maria Colucci (1938–2015), Stephanie Oursler (1938–2018), and Marisa Busanel (1933–1990).

The gallery's inaugural presentation, *Un Quadro*, on April 8, 1976, was dedicated to Artemisia yet featured a single work: *Aurora* (1625–27), goddess of the dawn. It was curated by art historian Eva Menzio, whose accompanying leaflet and research contributed to an act of authentication that publicly attributed *Aurora* to Artemisia for the first time.³⁶ Baroque audiences of the past might have recognized the goddess's gesture, hands outstretched toward the sky, as indicating her mythological role as colorist of the blue dawn, something a modern scholar interpreted as a self-referential gesture on Artemisia's part.³⁷ The powers of the goddess were harnessed to the purpose of the Baroque painter long before her own powers fired the imaginations of her artistic heirs.

At the center of her very blue 1976 portrait, May Stevens attentively positioned Artemisia's hand: poised with a brush, she prepares to make her mark. The hand appears to be a visual quotation of Pierre Dumonstier's 1625 drawing held at the British Museum. Stevens is unlikely to have seen his drawing in London, but it was discussed in Cavaliere's *Womanart* article, and it is possible that she saw the drawing reprinted in the leaflet authored by Menzio to accompany the Beato Angelico show.³⁸ In both the leaflet and the journal, Dumonstier's drawing is discussed and the inscription on its verso is quoted: "The hands of Aurora are praised and renowned for their rare beauty. But this one is a thousand times more worthy for knowing how to make marvels that send the most judicious eyes into raptures."³⁹ Whatever the *Aurora* meant to Baroque audiences, this painting that metaphorically endows the woman artist with mythological divinity was reactivated by and for feminist artists and audiences of 1970s Italy and America, simultaneously symbolizing the dawning of a new feminist consciousness and a rekindling of Artemisia's legacy within feminist circles.

The Sister Chapel and the staging of *Un Quadro* are installations in which women artists were remaking and reimagining

women's time by drawing on familiar and less familiar Renaissance vocabulary. Yet they were also resonating within a broader feminist discourse about ancient goddess worship and matriarchal iconography that was prevalent at that time in British and American literature. Publications like Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (1973), Marija Gimbutas's *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe, 7000 to 3500 BC* (1974), and Adrienne Rich's *Of Women Born* (1976), had a major influence on American feminist art.⁴⁰ These interests were further reflected in *Chrysalis* (1977–1980), a journal dedicated to feminist spirituality and the visual arts.⁴¹ Antique heroines and goddesses had likewise interested Artemisia. The gestures and postures of divine feminine iconography found expression again in feminist art of the seventies in the work of Ana Mendieta (1948–1985), Mary Beth Edelson (1933–2021), and Nancy Azara (1939–2024).⁴² The pointed use of Artemisia as an art historical reference seems to have experienced a moment of intensity in the 1970s and, like the goddess of the dawn, she re-emerged in the late 1990s as an icon around which the patchwork feminist imaginary continued to coalesce.

Over three hundred years ago, Artemisia rode the tail end of a feminist tide that was ultimately quelled by Rome's Catholic Counter-Reformation backlash.⁴³ In the seventies, the achievements of feminists included the passage of Title IX in 1972, and the Supreme Court ruling on *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, however, these strides forward were also met with an observable backlash of the eighties.⁴⁴ Looking back on these advances it can be disheartening to think they were short-lived. The most recent intensification of misogyny and racism under the current American presidency of a felon, publicly accused of rape, assault, and harassment by twenty-five women, since 1970, has ushered in regressive policies: the gutting of the Affordable Care Act's birth control benefit; the weakening of Title IX; and the dismantling of Title X, all of which set the stage for the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. Sexism and racism are de rigueur once more as federal institutions and universities across the US have rolled back diversity, equity, and inclusion measures. Four episodes of American feminist art are examined below, when the artists borrowed from Artemisia's Baroque paintings to conceptualize complex, sometimes personal relationships to this great woman artist of the past, ultimately to make sense of misogyny in the present twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

As early as 1998, Brooklyn-born artist and restorer Kathleen Gilje (b. 1945) created an installation piece, *Susanna*



Fig. 3. Anna Ostoya, *Judith Slaying Judith* (2016), oil on canvas, 78 1/2" x 62". Courtesy of Anna Ostoya and the Bortolami Gallery.

and the Elders, *Restored*, which imagined a violent personal narrative beneath Artemisia's 1610 painting of the same subject (Fig. 2 and Pl. 6). Gilje painted Artemisia's image in accurate detail, but underneath her copy she buried a lead-white underpainting only visible via X-ray. In the biblical story from the Book of Daniel recounting Susanna's sexual harassment by two lecherous elders, the innocent Jewish woman and wife is accused of adultery and almost stoned to death. Hiding behind this scene in her rendition, Gilje portrayed the imagined personal narrative of Artemisia's own sexual assault by Agostino Tassi, in 1611, a year after the completion of the original painting, including details from Artemisia's testimony as they were presented at her trial the following year, in 1612. These details were widely circulated after their translation and publication in Garrard's 1989 monograph. Gilje imagines the young artist's screams and the knife she claimed to have grabbed in the aftermath to threaten her attacker.



Fig. 4. Anna Ostoya, *Mirrored Sheets, A Butterfly Mirrored* (2016), archival inkjet print on paper, 13" x 19". Courtesy of Anna Ostoya and the Bortolami Gallery.

Mieke Bal has noted for Gilje's work how the painter turns the scientific tool of the X-ray inside out. Something used by the art historical establishment to determine material and technical truth is deployed, instead, to imagine an emotional truth lost to us as viewers forever: the inner, psychological struggles of the long-dead and absent Artemisia.⁴⁵ Like stacked matryoshka dolls, Gilje's interpretation nestles inside Artemisia's painting, mimicking the way we might imagine Artemisia's own feelings of anger and innocence nestled inside her narrative depiction of Susanna. Even if Artemisia's painting was not "commenting" on her assault yet to come in 1611, Gilje's project, through the stories of both Susanna and Artemisia, unpacks backwards and forwards to evoke empathy and solidarity with women across time. Such embedded images are powerfully suggestive of the transhistorical issue of violence against women, pointing to the physical and emotional injuries they have faced in male-dominated societies. Artemisia's biblical scenes are often explicitly violent, and there is an historical awareness on our part that the late Renaissance society in Rome, into which she was born, was brutish and cruel: at twelve, Artemisia could bear witness to her mother's death in childbirth; at thirteen, she would have known about Caravaggio's street duel with Ranuccio Tomassoni, who bled to death from a wound inflicted to his femoral artery; and by age nineteen, she was

raped by her tutor and tortured by the authorities. Gilje's installation magnifies the historical reality of these violent histories while insisting that the violence still belongs to us all in our present. Remaking the work asks us to empathize not only with the biblical Susanna and the Baroque Artemisia, but to recognize that their pain is our pain, too. Gilje's image allows an isolated episode of trauma to resurface in capillary waves.

In 2016, the New York-based Polish artist, Anna Ostoya (b. 1978), had a solo exhibition at the Bortolami Gallery called *Slaying*: it presented a series of small ink-jet printings and paintings, many of which reinterpreted Artemisia's first version of *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (1612–13) through the dissected language of Cubism and the fragment. Some of Ostoya's versions broke Artemisia's painting into its most basic, constituent formal elements as abstracted planes. A large number juggled the roles of characters by envisioning, for example, *Judith Slaying Judith* (2016; Fig. 3 and Pl. 7) or *Holofernes Slaying Holofernes* (2016). Others superimposed figures or elements from the original painting, in *Two Faces: Judith and Holofernes, Action*, for instance, creating disturbingly monstrous visions. Some mirrored, extracted, or dissected elements to create entirely new forms, observed in the vaginal images of *Mirrored Sheets, A Butterfly Mirrored* (2016; Fig. 4). Several reviewers described the show as a "forensic" investigation⁴⁶ or "a detective's evidence wall"⁴⁷—in this sense, the violence of Artemisia's personal life was once again understood as the animating principle driving any contemporary work that references her. Another critic panned the show, calling it "self-indulgent, devoid of any inkling of the humanity, blood, or violence that the original conveys..." commendable only for the artist's remarkable "ability to make a decapitation look blasé," and vehemently disliking how she saw "no trace of [Artemisia's] history here."⁴⁸ However, *Slaying* represented a conscientious attempt to see art of the past through a modernist lens. What was lost, arguably, on these critics was how Ostoya revised and interrogated Artemisia through the early twentieth-century avant-garde techniques of fragmentation and collage, both utilized to repudiate the concept of Alberti's Renaissance "window." This approach allowed the artist to metaphorize our viewing relationship to Artemisia: fragmented, pasted-together, a collapsed window, as it were. An artist-icon who may give the illusion of three-dimensions is revealed, in fact, to have only two. The flatness of Artemisia's history is embraced, akin to the canvas's flatness embraced by Picasso or Braque—as truth to materials. As said of Banti's 1947 novel on the artist, "The life of Artemisia herself is given form, by the act of memory, by the will of the writer."⁴⁹

Like Banti, Ostoya looks back on Artemisia, not unlike a dialogue between the younger and the elder, historical artist, to reinvent her in a process that does not seek the "real" Artemisia but transforms her into the mirror through which she can understand herself. Ostoya's *Two Faces, One Hiding, One Observing* (2016; Fig. 5) illustrates this: she spliced the face of Artemisia's *Penitent Magdalene* (1616–18), located in the Pitti Palace, with the hand and décolletage of another painting of

Mary Magdalene (more recently attributed to Artemisia from the Seidel Collection in Los Angeles) to assume the look of someone gagged rather than hiding. Onto these, she overlaid another female face looking up from the lower right corner, which appears to be the face of Abra from Artemisia's *Judith and Her Maidservant* (1623–25), in the collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts.⁵⁰ This pastiche of three characters is a thoughtful reflection on women's desire to uncover each other—calling attention to those whose stories have been manipulated or left unwritten—as well as a revisitation of sisterhood seen not only through the biblical story of Judith and Abra, and the early modern betrayal of Artemisia by Tuzia, but also via the idea of our sisterly identifications with past women. The title of Ostoya's show is equally enigmatic and suggestive of the weight held by Artemisia: *Slaying* can refer to the death of Holofernes and the title of the original painting, or it can simultaneously refer to Ostoya's cutting up or slashing of Artemisia's images, but it also suggests the long death imposed by patriarchal art history on the Baroque artist's legacy and, more generally, on women throughout history. A slangy interpretation of the term further suggests triumph—someone so impressive or successful that they killed it, as in, “You slayed ‘em, Artemisia.” Above all, Ostoya shows us that even if the twenty-first-century lens through which we see Artemisia is cracked, our inevitable distortions and reshaping of her are full of potential.

In her *Apologia* series of 2018, Betty Tompkins (b. 1945) seized the words of art world public figures accused of sexual assault, and she later superimposed them in pink text onto a wide range of works by artists such as Raphael, Ingres, and Warhol. In this case, she made more extensive use of art by women, so, in addition to Artemisia, she used paintings by Judith Leyster (1609–1660) and Mary Shepard Greene Blumenschein (1869–1958). Tompkins's borrowings from Artemisia included *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (combining both versions from 1612–13 and 1620) for *Apologia* #1; *Lot and His Daughters* (1636–38) for *Apologia* #2; *Jael and Sisera* (1620) for *Apologia* #3 (2018; Fig. 6 and Pl. 8); and *Susanna and the Elders* (1610) for *Apologia* #4. In the biblical tale, Jael drives a tent spike through the Canaanite general Sisera's forehead after he flees the battlefield to hide in her tent.⁵¹ Tompkins juxtaposed Jael's very real act of violence with the hyper-inflated words of contemporary portraitist Chuck Close, who described his experience of being accused of sexual assault as a kind of crucifixion by the media. “It's lies,” Tompkins transcribes over Sisera's sleeping form, “I haven't slept in



Fig. 5. Anna Ostoya, *Two Faces, One Hiding, One Observing* (2016), archival inkjet print on paper, 19" x 13". Courtesy of Anna Ostoya and the Bortolami Gallery.

weeks. I've been such a supporter of women and women artists. I've done nothing wrong and I'm being crucified."

In Susanna's story, the deceitful elders falsely accuse her of adultery in retaliation for spurning their advances, but Daniel discovers the truth in time to save her life. In Tompkins's remake of this painting, *Apologia* (*Gentileschi* #4), the half-hearted apology of *Artforum* publisher Knight Landesman is projected onto the figures of Susanna's two voyeurs, intentionally highlighting Landesman's supposedly unintended bad behavior and notoriously retaliatory behavior towards his accusers. "I fully recognize that I have tested certain boundaries which I am working hard to correct," he told news outlets, "I have never willfully or intentionally harmed anyone. However, I am fully engaged in seeking help to ensure that my behavior with both friends and colleagues is above reproach in the future." The deceit that lies at the heart of both biblical stories is mirrored in Tompkins's paintings, whose work implies that Close and Landesman's statements



Fig. 6. Betty Tompkins, *Apologia (Gentileschi #3)* (2018), acrylic on book page, 11" x 8 1/4". Courtesy of Betty Tompkins and P-P-O-W, New York, © Betty Tompkins, Photo: JSP Art Photography.

are similarly disingenuous.⁵² Although there are several instances in the series where Tompkins has covered male figures with text (including Sisera), the majority of the figures she has obscured in this way are women. When asked about this, Tompkins explained, "I cover the women because language defines us. The women are defined by what is written on top of them. They're obliterated."⁵³ In another *Apologia* (2018; Fig. 7 and Pl. 9), Tompkins writes her pink script over the young woman looking into the mirror in Mary Shepard Greene Blumenschein's *Un Regard Fugitif* from 1900, this time with the words of New York University Professor Avital Ronell, who defended herself against allegations of sexual assault by a male graduate student in 2017. Tompkins's contemporary episodes compound the historical phenomenon of women's erasure from the history of art, in which abuses are played down, wrongdoings erased, and, once more, women are dismissed. She appropriates male and female artists of the past and comments on abuses committed by both sexes. Her marriage of historical images to contemporary words visualizes our ongoing cultural engagement with pictures from the past, which, notwithstanding the value of historical and cultural context, are constantly and critically invested and received with new meanings to perform conversations across time.

Arguably, the most challenging and significant recent appropriation of Artemisia's work is found in *Carlota Slaying the Slaver* (2015; Fig. 8 and Pl. 10) by Cuban-American artist Lili Bernard (b. 1964). Bernard is an artist, actress, and activist, and, like Artemisia, publicly known as a whistleblower (she is one of the many women who spoke out against actor Bill Cosby). Her paintings speak to the horrors of the trans-

Atlantic slave trade and the systematic physical and sexual abuse endured by generations of Black women in the Americas and Caribbean. *Carlota Slaying the Slaver* is one in a series of four paintings from *Antebellum Appropriations* (2010–15) that re-make iconic European paintings. The others are *The Sale of Venus* (After Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*), *Carlota Leading the People* (After Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*), and *Caroline* (After Manet's *Olympia*). These intentionally disturbing works comment on the trauma of African American experience and, in the artist's words, position "the story of my ancestors into the halls of art history."⁵⁴ *Carlota Leading the People* and *Carlota Slaying the Slaver* are based on an historic Nigerian-born Yoruba woman, Carlota Lucumí, who, with the enslaved Fermina, led a slave uprising against the Triunvirato plantation in Matanzas, Cuba, in 1843. While the other two paintings in Bernard's series rewrite so-called European "masters" and their allegorical visions of the female nude, *Carlota Slaying the Slaver* is unique in that it reuses or rewrites a

mistress, or *maestra*. It is also the only painting from the series wherein the original subject constitutes someone considered to be a real historical figure rather than a visual allegory of womanhood created by patriarchal culture. Bernard has personified Carlota and Fermina as the biblical Judith and Abra, not as another Venus, Liberty, or Olympia. Like Gilje, she is able to construct a new, identificatory *mise en abyme*, by taking up the position of a woman artist.

Race complicates issues: the ethnicities of the Jewish Judith and Assyrian Holofernes were whitewashed in Early Modern and Baroque history paintings. While Bernard retains a European identity for Holofernes as slaver, all four of the powerful women depicted in her re-reading are Black. Fermina takes the place of Abra, holding the slaver down. Carlota takes the place of Judith beheading him. The Brazilian folk saint Anastasia Escrava wears a slave iron bit or scold's bridle, and sheds tears as she sits on the slaver and prepares to castrate him. Her chest is branded with the letters JR, which also appear on the bookmark in the bible resting on the table before them. This suggests, on the one hand, the perverseness of chattel slavery, which turned human beings into objects, and simultaneously offers up the idea that Anastasia represents the hand of Christian divine retribution. The presence of the Yoruba *orisha* Oya, spirit of lightening, storms, death, and rebirth, identified clearly by her halo, points to the power of an alternative Indigenous African perspective on divine justice than that of the vexed white wife of the slaver standing guard at the left, compelled to hand over a pistol. Oya's bold rainbow colors and assertive posture contrast dramatically with the wife's saggy, white sleeping garb and ineffectual attitude. If, as it has been argued, Artemisia's

multiple depictions of Judith and Abra intentionally emphasize the need for solidarity between women, then, through her appropriation, Bernard offers a painful reminder of that terrible lack of solidarity between women across the color line that not only characterized the dehumanizing of enslaved people in the Americas but continues to divide America today.⁵⁵

Drawing upon the heroic and symbolic power of historic women, Bernard's work is about the distinct experiences of Black women, giving expression to the anger and pain of generational trauma. Her claim of Artemisia can only be understood in the context of other contemporary Black artists who have reappropriated iconic characters and stereotypes in an effort to reinterpret histories and activate new meanings, what Hamilton theorizes as a series of elements, among them temporality and appropriation, at work in the Afrofuturist imagination to "generate counter-histories that reweave connections between past, present, and future in a new practice of technoscientific storytelling."⁵⁶ For Hamilton, Alison Saar's *Swing Low* public memorial (2008) exemplifies how a contemporary Black woman artist reactivates the heroic history and symbolic power of a figure like Harriet Tubman; Kara Walker's massive public installation, *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby* (2014), a sugar-coated mammy-sphinx hybrid, "recover[s], create[s], and amend[s] histories and memories of slavery."⁵⁷ Bernard's entourage is equally numerous, transnational, and ethnically diverse. She, too, amends the trauma of history in *Carlota Slaying the Slaver*, here tapping into the biblical vengeance that was activated by Artemisia in her own Baroque painting, and channeling it toward past, present (including herself), and future generations of Black women.

Art history since Vasari has corroborated the belief that great artists are driven by Oedipal drives in a contest toward progress—sons attack fathers and new generations overthrow the old forces of cultural and patrilineal authority. At the core of this tradition is an urge toward competition and aggression and a belief in a profoundly linear model of history based on the supremacy of the new. Modernism since the early nineteenth century saw a dramatic increase in the intensity and speed of radical critique and father-son rebellions—from Manet's borrowing of Titian and Picasso's use of Goya to Duchamp's appropriation of Leonardo. But if Picasso and Duchamp had a plethora of possible patresfamilias to draw upon and compete with, it is unlikely that Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876–1907) or Hannah Höch (1889–1978) knew of Artemisia's legacy and unclear whether they would have been driven by similar urges toward competition. American artist, feminist, and critic Mira Schor (b. 1950) has insisted that the success of a woman artist has always depended upon her "perceived relationship to megafathers like Marcel Duchamp."⁵⁸ Traditional, critical strategies of reception that underpin the patrilineal norms of art history have excluded women, however, the above contemporary appropriations illustrate how some feminist artists have refigured new relationships to the past via Artemisia.

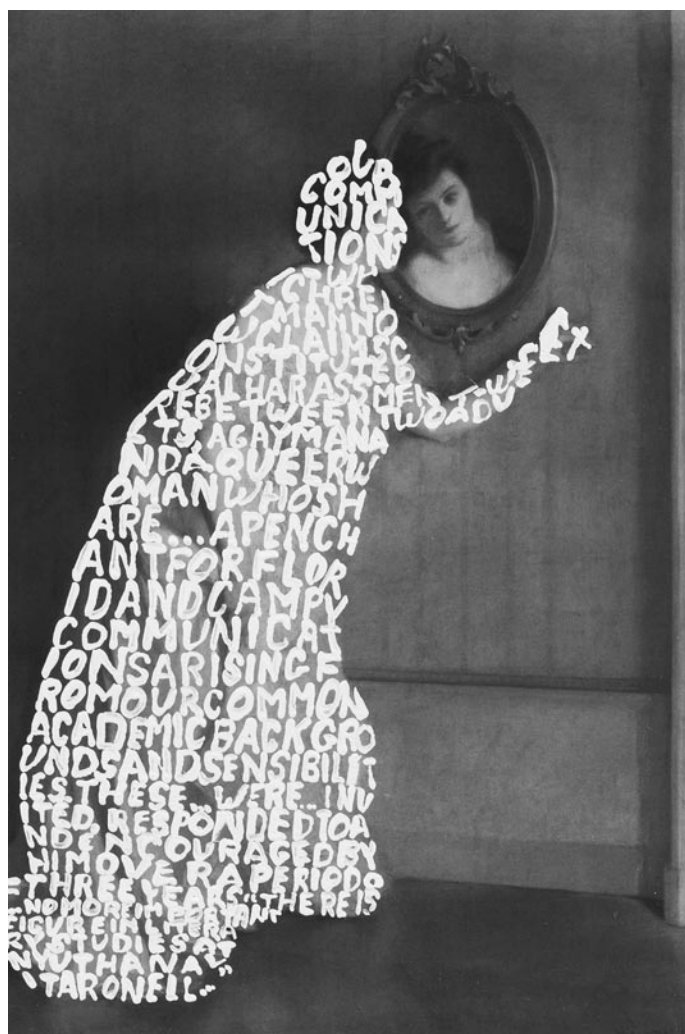


Fig. 7. Betty Tompkins, *Apologia* (Mary Shepard Greene Blumenschein) (2018), acrylic on book page, 11" x 9 1/4". Courtesy of Betty Tompkins and P-P-O-W, New York, © Betty Tompkins, Photo: JSP Art Photography.

In her exploration of parental analogies, Lisa Tickner juxtaposed two very different conceptions of cultural inheritances, conceived, on the one hand, by Virginia Woolf, and on the other, by Harold Bloom. While Bloom theorized a patrilineal genealogy born of competition and "anxiety of influence," Woolf sought, according to Tickner, "a sense of kinship" with her creative female precursors, having claimed, in *A Room of One's Own*, that creative women "think back through [their] mothers."⁵⁹ There is no doubt that for some contemporary women artists, Woolf's mother-daughter metaphor is germane, relatable, and empowering, but others may not find the family or kinship model particularly useful in thinking through their relationships to women artists of the past. More recently, Catherine Grant has proposed an alternative, non-familial model for looking at contemporary re-stagings of feminist history qua the figure of the fan, one who "brings up the irrational, passionate, and violent aspects of the desire to embrace feminism."⁶⁰ Gina Siciliano's graphic novel, *I Know What I Am: The Life and Times of Artemisia*

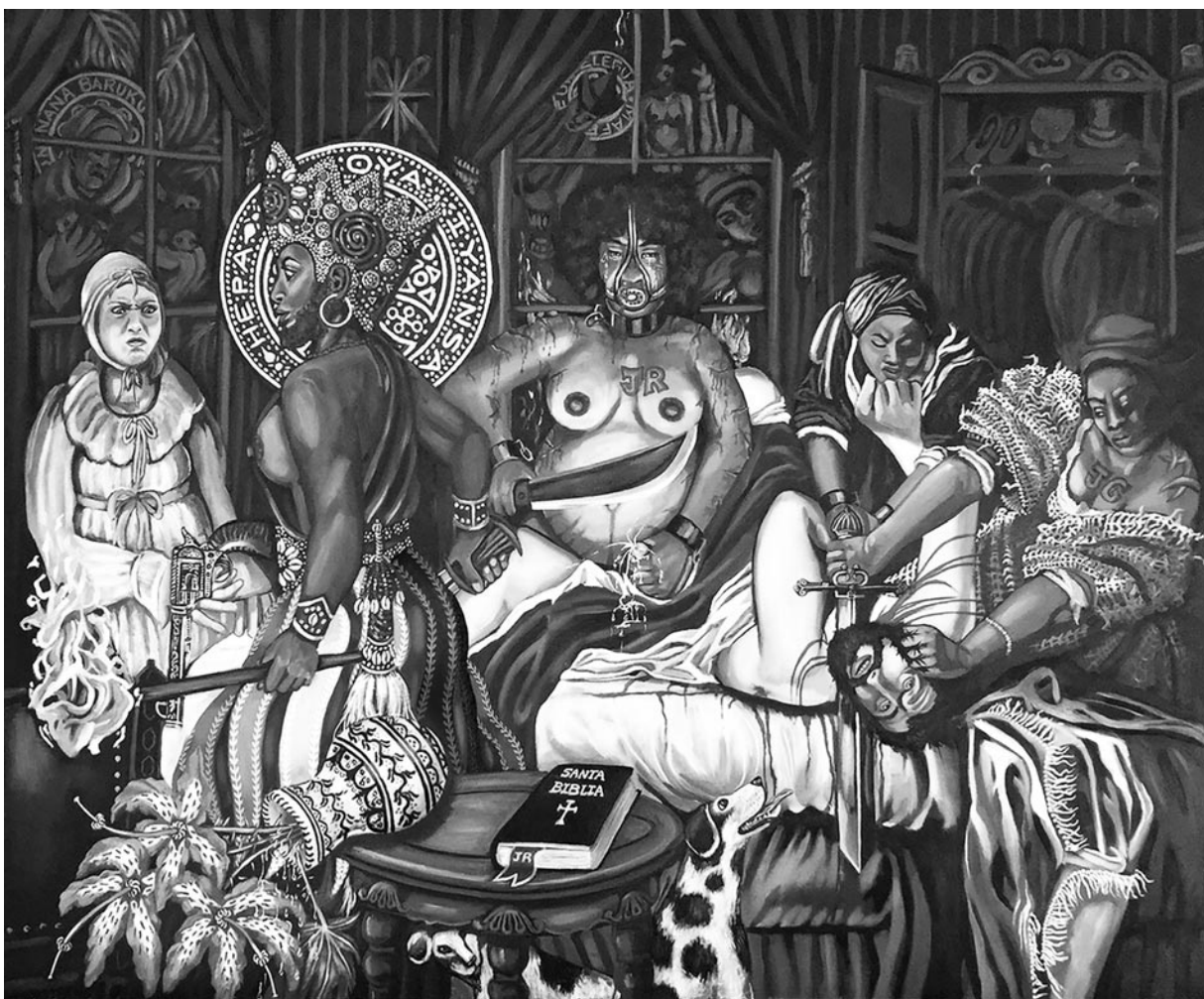


Fig. 8. Lili Bernard, *Carlota Slaying the Slaver* (after Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, 1612) (2015), oil on canvas. 72" x 96". Collection of the Artist. © 2026 by LILI BERNARD.

Gentileschi (2019), offers an example wherein fandom is overtly at play in the writer's relationship to Artemisia.

However, these two models—kinship (matriarchal or otherwise) and fandom—are not mutually exclusive. A deeper feminist approach can lie in adopting a both/and rather than an either/or position, embracing the coexistence and simultaneity of multiple models. One can be a daughter, cousin, niece, granddaughter, *and* fan. One can also have biological, adoptive, or chosen mothers. Both such models provide a basis for understanding feminist appropriations; both offer powerful alternatives to patriarchal and Oedipal relationships that have too often underpinned artists' relationships to the history of art and their antecedents; both substitute the urge toward competition and aggression with an alternative desire for identification with the past and solidarity with the present; both are legitimate ways of understanding contemporary feminist appropriations in terms of circular relations. Whether the above women artists are relating to Artemisia and her work through the lens of kinship or fandom, their borrowings are activating anachronistic and fantastical approaches to history that challenge linear,

teleological, or progressive concepts of time. Moreover, such examples of feminist reuse are related both to Warburg's concept of the "Nachleben" and Kristeva's third phase of women's time, which allow for the interweaving of linear and nonlinear threads.⁶¹

The fate of *The Sister Chapel* is a fitting testimony to the nonlinearity of feminism and to the place of women in the history of art who disappear and reappear in waves, loops, or quantum apparitions. After consecutive exhibitions in 1978, 1979, and 1980, the installation was dismantled and removed from public view for thirty-six years until 2016, when the panels were reunited—and, in the case of Sharon Wybrants's *Self-Portrait as Superwoman* (*Woman as Culture Hero*) (1977–78), recreated—at last granted a permanent home at the Center for Art and Social Engagement, in 2019, at Rowan University in New Jersey.

Fantastical interrogations of linear time are by no means exclusive to feminism, neither are they a philosophical discovery of European poststructuralism. As Indigenous peoples have tried to explain and anthropological research has frequently investigated, models of cyclical and circular time

are foundational to Native cultural philosophies around the world. In 1956, William Stanner coined the term “everywhen” to explain the untranslatable way that Australian Aboriginal peoples conceive of what we call “time” and what they call “the Dreaming.” Based on the “notion of a sacred, heroic time of the indefinitely remote past” that is “still part of the present,” he explained that “One cannot ‘fix’ the Dreaming in time: it was and is everywhen.”⁶² Indigenous cultures of the Andes are also known to imagine time as oscillating between the present and nonpresent, merging past and future as a phenomenal continuum.⁶³

In his foundational essay on Afrofuturism, Mark Dery asked, “Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?”⁶⁴ American Indigenous artist Cannupa Hanska Luger has been taking up this question in his series *Future Ancestral Technologies* (2018–). He responds to romanticized historical narratives about Native peoples as primitive and ancient—not of the present—by imagining what Indigeneity means in the distant future. His visual narratives posit a future in which *only* Indigenous technologies and philosophies can save the world from colonialism and capitalism. “Future Ancestral Technologies is Indigenous science fiction,” Luger says, “a way of future dreaming rooted in continuum. As an artist and craftsperson, I understand how the very act of making creates future potential.”⁶⁵ Indigenous philosophies of time, he explains, can be a tool for redirecting human experience in this entangled world. As strategies of empowerment for anyone or group whose histories have been obscured or erased, such temporal splicing of human stories often cut across lines of ethnicity, race, and gender, and provide a basis upon which to build optimism in the present and speculative futures filled with promise. Separate scholarly investigations, cultural perspectives, and artistic examples converge on phenomena in which multiple groups today are rethinking, reimagining, and fantasizing the past as “everywhen.”

This article insists that there is a long arc to the feminist imaginary and that contemporary feminist artists who draw upon Artemisian imagery activate and engage deeper feminist time. In this way they are reconnecting us with severed histories, giving women’s art an afterlife, and unveiling expansive possibilities for unconventional feminist timelines that are complex, inclusive, nonlinear, polytemporal, and looping. Artemisia has become a feminist icon outside of time, a heroic persona for us to reinvent fantastically for the present and future. The various artists discussed have evoked the past in the present, displaced the present onto the past, and created a montage of moments that rebuild and revalue feminist pasts for our present circumstances when women in America continue to struggle for respect, agency, and equal pay. Collapsing time and constructing new lineages through bonds of kinship, fellowship, or fandom, these artists are constructing the Myth of Artemisia for us to use in the present, an archetypal heroine for art herstory. •

Jennifer S. Griffiths is an associate editor at the Bibliotheca Hertziana in Rome. She is the author of *Marisa Mori and the Futurists: A Woman Artist in an Age of Fascism* (Bloomsbury, 2023), and co-editor of the forthcoming volume, *Feminist Friendships, Collaborations, and Networks in the Visual Arts*, essays in honor of Norma Broude and Mary Garrard (Harvey Miller, 2026). She received her doctoral degree from Bryn Mawr College.

Notes

1. “As Artemisia approaches twenty-first-century superstardom, it is right that she is now known by one name, just like Michelangelo, Raphael and Caravaggio.” Mary Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi and Feminism in Early Modern Europe* (Reaktion, 2020), 11.
2. Roberto Longhi, “Gentileschi padre e figlia,” *L’Arte* 19 (1916), 235–314.
3. Anna Banti, *Artemisia* (Sansoni, 1947).
4. Mary Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art* (Princeton University Press, 1989).
5. Alexandra Lapierre, *Artemisia* (Mondadori, 2000); Susan Vreeland, *The Passion of Artemisia* (Penguin, 2002); Elizabeth Fremantle, *Disobedient* (Pegasus, 2023).
6. These include Sally Clark’s *Life Without Instruction* (Talonbooks, 1994); Helena Hale’s “Artemisia Gentileschi—Of Lies and Truth,” a one-woman show; and Olga Humphrey’s *The Exception* (Dramatic Publishing, 1997).
7. Adrienne Clarkson, “Artemisia,” CBC Television documentary, 1993: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1oNhqH2YxiQ>.
8. Gina Siciliano, *I Know What I Am: The Life and Times of Artemisia Gentileschi* (Fantagraphics, 2019).
9. Germaine Greer, *The Obstacle Race: The Fortunes of Women Painters and Their Work* (Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1979).
10. Two letters from Artemisia Gentileschi to Don Antonio Ruffo, the former dated August 7, 1649, and the latter dated November 13, 1649; repr. Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: Image of the Female Hero*, 396–97.
11. Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi and Feminism*, 9.
12. The term “feminist movement” is used intentionally after the manner of bell hooks, following, for example, the author’s *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (South End Press, 2000).
13. Griselda Pollock, “Feminist Dilemmas with the Art/Life Problem,” in *The Artemisia Files: Artemisia Gentileschi for Feminists and Other Thinking People*, ed. Mieke Bal (University of Chicago Press, 2005), 169–206.
14. Elizabeth Cohen, “The Trials of Artemisia Gentileschi: A Rape as History,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 31, no. 1 (2000): 47–75.
15. Georges Didi-Huberman, “The Surviving Image: Aby Warburg and Tylorian Anthropology,” *Oxford Art Journal* 25, no. 1 (2002): 61.
16. Warburg argued “for an extension of the methodological borders of” art history and called out our discipline’s “dogmatic faith in genius,” for example, in “Italian Art and International Astrology in the Palazzo Schifanoia,” in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, trans. David Britt (Getty Research Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999), 585. Nochlin’s 1971 essay questioned the myth of genius, pointing out the systemic exclusion of women from art institutions.
17. Nochlin et al., “Feminism and Art: Nine Views,” *Artforum* 42, no. 2 (October 2003): 141–49. She discusses Didi-Huberman’s “fascinating book,” *The Surviving Image: Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms: Aby Warburg’s History of Art* (Penn State University Press, 2002).

18. Didi-Huberman, "The Surviving Image," 68.
19. Stephen Jay Gould, *Time's Arrow, Time's Cycle: Myth and Metaphor in the Discovery of Geological Time* (Harvard University Press, 1987), 191.
20. Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time," trans. Alice Jardine and Harry Blake, *Signs* 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1981): 13–35.
21. Kristeva, 33.
22. Kristeva, 18.
23. Victoria Browne, *Feminism, Time, and Nonlinear History* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 26, 143.
24. Here I am referring to the idea of postfeminism that has circulated in popular thinking and discussion of the late 1990s and early 2000s, and that has been documented in books, such as Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker's *Interrogating Postfeminism* (2007), Angela McRobbie's *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009), or, most recently, Sophie Gilbert's *Girl on Girl: How Pop Culture Turned a Generation of Women Against Themselves* (2025).
25. Browne, *Feminism, Time, and Nonlinear History*, 146.
26. Elizabeth Carmel Hamilton, *Charting the Afrofuturist Imaginary in African American Art: The Black Female Fantastic* (Routledge, 2023), 49. See also Sarah Richter's review of *Charting the Afrofuturist Imaginary* in this issue of *Woman's Art Journal* 47, no.1 (Spring/Summer 2026): 60–61.
27. Catherine Grant, *A Time of One's Own: Histories of Feminism in Contemporary Art* (Duke University Press, 2022), 68.
28. Grant, 4.
29. Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, ed., *The Power of Feminist Art: the American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact* (Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 21–22.
30. Lucy Lippard, "Projecting a Feminist Criticism," *Art Journal* 35, no. 4 (Summer 1976): 338.
31. Artemisia and ARC Gallery opened in Chicago in 1973, only one year after the founding of A.I.R., the first all-women cooperative art gallery in the United States.
32. See *Womanart* 1, no. 1 (Summer 1976): 3.
33. In addition to Ilise Greenstein and May Stevens, the artists included June Blum, Maureen Connor, Martha Edelheit, Elsa M. Goldsmith, Shirley Gorelick, Betty Holliday, Diana Kurz, Cynthia Mailman, Alice Neel, Sylvia Sleigh, and Sharon Wybrants. See Andrew Hottle, *The Art of the Sister Chapel: Exemplary Woman, Visionary Creators, and Feminist Collaboration* (Ashgate, 2014).
34. Suzanne Santoro, *Per una espressione nuova* (Towards New Expression) (Rivolta Femminile, 1974).
35. Maria Bremer, "Unexpected Artists. The Cooperativa Beato Angelico in the Context of 1970s Feminism," *Römisches Jahrbuch der Bibliotheca Hertziana* 44 (2019/2020): 483–98.
36. The trial transcripts were published for the first time in Eva Menzio, ed., *Artemisia Gentileschi/Agostino Tassi: Atti di un processo per stupro* (Edizioni delle Donne, 1981).
37. Jesse Locker, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Language of Painting* (Yale University Press, 2015), 113.
38. I have not been able to establish if May Stevens saw the Italian leaflet. Suzanne Santoro and Stevens knew each other. Perhaps Lucy Lippard brought the Italian show to her attention. The timings of the Rome exhibition in April 1976, followed by Barbara Cavaliere's article on Artemisia in *Womanart* in fall 1976, and the 1976 May Stevens painting, seem to be suggestive of some transatlantic communication.
39. The inscription is in French: "Les mains de l'Aurore sont louées et renommées pour leur rare beauté. Mais celle cy/ plus digne le doit estre mille fois plus, pour scavoir faire des merveilles,/ qui ravissent les yeux des plus Judicieux." Pierre Dumonstier II, *Right Hand of Artemisia Holding a Brush* (1625), black and red chalk, The British Museum: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_Nn-7-51-3?selectedImageId=257327001.
40. Jennie Klein, "Goddess: Feminist Art and Spirituality in the 1970s," *Feminist Studies* 35, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 575–602.
41. Carrie Rickey, "Writing (and Righting) Wrongs: Feminist Art Publications," in *The Power of Feminist Art*, 126.
42. See Gloria Orenstein, "Recovering Her Story: Feminist Artists Reclaim the Great Goddess," in *The Power of Feminist Art*, 174–189.
43. Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi and Feminism*, 63–68.
44. Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (Crown Publishers, 1991).
45. Mieke Bal, "Grounds of Comparison," in *The Artemisia Files*, 163.
46. "Anna Ostoya: 'Slaying,'" *Time Out*, March 7, 2016, <https://www.timeout.com/newyork/art/anna-ostoya-slaying>.
47. Lara Atallah, "Anna Ostoya," *Artforum*, February 25, 2016, <https://www.artforum.com/events/anna-ostoya-3-217547/>.
48. Katelynn Mills, "Really Killer: Anna Ostoya's Judith," *artcritical*, March 6, 2016, <https://artcritical.com/2016/03/06/katelynn-mills-on-anna-ostoya/>.
49. Sharon Wood, *Italian Women's Writing, 1860–1994* (The Athlone Press, 1995), 126.
50. Thanks to Mary Garrard for this observation and for her many useful suggestions.
51. Tompkins plays here with rabbinical commentators' suggestion that the phrase "letting him into her tent" is used metaphorically in the narrative to imply a sexual act. See Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi and Feminism*, 161.
52. Alina Cohen, "Betty Tompkins Gives Art History a #MeToo Overhaul," *Artsy*, November 23, 2018, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-betty-tompkins-art-history-metoo-overhaul>.
53. Bean Gilsdorf, "An Atmosphere of Threat: Betty Tompkins Interviewed," *Bomb*, September 24, 2021, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2021/09/24/an-atmosphere-of-threat-betty-tompkins-interviewed/>.
54. Liz Ohanesian, "Lili Bernard: Fighting Trauma With Art," *PBS SoCal*, March 30, 2015, <https://www.pbssocal.org/shows/artbound/lili-bernard-fighting-trauma-with-art>.
55. Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi* (1989); Wood, *Italian Women's Writing* (1995), 126; and Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi and Feminism in Early Modern Europe* (2020), 147.
56. Hamilton, *Charting the Afrofuturist Imaginary in African American Art*, 241.
57. Hamilton, 39.
58. An idea Mira Schor first expressed in "Patrilineage," *Art Journal* 50, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 58–63.
59. Lisa Tickner, "Mediating Generation: the mother-daughter plot," *Art History* 25, no. 1 (February 2002): 26.
60. Grant, *A Time of One's Own*, 28.
61. Kristeva, "Women's Time," 33.
62. W.E.H. Stanner, "The Dreaming" (1956); repr. Stanner, *The Dreaming and Other Essays* (Black Inc., 2011), 61–62.
63. See Edward Swenson and Andrew Roddick, eds., *Constructions of Time and History in the Pre-Columbian Andes* (University Press of Colorado, 2018).
64. Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, ed. Mark Dery (Duke University Press, 1994), 180.
65. See Cannupa Hanska Luger's website at <https://www.cannupahanska.com/fat/ethos>.

“CATEGORIES ALWAYS LEAK”

ZARINA BHIMJI’S INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE

By Allison K. Young

In December 1997, readers of the Oxford University medical journal, *QJM: Monthly Journal of the Association of Physicians*, may have been surprised to encounter a series of enigmatic art photographs printed on the pages between research articles in that month’s issue.¹ In one, labeled *Tiny Pulse*, eight neat columns of saffron thread are carefully arranged on a sheet of Japanese paper and photographed from above (1997; Pl. 11). They curve and cross, like calligraphic marks, forming an imperfect matrix across the delicate ground. The image’s meaning is opaque. Aided by the titular evocation of a ‘pulse,’ it beckons to be read rhythmically, like a musical score or a trail of footprints. Similarly evocative images are interspersed throughout the issue: pink hibiscus petals laid atop black velvet; dried cloves over white chiffon; crushed chrysanthemum, piled like damp earth onto a sterile metal dish.

Produced by the artist Zarina Bhimji (b. 1963) and collectively titled *Decayed Teeth*, these photographs and their publication in *QJM* resulted from a collaboration with the Ruskin School of Fine Art, Oxford, through an interdisciplinary research unit in art and science that was appropriately titled “The Laboratory.”² Bhimji’s images portray a range of herbal medicinal treatments and address forms of embodied or intuitive knowledge that run counter to the medical field’s clinical gaze—through which a practitioner’s care of the patient’s body is mediated by X-rays, scans, and biochemical metrics. At the time, the artist stated, she wished to demonstrate that “our articulation of feeling and understanding is culturally determined and defined,”³ and to present an “alternate representation of bodily pain and the nature of healing.”⁴ Envisioning the body through symbolic means, she placed spices and flower petals in careful, dotted lines across textile grounds, offering a soft translation of surgical sutures or scar lines, traced across skin.

Decayed Teeth is one of several bodies of work that Bhimji produced throughout the 1990s, which sought to address the nature of our subjective experiences within institutions like hospitals. Issues surrounding the complex and often

problematic relationships of individuals to institutions had been at the forefront of Bhimji’s career to this point and arguably stem, in part, from her own experience as an immigrant in the United Kingdom. Born in Uganda in 1963 of South Asian parentage, Bhimji and her family fled to England in 1974, following Idi Amin Dada’s military coup d’état and subsequent expulsion of Asians from the country. They arrived in the UK during an era marked by the rise of the National Front and its xenophobic politics, leading Bhimji to interrogate the ways in which individuals and communities are processed, categorized, and exploited within social and political systems.⁵ Yet within the arc of the artist’s career, *Decayed Teeth* and works created in the 1990s remain understudied, especially in comparison to the artist’s celebrated photo-text works of the 1980s, or the cinematographic installations that have earned her global recognition since 2002. While her best-known series are more directly engaged with themes regarding cultural identity, feminism, and migration, Bhimji deliberately turned away from these subjects in the 1990s. She explained to an interviewer in 1993 that “I wanted to have that space not to be taken on because they wanted a Black artist ... I just felt uncomfortable with that, and I felt it was, in fact, damaging to what I was doing, and so I kind of completely withdrew. I didn’t bother.”⁶ The artist’s rejection of identity-based interpretations of her work is well known. As Zehra Jumabhoy has attested, “Bhimji herself has for years been vitriolic” around the subject of categorization.⁷ Interpreting her work “in the context of *diasporic feminist art* is a tricky task,” she admits, later asking: “Is it fair to look at Bhimji in terms of the question of identity politics at all?”⁸

Despite her apparent withdrawal from identity-based imagery in the 1990s, works such as *Decayed Teeth* may be understood as offering a nuanced reflection on the ways in which identity is constructed and mediated by Western institutions and disciplinary structures. Utilizing a range of mediums and formats such as found objects, organic substances, vitrines, metal shelving, and lightbox

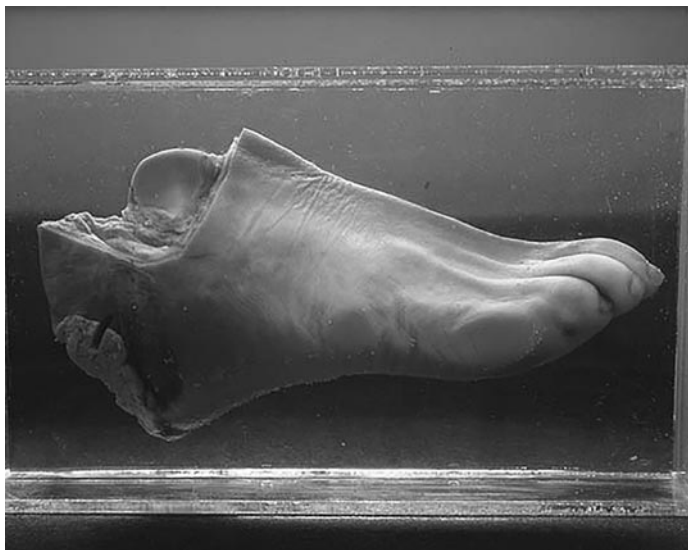


Fig. 1. Zarina Bhimji, *Indelible* from the series *Listen to the Room* (1995), one of eight Cibachrome photographs mounted on lightbox. Collection Charing Cross Hospital, London. © 2025 Zarina Bhimji / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / DACS, London.

photographs, her major works from that decade mimicked and subverted the terms of Enlightenment-era visuality and requisite methods of social and biopolitical regulation. These projects were enabled by a series of residencies through which Bhimji gained access to some of England's premier academic, cultural, and scientific organizations. In addition to *QJM* and The Laboratory at the University of Oxford, these included the Victoria and Albert Museum, Darwin College at the University of Cambridge, and London's Charing Cross Hospital. In these spaces Bhimji created work that undermined the 'classificatory mode' or the 'clinical gaze' that are central to disciplines as wide-ranging as museology, criminology, eugenics, medical pathology, anthropology, and art history.⁹ As such, she offers a lesson that we may also take to heart when approaching the interpretation and, indeed, the *classification* of her own work.

By placing emphasis on the formalist and conceptual qualities of Bhimji's practice, this article moves beyond interpretive reliance on the specificity of cultural markers, and instead shows how her works, in fact, disrupt the methods through which the 'Other' has been constructed, controlled, and suppressed by those in power—challenging the very gesture of classification itself. A range of artistic and critical histories are examined, around which Bhimji's projects in the early 1990s might be orientated: the body as seen and controlled by scientific and political institutions; representations of the body in art; the ontological status of museum objects as "alive" or "dead"; the politics of display; and the dialectics between difference and conformity, beauty and revulsion, order and formlessness. Informed by research into institutional histories, Bhimji's works testify to the legacy of the early Modern project at large, as it manifests in contemporary spaces such as hospitals. As such, Bhimji's interventions seek to liberate their subjects from classificatory structures, exposing viewers to a fuller realm of feeling, embodiment, and meaning.

Placing her series *Listen to the Room* (1995), created at Charing Cross Hospital, in dialogue with contemporaneous works by Christian Boltanski, Susan Hiller (1940–2019), Donald Rodney, Helen Chadwick (1953–1996), and Rotimi Fani-Kayode, Bhimji's work from the 1990s may be understood within a wider artistic preoccupation with Enlightenment-era structures of classification and Cartesian dualism. These artists either mirrored Enlightenment logics through the invocation of archival or ethnographic strategies, or embraced an aesthetics of abjection, eroticism, and corporeality; Bhimji's works at Charing Cross Hospital did both.¹⁰ Indeed, a statement included in the pamphlet that accompanied the display of her installation *1822–Now*, at the Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen (M HKA) in 1993, cited the Vietnamese feminist filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha, whose words exemplify the subversive tenor of Bhimji's work: "Despite our desperate, eternal attempt to separate, contain, and mend," Minh-ha writes, "categories always leak."¹¹

In 1993, Bhimji was invited to participate in the 'Art in Hospitals' initiative developed by the Public Art Development Trust (PADT). This commission enabled her to explore themes surrounding power, science, and social control from within the very type of institution she had set out to critique. Established in 1983, Art in Hospitals initially welcomed artistic collaborations with medical patients and staff, but ten years later the PADT innovated on this model by centering artists' own practices over community-engaged or rehabilitative creative projects. Fellows were encouraged to make work inspired by their exposure to the medical environment.¹²

Bhimji was one of three artists selected for the first round of the new scheme, along with Tania Kovats (b. 1966) and Catherine Yass (b. 1963). She undertook her research in Charing Cross Hospital under the supervision of Robin Illingworth, the hospital's medical director and consultant neurosurgeon. She observed surgeries and other operations but quickly became captivated by one space in particular: the hospital's Pathology Museum, a repository of over ten thousand medical specimens and anatomical fragments preserved in formaldehyde within glass vitrines. The Pathology Museum was established in the mid-nineteenth century, soon after the hospital's foundation in 1831. It continues to collect specimens and serves as an educational resource utilized by medical students. Bhimji requested permission to photograph in the museum, explaining in her proposal: "I hope that the final images will be more abstract, and therefore inviting, yet may inspire uneasiness too."¹³

The resulting series, *Listen to the Room*, consists of eight Cibachrome color photographic transparencies mounted on illuminated lightboxes. These prints were further divided into two series of four individual works. Each is paired with one in the opposite grouping, with which it shares a title, such that there are two photographs each bearing the titles of *Listen to the Room*, *We Are Cut From the Same Cloth*, *Indelible*, and *Monster*. Rather than being shown side-by-side, the two sets were conceived for entirely different spaces in the hospital.

One series of colorful, evocative tableaux was installed in public corridors, to be viewed by patients, visitors, and medical personnel. The other set of images depicted specimens in the Pathology Museum collection; these were hung in restricted areas, visible only to medical students and staff. As historian Marina Warner noted, the privacy of the Pathology Museum itself stirred the artist's ongoing interest in "secret codes as sites of power."¹⁴

Across the eight photographic transparencies, Bhimji addresses the history and lineage of Western medical institutions and their bureaucratic management of the body, subjects that can be traced to biopolitical regimes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In his 1963 study *Birth of the Clinic*, for instance, Michel Foucault elaborates on the emergence of modern medical institutions in the late eighteenth century, speaking to the process whereby low-income patients were transformed, so to speak, into objects of medical study rather than recipients of care and healing. It was in this era that private clinics became distinguished from general hospitals. The former were sites of research and training, while the latter provided health services. Yet, clinical doctors sought experience with sick patients (not just cadavers), and an uncomfortable solution was proposed: the poor would be forced to pay their dues for treatment by offering their bodies to clinical study.

Following Foucault, the anthropologist Deborah Poole has suggested that many of the challenges of modernity in Europe were addressed through the classification and surveillance of subaltern subjects—the insane, the criminal, the poor, the ill, women and colonized peoples—and their subsequent distribution into "the domain of value and utility."¹⁵ Medical anthropologist Nora L. Jones describes the result of this transformation as instituting the concept of the "body as specimen," which defines as "the way in which Western biomedical practice and practitioners, infused with the legacy of the Enlightenment philosophy and Cartesian materialism, have come to view the body of the patient as an object, as something in need of repair."¹⁶ This view of the human body is, she continues, manufactured and carefully produced through medical encounters, so that "body as specimen" "refers to the body that is prodded and probed, tested and treated ... [it] is 'the spleen in room 12.'"¹⁷

In the set of images of *Listen to the Room* displayed privately for staff at Charing Cross, Bhimji makes use of formal devices such as fragmentation, framing, and spatial isolation. The work titled *Indelible* (1995; Fig. 1 and Pl. 12) offers a frontal view of a dismembered foot that floats in a tank of clear formaldehyde. Each toe gently tugs at the muscular hallucin tendons that guide our vision towards the ankle, where the foot has been amputated, revealing internal layers of skin, muscle, and bone. Bhimji's photograph aestheticizes and dramatizes this object. The arch and heel are cloaked in shadow, while the top of the foot bathes in the warm glow of artificial light, emphasizing the impossible softness of preserved skin. The effect is reminiscent of painterly tenebrism; high contrasts of light and shadow, likewise, added a visceral charge to seventeenth-century



Fig. 2. Zarina Bhimji, *Listen to the Room* from the series *Listen to the Room* (1995), one of eight Cibachrome photographs mounted on lightbox. Collection Charing Cross Hospital, London. © 2025 Zarina Bhimji / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / DACS, London.

depictions of martyrs, glorifying death when it is redemptive or spiritual.

Crucially, this iteration of *Indelible* portrays not only the anatomical specimen but also the vitrine framed at the photographic edge. As an image within an image, the foot has thus been twice flattened and prepared for observation, and the vitrine becomes akin to an X-ray or a slide. Presented thusly, Bhimji exaggerates the kind of cognitive distance that is necessary for physicians who study the body. However, looking more closely at her compositions, it becomes clear that she also seeks to disrupt the objectivity of this clinical gaze, primarily by capitalizing on the polysemic properties of the glass façade itself.

For art historian Elyse Speaks, the vitrine often "operates in contemporary art as both surface and lens."¹⁸ As lens, the vitrine functions to guide the very act of looking. It enables an artificial demarcation of "other space," as Speaks puts it, through or into which we are encouraged to gaze. But a vitrine is also a physical object. It can serve as a frontier that *halts* the movement of our gaze. When treated as surface, the vitrine (like the window) "flattens what is beyond; its graphic armature acts as a special adhesive that binds together the pictorial contents into a near-parallel plane even as it connotes depth."¹⁹ The body within the vitrine in *Indelible* is transformed into an image behind a reflective glass surface. Likewise, in her essay on the grid, Rosalind Krauss addresses the motif of the window in Western painting via a dialectic of the simultaneous centripetal *and* centrifugal forces of image-as-window: one summons our gaze inward from the outer limits of the artwork, while the other compels, in her words, "our acknowledgment of a world beyond the frame."²⁰

In each of Bhimji's photographic transparencies, the vitrine acts as both surface and lens. In *Monster*, which portrays a



Fig. 3. Susan Hiller, *From the Freud Museum* (1991–96), glass, 50 cardboard boxes, paper, video, slide, light bulbs, other materials, displayed 86 5/8" x 393 7/10" x 23 5/8". Collection Tate, London. © 2025 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / DACS, London.

collapsed lung, the edge of the vitrine is visible at the right-hand margin and very faintly at left. As our eyes shift between the sides and the center, we are either completely immersed in, or distanced from, the "other space" of the world behind glass. In another image entitled *Listen to the Room*, from the same series, which depicts about thirty specimens arranged and stacked in a large metal case, the individual vitrines on the top row of shelving appear nearly opaque (1995; Fig. 2 and Pl. 13). Our vision is occluded by reflections of light that originates behind or above the photographer, outside of the demarcated frame. As the only image to take a wider view of the Pathology Museum, *Listen to the Room* initially seems to privilege the organizational structure of the collection itself. However, the apparently geometrical pattern of horizontal and vertical lines that comprise the armature of shelves and the cubic shapes of the vitrines are, in fact, asymmetrical; they don't run parallel to the edges of the photograph. Some vitrines are deliberately cut off from view, formally mirroring the fragmentation of the specimens contained within them. Unaligned and unresolved, in this image Bhimji rejects the sterile order of Cartesian perspective that is traditionally associated with forms of biopolitical, scientific, and visual control. While the vitrines represent the attempt to impose order on an unspeakable and undeterrable process, Bhimji's photographs push back, corroding this formal logic.

Bhimji's torqued and fragmented representation of anatomical specimens also recalls the compositional technique that Linda Nochlin referred to as "the body in pieces." Writing on the art of the late nineteenth century, Nochlin proposed that artists such as Edgar Degas regularly depicted figures "cut off" by the painting's edge in order to reflect on the condition of modernity as "a loss of wholeness,

a shattering of connection, a destruction or disintegration of permanent value."²¹ Such depictions are echoed in Bhimji's own impressions of the hospital and its Pathology Museum. In 2000, she reflected that in her works for Charing Cross Hospital she wanted to "confront a sense of fragmentation, mutilation, and destruction. The fragments and their dismemberment are at issue here. The coherence of the body is totally shattered."²²

Critics took note of these connotations. Tania Guha wrote about her failed attempt, when faced with Bhimji's lightbox, *We are cut from the same cloth*, which depicts a human eye, to "reconstruct this anatomical fragment into a face with a history and an identity."²³ For David Alan Mellor, Bhimji's photographs of specimens are demonstrative of the Freudian *Unheimliche*—the feeling that derives from not knowing if something is alive or dead. He contemplates the nature of the eye, in its frozen, "unblinking" state; it "appears tired and rheumy, but sentient, alive, despite its radical detachment from a unified body."²⁴ Mellor concludes that the artist's grisly portraits of artificially preserved body parts constitute "a specifically uncanny inquiry into the opening that surgery makes, or the moment of the autopsy, or the residues, the carnal precipitates of death."²⁵ In light of the depersonalized nature of hospital care, as identified by Foucault, Bhimji's images of anatomical specimens convey the fear of death that patients often carry, and of the psyche's futile attempts to postpone it. The corpse, for Julia Kristeva, is the abject vision *par excellence*.²⁶ But the Pathology Museum drains the fragmented corpse of bodily fluids, transforms it into an image, classifies it, and places it into a box, thus ensuring it will *never* undergo the transformative decay of death. Bhimji's images convey this uncanny contradiction.

Bhimji had previously worked with vitrines in a mixed-media installation entitled *I Will Always Be Here* (1992), displayed in the artist's first solo museum exhibition at the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham and produced during her brief hiatus from her primary medium. In a 1992 radio interview, she remarked that "Photographs are dead.... They don't move, they don't do anything other than stay in the frame...."²⁷ She was struck by a sudden desire to work with *things* rather than *images*, and to facilitate processes of change and transformation. As an artist-in-residence at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1991, she had reflected on the ways in which cultural artifacts were rendered isolated and sterile in their cases.²⁸ Inspired by this experience, she embarked on a practice of "close observation of disintegrating, decomposing or partially destroyed items and substances."²⁹

I Will Always Be Here consists of long wooden shelves of glass boxes filled with black hair and organic materials such as carrots, chili peppers, and flower petals that rotted during the run of the exhibition. Art critic Jyll Bradley described these boxes as being "ready for inspection or classification,"³⁰ while Bhimji stated that they were meant to look like "glass coffins" in their sterility, noting that the gradual decay and disappearance of the substances within them served as tactile surrogates for the body.³¹

As Bhimji later illustrated in *Listen to the Room*, vitrines typically function to preserve their contents, so that the objects under glass are immune from change. In this sense, they share with the medium of photography the capacity to structure vision and to arrest the flow of time—properties that, together, transform a once living and speaking subject into a mute object to be gazed at. Paradoxically, in *I Will Always Be Here*, it was the capacity for Bhimji's materials to both live and die inside the gallery that rendered them more *vital* than objects typically viewed in museums. The installation thus troubled the processes of classification, display, and preservation that are shared by several types of institutions: not just the museum, but also the archive, the laboratory, the morgue.

During the 1990s, the vitrine appeared as a predominant motif in the work of several artists who lived or exhibited in Britain. In one of the most well-known examples of British art in that decade, Damien Hirst suspended animal corpses in formaldehyde-filled tanks or, as in the case of *In and Out of Love* (*White Paintings and Live Butterflies*) (1991), quite literally allowed insects to live, procreate, and die throughout the run of an exhibition. But perhaps more important to Bhimji's practice was the work of Susan Hiller, who was Bhimji's tutor at the Slade School of Fine Art, and explored themes of classification, psychoanalytic pathology, and museology in her art. Hiller's 1996 installation, *From the Freud Museum* (1991–96; Fig. 3 and Pl. 14), consists of a long museum vitrine containing



Fig. 4. Christian Boltanski, *Autel Chases* (1988), 10 black and white photographs, 37 tin biscuit boxes and 10 lights, overall 94" x 83" x 8 1/2". © 2026 Christian Boltanski / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

archival boxes, each filled with hand-labeled artifacts such as decorative items, photographs, and cultural specimens.³² Here, the vitrine becomes representative of the unconscious, where ideas, images, and memories might be stored in open or closed vaults. Hiller wrote: "Archaeological collecting boxes play an important role in the installation as containers or frames appropriate to the processes of excavating, salvaging, sorting, naming and preserving." She emphasized that these methods are "intrinsic to art as well as to psychoanalysis and archaeology."³³ The vitrine signals our subjectivity as well as our drive to contain and compartmentalize it.

In a 1992 interview with Bhimji for *Audio Arts*, a British sound art magazine published on audio cassettes, critic Michael Archer ventured that *I Will Always Be Here* seemed indebted to the work of French artist Christian Boltanski, whose installations similarly make use of "boxes and tins as repositories for people's personal effects."³⁴ Bhimji dismissed the comparison, stating that she'd never read about Boltanski's work, and that her use of glass boxes was meant to invoke "sexuality, sexual abuse, coffins, things like that."³⁵



Fig. 5. Zarina Bhimji, *1822–Now* (1993), installation consisting of 200 black and white color photographs, metal shelving, table and chair; dimensions variable. © 2025 Zarina Bhimji / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / DACS, London.

Yet the artist had almost certainly encountered Boltanski's work prior to making *I Will Always Be Here*. In 1990, when the French artist's retrospective *Reconstitutions* traveled to London's Whitechapel Art Gallery, Bhimji was one in a select group of emerging contemporary artists tasked with giving public tours of the exhibition on weekends.³⁶ In his *Vitrines de référence* (1970), a version of which was included in the Whitechapel show, Boltanski created small "retrospective" exhibitions of his own early works positioned within suitcases and glass vitrines.³⁷ As Rebecca DeRoo has suggested, Boltanski's project demonstrated how museums are capable of enforcing a narrative structure onto any collection of items, no matter how disparate. The vitrines, she wrote, "seemed to impose a coherence that contents refused."³⁸ Boltanski was inspired by his many trips to the Musée de l'Homme, an ethnographic museum in Paris wherein images and objects are classified, supplemented with text, and labeled as "proof of authentic presentations of the past," or as artifacts understood to be "exemplary of [a] culture."³⁹ He was interested in the power of such narratives, however artificial they may be, to transform the way we understand or regard museum objects. "If I put my glasses in a vitrine," he once mused, "they will never break, but will they still be considered glasses?"⁴⁰

Like Bhimji, Boltanski struggled against overtly biographical interpretations of his work. Born of Jewish heritage in France in the wake of the Second World War, he has been described as a Holocaust artist, but staunchly resisted this appellation, stating that his images "have nothing to do with a

particular event nor are they linked to an exact period of time."⁴¹ Nonetheless, to create works such as *Lycée Chases* (1986), *Autel Chases* (1987; Fig. 4), and *Monument to the Lycée Chases* (1989), Boltanski recovered group portraits depicting students in a Jewish secondary school during the interwar period. He re-photographed, enlarged, and cropped these into individual portraits that were affixed to the surfaces of tin boxes, which were then stacked and spot-lit by electric lamps whose cords run down the front of the photographs, partially obscuring each face. Such works imply that the represented individuals might not have survived World War II. Commentators describe the experience of viewing variations of these installations as uncanny: the writer Brett Ashley Kaplan, for instance, describes her experience viewing *Monument: Les enfants de Dijon* (1985) thusly: "After scrutinizing each child for clues to his or her life, I sat down in the middle of the melancholy room and absorbed the crowd of images.... After some time, I rose, examined some faces up close, and found that they resembled my lost aunt, friend."⁴²

In 1993, Bhimji presented the installation *1822–Now* (Fig. 5 and Pl. 15), which consisted of over one hundred photographic portraits installed on long metal shelves at the Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen (M HKA). During a residency sponsored by the art gallery at Kettle's Yard and Darwin College at the University of Cambridge, Bhimji had become fascinated by the college's eponym and decided to research the history of eugenics—a pseudoscientific discipline developed by Francis Galton during the late nineteenth century that

sought to apply the evolutionary theories of his cousin, Charles Darwin, to the structuring of human societies. Eugenics was developed in response to the perceived afflictions brought on by rapid modernization and urbanization, such as “overcrowding, poverty, crime, and ill health,” as well as the consequences of global migrations.⁴³ Galton worried that class intermixing would lead to the collapse of boundaries between individuals of “good stock” and those perceived to be social deviants, such as criminals, the mentally ill, and the physically disabled. In Bhimji’s own summation, Galton also “saw non-white people as moral fossils in human evolution.”⁴⁴ Titled after the year of Galton’s birth, *1822–Now* mimics the uniformity of ethnographic and criminological photographic documents that were produced in the context of colonial and bureaucratic administration and co-opted by eugenicists like Galton for their apparently evidentiary value.

The photographs in *1822–Now* depict individuals of mixed racial backgrounds, or those who identified themselves as being in mixed-race relationships at the time their portrait was taken. Each portrait is tightly cropped between the sitter’s shoulders and the crown of their head. However, the artist used a 300 x 400 mm camera and a long exposure time of ten to thirty minutes, producing blurred images that rendered her subjects “unclassifiable.” For Warner, the result was unsettling. “They seem subaqueous,” she wrote, “twilit, mysterious, only tentatively visible, suggesting hauntingly the fugitive, the precarious, the provisional character of any statement about a person.”⁴⁵ The work may be regarded as a riposte to Galton’s assumption that the diversity of humanity might be segregated and contained.⁴⁶

Bhimji’s blurred photographs also recall the composite photographs that Galton produced as propaganda for the eugenics movement. He exposed several portraits on a single plate, each receiving “one-twelfth of the required total exposure,” as photographer Allan Sekula explains, so that “distinctive features, features that were unshared or idiosyncratic, faded away into the night of underexposure.”⁴⁷ Rather than serving as meticulous records of individual subjects, Galton effectively consolidated numerous likenesses into a “photographic impression of an abstract, statistically defined, and empirically nonexistent criminal face”—thus erasing the individual, and producing a stereotype.⁴⁸ Bhimji’s photographs, too, reflect the loss of identity through classification; as curator Gilane Tawadros commented: “I see individuals’ faces and they could be someone I know, but then again I’m not so sure, because their faces are blurred or their eyes are not quite clear enough to be distinctive.”⁴⁹

Sandra Percival, then-director of the PADT, remarked in the *Art in Hospital* program’s catalogue that Bhimji was “not unnerved by the specimens of human body parts in jars for study by pathology students; she was concerned about who had the rights to them, who they ‘belonged’ to before they went on display.”⁵⁰ Bhimji’s personal concern, and her subsequent artwork in Charing Cross finds resonance with the work of contemporaries such as Donald Rodney, Helen

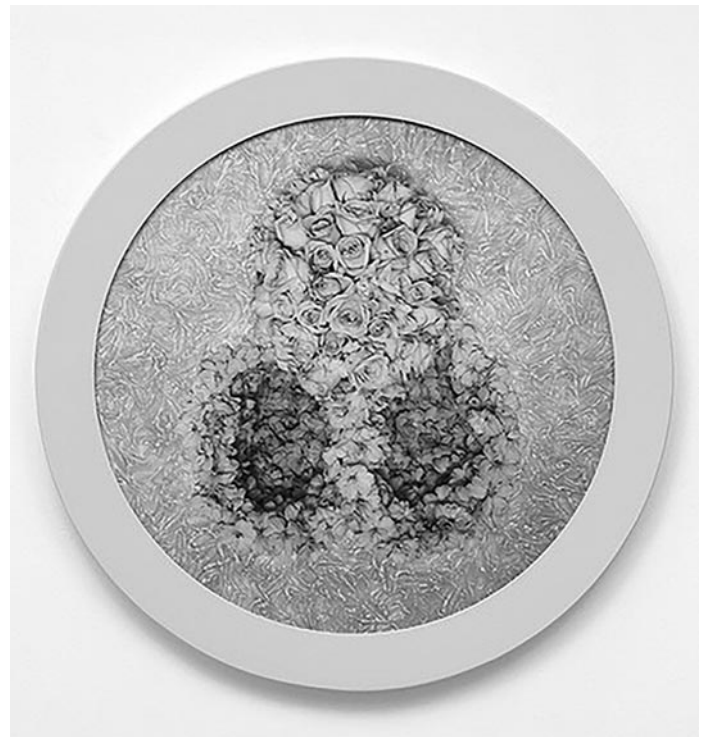


Fig. 6. Helen Chadwick, *Wreaths to Pleasure No. 10* (1992–93), Cibachrome print mounted on aluminum faced MDF in a glazed powder coated steel frame, 43 1/4" (diameter) x 2". © The Estate of Helen Chadwick, Courtesy Richard Saltoun Gallery, London, Rome, and New York.

Chadwick, and Rotimi Fani-Kayode who also centered the body as a site of medical, institutional, or political control.

In Rodney’s photograph, *In the House of My Father* (1996–97), the artist holds in his palm a delicate sculpture of a house composed from lateral grafts of his own skin, “removed during one of the many operations he underwent to combat sickle cell anemia,” and held together with metal pins.⁵¹ This poignant work addresses the simultaneous experiences of pain and comfort, confinement and intimacy that Rodney felt while undergoing medical treatment. As Eddie Chambers has suggested, “The house, a delicate simple dwelling, seemed to symbolise the fragility and near-futility of Rodney having to live within a structure hopelessly unable to sustain itself.”⁵²

Like Rodney’s photograph, the second suite of photographic lightboxes that comprise Bhimji’s *Listen to the Room* sought to address questions of intimacy and corporeality, of *being in a body*. Unlike the Pathology Museum images, these works were meant to be viewed by patients and loved ones and were installed throughout the hospital’s ground floor corridors “on a route which the majority of visitors follow.”⁵³ Consequently, this second set are lusciously chromatic studio photographs that portray flowers and textiles, emphasizing an ecstatic vision of healing, nature, and bodily function. As in Bhimji’s *Decayed Teeth*, the four still life photographs of *Listen to the Room* are meant to intervene into the medical institutional context. She embraced sensory memory and experience, suspecting that patients “have this tremendous longing for touch and communication” that is not often



Fig. 7. Rotimi Fani-Kayode, *Grapes* (1989), archival chromogenic print, 47 1/5" x 47 1/5".
© Rotimi Fani-Kayode, courtesy Autograph ABP.

granted in such an environment.⁵⁴ By foregrounding the needs of the patient in these works, Bhimji counters the "body as specimen." Prioritizing the patient, as Nora Jones suggests, brings us closer "to the lived experiences, attitudes, and behaviors of the sick or diseased. We see in this body how living with illness is bound up intimately with identity and worldview."⁵⁵

Bhimji's luscious, public-facing lightboxes privilege sensation over narrative. *Listen to the Room* (1995; Pl. 16) depicts a field of bright pink chiffon, photographed from above. Eight orchids are arranged on the fabric's surface, facing upwards and revealing their petals and lips—a tasteful metaphor, potentially, for female genitalia. In its abstractly erotic and sensuous affect, this image opposes the more literal depictions of bodily organs—distanced and mediated through a scientific gaze—in the Pathology Museum photographs. It was installed, alongside the other three works, in a fluorescently-lit and white-walled corridor leading to the rheumatology and radiotherapy wings of the hospital. Seen *in situ*, it is striking just how intensely one feels the allure of this hot-pink reverie, backlit and glowing in bright, magnificent hues. *Indelible* also invokes this floral motif, featuring dried red tulips arranged on a spread of black rubber; Bhimji's materials here take on subversively sexual undertones. *We are cut from the same cloth* depicts only a veil of blood-red chiffon. It is, essentially, a monochromatic, highly textured field. The image is slightly blurred, as if to suggest the movement of our eyes

scanning its surface, as we might a body or a landscape. Absent of iconic signification, it seems to perform a kind of gaze that is typically reserved for the erotic object—one that incites pulsation in the looker's own body, unlike the disaffection required of the clinician. It is at once tantalizing and disturbing, with Bhimji deploying abstraction to encourage the viewer to engage with sensually potent materials on the basis of texture and color.

This set of works responds to the research prompts attached to Bhimji's commission, which included the question of why visitors bring flowers to their loved ones in hospital. They also resonate with other feminist and queer modes of practice by artists like Chadwick and Fani-Kayode. Chadwick's series *Wreaths to Pleasure* (1994; Fig. 6) offers close-up views of vibrant botanical specimens "suspended in a variety of organic and chemical liquids" to allude to the insides and orifices of the human body.⁵⁶ According to Sophie Raikes's survey text, the installation of Chadwick's works from this series at the Serpentine Gallery was envisioned as a kind of landscape, which spilled out from the galleries to the parkland surrounding them. "This was no ordinary celebration of the natural world," Raikes writes. "Embedded within or smeared across all of the works were references to the human body, including bodily fluids, tissues, cells, and sexual organs."⁵⁷

Chadwick's work most explicitly invokes the abject, which Krauss understands as "a kind of feminine sublime, albeit composed of the infinite unspeakableness of bodily disgust: of blood, of excreta, of mucous membranes."⁵⁸ The artist wanted her images of plants to resonate unmistakably as sexual forms, and to remind viewers of aliveness and mortality all at once. She herself once stated that flowers were essentially "dying organs, fundamentally ephemeral and unstable," an assertion that resonates strongly with the writing of Surrealist artist and critic Georges Bataille.⁵⁹ In his essay "The Language of Flowers," Bataille discusses the "ridiculous" process by which flowers age, rot and decay on their stems, concluding that "love smells like death."⁶⁰ In light of Bataille's unconventional description of flowers as sick, dying bodies, it is possible to regard Bhimji's earlier installations, such as *I Will Always Be Here*, as existing within, or at least in proximity to, a lineage of work by artists who have re-examined issues of desire, abjection, the body, and materiality. Like Chadwick, Bhimji was attracted to substances or motifs that are repulsive and beautiful at once, suggesting a kinship with Bataille's theorization of connections between death and the erotic.

These concerns likewise motivated the Nigerian-British photographer Fani-Kayode, who, in the 1980s, produced a series of luscious, erotic portraits of nude Black male models whose bodies are often adorned with flowers, fruits, and symbolic elements related to both Catholic and Yoruba ritual (1989; Fig. 7). Formally vivid and brazenly erotic, his

photographs were meant to address themes surrounding bodily pleasure, desire, pain, and transcendence. Evan Moffitt writes on the power, in Fani-Kayode's images, of the entanglement of Eros and Thanatos, "Sex and death—the phantoms of AIDS," as well as his art's embodiment of what Jacques Lacan called *jouissance*—"a sensation of erotic joy achieved when the ego submits to its own dissolution and merges with the cosmos."⁶¹ Through corporeality and eroticism, the artist reclaims a sense of agency in the face of both sickness and social violence. Moffitt directly quotes Bataille, who muses that "eroticism opens the way to death," as well as Audre Lorde, for whom eroticism was a crucial source of power in the face of an oppressive social order.⁶²

As in work by Chadwick and Fani-Kayode, Bhimji's still-life photographs represent natural life as fleeting, painful, and beautiful at once; Tania Guha wrote in the catalogue from *Hospital Projects* that the tulips in *Indelible* are "delicate but fading," and that they echo "the natural process of decay that befalls our bodies as we die."⁶³ The scattered orchids in *Listen to the Room* may likewise serve, following Bataille, to equate the process of dying with ecstatic corporeality.

Bataille's writings offer multiple frameworks for viewing and interpreting Bhimji's work. Reflecting on her time at Charing Cross Hospital, Bhimji noted that observing physicians and patients was a "profoundly intense experience." "This sort of collaboration," she continued, "has enabled me to listen to 'difference' more acutely—to the difference in shadows, microcosms, to be sensitive to listen with the eyes to the changes in tone and colour."⁶⁴ Her sensitivity to the nuance of light and shadow may be understood in connection to Bataille's concept of the *informe*—the formless—which he describes in his *Critical Dictionary* as that which "serves to bring things down in the world."⁶⁵ Bataille celebrated debased and abject matter—spittle, bodily fluid, mud—that *escapes* classification. The formless likewise appears in Bhimji's art in juxtaposition with the very structures that impose a sense of order: museums and archives; laboratories; identification photographs; shelving and vitrines.

Bataille's 1930 essay, "The Deviations of Nature," is dedicated to the 'monster,' a term that refers, in this context, to so-called freaks of nature, the fascinating abominations "through which we see the works of nature inverted, mutilated, and truncated."⁶⁶ By the time Bhimji would use this term in the title of two photographs in *Listen to the Room*, the 'freak show' had finally become obsolete, but for Bataille, writing in the 1930s, the exhibition of human oddities was a common form of entertainment. The subject of Bataille's essay is, in fact, the social production of the monster or deviant, which he traces to the "statistical averaging" by man of his own species. Significantly, in relation to reading Bhimji's work through Bataille's writing, he engages here with the photographic work of Galton, whose unique composite images were meant to erase anomalies in order to arrive at an unattainable "common measure." However, Bataille warns us that the composite portrait photograph creates a false whole from disparate parts, as "each individual form escapes this common measure and is, to a certain degree, a monster."⁶⁷

Krauss brought this text back into contemporary

prominence as defining what is, for her, the most salient conception of the *informe*: the residue left behind by the collapse of hierarchies. The production of the monster is a paradox for Krauss, because it results from "a force that creates nonlogical difference out of the categories that are constructed to manage difference logically."⁶⁸ Krauss points out that when Bataille writes on deviance, he sometimes uses the word *informe*, which has come to be associated with the scatological, the bodily, and with everything that resists order. The formless represents a type of deviance that is not opposed to order, but was rather invented by it.

The press release for Bhimji's project at Charing Cross Hospital explained that the artist was in pursuit of emotions; she herself writes on the body's vulnerability, explaining that "the search for truth is not my main point, it is fear I am after more than the truth."⁶⁹ The two sets of images in *Listen to the Room* perform two opposite approaches to the representation of bodily experience in the medical environment, which echoes Bataille's theorization on the ways in which categorical frameworks are intricately bound to the 'formless' which exceeds them. While Bhimji's photographs of pathological specimens lay bare structures of classification and difference, her sensory abstractions relay the patient's own subjective, sometimes messy, experience of their own body. Together, they disavow or even counteract the violence implied by the clinical gaze, in the hopes of recovering a sense of humanity in the most depersonalizing of circumstances. As Bhimji stated, she was most interested in "the memory of the body and the way we experience people to whom we are close as fragmented."⁷⁰

While Bhimji has made great effort to discourage critics from focusing on her personal gendered or cultural identity, her artistic output of the 1990s engaged, perhaps even in more incisive ways than is often understood, with the troubling legacies of Western society's construction of identity and difference. Whether or not Bhimji was aware of or interested in Bataille's writing, his unconventional ideas lend themselves as compelling analytic frameworks for her expressions of both *difference* and corporeality: Minh-ha's assertion that "categories always leak" is an apt summation of Bhimji's own artistic thesis. •

Allison K. Young is associate professor of contemporary art history at Louisiana State University and A&M College, Baton Rouge. Her research engages with the intersections of art and social justice movements, with a special focus on artists and art histories of Africa and its diasporas. Her first book, *Freedom as Form: Gavin Jantjes, Anti-Apartheid, and the Transnational Avant-Garde*, is forthcoming with Duke University Press.

Notes

This research was made possible by the generous support of the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and the cooperation of archivists at the Henry Moore Institute, the Whitechapel Art Gallery, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and Kettle's Yard. The author would like to thank Alice Correia, Elizabeth Robles, and Anjalie Dalal-Clayton for their guidance on an earlier version of this text, as well as Thomas Crow and Shelley Rice for their mentorship on the initial research from which this article has developed.

1. *QJM: Monthly Journal of the Association of Physicians* 90, no. 12 (December 1997).
2. According to the note in *QJM* (90:12), Bhimji was one of eight artists commissioned for The Laboratory's *Inserts* project, which was meant to "[promote] cross-disciplinary dialogue and exchange through artists' interventions in the matter and discourses of academic journals and special interest magazines."
3. Press release for "Zarina Bhimji in *QJM Monthly Journal of the Association of Physicians*."
4. Zarina Bhimji, "Imaging the Body: The Work of Zarina Bhimji," *The Lancet* 355 (April 15, 2000): 1377.
5. One of Bhimji's most well-known early works, for instance, is the 1987 installation *She Loved to Breathe—Pure Silence*, which meditates on the experiences of Indian women who were gynecologically "screened" by Home Office officials upon their arrival to Heathrow Airport. Subsequent bodies of work interrogated systems of racial classification, medical treatment, the pseudoscience of eugenics, and the lived experience of refugees.
6. Zarina Bhimji interviewed by David Brittain, "Oral History of British Photography: Zarina Bhimji," September 22, 1993, British Library Sound Archive, September 2014.
7. Zehra Jumabhoy, "Betwixt and In-Between: Reading Zarina Bhimji," *n. paradoxa* 31 (2013): 88.
8. Jumabhoy, 88.
9. For a thorough examination of contemporary artists' engagement with hospitals and medical institutions through the lens of disability studies and activism, see Amanda Cachia, *Hospital Aesthetics: Disability, Medicine, Activism* (Manchester University Press, 2025); and Cachia, "A Firm Infirmary: Extending Rebecca Horn's Prosthetic Aesthetics to Disability Studies," *Woman's Art Journal* 46, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2025): 3–14.
10. Her work, as such, bridges the perceived differences amongst fractions of feminist art practitioners in the late twentieth century. As Tamara Trodd chronicles in *WAJ*, Helen Chadwick's embrace of bodily pleasure placed her work out of favor with Conceptual feminist artists like Susan Hiller. Yet both Chadwick and Hiller are invoked, in my discussion herein, in connection to Bhimji's practice which, within the same series, *Listen to the Room* (1995), deploys each of the aesthetic sensibilities seen as incommensurable in these polarizing debates. See Trodd, "Helen Chadwick's *Of Mutability*: Visual Pleasure and Goddess Imagery in British and American Feminist Art and Theory of the 1970s and 1980s," *Woman's Art Journal* 45, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2024): 25.
11. Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Indiana University Press, 1989), 94, quoted in Bhimji, pamphlet, *On Taking a Normal Situation and Retranslating it into Overlapping and Multiple Readings of Conditions Past and Present*, MUHKA, Antwerpen, 1993, n.p.
12. "King's Fund Review—10 years Art in Hospitals," prepared by Phyllida Shaw, 1996, unpublished, "Art in Hospitals," box 9, Public Art Development Trust Archive, Henry Moore Institute, Leeds (hereafter cited as HMI).
13. Zarina Bhimji, "Proposal for the Public Art Development Trust—Art in Hospitals," 2 January 1995, unpublished, "Art in Hospitals," box 123, Public Art Development Trust Archive, HMI.
14. Marina Warner, "A chilling bedside manner," *The Independent*, 3 March 1995, <https://www.the-independent.com/arts-entertainment/a-chilling-bedside-manner-1609947.html>.
15. Deborah Poole, *Vision, Race, and Modernity: A Visual Economy of the Andean Image World* (Princeton University Press, 1997), 15–16.
16. Nora L. Jones, "Embodied Ethics: From the Body as Specimen and Spectacle to the Body as Patient," in *A Companion to the Anthropology of the Body and Embodiment*, ed. Rancis E. Mascia-Lees, 1st ed. (Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 73.
17. Jones, 74.
18. Elyse Speaks, "The Transparent Signifier: Hirst, Invisibility, and Critique," in *Sculpture and the Vitrine*, ed. John C. Welchman (Ashgate Publishing, 2013), 232.
19. Speaks, 232.
20. Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October* 9 (Summer 1979): 60.
21. Linda Nochlin, "The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity" (Thames & Hudson, 1994), 23–24.
22. Bhimji, "Imaging the Body: The Work of Zarina Bhimji," 1377.
23. Tania Guha, "The Sleep of Reason," in *Hospital Projects: Zarina Bhimji, Tania Kovats, Catherine Yass*, by Guha and Jeremy Millar (Public Art Development Trust, 1997), n.p.
24. David Alan Mellor, "From the Carnal to the Virtual Body," in *Photography in the Visual Arts*, ed. John Stathanos, *Art & Design Profile*, no. 44 (London, 1995), 92.
25. Mellor, 92.
26. See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.
27. "Transcription of Interview with Zarina Bhimji" (unpublished interview by Charles Esche, 1992), exhibition files for *Zarina Bhimji* (1995 solo exhibition), uncatalogued, Kettle's Yard Archives, Cambridge, UK.
28. Bhimji's residency at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1991 was jointly hosted by the Department of Indian and South East Asian Art and the Department of Photography.
29. "Zarina Bhimji—Visiting Artist at the V&A" (unpublished draft for a press release of January 1991), file 91/1711, Blythe House Archive, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
30. Jyll Bradley, "An Audience unto Herself: Zarina Bhimji profiled by Jyll Bradley," *Women's Art Magazine*, no. 51 (March/April 1993), 23–24.
31. Zarina Bhimji, *Audio Arts* 12, no. 1 (June 1991), edited and produced by William Furlong, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, Sound Archive of the British Library, London.
32. Fiona Anderson, "From the Freud Museum, 1991–6," Tate Summary, September 2013, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hiller-from-the-freud-museum-t07438>. While space does not permit a discussion of this herein, *From the Freud Museum* by Susan Hiller speaks to the human desire to preserve material traces of our collective and individual existence, as well as to the Western tradition of displaying objects that have been scavenged from other cultures, from the *kunstkammer* to the ethnographic museum.
33. Susan Hiller, quoted in *The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect*, ed. Kynaston McShine (The Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 92–93.
34. Michael Archer, *Audio Arts* 12, no. 1 (June 1992), Sound Archive of the British Library, London.
35. Bhimji, quoted in Archer.
36. "Talks and Lectures," "Reconstitutions" Exhibition Archive (WAG/EXH/2/415/1), Whitechapel Art Gallery Archive, London.
37. The checklist in the exhibition catalogue lists three variations of *Vitrine de reference*, each dated 1970 but with different dimensions. See *Christian Boltanski: Reconstitution* (Trustees of the Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1990), a rare publication in an archival case containing small catalogues, postcards, facsimiles, and posters in the Joyce F. Menschel Photography Library, Thomas J. Watson Library, at The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
38. Rebecca J. DeRoo, *The Museum Establishment and Contemporary Art: The Politics of Artistic Display in France after 1968* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 97.
39. DeRoo, 90.
40. Christian Boltanski, quoted in *The Museum as Muse*, 90–91.

41. Boltanski, "Christian Boltanski: Interview by Suzanne Pagé," in *Statements New York 82: Leading Contemporary Artists from France* (Les Presses Artistiques, 1982), 26, n66, quoted in Brett Ashley Kaplan, *Unwanted Beauty: The Politics of Aesthetic Pleasure in Holocaust Representation* (University of Illinois Press, 2007), 131.
42. Kaplan, *Unwanted Beauty*, 129.
43. Anne Maxwell, *Picture Imperfect: Photography and Eugenics, 1870–1940* (Sussex Academic Press, 2008), 79.
44. Bhimji, unpublished proposal to Antwerpen '93, exhibition file, *Zarina Bhimji* (1995 solo exhibition), Kettle's Yard Archives.
45. Marina Warner, "Zarina Bhimji: Secret Ceremonies of Innocence," in *Zarina Bhimji* (Kettle's Yard, 1995), n.p.
46. Bhimji has also noted the rise of xenophobic demonstrations by the National Front and its supporters during these years, which led her to conduct research into the longer history of racist and anti-immigrant sentiment in British institutions. Bhimji, email to the author, February 2023.
47. Allen Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (1986): 47.
48. Sekula, 19.
49. Gilane Tawadros, unpublished transcript of a conversation with Zarina Bhimji produced by Kettle's Yard, 1994, in conjunction with preparations for the exhibition *Zarina Bhimji* (1995); exhibition file, Kettle's Yard Archive.
50. Sandra Percival, introduction to *Hospital Projects*.
51. Tanya Barson, "Donald Rodney: In the House of My Father," *Tate Museum*, February 2002, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/rodney-in-the-house-of-my-father-p78529>.
52. Eddie Chambers, "My Catechism: The Art of Donald Rodney," *Third Text*, no. 44 (Autumn 1998): 53.
53. "King Edward's Hospital Fund for London—Art in Hospitals—Six Monthly Report," September 1995, "Art in Hospitals," box 9, Public Art Development Trust Archive, HMI.
54. Bhimji, "Proposal for the Public Art Development Trust—Art in Hospitals," 2 January 1995, unpublished, "Art in Hospitals," box 123, Public Art Development Trust Archive, HMI.
55. Jones, "Embodied Ethics," 74.
56. Sophie Raikes, "Unravelling the Wreaths," in *Helen Chadwick: Wreaths to Pleasure*, by Helen Chadwick (Ridinghouse, 2014), 11.
57. Raikes, 11.
58. Krauss, "'Informe' without Conclusion," *October* 78 (Autumn 1996): 92. See also Trodd, "Helen Chadwick's *Of Mutability*."
59. Chadwick's interest in the writing of Georges Bataille (alongside Julia Kristeva, Mary Douglas, and other theorists of materiality, touch, abjection, repulsion, and desire) is discussed in Marina Warner, *Helen Chadwick: The Oval Court* (MIT Press, 2022), which revisits Chadwick's erotic and flamboyant work of the late 1980s. Linkages are also noted in Lynn Burns's review of the 2004 exhibition, *Helen Chadwick: A Retrospective*, Manchester Art Gallery, *Papers of Surrealism*, no. 3 (Spring 2005): 1–13.
60. Georges Bataille, "The Language of Flowers" in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, ed. and trans. Allan Stoekl, *Theory and History of Literature* 14 (University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 13.
61. Evan Moffit, "Rotimi Fani-Kayode's *Ecstatic Antibodies*," *Transition*, no. 118 (2015): 81. In an earlier analysis of Fani-Kayode's work, Steven Nelson likewise invokes Bataille suggesting that the theorist's positionality within a heterosexual and "seemingly race-free network" is subverted intentionally in Fani-Kayode's practice. See Nelson, "Transgressive Transcendence in the Photographs of Rotimi Fani-Kayode," *Art Journal* 64, no. 1 (2005): 4–19, see esp. pp. 8–9.
62. Moffit, 86.
63. Guha, "The Sleep of Reason."
64. Bhimji, "Imaging the Body: The Work of Zarina Bhimji," 1377.
65. Bataille, "Formless" in *Visions of Excess*, 31.
66. See chapter epigraph, cited as Pierre Boaistuau, *Histoires prodigieuses* (Edition de 1561), in Bataille, "The Deviations of Nature," in *Visions of Excess*, 53. Bataille provides a footnote to the quotation, stating that "Pierre Boaistuau, called Launay, born in Nantes, died in Paris in 1566. His *Histoires prodigieuses* ... was reprinted many times."
67. Bataille, "The Deviations of Nature," 55.
68. Krauss, "'Informe' without Conclusion," 105.
69. Bhimji, "Proposal for the Public Art Development Trust—Art in Hospitals," 2 January 1995, unpublished, "Art in Hospitals," box 123, Public Art Development Trust Archive, HMI.
70. Bhimji.



AMINATA
Abbey Lincoln's Song of Faith
Aida C.M. Thomas

JANE FONDA
There's a Great Deal to Say
Marilyn S. Greenwald

THE QUIET ZONE
Caribbean Expressive
Cultures and the Feminist
Aesthetics of Disturbance
Petal Kimberly Samuel

HER NAME THAT DAY
A Novel
Pietro Spinto
Other Voices of Italy

NO HAND HELD MINE
Stories — "Granny Wild
Goose" and "The Root's
Tale"
Kim Soom
DITA: Korean Humanities in
Translation

FLATFISH
Poems, A Bilingual Edition
Moon Tae-jun
DITA: Korean Humanities in
Translation

JUNCTURES
IN WOMEN'S
LEADERSHIP: MEDIA
AND JOURNALISM
Edited by Linda Steiner
Junctures: Case Studies in Women's
Leadership

**SPACES OF CREATIVE
RESISTANCE**
Social Change Projects
in Twenty-First-Century
East Asia
Edited by Andrea Gevurtz Arai

Includes little-seen work by such visionaries as Faith Ringgold, Renée Stout, and Kara Walker

When Rutgers professor Amber N. Wiley began teaching her African American Art class in 2018, she and her students made a shocking discovery. While the university's Zimmerli Art Museum had over seventy thousand artworks in its collection, only one of the pieces on display was by a Black American woman. The students, who came from a variety of majors and reflected the ethnic diversity of New Jersey itself, agreed something needed to be done to correct this imbalance. And so begins the story of the groundbreaking exhibition: *Collective Yearning*.



COLLECTIVE YEARNING
Black Women Artists from the Zimmerli Art Museum
Edited by Amber N. Wiley
824-color images

In this book, Wiley tells the story of how she and her student curators took a deep dive into the Zimmerli's holdings to recover, catalog, and display its art by Black women. Along the way, contributors discuss the ethics of curation, the history of African American expressive traditions, and the institutional biases that erase or marginalize Black female perspectives. Richly illustrated with pieces from the exhibition, including little-seen work by such visionaries as Faith Ringgold, Renée Stout, and Kara Walker, *Collective Yearning* makes a powerful statement on the importance of showcasing Black women artists.

RUTGERS UNIVERSITY PRESS Order these books (and any other books) at a 30% discount AND free U.S. shipping.
Call 800-621-2736. Use discount code RWARTJ22.
rutgersuniversitypress.org

Women Artists in the Reign of Catherine the Great

By Rosalind P. Blakesley
Lund Humphries, 2023

Reviewed by **Tori Champion**

At the center of an imposing interior, a young woman stands beside a tall, golden basin of freshly cut flowers (Fig. 1). She adds a blush pink rose to a small bouquet, the improbability of which is suggested by the presence of flowers that bloom at different seasons, including the rose, tulips, hyacinths, and perhaps jasmine. Roses likewise adorn her hair in a floral crown, and the exquisite refinement of her formal gown is reflected in her marked physical poise. This portrait of the sixteen-year-old Elizaveta Alekseevna, the young wife of Catherine the Great's eldest grandson, was one of the empress's last major commissions. One could be tempted to assume that the flowers were placed there by those that held sway over Elizaveta's life, to signal to the viewer the girl's youth, innocence, beauty, and even fertility. Perhaps, however, they were chosen by the girl herself, a trained musician and lover of the arts as well as future empress, to demonstrate her own creative agency as a cultivator, not just of flowers, but of her own talents and abilities.

The artist who met Elizaveta's knowing, wiser-than-her-years gaze was the singular French portraitist Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun (1755–1842). Le Brun was eager to please with this painting despite wanting to portray Elizaveta in classical guise rather than in full court regalia, because she had just been ordered, by a dissatisfied Catherine, to repaint a double portrait of her granddaughters. The artist dutifully pays tribute to her employer by including a bust of the empress above and to the left of the sitter, placed to preside over the scene. It is the rich stories of such commissions under Catherine's patronage throughout her many years in power, of works made by women and often representing women, that comprise Rosalind P. Blakesley's latest book. *Women Artists in the Reign of Catherine the Great*, composed of eight

chapters plus an introduction and conclusion, charts the life and political career of Catherine II of Russia through the lens of the women artists who entered her orbit and played a crucial role in her strategies of self-fashioning. This book interweaves stories of Catherine's politically motivated art patronage with the lives and work of the prominent women artists she employed. These women possessed cachet valuable to Catherine's agenda: they were international celebrities who had made names for themselves through travel, grand commissions, and endorsements from leading art critics. For Catherine, these patronage relationships were a kind of collaboration, or rather, a kind of trade that exchanged goods and services for connections and prestige.

Blakesley begins the study with crucial context for understanding Catherine's approach to collecting. The empress saw art patronage as a form of statecraft and an avenue for international diplomacy; a means of forging connections and keeping up with the other great courts of Europe. Art collecting in Russia had long been focused on foreign art, and this continued throughout Catherine's reign. After surveying the handful of women who worked as professional artists in Russia before Catherine, including the Dutch natural history artist Dorothea Gsell (1678–1743, daughter of Maria Sibylla Merian, 1647–1717), and German miniaturist Elisabeth Blesendorf (1677–1760), Blakesley is keen to note the dearth of Russian artists in her study. Blakesley underscores the absence of Russian women artists in this period that arises from systemic and systematic erasure, noting that the surely once-abundant 'material trace' of work produced by Russian women, particularly on paper (drawings, watercolors, friendship albums) and in textiles (especially needlework) has largely disappeared.

An artist in her twenties, Anna Rosina Lisiewska (1713–1783) painted one of the earliest known portraits of the future Catherine II, then a humble German princess entering her teenage years. This portrait was meant to facilitate Catherine's success on the

marriage market as it circulated at other European courts. Blakesley deftly describes the balancing act that had to be achieved in this sort of portrait in both formal and material terms: it had to idealize but not deceive, emphasize virginity as well as fertility, and present the sitter as both dignified and modest.

In 1745, Catherine married Grand Duke Peter Fedorovich, the future Peter III of Russia, who Blakesley humorously describes as being "of limited intellectual application" (16). A decade into their largely unhappy marriage, and six years before Catherine's coup d'état would place her at the head of the nation, Lisiewska was tasked with painting a double portrait of the couple. Though the commission was likely made to present a harmonious conjugal front, the fractured nature of the composition reveals a different story. In fact, as Blakesley reveals, the portrait signals discord through its patchwork execution produced at a remove from the couple, its likenesses of the sitters based on other portraits and composed from multiple canvases.

Once sole ruler, Catherine wielded her patronage to much more powerful and convincing effect. Throughout the study, Blakesley shows that Catherine sought to rival the arts institutions of other European powers in order to claim more prestige for Russia on the international stage. In 1755 she followed the lead of France, Italy, and Great Britain in the establishment of a state-sponsored academy of art. Like other academies, it excluded women. Furthermore, as she set up the Academy and began developing the collection that would form the Hermitage Museum, her early purchases do not appear to have included works by women.

This began to change from the late 1760s onward. Catherine was one of the small group of subscribers to the *Correspondance littéraire*, the periodical helmed by the Baron von Grimm, a German-born aristocrat based in Paris, which included art criticism by the French writer Denis Diderot. Catherine placed a great deal of stock in Diderot's evaluations of artists and sought to collect work by those he endorsed. However, this led to conflict between

critic and artist that caught Catherine in the middle. Diderot initially praised the work of Anna Dorothea Therbusch (1721–1782, sister to Lisiewska), who spent several years in Paris and was admitted as a more-or-less honorary member of the French Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture. When Catherine expressed displeasure at a painting by Therbusch that she had acquired, and after Diderot seems to have made unwanted sexual advances on Therbusch, which she rebuffed, the critic ruthlessly slandered Therbusch in the press.

The artist navigated through the conflict, and Catherine commissioned a series of portraits of the extended Russian royal family from Therbusch and her brother, Christoph Friedrich Reinhold Lisiewski. Blakesley offers a different reading of the division of labor in the collaborative portraits by Therbusch and Lisiewski, in which the latter painted the faces and the former everything else, from that of scholar Christina Lindeman, in her recent monograph, *The Art of Anna Dorothea Therbusch (1721–1782)* (Amsterdam University Press, 2024). While Lindeman argues that Therbusch could be relied upon for a successful finish of the vast majority of the canvas, and was thus entrusted with greater artistic responsibility, Blakesley sees her relegation to “a supporting role” in the series as representative of the “gendered hierarchy which often demoted women artists from the most esteemed aspects of a production” (54). Blakesley also considers the possibility that Therbusch had not, in fact, overcome the earlier debacle in Catherine’s eyes.

The fourth and fifth chapters examine some of the ways in which Catherine began crafting her own legacy during her lifetime through patronage and collecting. One of her grandest commissions was the statue of Peter the Great, which was meant to solidify her place as his successor. Catherine sought out a sculptor in Paris, soliciting recommendations from Diderot and others, and was given a shortlist of three. One was Etienne-Maurice Falconet, whose price was the lowest by a long shot. Offered the job, he insisted



Fig. 1. Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, *Grand Duchess Elizaveta Alekseevna* (1795), oil on canvas, 103 3/8" x 78 3/4". State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg.

on bringing three assistants, one of whom was Marie-Anne Collot (1748–1821). Collot was eventually asked to work on Peter the Great’s head because Catherine was never satisfied with Falconet’s attempts. Even though Falconet openly acknowledged the fact, her authorship has been routinely questioned, “echoing the difficulty so many women artists have encountered in having their work inscribed in the historical record or even recognized as their own” (69–70).

In the 1770s, Catherine’s facilitation of the marriage of her son Paul and receipt of long-anticipated visits from Grimm and Diderot spurred on a bout of collecting mania. This period saw her snap up two of Europe’s greatest private art collections upon the deaths of their

owners: French financier Pierre Crozat and the former British Prime Minister Robert Walpole. These massive purchases were made to the outcry and astonishment of the general public in their countries of origin. Significantly for Blakesley, the arrival of these collections to her court marked the entrance of Elisabetta Sirani (1638–1665) and Rosalba Carriera (1673–1757) into Catherine’s collection.

In chapters six and eight, Blakesley details how Catherine secured allies in two of Europe’s most renowned society portraitists: Vigée Le Brun and Angelica Kauffman (1741–1807). Blakesley sets up important context in the first of these discussions by describing how the French Revolution severed diplomatic ties between Russia and France. This

coincided with Russia's cultural disenchantment towards Paris and increased attention towards Rome, where Kauffman had settled in 1782. Earlier that same year, Catherine's son and daughter-in-law had visited Kauffman's Venice studio, bringing three history paintings back home with them to Russia. As Kauffman's star continued to rise across Europe, Catherine eagerly acquired existing paintings and made fresh commissions. Blakesley attends to the dynamic ways in which Kauffman reformulated the subjects of history painting "to bring women and their dilemmas to the fore" (86), and notes Catherine's intriguing enthusiasm for Kauffman's literary scenes that often featured gender-fluid male protagonists.

In the intervening chapter, Blakesley uncovers the artmaking by women that surrounded Catherine within the royal household, including family members who were highly skilled but not working professionally. This is an extremely valuable addition to the book, for it acknowledges the ubiquity of 'amateur' artistic production by women who were excluded from official institutions but sought out and received private artistic training to a very high degree of proficiency. Using the Grand Duchess Maria Fedorovna (1759–1828, the second wife

of Catherine's son) as a primary case study, Blakesley demonstrates how women artists training and making within the domestic environment, and with a great deal of disposable income, worked across mediums, both independently and collaboratively. Already instructed in drawing from childhood, Fedorovna pursued further training across her married years (from 1776 until her death in 1828), in miniature painting, wax modelling, ivory carving, and engraving. She produced an astonishing variety of objects, often in collaboration with master artisans, from cameos to inkstands, to table centerpieces and elaborate fire screens.

As Blakesley notes early on in her study, while a great number of works by the artists detailed in this book survive, other objects acquired by Catherine have disappeared over time, whether lost or destroyed. One such example is an untraced study of a golden pheasant by French natural history artist Marie-Thérèse Reboul Vien (1735–1806) that Catherine had purchased in advance of its display at the Paris Salon in 1767. Blakesley's generative survey, one hopes, will serve as a point of departure for future research on the women artists in Catherine's orbit who have still received very little scholarly attention, including Reboul, Collot, and Fedorovna,

as well as other minor players in the book, such as Caroline Watson (1761?–1814) and Catherine Read (1723–1778). This book makes a significant contribution to feminist art history by introducing a novel and worthwhile approach to contextually driven studies of art by women. It seems fitting to conclude, as Blakesley demonstrates with such clarity, that Catherine did not seem to have a particular penchant for art by women. It is unclear how much questions of gender and representation ever mattered to her. But, as Blakesley writes, "she simply aspired to commission and collect the work of the best, some of whom, by that time, were women" (8). •

Tori Champion is the Andrew W. Mellon Curatorial Fellow in Prints, Drawings, and Photographs at the RISD Museum, and recently completed her PhD in the School of Art History at the University of St. Andrews. Her research focuses on the histories of women's artmaking, patronage, and representation, as well as the practice of natural history illustration and traditions of shared authorship in the early modern period. Her scholarship has been published in *Journal18*, and forthcoming articles will appear in the *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* and the edited volume *Captivity: Assembling Nature's Histories* (University of Toronto Press).

Rachel Ruysch: Nature into Art

Edited by Robert Schindler, Bernd Ebert, and Anna C. Knaap with contributions by Marianne Berardi, Charles C. Davis, Lieke van Deinsen, Josephina de Fouw, Nouchka de Keyser, Jorinde Koenen, Bert van de Roemer, and Katharina Schmidt-Loske
MFA Publications, 2025

Reviewed by Oana Stan

Rachel Ruysch (1664–1750) is without doubt one of the most accomplished artists from the early modern era. Her navigation of Dutch society otherwise averse to career-driven women was supported by her birth into a prominent cultural and scientific family. Trained as a flower painter by Willem van Aelst, Ruysch in turn developed into the quintessential actor for her surrounding botanical scientific



Fig. 1. Rachel Ruysch and Michiel van Musscher, *Rachel Ruysch* (1692), 30" x 25".
Photo: MFA Boston © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

community and was unrivalled in her rendering of floral still lifes and knowledge of flora and fauna. She remains one of the best documented historical women artists, having not only an abundant signed corpus of works but also countless documents that help us ascertain a profound understanding of her life and career.

Virtually every museum specializing in pre-modern art owns at least one Ruysch still life; however, despite lifetime fame she rarely benefited from systematic research, and her oeuvre was typically analyzed in discussions of Dutch pictorial genres or in historical surveys of women artists.¹ *Nature into Art* is long overdue as the first monographic study on Ruysch in more than seventy years. (Maurice Grant's incomplete painting survey was published more than seventy years ago, a misogynistic predilection and unreliable guide [11].) Contributor Marianne Berardi wrote her unpublished doctoral dissertation on Ruysch's early career, but there is still much fertile ground to cover. The accompanying exhibition—an ongoing collaboration between the Boston MFA's Center of Netherlandish Art, Munich's Doerner Institute, the Toledo Museum of Art, and Cambridge University's Hamilton Kerr Institute—is not only the first retrospective on Ruysch but has launched a collective platform to examine her oeuvre broadly.

The catalogue is a repository of all things Ruysch: life story; illustrious scientific upbringing in the company of her father, Frederik; clientele; and fascinating painterly and compositional details. Aligned with current art historical trends, the book seeks to reframe her image by extensively chronicling her scientific literacy, placing her at the epicenter of a network of botanists, detailing for the first time the collecting history of her oeuvre, and even applying a biodiversity lens to her repertoire. The main essays thematically tend to Ruysch's biography, and her relationship to her father, a noted professor of anatomy and botany, is discussed throughout several contributions from different angles as are their positions within horticultural and scientific networks at the turn of the



Fig. 2. Rachel Ruysch, *Bouquet of Flowers* (1708), oil on canvas, 36 3/8" x 27 5/8". Photo: MFA Boston © Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen–Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

eighteenth century. Two diligent studies of collecting trends explore how her floral still lifes acquired fame throughout Europe. The biographical dimension aptly avoids hagiography and traditional stereotypes about the exceptionality of women artists.

Robert Schindler, a co-editor, chronicles Ruysch's life in detail, a "reconstruction" that intertwines biographical lore with minute visual analyses of some of her most relevant works, sketching a rough chronology of her oeuvre by paralleling her life. He identifies possible sources of inspiration for her still lifes transplanted from her social network, patronage, and family. For example, her use of architectural elements in her early still lifes may be a subtle nod to the architects in her family, such as Pieter Post, her maternal grandfather. Berardi's chapter contributes perhaps the most eloquent essay thanks to the author's capacity to express those elements of Ruysch's oeuvre that make her stand out in the floral still life genre. This essay poignantly explores the conceptual dimension of her paintings and makes a compelling argument for Ruysch's preoccupation in narrating nature

by portraying the interaction between species in visually compelling images.

From a different angle, Bert van de Roemer delves into the maxim "Art is human added to nature." Formulated by the English philosopher Francis Bacon, it informed the work of both Frederik and Rachel. The key word is immortalizing—for Frederik by preserving human specimens, for Rachel by capturing fragile and ephemeral plants in images of their likeness. Van de Roemer evades typical sources (such as correspondence) that gloss over the Frederik-Rachel relationship and presents his argument with a close look at their work plus citations to contemporary sources that further reinforce the shared philosophical standpoint in what regards their respective methods of conserving nature. In Michiel van Musscher's portrait of Rachel, she is depicted as an intermediary between nature and art. In the same vein as Frederik's conservation techniques, Rachel wants to render her capacity to *eternalize* her flower bouquets. Van Musscher therefore captures Rachel's working process, as well as her mission (Fig. 1). The essay cleverly reconsiders the intellectual connection between father and daughter, drawing on frontispieces, portraits, and contemporary verses to articulate ideas coherently and historiographically significant.

Ruysch's still lifes possess not only aesthetic and art historical value; they also serve as repositories of early modern experimental botany. Precisely for this reason, they invite renewed interdisciplinary research that integrates various platforms by biodiversity specialists. Scientific expertise is deployed with notable precision in the essays by Charles C. Davis and Katharina Schmidt-Loske. Davis's survey of plant diversity and Schmidt-Loske's discussion of animal species together demonstrate the extent to which Ruysch's paintings align with early modern taxonomic knowledge of species. We learn, for instance, that in her mid-career, Ruysch portrayed the largest array of both flora and fauna species. In Ruysch's *Bouquet of Flowers* of 1708 (Fig. 2), there is a variety of more than twenty different species, but her

diversity wanes in her later years. The contributions of Davis and Schmidt-Loske show how interdisciplinary analysis can sharpen art-historical interpretation and positions Ruysch's production within broader environmental histories. Their findings open a useful path for further comparative research, particularly in assessing how early modern still life paintings register environmental conditions now in decline.

The main contribution that engages with gender is Anna C. Knaap's look at the "broad network of Dutch garden enthusiasts," which included many women with significant roles in the advancement of botany and horticultural endeavors at large (73). Knaap aims to place Ruysch's profound knowledge of botanical discoveries in relation to her possible acquaintances with other women who had likeminded preoccupations. The most prominent names are Agnes Block (1629–1704), Ruysch's Amsterdam neighbor, and Maria Sybilla Merian (1647–1717), an illustrator known for her advanced entomological research in Suriname. Knaap discusses in detail the unprecedented accessibility offered by the Hortus Medicus in Amsterdam, the first botanical garden open to the public, and therefore accessible to both men and women.²

Further situating Ruysch in the European network of botanical science, "Surinam Toads" by Schindler looks at the only surviving drawing officially attributed to her, found in the collection of the Royal Society in London. The drawing is connected to an unpublished signed and dated 1690 painting not chiefly depicting flowers, plants, or fruit. The drawing is known to have accompanied a letter sent to the Royal Society that detailed curious aspects of the so-called Surinam toad, namely, its unusual method of hatching its eggs in the skin pockets growing on the back of female specimens. This chapter shows another telling instance of Ruysch's close-knit connections to several *naturalia* enthusiasts from Amsterdam to London, making her the proper artist for the first depiction of this extraordinary toad species upon submission to Royal Society of London for the Improvement of Natural Knowledge.

Bernd Ebert's comprehensive account of collecting trends and transactions connected to Ruysch's paintings reveals a common thread: generally, the inventories of both princely and non-aristocratic collections indicate an equal interest in art, scientific knowledge, and, most of all, botany. Considering the esteemed intellectual dimension of her still lifes, her work was best matched in collections at the intersection of art and science (177). Notwithstanding those placements, and in spite of this rigorous and state-of-the-art deep dive into her legacy in collections from Germany, France, and the Netherlands throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the publication still perpetuates the trope of Ruysch's declining recognition on account of her gender (49). This account would probably be best rectified in an additional study that follows the transition from private collections to nascent public museums in the nineteenth century and later. Alternatively, her purported fall into oblivion seems to be attributed to a longstanding feminist tradition of condemning absences in the art historical canon for the sake of programmatic rhetoric. However, it is difficult to substantiate this convention, since Ruysch's ample oeuvre was unparalleled in quality and its acquisition even survived changes in fashion during the Rococo era. Such tensions are further emphasized by the account of Josephus Augustinus Brentano's Amsterdam art collection. The case study by Josephina de Fouw, Nochka de Keyser, and Jorinde Koenen explores Ruysch's prominent place in Brentano's collection and in countless other markets and inventories, ranging from the Elector Palatine's patronage to the interest of British, French, Austrian, and American connoisseurs and museums. Their expeditious yet compelling historiography articulates the immense potential for further explorations of Ruysch's unassailable prestige in the centuries following her death, and it provides a steadfast starting point for the further exploration of modern and contemporary collecting practices of floral still lifes.

The catalogue's symphony of interpretations underscores dissenting opinions. Berardi celebrates the painter's seemingly encyclopaedical knowledge (54–56); seventy pages later, Davis discounts this appraisal of Ruysch's unerring botanical and zoological expertise (121). Although Ruysch demonstrated an exceptional command of botanical representation, the catalogue's analyses clarify the limits of her taxonomic knowledge, placing in a different light the fact that art-historical scholarship has sometimes overstated the breadth of her scientific expertise. This observation does not diminish her achievement; rather, it situates her practice more accurately within the scientific culture of her time and makes the case, generally, for additional transdisciplinary research for art history publications that invite a plurality of methods.

The epilogue, Lieke van Deinsen's "Painting with Poetry," considers the poems dedicated to Ruysch and documents the breadth of her contemporary reputation. This material offers a useful complement to the catalogue's art-historical focus and provides an appropriate closing perspective on Ruysch's standing within her cultural context.

While several chapters touch on gender and how that plays into her reputation and oeuvre, the catalogue overall does not significantly engage feminist or gender theory (motherhood, marriage, familial training), stressing Ruysch's biography and interdisciplinary perspectives from biology or zoology, for instance. This appears to be a conscious editorial decision that responds to the decades old debate over the "inclusion or ghettoization" of women artists. The natural sciences is bolstered by the appendix. Other than a collection of poems dedicated to Ruysch and cited in full, and the usual critical apparatus of endnotes and further readings, the catalogue proposes an inventory of botanical species identified from sixteen paintings, ranging from her early to late career. The species are listed in family, genus, and specific epithet, and when identifiable, are nominated as mere morphotypes; their inclusion as morpho-

types still illustrates the variety of species painted by Ruysch, even when taxonomy is unsuccessful. The catalogue bypasses traditional structuring and supporting elements—namely the endnotes, maps, primary sources, list of depicted species of plants, bibliography, and the author's profiles are placed together in a section that is easy to use thanks to its different page color and texture. For the readers following the endnotes of each chapter, this feature provides a more leisurely experience.

Ruysch was not only a talented floral still-life painter operating at the nexus of art and science but an important actor deeply embedded in European expert networks of botany, zoology, and collect-

ing. *Nature into Art* is a foundation for future scholarship which crosses disciplinary boundaries. •

Oana Stan is a Haarlem-based art historian specializing in early modern Dutch and Italian art. She holds an MA in Renaissance Studies from Utrecht University, where she graduated with a thesis on the institutional representation of Dutch and Flemish women artists in collections across the Netherlands and Belgium. She has published a shortened version in the catalogue of *Unforgettable Women Artists from Antwerp to Amsterdam, 1600–1750*. She currently focuses on educational programs aimed at increasing the visibility of women's

history through the Women of Haarlem project.

Notes

1. Recent examples include *In Full Bloom* (Mauritshuis, 2022), exploring the history of floral still lifes; *A Feast of Fruit and Flowers: Women Still Life Painters of the Seventeenth Century and Beyond* (The Hyde Collection, 2025–26); and *Unforgettable. Women Artists from Antwerp to Amsterdam, 1600–1750* (NMQA with MSK Ghent, 2025–26).
2. *In Full Bloom* similarly touched upon the contribution of women to the world of botany with two catalogue essays analyzing the horticultural craze of the Netherlands by Ariane van Suchtelen and Erik A. De Jong.

Sofonisba Anguissola

By Cecilia Gamberini
Getty Publications / Lund Humphries,
2024

Elisabetta Sirani

By Adelina Modesti
Getty Publications / Lund Humphries,
2023

Artemisia Gentileschi and the Business of Art

By Christopher R. Marshall
Princeton University Press, 2024

Reviewed by Margaret M. Barnes

The three women providing the namesake titles for these books are amongst the most recognizable early modern women artists in Italy. Although the field continues to inspire interest in the discoveries of lesser-known artists within this subcategory, there is no shortage of writings and exhibitions on each of these women in American and international scholarship given that their gendered experiences and disadvantages are both unique to themselves and provide fertile connections amongst their literature. These complementary relationships are demonstrated in the following three monographs that prize historical context and archival documents.

Two are from the Getty's *Illuminating Women Artists: Renaissance and Baroque* series, co-published with Lund Humphries, on Sofonisba Anguissola (1532–1625) and Elisabetta Sirani (1638–1665), a series aiming to broaden its scholarly readership to include popular audiences while critically sponsoring publishing on underrecognized artists within larger art historiographies. While reduced citations and streamlined footnotes are frustrating limitations of this series, the generous full-page illustrations of artworks and archival documents are most welcomed.

Sofonisba Anguissola by Cecilia Gamberini finds its roots deep within the archive, sourcing a multitude of documents to skillfully re-construct Sofonisba's world. Born into an aristocratic family in Cremona in 1532, Sofonisba's father facilitated her painting education by artists Bernardo Campi and Bernardo Gatti; later she became lady-in-waiting to Queen Elisabeth of Valois in Spain. Following the death of the queen, Sofonisba returned to Italy, spending time in Paternò, Genoa, and Palermo until the end of her long life in 1625. Gamberini examines the historical context of Sofonisba's life as both a noblewoman and artist, migrating from specific debates regarding attribution of her many works. The book proceeds chronologically, beginning with the



Fig. 1. Sofonisba Anguissola, *Self-Portrait in Miniature* (c. 1556), oil on parchment, 3 1/4" x 2 1/2". Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Anguissola family and their history within the Duchy of Milan, developed from archival documentation and paintings such as Sofonisba's *Self-Portrait in Miniature* (c. 1556; Fig. 1), and showcasing the Anguissola family name, the father, Amilcare, and their connections within the wealthy duchy. The next chapter traces the historical identities of the young Sofonisba as the daughter of Amilcare, Sofonisba the Cremonese, and finally, Sofonisba and her sisters, referencing well-known portraits such as

The Chess Game (1555), featuring Sofonisba's three sisters, Lucia, Minerva and Europa, as well as the artist's *Self Portrait with Bernardo Campi* (1559).

The book truly shines in Gamberini's discussion of Sofonisba's time at the court of Philip II in Madrid as a lady-in-waiting to Queen Elisabeth of Valois, drawing on letters, payment records, room layouts, and first-hand accounts of major events to demonstrate the artist's roles at the royal household, from a lady of the court to the more unofficial role of court portraitist. The final chapter covers Sofonisba's life in Italy following her court departure, discovering the artist's stay in Paternò, Pisa, Genoa, and Palermo, and the connections of her first husband, Fabrizio, and later husband, Orazio Lomellini. In Palermo, Gamberini highlights the fascinating interaction of the elderly Sofonisba with Anthony van Dyck, the Flemish Baroque painter, recorded in Van Dyck's journal along with a sketch of Sofonisba, and concludes with the author's declaration for further investigation on the remarkable artist.

Adelina Modesti's book on Elisabetta Sirani contextualizes the artist's brief career in the seventeenth-century city of Bologna in northern Italy, where she was born in 1638, the daughter of painter Giovanni Andrea Sirani, and where she spent most of her life before her untimely death at age twenty-seven. Avoiding a strict chronology, Modesti opts instead for a contextual framing of Bologna, first elaborating on the center's political, artistic, religious, and educational conditions to demonstrate how it was rife with opportunities for women, a point made by art historians such as Babette Bohn.¹ Modesti underscores Sirani's own education, and, reflexively, the influence of Sirani's paintings on female education within the city. An embroidered image of the *Virgin and Child with a Female Saint* (*Saint Martha*), identified by Modesti as a close replica of Sirani's *Holy Family with Saint Teresa* (not illustrated), is discussed as a model for textile production in Bologna's silk industry.

Modesti's presentation of the "Professional Female Artist," an identification



Fig. 2. Elisabetta Sirani, *Timoclea of Thebes* (1659), oil on canvas, 89 7/10" x 68 7/10". Museo di Capodimonte, Naples.

assigned to Sirani, Anguissola, and Artemisia Gentileschi, recalls that like most women artists from this period, Sirani was trained by her father in his workshop; although as Gamberini echoed for Sofonisba, Sirani would be constrained in her study of anatomy due to her gender and period standards of propriety. Despite these constraints, Modesti describes Sirani's praise, demonstrating how instead of devaluing her identity, the male-gendered descriptions of Sirani's work defined her as the "apex of artistic excellence" (51). Modesti also highlights Sirani's creation of an artistic school for girls.

Sirani's artistic production and subjects, including the Mary Magdalene, Saint Anne, and the Madonna and Child, are then contextualized within the era's devotional practices. While *Penitent Magdalene* (1663) is described as catering to the male gaze, later subjects of female fortes uniquely reject sexualized interpretations, such as those portrayed in the *Judith Triumphant* (1658) and *Timoclea of Thebes* (1659; Fig. 2). Most interesting are the numerous male and female patrons of Sirani, identities known from the artist's diligent and surviving recordings of her works,

patrons, and dates. Additionally, Modesti spotlights one way by which Sirani acquired patronage. Sirani's *Cupid Triumphant* (1661) was bestowed to Grand Duchess Vittoria della Rovere as a method of obtaining additional paid commissions by the artist from gifted paintings. Also employed by Artemisia, this strategy of inspiring commissions was only one of the avenues Modesti shows as part of the promotional and publicity strategies of Sirani, her father, and their associates. Modesti closes the book on Sirani's early death and posthumous commemoration alongside a "List of Known Works" (135–38), including "Autograph," "Collaborative," and "Attributed Works." While a welcome addition, the qualifications of the works in each of their categories remain unclear. Modesti's earlier 2014 book on Sirani as "virtuosa" is briefly mentioned, which shares many similarities in order and content.²

Both Gamberini and Modesti, through archival documents and visual analyses, offer the reader a direct immersion into the paintings and lives of the artists while also showcasing some of the common debates in their scholarship regarding the involvement of gender of early modern Italian women artists. For example, Gamberini's choice to omit arguments of connoisseurship are a more recent yet not uncommon art historical approach from scholars who feel that readings of the artworks are often biased towards the gender of the artist. While Gamberini showcases Sofonisba's incredible talent, recognized by artists such as Michelangelo, it is argued that paintings, such as the *Chess Game* (1555), suffer from a lack of formal training in perspective and anatomy due to her gender. Likewise, Modesti's articulation of the "male-gaze" in the nude Mary Magdalene, alongside concurrent themes of female vengeance in *Timoclea*, around which proto-feminist identities take root for artists such as Sirani, Artemisia, and others, sometimes offer inconsistent conclusions when arguing for the innate representation of the woman's experience or proto-feminism within their

paintings and subjects. Undoubtedly, as both books demonstrate, their gender impacted their lives and artistic practices, although maybe not as pervasively or consistently as we assume.

Christopher Marshall's *Artemisia Gentileschi and the Business of Art* presents the most recent monograph on the well-received Baroque artist, better known as Artemisia, born in 1593 in Rome to artist Orazio Gentileschi. She had a long career, working in Rome, Florence, Venice, Naples, and London, and much of her historiography has highlighted her works of female heroines. Similar to the *Illuminating Women Artists* series, Marshall aims his book at broader audiences with the ever-developing information emerging on the artist. Additionally, Marshall declares his goal to provide a new perspective through her business practices and their impact on her work and reputation. Organized chronologically, part one focuses on Artemisia in Rome between 1606–1613, presenting her early training and offering several contributions regarding key debates on authorship or modeling, for instance in her seminal *Susanna and the Elders* (1610) and *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (1612).

The second part identifies Artemisia's move to Florence in 1613 as a major moment of transference for Caravaggism to the city. Amidst this claim he highlights her deployment of the "disguised self-portrait" (66), common amongst artists of the city such as her Florentine contemporary Cristofano Allori. Marshall describes Artemisia as an actress performing in each of the roles when she "appears" on canvas, assessments previously made by the seminal Artemisia scholar Mary Garrard. Marshall praises the artist's *Conversion of the Magdalene* (c. 1614–15; Fig. 3) for its delicate balance of lavish fabrics alongside Magdalene's pious conversion and the painting's inscription, representing a self-declaration from the artist in her status as a talented *virtuosa* in Florence, while still maintaining the humility and religious devotion expected of her.³

Part three follows Artemisia back to Rome, and later to Venice. Tracing her



Fig. 3. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Conversion of the Magdalene* (c. 1616–18), oil on canvas, 57 5/8" x 42 1/2". Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti, Uffizi, Florence.

roles as both mother and artist, a consideration not often made, Marshall confronts some commonly debated works attributed to the artist, with the addition of technical studies to support his arguments. This includes the contested Burghley House *Susanna and the Elders* (1622), which Marshall argues represents stylistic shifts of an artist trying to appeal to new patrons. Later highlighted are the gendered limitations of her oeuvre and the number of commissions she received, less than her male contemporaries: a nuance left unexamined. Transitioning to Venice, a drastic change occurs as Marshall examines her celebrity status in the city.

Arriving in Naples (with a brief London sojourn) in 1630, Marshall briefly brings the reader into the city's political and social fabric and her complex relationships with Neapolitan artists and Spanish patrons. Marshall discusses her *Birth of Saint John the Baptist* (1633–35) and *Saint Januarius in the Amphitheatre* (1635–37), furthering her stylistic evolution through an inclusion of a visual analysis of the *Saint Januarius* and citing its expressivity

through a hierarchy of repetitive forms and inclusion of the amphitheater. Her prices in Naples are explored, noting that while Marshall considers them high for the region, he maintains a gender bias that resulted in the financial difficulties reported by the artist in her letters to patrons. What may also be worth exploring here is the complex Neapolitan environment that resulted in price discrepancies even amongst male artists, or a continuing examination of the overtaxing by the viceregal government that led to the Revolt of Masaniello. Finally, Marshall takes on Artemisia's final years in Naples, including her patronage, development beyond typecast, and argues for increased reliance on other artists due to her advanced age. It is due to this reliance on collaborators that Marshall explains the high numbers of late non-autograph works by Artemisia available on the art market.

The final part addresses Artemisia's legacy and revivals, starting with the scholarship of Roberto Longhi and later, her catalogue raisonné by R. Ward Bissell. Separate from this is her central role as an important subject for feminist art historians, for Linda Nochlin, Ann Sutherland Harris, Sheila Barker, and Garrard, writer of Artemisia's landmark 1989 monograph.⁴ Also discussed are the numerous monographic exhibitions on her offering differing lenses, as well as her image beyond formal scholarship, such as in Lucia Lopresti's novel *Artemisia*, and her contemporary re-imaginings in other artistic mediums. While offering an interesting summation, the separate categorization of feminist scholarship arguably devalues their groundbreaking work, most problematically when Garrard is critiqued by Marshall for having typecast Artemisia in her earlier Caravaggesque paintings, when Longhi evidently adhered to this typecast as well, due to her brief inclusion in Longhi's exhibition on Caravaggisti, and her later role in Longhi's writings as a follower of her father, Orazio Gentileschi (229–230, 234).

At two hundred fifty pages, the monograph contains one hundred fifty

color images of varying sizes, with a concluding appendix comprised of a table of payments made to Artemisia and a table of references to all her paintings in numerous Neapolitan and Southern Italian documentary sources. Substantial notes offer detailed commentary, historiographical references, and debates. As Marshall's earlier 2016 book presented the art market in Baroque Naples,⁵ this concentration on Artemisia's career in the city is much needed, and follows the exhibition and accompanying volume *Artemisia Gentileschi a Napoli* in 2022.⁶ Readers are also granted brief yet notable inclusions of works yet to appear in Artemisia's scholarship, most notably the *Hercules and Omphale* (1636) restored and exhibited at the Getty Museum and Columbus Museum of Art in 2025–2026.

As Gamberini, Modesti, and Marshall situate gender-related historical disadvantages at the forefront, it is worth questioning if such repeated observations about their limits are productive in highlighting the many ways in which these women succeeded, finding alternative methods to study anatomy and receive classical training, and maintaining strong presences

within their historical art markets and patronage networks. Our information regarding the lives and production of these artists—and the rules purportedly followed—is garnered through historical research within the physical archive, academic institutions and historiographies, sources inherently biased against women artists. In representing each of these artists while adhering strictly to these sources and their inherent boundaries, are we really telling the accurate stories of these artists and their careers? Instead, such examinations may be fruitful by highlighting informed readings and prizing lived experiences over historical circumstances and the many over the individual. As educational tools, all three books provide excellent starting points for scholars who wish to provide undergraduate introductory readings and reflect on the differences or similarities of the archive to the lived experiences of women and the role of contemporary feminist theories and the art market in early modern Italy. •

Margaret M. Barnes received her MA in art history from the University of Washington in 2025. Her research examines the proliferation and pro-

duction of women artists in the workshops of pre-modern Naples.

Notes

1. Babette Bohn, *Women Artists, Their Patrons, and Their Publics in Early Modern Bologna* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021).
2. Adelina Modesti, *Elisabetta Sirani 'Virtuosa': Women's Cultural Production in Early Modern Bologna* (Brepols, 2014); see also Frederika Jacobs, *Defining the Renaissance Virtuosa: Women Artists and the Language of Art History and Criticism* (Cambridge University Press, 1999). Modesti's first book does elaborate more heavily on the arguments of gendered language in the praise of Sirani, and her paintings of *femme fortes*.
3. Mary Garrard, "The Fictive Self: Musicians and Magdalenes," in *Artemisia Gentileschi and Feminism in Early Modern Europe* (Reaktion Books, 2020), 95–112.
4. Mary Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi and the Image of the Female Hero in Baroque Art* (Princeton University Press, 1989).
5. Christopher R. Marshall, *Baroque Naples and the Industry of Painting* (Yale University Press, 2016).
6. Antonio Ernesto Denunzio and Giuseppe Porzio, eds., *Artemisia Gentileschi a Napoli* (Skira, 2022)

Brilliant Exiles: American Women in Paris, 1900–1939

By Robyn Asleson with contributions by Zakiya R. Adair, Denean Sharpley-Whiting, Samuel N. Dorf, and Tirza True Latimer
National Portrait Gallery and Yale University Press, 2024

Reviewed by Britta Dwyer

Chapeau! (hats off) to the organizer of this exhibition and 'Brava' for the accompanying catalogue that traces the accomplishments of sixty expatriate women. With two hundred fifty illustrations in various media, the two hundred seventy-seven page hardcover publication is impressive in scope and scale.

The main body of the book is organized around eight thematic catalogue entries, "From Modern Art and Modern Women" to "Refashioning

Modern Women," followed by four contributing essays. Curator Robyn Asleson points out in her introductory essay, "Transatlantic Transformations: Portraying American Women in Paris, 1900–1939," that drawing on the Smithsonian's large archival collection of relevant material reveals the breadth and depth of the various contributions made by expatriate women in the first four decades of the twentieth century. Asleson foregrounds the experiences and accomplishments of fourteen women, some famous and well-known, others scarcely remembered as "exceptional women [who] took their lives into their own hands by reinventing themselves overseas" (2).

"Dancer of the Future," the second entry, credits Isadora Duncan (1877–1927) for leading the way to rebellious new forms of dancing, "barefoot in minimal clothing" (57). Far less known is multi-talented Winnifred de Wolfe

(1897–1966) with her visually striking and controversial costume design as well as her groundbreaking work in silent film. Better known posthumously for her marriage to the superstar Rudolph Valentino, she was one of Hollywood's first women art directors (65–67).

"The Stein Effect" reviews the position Gertrude Stein (1874–1946) achieved of unique authority within the Parisian avant-garde and her wide-ranging support of modern art. International and gender fluid, Stein's gatherings served as a model for convention-defying relations, be it for same-sex couple Emily Crane Chadbourne (1871–1964) and Ellen La Motte, or for the closeted Theresa Helburn (1887–1959), whose passion for French theatre propelled American theatre into the modern era (95).

While Josephine Baker (1906–1975) may be the most famous and well

known of the “Stars of Montmartre Nightlife,” this section includes lesser known Ada “Bricktop” Smith (1894–1984), who “served as both anchor and magnet for an expatriate community of African American women” (100). Also included here is Florence Mills (1896–1927), who with her exceptional talent and her commitment to racial equality, made her one of the most popular vaudeville entertainers in Paris. In the words of a French journalist, “We can no longer understand the fierce segregation of Blacks and whites that certain Americans have made into a dogma that surprises us” (112).

Another category, “Literary Modernism,” highlights influential participants in the expatriate literary scene, from publisher and Shakespeare and Company English-language book-store and lending-library owner Sylvia Beach (1887–1962) to writer Djuna Barnes (1892–1982), whose experimental style in *Nightwood* (1936) was and remains a classic in lesbian literature. Noteworthy are the images of these “literary” women, including the *New Yorker* journalist Janet Flanner (1892–1978), that attest to their assertiveness, their “inner resolve of otherness.”

A thorough entry, “Harlem’s Renaissance in Paris,” discusses a network of African American women artists and writers who fled America to gain personal freedom and professional opportunities denied them in the United States. Highly illuminating are the experiences of sculptor and Salon exhibitor Nancy Elizabeth Prophet (1890–1960); praised for her works in words usually reserved for male artists, for example, vigorous, powerful, manly, and rough, others interpreted her work, intriguingly, as an expression of her African American identity (161). Resisting being pigeonholed, Prophet aspired to create “a universal art” (164) free from associative tendencies. A striking self-portrait captures the complexity of her own sense of self, both proud and vulnerable in her bravado outfit (Fig. 1). Equally compelling are the remarks by Loïs Mailou Jones (1905–1998) regarding the examples of African art on view in Paris at the time. Referencing Picasso’s Cubist



Fig. 1. Nancy Elizabeth Prophet in Hat (c. 1922–29), unidentified photographer, James P. Adams Library Special Collections, Rhode Island College.

appropriations, Jones asserted: “I, with my Afro-American background, had even more of a right than Picasso to be inspired by the mystical quality and strong geometric forms of African art” (173).

The following section, “Natalie Barney’s Salon,” focuses on the legendary literary salons hosted by poet, writer, and wealthy expatriate Natalie Clifford Barney (1876–1972). A parallel hub for the expatriate lesbian community to that of Stein’s, it could boast as its most prominent member

the painter Romaine Brooks (1874–1970).¹ Known for her many portraits that challenged gender norms, including her 1923 famous self-portrait, it is one of the twenty-three paintings of “modern women” that were acquired by the Smithsonian. Lesser known Eyre de Lanux (1894–1996) “produced some of the most radically innovative furniture and interior designs” (193) of the period. At the time of her death, at the age of 102, she was the last surviving member of Barney’s salon.

The last catalogue entry, "Refashioning Modern Women," mentions several women who aligned themselves with Parisian 'chic' fashion, notably Peggy Guggenheim (1898–1979) and Elsie de Wolfe (c. 1859–1950), the latter described by famed Englishman Cecil Beaton for being "the first to battle the appallingly low level of bad taste throughout America...." (204, 220n10). Last but not least in this category belong the words of Elizabeth Hawes (1903–1971), a.k.a. "the Parisite." After graduating from Vassar in 1925, she set off for Paris to learn everything she could about designing fine clothing. Six years later, Hawes made the bold decision to show her work in Paris. Hailed by the American press, she recorded: "The pictures went out over the wires and there I was—on the map" (214, 221n9).

The first of four contributing essays, "Genealogy of Expatriation: When Paris was a Black Woman," by T. Denean Sharply-Whiting, traces the lives of three expatriate Black women, "a triumvirate" (223), addressing the unparalleled freedom and opportunity that was available in Paris. An insightful essay, "The Found Generation: Creating Space of Emancipation in Early-Twentieth-Century Paris" by Tirza True Latimer, is a welcome contribution. Drawing on her work on gender theory and visual culture, Latimer adds important information and crucial contextual analysis. Firstly, as Latimer rightly points out: the incentives of going to Paris were manifold, but the very fact that same-sex liaisons were criminalized in the US but not in France made Paris doubly attractive. Secondly, Latimer considers performance art in the context of contemporary discourses such as "Primitivism," "Orientalism," and/or "negrophilia." We may thus ask, to what extent did Josephine Baker's *dance de sauvage* feed the narrative of primitivism's escapist fantasies of primordial sensuality? Did the unrestrained ovations for the Black women's vaudeville performances reduce these women to racialized and sexualized stereotypes? As Zakiya R. Adair rightly points out in the next essay, "Subverting Desire: Black Women and Transatlantic Expressive Culture in

Paris," Baker was acutely aware of her hyper sexualized portrayal by the press, yet desired to be known as more than just a provocative dancer (250). Negotiating their performances of colonial and racial stereotypes, Baker and other performers exemplify the contradictions and tensions to Black American women's transatlantic performances (246).

The last essay, "Capturing Ancient Dance in Modern France" by Samuel N. Dorf, broadens the field of inquiry. A musicologist and dance historian, he asks, What attracted these women to the classical past and how did that past influence modern dance? While uncorseted images of dancers seen in Greek vase paintings encouraged experimentation, the primary source of inspiration was the poetry of Sappho. With Sappho as their guide and distant mentor, a network of brilliant exiles reimagined in their performances "Sappho's love and life over and over" (257).

As Dorf discerningly concludes: Dance is an ephemeral art form, impossible to capture, yet, having had the opportunity to imagine the way that Fuller and others may have danced, particularly Dorne's consideration of an Art Nouveau lamp, that is "as close as a scholar can get to a historical dance" (263).

Organizing an exhibition with an accompanying catalogue is a huge undertaking. The accumulated information for *Brilliant Exiles* is in scope and scale perhaps overambitious; a project covering forty years of history comes with its own interpretive problems. Relatedly, the eight thematic categories, extensive and disparate in content, regrettably duplicate some information of the essays section. Given these comments, I am nonetheless tempted to add a comparative observation from another perspective; the project's research material is primarily American based, be it sources and works of art. It interprets an American phenomenon. A recent exhibition at the Musée Histoire de Paris Carnavalet, titled *Les gens de Paris, 1926–1936* (The People of Paris, 1926–1936), drawing on census records, offers a fresh look at the fast-changing city with its new inhabitants, many foreign.²

While Baker features large in this space, and Brooks, with the inclusion of her portrait of *Miss Natalie Barney L'Amazone*, one may ask, what would a search in the Paris archives reveal about our intrepid women?

These remarks aside, this is a handsome publication and a valuable resource for scholars and the general public. With its stunning cover (self-portrait by Brooks) and, importantly, with excellent endpaper (from a pocket map of 1925 Paris featuring monuments and streets), *Brilliant Exiles* is meant to be a readily useable and accessible resource. As a finale, a belated *chapeau* to these 'voluntary exiles,' to all the women who assertively claimed an identity and narrative power for future generations to remember. ●

Britta Dwyer is an art historian and retired university lecturer living in Cambridge, England, who regularly visits France.

Notes

1. See Elizabeth Richards Rivenbark, "Shades of Gray: The Postmodern Portraits of Romaine Brooks and the Slippage of Gender Representation," *Woman's Art Journal* 44, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2023): 35–42.
2. See *Les gens de Paris, 1926–1936*, Musée Histoire de Paris Carnavalet (October 8, 2025–February 8, 2026): <https://www.carnavalet.paris.fr/en/exhibitions/people-paris-1926-1936>.

A Room of Her Own: Women Artist-Activists in Britain, 1875–1945

Edited by Alexis Goodwin
Clark Art Institute and Yale University
Press, 2025

Reviewed by Nancy E. Green

Nearly one hundred years ago, Virginia Woolf voiced the need for women, particularly women in the arts, to have “a room of their own,” as a place to escape, to dream, to create, and to explore, uninterrupted from the interminable household duties women seemed to be assigned from birth simply based on their gender. While considering her own sphere of letters, she also thought of her artist sister, Vanessa Bell (1879–1961), who, like her, had achieved much by rejecting traditional familial expectations for young women raised in Victorian households, and setting her own path to personal fulfillment.

Although women all over the globe still struggle for the incontrovertible right of equality in every sphere, the exhibition, *A Room of Her Own*, and its accompanying catalogue looks at a slice of that struggle during a period in Great Britain when women began to make advancements in many arenas and few looked back. Painter Anna Swynnerton (1844–1933), whose career spanned the First World War, lived through some of the most seismic changes, noting in an interview from her final year, quoted on the catalogue’s frontispiece, “I have had to struggle so hard. You see when I was young, women could not paint—or so they said. The world believed that and did not want the work of women, however sincere, however good. I refused to accept that.”

Swynnerton was not alone. In 1768 the Royal Academy made a promising gesture, nominating Mary Moser (1744–1819) and Angelica Kauffman (1741–1807) as the first female academicians. But it would be another one hundred fifty years before the next woman, Swynnerton, was elected as an associate member, and a further fourteen years before Dame Laura Knight (1877–1970) became the next full member. This was

progress at a snail’s crawl and unsurprisingly spawned years of frustration.

But the times were changing, often in minute increments. In 1842, the Female School of Design was founded (rebranded in 1885 as the Royal Female School of Art). In 1871 the Slade School of Art, London, opened, a coed enterprise where scholarships were given on merit, “irrespective of sex” (28). Women also began agitating for the vote, and for changes to the marriage and property laws eventually rewritten to grant them new rights.

More exhibition spaces were opening their doors to women, most notably the Grosvenor Gallery, founded in 1877 by Sir Coutts and Blanche Lindsay. Life drawing classes, so yearned for by women artists who were forced to draw from antique models, began to be offered at the Royal Academy (though male models were still partially draped). It was a small step. Royal Academy artist Laura Knight, denied access to live models while training, recalled the effect on her work:

If the men worked from the living [nude] figure, I had to go into the Antique Room; the hatred of those plaster figures stays with me to this day—I never got the benefit out of their study, and through working from them so much a woodenness came into my work that took years to eradicate (28).

And when the gates to male arts’ organizations seemed unbreachable, the women became their own advocates. As Pamela Nunn notes in her essay on “Organizing for Success,” the question remained “of how they might or should associate exercised women who were wrestling with the equation between capacity, opportunity, and achievement as much as it concerned their habitual oppressors, who were monitoring that tussle with consternation” (85). Not content to wait patiently, they began to set up their own confederations with a range of names—association, guild, society, club—all intent on empowering their members to succeed as professional artists, whether painters, sculptors, printmakers, or decorative artists. These groups served to make the women more visible and

stronger in their resistance to the rules of the male establishment.

By any standard, this seventy-year history covers significant changes for British women in general and, for those working in the arts, many successes were achieved. Long fought for and hard won, these advancements are highlighted in four engaging catalogue essays, each examining a crucial aspect of this period and the artists who helped perpetuate the advancements.

Curator and editor Alexis Goodin addresses the variety of ways that women artists understood the private and public components of their lives that needed change, not just within the arts, to enable them to achieve their goals. Many were suffragists, some were pacifists, others put their careers and dreams on hold to work as nurses during World War I, and some volunteered for charitable causes while actively raising funds for their chosen causes. Some taught or wrote books to bring their art to broader audiences. Artist Gluck (née Hannah Gluckstein; 1895–1978) put her career on a long hiatus while she successfully campaigned for better materials for artists, a boon for all practitioners. Changing women’s roles in society as a whole bolstered their claims for freedoms beyond the studio.

Evelyn De Morgan (1855–1919) held an exhibition of her anti-war paintings in her studio, free of charge to all visitors, to raise awareness of war’s devastating realities. Anna Airy (1882–1964) and Laura Knight were commissioned as war artists during World War I. While not allowed to work overseas, their efforts were concentrated on depicting the multiple war activities taking place on the home front. The war freed women in many ways, and helped them to finally achieve the vote, among other things.

One size did not fit all. Some women artists were anti-suffrage, some were antiwar, some stopped making art to devote themselves wholeheartedly to helping their country in its time of need. They were independent-minded women who, though they often relied on their sisterhood for support and inspiration, retained their independence in their thoughts and actions.

Charlotte Gere examines the lives of

six of the earliest success stories—those of Louise Jopling (1843–1933), Marie Spartali Stillman (1844–1927), May Morris (1862–1938), Helen Allingham (1848–1926), Evelyn De Morgan, and Anna Alma-Tadema (1867–1943). Each story is intriguingly different, however; the only commonality was their struggle in the midst of the conservative Victorian era, and they all needed to answer the first question, where to study? Opportunities were limited, even as the 1871 opening of the Slade made a major difference for women, offering coeducational classes and equal opportunities for scholarships and awards.

Family and societal prejudices against working women still prevailed; married or not, women's expected role was in the home. But married women like Jopling, Allingham, and Stillman had few options. All three had children to support after the deaths of their spouses and continuing as artists was the option they chose, often adding teaching duties to their commissioned work. De Morgan, though married to an artist and unencumbered by offspring, still needed to work. For many years it was her income that supported her husband, ceramicist William De Morgan. It wasn't until he switched careers and became a best-selling novelist that the pressure abated.

Morris and Alma-Tadema had the advantage of being born into homes where both parents were artistic and supported their careers. Stillman's successes may have been the hardest to achieve. Her husband, a failed artist, turned to journalism and criticism and denigrated his wife's unquestionable talents. Fortunately, this was tempered by the support of other artists, both male and female, who recognized her abilities. After her husband's death, Stillman needed to work more than ever, with three stepchildren and three children of her own, yet still encouraging their own artistic endeavors. Of these, her daughter Euphrosyne "Effie" Stillman (1872–1911), became widely recognized in the UK and United States for her public commemorative sculpture, earning the commission for the Bayard Memorial in Wilmington, Delaware, in 1907.¹

Communal meeting places were crucial to women's experiences. Clubs, guilds, and societies were welcoming entities for women seeking camaraderie and support. As Pamela Gerrish Nunn points out in her essay, places such as the Society of Female Artists (established 1857), which aimed to organize exhibitions for its members, such as the Slade Club, formed in 1902, with the object of "providing a convenient rendezvous for past and present students of the Slade School, for work and social intercourse," (89) and the Women's International Arts Club (WIAC), which afforded women the opportunity to exhibit in their annual show at the Grafton Galleries in Mayfair, were all vital venues for female artists.

Additionally, the WIAC openly accepted artists who worked in the sphere of decorative art, which not all the groups did. The only two criteria for inclusion were that the artist must have studied in Paris and must produce 'strong work.'

Artists started their own clubs, such as Vanessa Bell's Friday Club, which included writers and artists; May Morris was the moving figure behind the Women's Guild of Arts, and stained-glass artist Mary Lowndes (1857–1929) opened the Glass House as a meeting and studio place. In 1920, Gwen Raverat (1885–1957) was one of the founders of the Society of Wood Engravers, an organization that continues to thrive today. Some of these were coed from the start but others, as implied in their names, were meant to serve as comparable havens to the men-only clubs that women were barred from.

One problem that arose from these gender-specific groups was the criticism from outsiders: "Many commentators voiced the traditional desire for feminine work and behavior from women, believing sexual difference to be the bedrock of social stability and prosperity. These critics complained that works exhibited by the WIAC failed to *look like* they were made by women—betraying in the patriarch's opinion a mischievous if not subversive use of sex as a categorizing term" (92). By these standards, women couldn't win.

As noted, World War I helped change the public's attitude about women's

abilities and strengths and previous barriers were being ripped down at a rapid pace. Alice Strickland's essay on the war artists Anna Airy, Laura Knight, and Lucy Kemp-Welch (1869–1958) explores just how important their efforts and those of other patriotic women were to their cause. The misogynist musings of John Ruskin, a bastion of nineteenth-century Victorianism ("He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender ... women's power is for rule, not for battle, – and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision." [139]) were becoming obsolete. And though the queen herself would most likely have blanched, the days of Victorian ladies uninvolved and uninterested in the outside world were over. The war was a key factor in changing this, providing new opportunities in what were previously considered 'male' enterprises and women grabbed these opportunities to prove their abilities.

Writer J. B. Priestley acknowledged their accomplishments: "No country engaged in war has mobilized its women for the war effort more thoroughly and efficiently than Britain has and our use of woman power has been one of the unique features of our war record" (126). In some ways, Kemp-Welch was an anomaly within this group. She did not support a woman's right to vote and was never keen about being included in exhibitions of just women artists, stating, "I have always been of the opinion that the discrimination of sex is absurd, in such a matter as art" (120).

In the final sections of the catalogue, Goodwin presents the works of art under headings relevant to the artists and the individual work highlighted: A Room of Her Own; Home; Studio; Art School; Exhibition Sites. Each was critical for these artists and some of the artists are represented in several of the categories. The works themselves, carefully selected to explicate these pivotal connecting spheres, leave us with a strong sense of the artists' individuality, their talent, their commitment, and their achievements.

Rounding out this important examination, the artist biographies and the

historic chronology in which they came of age and eventually thrived, make this book both a fascinating read and an important addition to our understanding of this crucial period in the history of women's art. This is a history we should all know and consequently thank the women who made so much possible for future generations. •

Nancy Green was the Gale and Ira Drukier Curator of European and

American Art, Prints, and Drawings, 1800–1945, at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University. During her thirty-seven-year tenure she organized dozens of exhibitions at the Johnson Museum and elsewhere. Awarded numerous fellowships and travel grants for her research, she has published articles, exhibition guides, and catalogues. Green received her MA in Art History from Williams College. She continues to teach courses for Cornell

Adult University, where she leads travel tours and offers lectures through the Smithsonian Associates. Her current book project focuses on the couples of the Arts and Crafts Movement.

Notes

1. See Johanna Amos, "'The Penalty of My 'Woman's Work,'": Euphrosyne Stillman and the Bayard Memorial Commission," *Woman's Art Journal* 46, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2025): 14–24.

Anita Steckel: The Feminist Art of Sexual Politics

Edited by Richard Meyer and Rachel Middleman, with contributions by Kelly Filreis, Alison M. Gingeras, Jessica Maffia, Richard Meyer, and Rachel Middleman
Stanford Art Gallery, Stanford University, 2022

Sexually Explicit Art, Feminist Theory, and Gender in the 1970s

By Christian Liclair
Routledge, 2022

Reviewed by Kalas Ke

Like many of her contemporaries who were active during the rebellious Sexual Liberation Movements of the 1970s, American feminist artist Anita Steckel (1930–2012) is known for her sexually explicit art. Utilizing a unique approach of photomontage, Steckel painted on found photographs to juxtapose references to art and feminist politics. Challenging socially and historically constructed conceptions of gender and sexuality that were omnipresent in the boilerplate paintings of female nudes in art history, she produced sexually explicit imagery as a means of reclaiming agency and emancipating desire from patriarchal culture. Notably similar to Joan Semmel (b. 1932), for whom Christian Liclair has dedicated a chapter in his recently published *Sexually Explicit Art, Feminist Theory, and Gender in the 1970s* (hereafter cited as SE), Steckel would be indelibly linked to bold, sexually explicit art

throughout her career, and both artists were deeply engaged with feminist art in the 1970s. The close relation between Steckel and Semmel, as well as lesser known American feminist artists Betty Tompkins (b. 1945) and Tee Corinne (1943–2006), discussed by Liclair, merits primary consideration in this double review of Liclair's book on sexually explicit art in that decade and the exhibition catalogue *Anita Steckel: The Feminist Art of Sexual Politics* (hereafter cited as AS), curated by Rachel Middleman and Richard Meyer, both published in 2022.

A growing list of solo exhibitions, journal articles, and dissertations have been devoted to Steckel from the previous decade, especially by Middleman, a significant steward of Steckel's artistic legacy.¹ Alongside Meyer, Middleman's co-curation of Steckel's retrospective exhibition for the Stanford Art Gallery effectively offers a significant historical corrective to the artist's controversially cancelled one-person show at Rockland Community College in Suffern, New York, in 1972. On its fiftieth anniversary, the installation shares its original title and many of the same available works (AS, 2). The catalogue's introduction, co-written by the two curators, and five essays by Middleman, Alison M. Gingeras, Kelly Filreis, Jessica Maffia, and Meyer, respectively, provides a comprehensive overview of Steckel as a feminist artist and anti-censorship activist. Middleman critically focuses on Steckel's self-portrait collages from her *Giant Women on New York* series (c. 1969–74). Gingeras reviews Steckel's work in relation to the politics of pornography in the 1970s and

outlines a history of the relevant artist groups in which Steckel participated. From the dynamic perspectives of desire and power, Filreis uncovers the ambivalent feelings shared by US feminist art from the 1970s, pointing out that Steckel's humorous use of the phallus, as well as contemporaneous art practices on the West Coast by Judy Chicago (b. 1939) and Miriam Schapiro (1923–2015), "compromise" the artist's own autonomy (30), a symbol both empowering and self-limiting. Maffia's personal interactions as a student of Steckel offers a vivid account of what she was like as an educator, fitting the tone of an exhibition staged in a university art gallery. Meyer, who also knew Steckel, adds biographical heft to her charismatic artistic persona, highlighting her intelligence, irreverence, and fearlessness.

Steckel's artistic and political agenda benefited from a highly effective central strategy: her whimsical use of collage and photomontage to subvert found images and render them inseparable from feminist politics. Experimenting freely across media—pencil, oil, photography, silkscreen, prints, Xerox, and assemblage sculpture—Steckel produced an ongoing critique of the deeply rooted issues of sexism in Western art history and racism in postwar American society. These multimedia works, adding painterly touches onto existing photographs and prints, often interrogated such issues by disrupting and manipulating canonical works of art, an admixture of nude imagery and political messages. That the original 1972 exhibition was shut



Fig. 1. Anita Steckel, *Giant Woman on Empire State* (Collage for *Giant Women* series, c. 1969–1974), silver gelatin print, mixed-media collage, 8" x 10". Courtesy of the Estate of Anita Steckel; Ortuzar Projects, New York; and Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles.

down (Steckel was charged with obscenity) magnifies the importance of her work's recognition and support from the art community, peers, and feminists (AS, 12). Steckel was active in the feminist art movement through her advocacy with the Fight Censorship Group, which she also co-founded. In response to the cancellation of her Rockland show and attacks from local politicians, Steckel's first gathering of the Fight Censorship Group occurred in her apartment on March 8, 1973, with Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010), Semmel, and Hannah Wilke (1940–1993) in attendance (AS, 12). As noted by Middleman, the work was "referenced in all the major feminist art publications" and widely presented in "exhibitions at the Women's Interart Center."² However, Steckel's serious dedication to contemporary political issues as well as her artistic achievement remains "largely ignored," although she "defied the sex negativity and denial of female desire that sometimes accompanied radical feminist art in the 1970s" (AS, 7).

Despite being a target for feminist criticisms in the 1970s that, as the artist

and writer Joanna Frueh points out, were preoccupied with the binary relationship of looking and being-looked-at, Steckel's art is now being revalued in exhibitions and scholarship, the artist herself recognized for a career-long unflagging commitment to art, feminism, and freedom of expression. Steckel was unequivocally and often humorously confrontational regarding female pleasure, particularly when combining her own photographic likeness onto monumental female nudes, as with *Giant Woman on Empire State* (c.1969–74; Fig. 1), in which she contemplates the relationships among women, public space, and modernity in the bustling world capital, and skillfully blends rapturous joy, female desire, and architecture. The photographic collage of downtown New York is overlaid by a female nude adorned with the artist's own visage, characterized by a somewhat aloof expression although impossibly affixed atop the Empire State Building. By emphasizing the painted female nude's dramatic gesture and scale against a relatively monochromatic palette and striking expanse of azure, Steckel celebrates her sexuality, the nude

giantess interacting serenely, enigmatically, amongst the clouds, in possession of a jet-black paintbrush within this surreal tableau. This fantastical interaction is made clear when Steckel responded in an interview with Meyer, "Men seemed to own the city, and this was my way of responding to that" (AS, 48).

Similar to Steckel's images of female nudes bearing her own portrait, Semmel, as discussed by Liclair, also focused on her own naked body to create nude self-portraits, revealing "complicated power dynamics between sexual desire and visual representation that defies the simplistic demand to oppose women's sexual objectification of women" (SE, 52). Published by Routledge's Re-search in Gender and Art series, Liclair's book is a revised version of his dissertation. Remarkably, Liclair has compiled case studies on Robert Mapplethorpe, Semmel, Tompkins, and Corinne, four very different artists whose identifications guided them in creating transformative visualizations of sexual experiences marginalized in heteronormative American society. The book's four chapters draw on a range of art historical and theoretical frameworks, such as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's politics of desire and pleasure, and Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theories. Borrowing its title from a recent exhibition, *Coming to Power: 25 Years of Sexually X-plicit Art by Women*, at New York's Maccarone Gallery in 2016, the book proceeds from this exhibition and states its central premise that works of sexually explicit art were important for these artists "to (re-)claim agency, to gain control of their sexualities and bodies" (SE, 2).

In "Through the Object's Eye: Joan Semmel and the Upending of Erotic Art," Liclair uses the artist's work to argue against "the conviction that so-called Erotic Art also objectifies the female body for the pleasure of a male spectator and thus reinforced patriarchal power dynamics" (SE, 61). His discussion applies the art historical scholarship of Martha Nussbaum, Carol Duncan, Linda Nochlin, and Griselda Pollock, among others, in a reevaluation of canonical paintings of female nudes, bringing to the fore the ways in which

Semmel's nudes differ from those "traditionally linked with nature, passivity, sensuality, and sexual availability" (SE, 70). In an attempt to correct the objectifying nature of the male-dominated artistic tradition of Erotic Art, Semmel created sexually explicit paintings from a "woman's point of view" (SE, 52), and this first-woman perspective in her art is a reference to her authorship as a woman. Another key strategy of Semmel's attempt to upend Erotic Art is the monumental scale of her paintings, which "demands the physical distancing between spectator and image" (SE, 74), ultimately disrupting the experience of an intimate gaze. Liclair extensively analyzes Semmel's self-portraits, particularly *Me Without Mirrors* (1974), which exemplifies her first-woman (first-person) perspectival approach to a scale of painting that demands physical distancing between the spectator and the image, effectively "upending" an objectification of the female body that hitherto had been the stalwart feature of Erotic Art.

The third chapter, "Feminist Pleasures/ Pleasurable Feminism: Pornography and Betty Tompkins's *Fuck Paintings*," is about Tompkins's controversial paintings, equally monumental to those by Semmel. As a visual genre that is self-evidently linked to the exploitative sexualization of women for the pleasure of men, heterosexual pornography became a focus of criticism for many feminists during its nascent rise in the 1970s. Liclair attentively outlines the legal and feminist problems with pornography and distinguishes the pornographic from the erotic, and then identifies the overtly exaggerating ways in which Tompkins's *Fuck Paintings* present a repetitive series of radical cropping of genitals during sexual intercourse. Although directly appropriated from pornographic source material, Liclair argues that Tompkins's paintings maintained an ambiguity toward either anti or pro-porn assessments in that decade. To discuss the sexual politics of Tompkins's seemingly straightforward works that depict penetration during sexual intercourse, Liclair draws from Freud as well as

Michel Foucault to philosophically construct the meaning of sex and intercourse as a site of conflict, providing an insightful analysis for future studies of sexuality and gender in contemporary art.

The final case study, titled "Libidinal Disruptions and Homosexual Desire: Tee Corinne's *Cunt Coloring Book* and *Yantras of Womanlove*," reaches beyond the heteronormative system of relations and uses the artist's work to challenge prevalent notions of acceptable representations of lesbianism within the Women's Movement (SE, 12). Discussing two of Corinne's publications, *Cunt Coloring Book* (1975) and *Yantras of Womanlove* (1982), the author concludes that Corinne's "depictions of erotic practices between women stand in contrast to the conditions of production and reception of how they have traditionally been depicted throughout art history" (SE, 151). According to Liclair, Corinne's *Yantras of Womanlove* departs from the reluctance by many lesbian artists to use sexually explicit material manifested in *Lesbian Art and Artists*, the first art exhibition in the US dedicated to showcasing works by lesbian artists in the late 1970s. With these collages based on photographic depictions of erotic practices between women, Corinne's works emphasize the significance of sex and sexual pleasures while keeping the identities of her models obscured, allowing for numerous possibilities of identification of a variety of potential spectators: "disabled lesbians, fat lesbians, old lesbian, lesbians of color" (SE, 151). Corinne placed great importance on bodily and racial diversity and inclusivity in both two books.

As I read through these two publications, I became curious why Liclair, whose investigation situates debates associated with the insurgent Sexual Liberation Movements of the 1970s, did not include Steckel as a case study. He often references Steckel, especially in the second chapter dedicated to Semmel, and her formative stage was also set in the 1970s, the decade during which she founded the Fight Censorship Group and produced her most well-known series. Steckel was not strictly confined

to the bounds of heterosexuality, exploring both homosexual desire and voyeurism in her late series, *Anita of New York Meets Tom of Finland* (2004–5), in which "both the woman in the artwork and the artist herself peer into a primarily male homoerotic fantasy" (AS, 33). Steckel's medium also fit within the scope of Liclair's consideration, limiting his discussion "to pictorial, two-dimensional forms of visual representation" to directly address "the long tradition of sexually explicit pictures in Western art and visual culture" (SE, 9). In its 2022 iteration, *The Feminist Art of Sexual Politics* retrieves Steckel from her relative obscurity and positions her in the canon of feminism and social activism. Liclair's book offers a more comprehensive understanding of various art practices and art criticisms from the period of the 1970s. Undoubtedly, the publications complement each other as a rich collection of the erotic, sexually explicit art of the 1970s. •

Kalas Ke is a curator based in Hong Kong. She received her MA in Art History from the University of Hong Kong.

Notes

1. Ortuzer Projects presented her solo exhibition *Anita Steckel: My Town* in New York, May 17–July 16, 2022. Rachel Middleman discussed Steckel in her critically acclaimed book, *Radical Eroticism: Women, Art, and Sex in the 1960s* (Univ. of California Press, 2018), and in her article, "Anita Steckel's Feminist Montage: Merging Politics, Art, and Life," *Woman's Art Journal* 34, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2013): 21–29.
2. Middleman, "Anita Steckel's Feminist Montage," 28.

Inventing the Modern: Untold Stories of the Women Who Shaped the Museum of Modern Art

Edited by Ann Temkin and Romy Silver-Kohn, with foreword by Anna Deavere Smith and essays by Mary Schmidt Campbell, Sloane Crosley, Mary Gabriel, Jennifer Gray, Juliet Kinchin, Farran Smith Nehme, Nell Irvin Painter, Roberta Smith, Lanka Tattersall, Anne Umland, Kate Walbert, and Brenda Wineapple
The Museum of Modern Art, 2024

Reviewed by Shannon Bewley

Nearly fifty years after *LIFE* magazine published an article titled “Three Ladies and the Genius Who Launched the Museum,” the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) has firmly rebuked the idea that director Alfred H. Barr, Jr., was the only “genius” behind, arguably, the most influential art institution of the twentieth century. The fourteen chapters of *Inventing the Modern: Untold Stories of the Women Who Shaped the Museum of Modern Art* offer well-researched biographies of the museum’s largely forgotten and ignored “ladies”—fourteen female founders, donors, curators, and administrators—and accompanies the exhibition *Lillie P. Bliss and the Birth of the Modern*, the ninetieth-anniversary celebration of Bliss, the founding patron’s unparalleled bequest of forty masterworks to the venerable museum.

From the 1920s through 1960s, MoMA’s women, each a genius in her own right, defined nascent professions with vision, passion, and grit amid the precarity of global war and postwar gender tensions in the workforce. Actor and playwright Anna Deavere Smith’s foreword prepares readers to encounter individual stories of tenacity and innovation that encompass short biographies and lived experiences before and after their professional relationships with the museum. The strong editorial vision of Ann Temkin and Romy Silver-Kohn adds a consistent authorial voice throughout, and their brief introduction contextualizes the women’s backgrounds and race as largely married, childless, and socially

and financially privileged. Diaries, letters, interviews, newspapers, and museum records are referenced to build personable, humanized profiles without mere reduction to gender or profession. More than two hundred thirty color and black and white illustrations enrich the book with family photographs, collection masterpieces, catalogue covers, and press clippings.

The first three chapters cover Abby Aldrich Rockefeller (1874–1948), Lillie P. Bliss (1864–1931), and Mary Quinn Sullivan (1877–1939), the “adamantine” (67) trio whose collective vision is responsible for MoMA’s existence. They organized an Institute of Modern Art after the estate auctions of their close friends, the painter Arthur Davies and collector John Quinn. In despair after the dispersal of their collections, Rockefeller, Bliss, and Sullivan developed wills, gifts, and bequests that formed the essential anchors of MoMA’s developing collection. Both Rockefeller and Bliss, discussed by museum director Mary Schmidt Campbell and novelist Kate Walbert, respectively, shared similar upper-class Protestant upbringings that fueled a love of art collecting and unique abilities to orchestrate fundraising among the wealthy echelons of Manhattan society. Comparatively, Sullivan was born in Indiana to an Irish-Catholic immigrant family but leveraged her skills as an arts and home economics educator to rise through the ranks of the New York City public school system. Historian Nell Irving Painter’s chapter on Sullivan is a particularly novel contribution to MoMA’s institutional history, representing the first extended biography of the museum founder, whose comparatively small estate and lack of heirs limited opportunities for preserving her legacy compared to her female contemporaries.

Chapter four turns to the daily administration of the young institution, diligently supported by Margaret “Marga” Scolari Barr (1901–1987), the wife of Barr. A shared love of modern art accelerated their courtship, and Marga, a natural polyglot, was already tasked with translating and interpreting museum correspondence during their honeymoon. Curator Lanka Tattersall

delicately notes a persistent imbalance of power within the marriage: Marga declined a teaching opportunity at Smith College to support his career, adopted a nickname preferred by him, and received virtually no credit for her published translations. After working full-time to secure visas and funding for refugee artists during World War II, Marga then supervised the cataloguing of Barr’s papers and the establishment of the MoMA Archives. The importance of her contributions to the institution and support of refugee artists cannot be overstated.

The following chapters consider women who conducted essential curatorial work, including writing catalogue essays and securing accessions for the museum’s blooming departments. Curator Juliet Kinchin discusses Ernestine Fantl Carter (1906–1983), who assisted and then replaced (at half pay) Philip Johnson as the head of the architecture department and set the typography for museum publications (advocating for its now famous Futura font). Carter closely worked with Barr to develop circulating exhibitions of photographic reproductions and models. Carter’s capacity to form departments of architecture and graphic design shares a close trajectory to the career of Iris Barry (1895–1969), who secured funding for the unprecedented Film Library, then assertively shaped its canonical collection through acquisitions of popular films, important artistic works, and even examples of Nazi propaganda. Film critic Farran Smith Nehme persuasively argues that Barry technically invented the field of film preservation and helped elevate the popular idea of moviegoing from a bawdy weekend activity to a cultural experience.

Similarly, the directorship of Elodie Courter (1911–1994) of the Department of Circulating Exhibitions heightened the national reputation of MoMA through more than three hundred traveling shows of original works and high-quality reproductions. These “canned” exhibitions developed into a genre that would come to populate the calendar of countless regional institutions, libraries, schools, hospitals, and prisons. During her thirteen-year

tenure, Courter literally wrote the standards with her *Manual of Traveling Exhibitions* (UNESCO, 1953). Silver-Kohn thoughtfully contextualizes Courter's career, which ended at the recommendation of famed child psychoanalysis Dr. Benjamin Spock, whose writings called for mothers to withdraw from the workforce after World War II.

Sarah Newmeyer (1892–1955), head of the museum's publicity department (one of the first in America), promoted innovations of other departments. A published screenwriter, Newmeyer brought drama and excitement to press releases, radio broadcasts, and newspaper articles spread to national audiences. Unfortunately for Newmeyer, her own increasing celebrity status as a modern woman led to her firing in 1948. This pithy chapter by memoirist and novelist Sloane Crosley offers a standout narrative in the book.

Journalist and biographer Mary Gabriel discusses trailblazing curator Dorothy Miller (1904–2003). Well-known for acting as Barr's right hand and curating the seven groundbreaking *Americans* exhibitions of Abstract Expressionism and Pop art, Miller's involvement with all aspects of the museum extended to serving as the staff expert in historic and modern American art, casting a mold for how curators of modern art interacted with living artists. This is followed by prolific art critic Roberta Smith's consideration of perhaps the least known protagonist, Dorothy Dudley (1902–1979; Fig. 1), whose three decades as the head of the Department of the Registrar professionalized collection management. Classifying conceptual works that test the physical limits of what constitutes an art object, Dudley guided institutional recordkeeping, from book-bound ledgers to the card catalogue in the late 1940s to the computer data bank in the late 1960s. Coordinating international loans, she successfully lobbied for radical changes to archaic customs and import laws that disadvantaged modern and contemporary abstract and mixed-media art, and wrote essential handbooks like *Museum Registration Methods* (1958).

Author Brenda Wineapple describes how Nancy Newhall (1908–1974) stew-

arded the establishment of another first department of its kind, the Department of Photography. Acting in lieu of her husband during his military service, Newhall codified the department's foundational ethos that the photograph is a unique medium that encompasses the ideals of both fine art and photojournalism. Her short-lived Photography Center (1943–44) demonstrated how small spaces and small resources can stretch to offer a library, lectures, forums, and exhibitions. Unfortunately, like millions of other women, Newhall was displaced by the return of male workers after military service, and her labor to bridge the divide between views of photography as art or mass communication remain under credited.

Architectural historian Jennifer Gray's chapter on Elizabeth Mock (1911–1998) offers the bluntest assessment of the blatant sexism experienced by these women. Despite patronizing treatment by Frank Lloyd Wright and Philip Johnson, Mock earned promotions from the rank of assistant to full curator of the Department of Architecture. Upending her career for a husband who ultimately cheated on and abandoned her, over the decades Mock contributed text, all uncredited, for the institution's imprint. Gray persuasively argues that, despite the tumult in Mock's family life, her exhibitions included domestic and vernacular constructions that centered women, children, and their psychological needs as foundational elements for effective modernist architecture.

In the penultimate chapter, Temkin's research uncovers the private Olga Guggenheim (1877–1970), better known as Mrs. Simon Guggenheim, credited for the purchase of seventy-one major masterpieces of painting and sculpture in MoMA's collection. By 1940, having survived the deaths of her husband and two sons, Guggenheim redefined herself as a steadfast trustee of MoMA and important patron for other institutions, including the Denver Art Museum and New York Public Library. She scorned publicity and attention despite the gravitas brought by her monetary gifts, leaving Temkin to reconstruct her personality through scant references in letters and interviews.



Fig. 1. Dorothy Dudley (1940). The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

The final chapter concerns MoMA's first in-house conservator, Jean Volkmer (1920–2017), who spent four decades developing leading conservation laboratories for treating modern and contemporary art. She famously salvaged smoke-damaged works following the museum's 1958 fire, and the vandalism in 1974 of Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937). Many of her procedures and methods are still in use today, such as interviewing living artists and their kin to understand how to care for difficult surfaces. Historian Anne Umland argues that, like other female heads of new departments, Volkmer's studious experimentation defined a new field of museum work.

Inventing the Modern does not sow competition among these protagonists; each woman is given her fair attention, with space for their personal and professional highs and lows. The extensive acknowledgements offered by Temkin and Silver-Kohn attest to the collaboration needed to revive their contributions to MoMA, often uncredited, untitled, and underpaid. A helpful research tool might have included a timeline overviewing the women's active years and roles at MoMA. Even so, the chapters hint at patterns ripe for future researchers; for instance, many of the museum's curators, including Carter,

Barry, and Courter, made meaningful contributions to wartime visual culture and politics through traveling exhibitions of propaganda art. Hopefully, this volume will be followed by a sequel covering the non-white women administrators, artists, and personnel of later decades, for instance, Mary Lea Bandy (1943–

2014) and Howardena Pindell (b. 1943). *Inventing the Modern* is a pleasurable read for anyone interested in the professionalization of museum administration, the gendering of museum labor, and the balancing of careers, family, and modern art commitments by women art workers in the early to mid-twentieth century. •

Shannon Bewley is an historian of modern and contemporary art history. Her research focuses on twentieth-century public sculpture and situates artists' careers within the professionalization of arts administration amid changing state, federal, and international funding for the arts.

Gertrude Abercrombie: The Whole World is a Mystery

Edited by Eric Crosby and Sarah Humphreville
Carnegie Museum of Art and Colby College Museum of Art/DelMonico Books, 2025

Reviewed by Anna E. Dobbins

The singular American artist Gertrude Abercrombie (1909–1977) is the focus of the first retrospective in over thirty years co-curated by Eric Crosby and Sarah Humphreville.¹ The accompanying catalogue, *Gertrude Abercrombie: The Whole World is a Mystery*, brings to the forefront the mysterious world-building of Abercrombie's extensive oeuvre, a book richly illustrated with approximately two hundred color reproductions and the inclusion of a number of archival documents and objects. Abercrombie's interest in the relationships between music and art spans all the essays. The artist found herself amongst the bustling jazz scene of Chicago, home to such illustrious figures as Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, and Sonny Rollins. Abercrombie enmeshed herself within this scene by frequently hosting jam sessions at her Dorchester Avenue home, even joining on the piano from time to time, where her art served as a backdrop.

Abercrombie, born in Austin, Texas, to traveling opera singers, spent her early years on the road, moving from Texas to Illinois to Germany and back to Aledo, Illinois, the place she considered home. She studied romance languages at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, graduating in 1929. Her artistic career began in commercial spaces drawing ads for department stores, and she participated in her first

group exhibition in 1932 and continued showing her work. In 1933, she was employed by the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP). A transformative encounter with Gertrude Stein in 1935, while the author gave a series of lectures at the University of Chicago, immensely impacted the artistry of the young artist. In 1944, in conjunction with the WPA, her work was shown in the exhibition *35 under 35* at the Museum of Modern Art. Having moved her family in 1944 to the Dorchester Avenue residence, it subsequently became a salon to the literary, musical, and artistic culture of the city (much like that of Stein's home in Paris).

Abercrombie painted the world around her in an unusual and mysterious manner, filling her works with autobiographical objects and motifs, and creating her own style that engaged the imagination, dream states, and the uncanny. Often labeled a Surrealist artist due to her engagement with certain tenants of the movement, her work pushed past the confines of Surrealism. Abercrombie's work was heavily influenced by her life in Chicago and the Midwest, and as such resisted rigid classification. She painted desolate landscapes and barren interiors, often void of any signs of life. When figures appear, they take the form of troubled heroines, frequently interpreted as self-portraits of the artist.

The first two essays by Crosby and Humphreville provide extensive biographical and contextual information. In his study of the artist, Crosby considers the personal nature of Abercrombie's paintings to suggest that her work is "in one way or another, a form of self-portraiture" (11). In her essay "Simple Things, a Little Strange," Humphreville relies

heavily on archival documents to narrate Abercrombie's artistic progression.

In a 1977 interview, Abercrombie stated: "I invented the term 'bop' for my art.... I think they're called bop paintings, yes, because they're a little off, not color but off, kind of off the beam, they're kind of goofy. I feel that they're like the bop music" (59). This quote is the springboard for "Bop Art: Song Paintings, Fantasies, and Flatted Fifths," Donna M. Cassidy's exploration of the influence of the Chicago jazz scene on Abercrombie's work, from the "jam sessions" held at the artist's house to the titling of numerous works after songs from the bebop catalogue. Cassidy argues that while a number of well-known male artists, for instance, Wassily Kandinsky, Jackson Pollock, and Aaron Douglas, derived inspiration from music, Abercrombie's engagement is markedly different. For Abercrombie, she translated the improvised quality of the bebop music around her into a visual production that focused not on abstraction but on representational themes of nostalgia and dreamscapes. Effortlessly tracing the link between Abercrombie's visual production and the jazz and bebop music scene in Chicago, Cassidy's essay is one of the strengths of this catalogue.

As a bohemian eccentric artist, Abercrombie surrounded herself with the eclectic personalities of artists, writers, and musicians. In "The Queerest Things in Chicago: Abercrombie's Fey and Feral Network," Katie Anania illustrates Abercrombie's place within the queer art culture of postwar Chicago. Anania notes a recurring motif of "queer things" in her examination of archival documents from the literary and visual arts of this circle (79). While these objects

might constitute a “category of queer things,” Anania cautions the application of “a deterministic reading of these symbols,” suggesting, instead, that “we might imagine ever more ground for exploring their utility as shiny, enchanting, and ultimately unstable capsules of meaning” (79). The fluidity of meaning found in Abercrombie’s visual motifs echoes the fluidity of gender and sexuality, and thus withstands a conventional art historical narrative. By challenging how we understand objects, Anania offers a way of analyzing motifs that foregrounds a multiplicity of meaning.

In his contribution, writer John Corbett composes a series of mini-essays (seven) that speak to various moments in Abercrombie’s life and work, from her use of strong horizon lines to her engagement with the Surrealist uncanny to her use of the infinite loop of placing a painting within a painting in many compositions. Corbett’s lyrical essay can be understood visually through Abercrombie’s *Where or When (Things Past)* (1948; Fig. 1). In this work, Abercrombie centers a young woman (who resembles the artist) in a non-descript room. The figure stands frozen in a coral dress staring out at the viewer, as she holds in her hands a ribbon that connects her to a small cat and a golden cone. The dark black floor meets the charcoal wall to create a defined horizontal line; Corbett contends that Abercrombie’s strong reliance on the horizontality in her landscapes and interior compositions derives from her midwestern locale. On the wall hangs a painting by



Fig. 1. Gertrude Abercrombie, *Where or When (Things Past)* (1948), oil on canvas, 21 1/2" x 35 1/2". Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, Wisconsin. Gift of the Gertrude Abercrombie Trust.

the artist herself and a set of old off-white doors. The doors might be read as a barrier between the conscious reality and our unconscious mind. This style of painting is reminiscent of the early collage works by Max Ernst such as *La chambre à coucher* (The Master’s Bedroom) of 1920.

In addition to the catalogue’s thematic essays, *Gertrude Abercrombie: The Whole World is a Mystery* includes an interview with Abercrombie conducted by Studs Terkel shortly before the artist’s passing in 1977, and a chronology by Cynthia Stucki that traces the artist’s life, career, and exhibition history based on extensive archival study. This exhibition and insightful scholarship provide a path for new and exciting research on an

American artist who for too long lived at the margins of art historical scholarship. •

Anna E. Dobbins is a doctoral candidate in art history at the University of Florida. Her research focuses on constructions of gender and sexuality in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Her dissertation considers the influence of the Marquis de Sade on women Surrealists in the postwar era.

Notes

1. The exhibition traveled from the Carnegie Museum of Art in early 2025, to the Colby College Museum of Art in late 2025–26.

Undesirability and Her Sisters: Black Women’s Visual Work and the Ethics of Representation

By Tiffany E. Barber
New York University Press, 2025

Reviewed by Elizabeth Carmel Hamilton

America does not know what to do with Black women artists or their subjects who are not iconic or in service of their interests. This explains the vitriolic reaction to Thomas

Price’s *Grounded in the Stars*, an over-life-sized bronze sculpture that debuted in Times Square in February 2025. For this pedestrian, it was difficult, as a fat, Black, dark-skinned woman with natural hair, not to take fellow visitors’ disparaging comments personally, especially those by detractors saying the plush, Black woman with braids was not worthy of monumentalization. She was banal, ordinary, and embodied at her axis two identities routinely devalued and denigrated in American culture: Black and female. Reading Tiffany Barber’s *Undesirability and Her*

Sisters: Black Women’s Visual Work and the Ethics of Representation helped me make sense of the bitter criticism directed at the well-positioned sculpture. Although *Grounded in the Stars* was created by a male artist, his female figure is one of undesirability’s sisters Barber detailed in her book. The argument at the crux of Barber’s volume is the idea that art in a racist and patriarchal society cannot serve as reparation for Black women, but we can sit with artists’ various strategies of undesirability and see art for what it is, not the reparation we want it to perform.



Fig. 1. Xaviera Simmons, *One Day and Back Then (Seated)* (2007), chromogenic color print, 30" x 40". Courtesy of the artist and David Castillo. © Xaviera Simmons.

Undesirability and Her Sisters is intellectually rich, spanning feminist, queer, and literary theories to offer fresh art historical perspectives. Art historian Judith Wilson's seminal 2002 essay, "One Way or Another: Black Feminist Visual Theory," advocates embracing diverse theories that can better contextualize images of Black women. For Wilson, thinking and theorizing beyond traditional art historical boundaries can help us better understand images of Black women that are often difficult to interpret. Barber, over twenty years later, responds to Wilson's call for more Black feminist visual theory with precision and renewed clarity.

The introduction is thorough and situates the reader within the discourse of Black women's art; the body chapters consider the mid-career multidisciplinary art of Kara Walker (b. 1969), Wangechi Mutu (b. 1972), Xaviera Simmons (b. 1974), and Narcissister (b. 1971), each artist enacting her own method of undesirability identified by Barber through careful formal analysis. Barber begins the analysis with Walker, the most art-world notable for her black paper cutout silhouettes, and ends with performance artist Narcissister, the most obscure. This device by which Barber positions the artists—in terms of recognition and opacity—serves to highlight the intensity of undesirability's various methods enacted by them. In Barber's terms, undesirability is "a triple otherness ... a visual and embodied alterity and queerness that

materializes at the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality" (8).

In the first chapter, "The Black Female Bottom," Barber writes about a less critically considered aspect of Walker's artistic practice: the anti-monument. Through Walker's first public art commissions in the United States and United Kingdom, respectively, *A Subtlety* (2014), or the *Marvelous Sugar Baby*, and *Fons Americanus* (2019), Barber demonstrates the diminished social position of Black women in both countries—at an ideological bottom—that necessitates their positionality as queer subjects based on racial, gender, and sexual difference. The bottom is the submissive end of homosexual male intercourse and used to illustrate Barber's refrain, "reproduction without futurity," repeated throughout the book. Even as Barber places Black female subjects in the position of bottom, they emerge "as an aesthetic intervention, a site-specific character, a social and sexual position of submission and degradation, and a space of sexual excess" (45). Walker strategically embraces this degradation in her work despite the pressure to be positive and, somehow, redemptive and redressive, wherein Barber also interrogates the undue pressure on African American art to be uplifting. She maintains: "Both installations espouse negativity as a productive strategy for grappling with the complexities of Blackness, womanhood, and subjectivity in the art world and the wider world" (45). According to Barber, it is only when Walker's art is unburdened from demands to be positive and reparative that we can see the work anew and understand a new, more ethical terrain for Black womanhood. Through vivid descriptions and generous illustrations (there are fourteen in this chapter, others have fewer, for a total of thirty-four high-quality figures and twenty-four color plates), *Undesirability* brings Walker's work to life while carefully situating "The Black Female Bottom" as a space of possibility for Black female identity that embraces revulsion

and disgust as ethical strategies.

Barber gives readers new frameworks for understanding Mutu's collages in the second chapter, "Alien Kin." Providing a useful genealogy of historical collage, Barber situates Mutu within the art historical tradition while identifying the ways that she deviates from it in her mixed-media approaches. While Mutu may revel in the ruptures that define her bodily figurations, Barber's prose seamlessly melds the literary with the visual by reading Mutu's collages alongside Octavia Butler's 1979 novel, *Kindred*. Butler's time-travelling protagonist, Dana, self-amputates to escape the nineteenth century, and that fragmentation of her body, yielding wholeness for new possibilities, is what unites her with Mutu's fragmented figures. Dana and Mutu's figures thwart desires for reparation, repair, and wholeness. There is a critical desire for visual and ideological coherence in Mutu's collages, yet she grants the viewer neither, and instead opts for a more ethical consideration of Black womanhood. Barber maintains: "In refusing to cohere into a picture of seamless, or even radical, togetherness, the alien kin that populate the artist's oeuvre, posed as they are in inhospitable, nebulous landscapes and at once physiologically and racially unrecognizable, model a Black feminist ethics of non-relationality" (87). As a medium, collage lacks visual coherence, and this is Mutu's strategy of undesirability. The goal is not wholeness but reveling in the fragmentation.

The third chapter, "Against Revelation," considers Simmons's photographic practice. Simmons's strategy of undesirability is opacity, a potent form of refusal. Simmons disrupts the inherent knowability that photography dubiously proffers to its audience. Using her own body in her photographs, she does not consider them self-portraits; and this fact, along with references to blackface, unidentified landscapes, and obscured historical scenarios, keep viewers from readily identifying subjects. Such elements engendering opacity are apparent in *One Day and Back Then (Seated)* (2007; Fig. 1), where the artist sits primly in a wicker chair situated in a field. Her face and nude body are covered in the black-

face paint and she wears an afro. Black female identity is always presumed to be transparent and knowable. Simmons's photographs deny the viewer this assumed knowability. Barber states that "by privileging surface and superficiality—indeed opacity—Simmons likewise raises ethical questions about the ends of representation, particularly for Black female subjects who continue to endure unique and violent forms of physiognomic scrutiny and subjugation that undermine the matter and mattering of Black lives" (173). Simmons's refusal through opacity is an ethical response to the current political moment.

"Masks, Mayhem, and Kink," the final chapter of *Undesirability*, is about performance artist Narcissister (whose image graces the cover), and this section brings together all the strategies of undesirability previously discussed: bottoming, incoherence, and opacity. Narcissister bottoms in her self-sex performances using her anus. These performances utilize masks and merkins

that conceal her identity, and her strategies of undesirability culminate in her use of sexual kink in her risqué performances. Furthermore, Barber maintains: "Narcissister, however, burlesques her own mixed-race heritage as a site of undesirability where self-objectification functions as the limit of intersectional feminism and multiracial promise" (188). Narcissister's performances do not promise sexual empowerment or racial unification; instead, they revel in abjection, often refusing to climax from the sexual act.

As part of the Minoritarian Aesthetics series at New York University Press, *Undesirability and Her Sisters* makes a significant contribution to our understanding of Black women's art as well as Black women in art. In a critical landscape that strives for reparation and reconciliation, Barber challenges the paradigm that art has the capacity to do either. Barber's critical refusal of positive readings of Black women's art, that is clearly not meant to be so, opens up

new and more ethical terrain for understanding Black women's art in the age of intersectionality. As one of undesirability's sisters, the Black woman in Price's *Beyond the Stars* animated, for me, the issues at play in Barber's book. In a racist, misogynistic world, too much pressure is placed on images of Black women to heal those societal lapses. When we free art from such burdens, we will see it anew. •

Elizabeth Carmel Hamilton is an art historian and HBCU professor with a focus on African American art, feminism, and Afrofuturism. Her first book, *Charting the Afrofuturist Imaginary in African American Art* (Routledge, 2023), won the Wyeth Foundation for American Art Publication Grant. She is currently writing her second book, *Figuring It Out: Black Womanhood through the Figurative in the Oeuvre of Alison Saar*, which received funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS).

Jacqueline Lamba: The Forgotten Surrealist

By Salomon Grimbarg

'This landmark biography is essential reading for everyone interested in Surrealism'

Katharine Conley,
International Journal of Surrealism

This new biography repositions Jacqueline Lamba as one of the pioneers and finest exponents of Surrealist painting.

Jacqueline Lamba (1910-93) defied categorization. She is remembered only as the wife of André Breton, French poet, founder of Surrealism, but she was not just his spouse, she was a painter in her own right. This long overdue reevaluation of her life and contribution to Surrealism has brought her out of the shadow into her rightful place.

Published on April 7th, 2026
\$38.00, hardcover, 224 pages, 40 illustrations
ISBN: 9781858947266

MERRELL
LONDON • NEW YORK
merrellpublishers.com



Charting the Afrofuturist Imaginary in African American Art: The Black Female Fantastic

By Elizabeth Carmel Hamilton
Routledge, 2023

Reviewed by Sarah Richter

In one of her latest contributions to the field, Elizabeth Carmel Hamilton offers a significant and overdue reorientation of Afrofuturism within art history. Moving decisively away from the field's long-standing emphasis on music—particularly the canonical figure of jazz composer Sun Ra—Hamilton reframes Afrofuturism as a visual and theoretical practice deeply shaped by Black women artists. Rather than beginning with narratives of cosmic escape or technologically driven futurity, Hamilton opens her study with American painter Alma Thomas (1891–1978), whose radiant abstractions articulate an Afrofuturist sensibility grounded in presence, transformation, and joy. This opening gesture signals the book's broader intervention: Afrofuturism, Hamilton argues, has always existed within African American visual culture, but its aesthetic and intellectual contributions by Black women have been persistently overlooked.

Hamilton's monograph is the first sustained study to center Afrofuturist aesthetics and visual language within African American art history. She challenges the assumption that Afrofuturism's origins are primarily sonic or literary, contending instead that it must be understood as a visual language defined by "futurity, fantasy, and technology" (3). By shifting attention to visual art, Hamilton expands the movement's scope while also complicating its temporal logic. Afrofuturism, in her account, is not only about speculative futures or escape from the present, but about ongoing negotiations of freedom across the past, present, and future. This expanded framework allows Hamilton to foreground Black women artists whose practices operate within, against, and beyond linear historical time.

Central to Hamilton's theoretical contribution is her articulation of the Black

Female Fantastic. More than an aesthetic category, the Black Female Fantastic functions as a critical framework that enables Black women artists to resist, rework, and transcend racialized histories of representation. Through fantasy and futurity, these artists reclaim agency over embodiment, time, and self-definition. Hamilton situates the Black Female Fantastic in direct opposition to the visual legacies of scientific racism and objectification, particularly the nineteenth-century Zealy daguerreotypes (a series of photographs stamped with the moniker Zealy, the photographer, intended to illustrate "polygenesis"). At the same time, she challenges the persistence of reductive stereotypes—such as the mammy, the jezebel, or the "strong Black woman"—that continue to shape cultural perceptions of Black womanhood. In Hamilton's formulation, fantasy becomes a mode of autonomy rather than escapism, a strategy through which Black women artists imagine themselves otherwise.

Hamilton's first chapter, "Harriet Tubman(s) (afro)Future," positions the Black activist and former slave Tubman as a "dynamic symbol of the future" (26). Tubman emerges not simply as a historical figure but as an Afrofuturist icon whose life was devoted to imagining and enacting freedom beyond the confines of enslavement. For Hamilton, Tubman exemplifies the Black Female Fantastic: she is both real and speculative, historical and futuristic. Tubman's insistence on bodily autonomy and collective liberation challenges male-centered Afrofuturist narratives, offering a powerful feminist counterpoint to figures like Sun Ra. As Hamilton argues, Tubman enables the articulation of "imaginative Black female identities" (43) and reframes American history by situating Black womanhood within contemporary discourses of heroism and futurity.

These ideas are made visually concrete through the bronze sculpture *Swing Low, Harriet Tubman* (2007) by Alison Saar (b. 1956). Hamilton's reading of the work—Tubman's body merges with a locomotive—is particularly compelling: Tubman is rendered as

a female cyborg, her body transformed into the very engine of liberation. By fusing Tubman with the technology of the train, Saar disrupts entrenched narratives that position Black female labor as serving capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy. Instead, Tubman becomes the force that dismantles these systems from within. As Hamilton notes, the sculpture "subverts the image of a laboring enslaved body" (35), reframing labor as insurgent and emancipatory.

Chapter two, "Narratives of Fugitivity: Black Feminist Futures in Art History," expands Tubman's legacy by tracing its influence through Thomas and the output of science fiction writer Octavia E. Butler, and into the work of the southern quilter and farmer Harriet Powers (1837–1910), an emancipated slave born in Georgia. Here, Hamilton introduces fugitivity as a key conceptual tool, defining it not only as escape from slavery but as the "mundane, innocuous, and quotidian practices of refusing slavery, and more broadly, white supremacy" (51). This expanded understanding allows Hamilton to read Powers's quilts and Thomas's space paintings as fugitive performances—quiet yet radical acts of imagining futures beyond oppression. Although Powers lived long before space exploration, Hamilton argues that the stars embedded in her quilts, especially her most well-known *Bible Quilt* (1885–86; Fig. 1), signal a speculative reach toward other worlds (59). These gestures, though subtle, represent profound refusals of the limitations imposed by racialized and geographic confinement.

Hamilton further links Powers and Thomas through shared regional histories, noting that both artists were Georgia natives whose lives—though separated by decades—reflect parallel negotiations of Black womanhood in the South. Their work, she argues, demands interpretation beyond the archive, as their artistic visions exceed what historical documentation alone can capture. Thomas's space paintings from 1968 to 1972, created during the Apollo missions, become especially significant in this regard. Born in what she described as "horse-and-buggy times," Thomas translated the technological transforma-

tions of her lifetime into vibrant compositions rooted in color and optimism. Painting “with the astronauts” (62), Thomas transformed grainy NASA imagery into a visual language of fugitivity and joy, insisting on beauty as a radical counter to dehumanization.

In chapter three, “The Mammy as (Anti)Heroine,” Hamilton confronts one of the most enduring and damaging stereotypes in American visual culture. The Mammy—most familiarly embodied by the now-defunct Aunt Jemima figure—is identified as a product of “the white imagination of and desire for faithful Black servitude” (77). Hamilton examines this figure’s contemporary reconfigurations by sculptor Betye Saar (b. 1926) and photographer Renée Cox (b. 1960), arguing that both artists emancipate the mammy from her role as the acquiescent, happy slave. Through exaggeration, confrontation, and satire, Saar and Cox transform the mammy into an anti-heroine of the Black Female Fantastic—one who exposes the ideological violence embedded in the stereotype while reclaiming futurity.

Hamilton places these works in dialogue with *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby* (2014) by Kara Walker (b. 1969), situating the colossal public art project as an immersive encounter with the material and symbolic legacies of racialized labor. When installed in the now-defunct Domino Sugar Factory, in Brooklyn, NY, *A Subtlety* enveloped viewers in the afterlives of slavery and industrial exploitation. While Saar famously critiqued the work for reproducing grotesque stereotypes, judgement typically lodged at Walker’s black paper cutout silhouettes, Hamilton’s juxtaposition of Saar, Cox, and Walker underscores how each artist mobilizes antebellum imagery to confront, rather than perpetuate, its harm on future generations. Together, their works render the persistence of these stereotypes impossible to ignore (90), while also imagining pathways beyond them.

The final chapter, “The Alchemy of Hair,” turns to Black women’s hair as a site of intense social, political, and racial overdetermination. Hamilton describes hair as a “problem” precisely because of

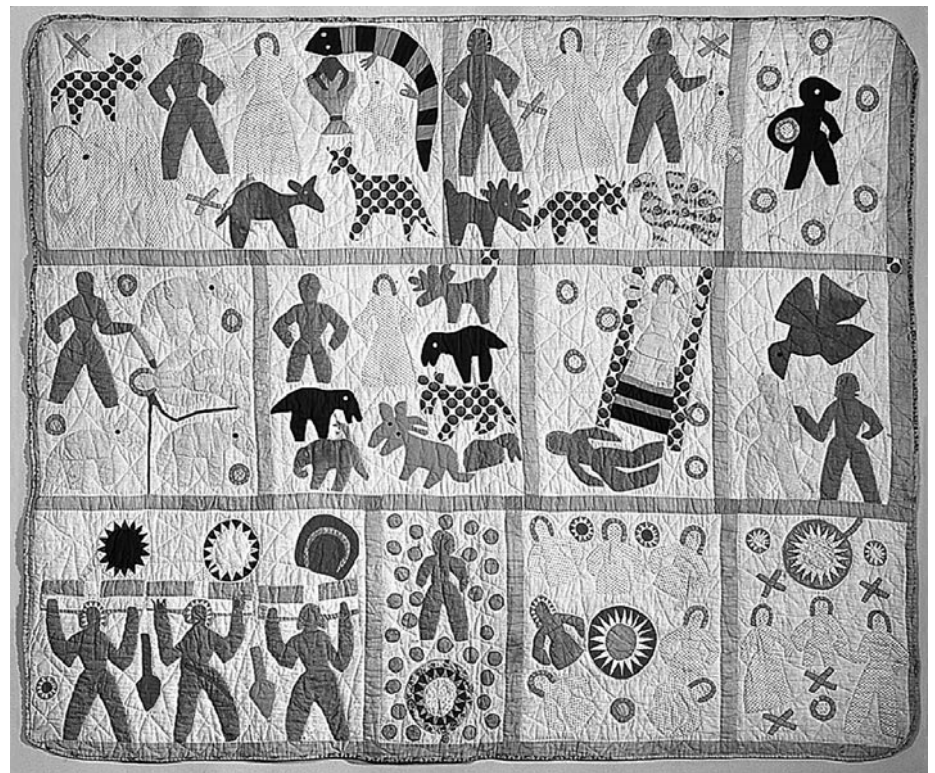


Fig. 1. Harriet Powers, *Bible Quilt* (1885–86). Courtesy of the Division of Cultural and Community Life, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

the meanings imposed upon it by racial ideologies (108). By invoking alchemy, however, she emphasizes transformation rather than assimilation. Through the work of such multidisciplinary artists as Ellen Gallagher (b. 1965) and Sonya Clark (b. 1967), Robert Pruitt, and self-portraitist Mequitta Ahuja (b. 1976), hair becomes a material through which the Black Female Fantastic takes visual form. No longer subject to external scrutiny, the Black female body emerges as self-authored and speculative—freed from the “whims of white supremacy and misogyny” (142).

Charting the Afrofuturist Imaginary in African American Art is a rigorous, generous, and deeply generative intervention. Hamilton not only expands Afrofuturism’s visual archive but fundamentally reshapes its theoretical terrain by centering Black women’s aesthetic practices, lived experiences, and speculative visions. Her concept of the Black Female Fantastic offers scholars and artists alike a powerful framework for thinking across history, embodiment, and

imagination. Written with clarity and care, this book will be indispensable to art historians, Black studies scholars, and general readers invested in Afrofuturism as a feminist, visual, and world-making practice. •

Sarah Richter is an art history lecturer at the University of Vermont. Her teaching and research focus on art of the African diaspora, photography, and performance in the Global South. She is particularly interested in questions of race, gender, power, and historical memory, and how artists use visual practices to challenge dominant narratives. Richter is deeply committed to inclusive, student-centered pedagogy, and designs courses that emphasize experiential learning, collaborative inquiry, and public-facing student work that connects art history to broader social and cultural contexts.

Gail Rebhan: About Time

By Sally Stein
MACK, 2023

Reviewed by Sally Jane Brown

Sally Stein opens her catalogue to the retrospective exhibition of DC-based artist and photographer Gail Rebhan (b. 1953) by stating, “I purposefully don’t speak of the ‘arc’ of Rebhan’s work because I’ve long sensed something more multi-faceted and full of pivots in her observational stance” (6). She identifies two primary realms in which Rebhan operates: “The micro world of family relations or the macro world of urban interactions....” (6). From this, one might anticipate a thematic organization, yet while the book does group works and texts into series, its structure is ultimately chronological. Still, despite Stein’s reluctance to define an “arc,” Rebhan’s practice does form one, not in a linear or evaluative sense, but through a return to self-portraiture. Beginning and ending with the self, with decades of outward focus between, her trajectory feels deeply authentic and quietly affirming of a woman artist’s sustained and reflective gaze.

The retrospective, curated by Stein, took place at the American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center (2023), and then travelled to the University of California Riverside, California Museum of Photography (2025). Stein’s resulting catalogue raisonné stands as a luminous testament to an artist whose work remains raw, grounded, and profoundly resonant; a lasting reflection of women’s lived experiences. Stein’s prose is accessible yet nuanced, offering just enough context to illuminate without overwhelming or detracting from the photographs themselves. The selected works beautifully complement her commentary and are presented elegantly against the clean white pages. If the book has a shortcoming, it is practical: the dark brown background beneath the black text in the essays makes reading difficult for anyone without perfect eyesight, and the absence of page numbers further complicates navigation, an unexpected challenge for scholars who may wish to

cite or closely track Stein’s insights.

Nonetheless, Stein adroitly contextualizes Rebhan’s work within the broader history of photography while striking a thoughtful balance with feminist art and the feminist movements unfolding around her. She presents Rebhan as an exceptional artist in both arenas, highlighting how much of Rebhan’s work emerges from her own (female) perspective. By documenting her life with care and insight, Rebhan preserves these experiences while challenging the persistent underrepresentation of women, as well as other marginalized groups, in museums and historical narratives. This book accomplishes both with clarity and conviction.

Stein begins by tracing Rebhan’s early life, from growing up in Chicago, to attending a private school in Geneva, then returning to Washington, DC, all while becoming politically aware under the influence of her activist father. During her time at the “freewheeling radical” (8) Antioch College, Rebhan was inspired by a video professor and ultimately graduated with a degree in communications. Stein devotes particular attention to Rebhan’s 1973 self-portrait, which, along with her “early hippie style” (8), was paired with a clipping from *Ms.* magazine featuring a painting of four older women. Rebhan could not recall any specific significance, so Stein researched the piece in the library, discovering only the artist’s name, Susan Brenner (b. 1950), and little else. Yet she examines the portrait in depth, linking it to the feminist movement of the era: “In this fledgling self-presentation, she directly affiliated herself with a lineage of unfamous but self-possessed females who knew they hailed from a long line of women who gave each other strength to persevere....” (9). These kinds of feminist insights throughout the book are thoughtful and illuminating.

Stein’s methodology is convincing precisely because it draws upon her deep command of both photographic history and feminist visual culture. She brings a rare ability to contextualize Rebhan’s early gestures within broader debates about women’s self-representation, while also attending to the small archival details that other

scholars might overlook. Her research sharpens the stakes of these formative works, showing how even a seemingly modest student portrait participates in far larger cultural conversations. Together, Stein’s scholarly rigor and attentiveness to feminist discourse serve to enrich readers’ understanding of Rebhan’s early works and prepare them for the book’s broader, section-by-section exploration of the artist’s growing practice.

The first section concludes by detailing Rebhan’s return to school for a master’s in photography at CalArts—studying after *Womanhouse* (1972) but still among faculty with strong feminist interests—and her first series capturing the home of her new husband’s mother along with other domestic interiors. While those around her dismissed the photographs as “un-hip or downright tacky” (10), Stein frames them as a crucial point of departure for Rebhan. Through this work, and as a new mother, she began to explore photography “as both an intimate and worldly medium of temporary arrest, to explore further the still image’s complex relation to all that would not stay quietly, obediently fixed” (10), such as a child. The images anticipate environmental photography in their acute attention to place, materiality, and the politics of domestic space, perhaps an early acuity that makes the work even more compelling.

Rebhan’s series focused on the everyday life of herself, her husband, her mother-in-law, and her new son, often capturing sequences or repeated views of the same scene. Stein insightfully frames these images as “more subversive of prevailing sex and gender roles” than Robert Mapplethorpe, even without nudity, while simultaneously “banal and unrelieved by serendipity” (41). She further elaborates on Rebhan’s “dispassionate, philosophical feminism” (42) by highlighting her documentation of “the endless cycles of domestic work” (44). Most of Stein’s comparisons, however, are drawn to male artists. Although she mentions Dorothea Lange (1895–1965) in her notes at the section’s end, and later Frances Benjamin Johnston (1864–1952), additional comparisons to the photos of Julia Margaret Cameron



Fig. 1. Gail Rebhan, selections from the series *Living* (2022), archival pigment print. Courtesy of the artist and MACK.

(1815–1879) and Imogen Cunningham (1883–1976), who also photographed family and domestic interiors, and some over time, would be valuable.

In the next section, which examines Rebhan's pregnancy and infant series, Stein situates the work alongside Susan Heller's (b. 1956) *10 Months* (of which Rebhan was, admittedly, unaware, a tellingly common occurrence for women in art), and other pregnancy-focused photographic projects. Stein emphasizes Rebhan's distinctive approach: a refusal of erotica, the absence of nudity, and a modest, unassuming style, largely captured via *280 Days*, daily pregnant self-portraits in a mirror using a tripod, camera, and flash, many of which were taken from the vantage point of her home closet. Stein vividly conveys this busy period in Rebhan's life as mother, professor, and household participant, noting a temporary dip in her photographic output. Yet Rebhan engaged with feminist research at the time, particularly "revisionist texts on mothering" (59) and Mary Kelly's (b. 1941) *Post-Partum Document*, which likely influenced her later text-based works. The section concludes with Rebhan's

Large Infant Heads series, intimate, blown-up images of crying babies that leave viewers with little respite. Stein captures the unsettling humor of critical responses, such as one offered in a review in *The Baltimore Sun*: "[They are] the opposite of endearing ... but rather ugly, frightening, knowing, even also malevolent in super closeups" (60).

The dualities of motherhood are also central to Rebhan's *Mother-Son* series, where she combines text and collage to capture moments that, though entirely natural between mother and young son, are potentially embarrassing and socially awkward when revealed to the viewer. Stein thoroughly examines the series' engagement with issues such as discrimination and other social topics while also addressing its formal qualities, stating that, "Text is spare yet with an engaging flow, and there's plenty of space around the illustrations so that both text and image may be studied independently and in easy tandem" (74). While she stops short of explicitly connecting the rawness of the imagery to its content, Stein does note that during this period, Rebhan "reclaimed her voice" (75).

If the motherhood series offers little respite, Rebhan's *A Daughter's Report on a Father's Aging* offers none at all. The work is suffused with her care for her aging and ailing father, created shortly after the passing of her mother, whose final days she also documented. Both projects, as Stein notes, evoke a "community of caregivers" (89). While Stein opens with DC-area artist and art professor Ann Stoddard's glowing assessment of the *Aging* series, praising how it "reframes the ... female caregiver-victim as a powerful subject, the photographer-daughter...." (88), what unfolds is a deeply human, often heartbreaking chronicle of her father's decline. As Stein emphasizes, he was a vibrant activist and notable international labor leader. Rebhan incorporated text alongside collaged objects from her father's care, including calendar markings that document his lost abilities.

In the series *Can't* (2003–6) she lists mundane activities her father can no longer perform, concluding starkly and with finality in a late image, "My 85-year-old father can't." Somber images of upraised toilets, diapers, and mattress liners underscore the daily difficulties of

caregiving, prompting Stein to observe, “The indignities outweigh any brush with dignitaries....” (91). A particularly provocative question posed to readers asks how the father might react: “Would he proudly commend his daughter for extending labor concerns to ... unpaid family work? Or would he ... remark that this is what every daughter has always been expected to do as a labor of love, and that second-wave feminism has no business challenging that age-old tradition?” (91). Stein implicitly raises broader questions about legacy and historical narrative: Does this series challenge patriarchal histories that omit invisible labor, or does it simply document it? Rebhan seems to present the complexity, leaving it for viewers to navigate.

Rebhan’s next series offered a welcome reprieve from the serious topic of infirmity and age to focus on photographs taken in her son’s room during his summer visit from college. With minimal text and no attempt at tidiness, the images capture piles of objects: squirt gun, tennis ball, skateboard, remote control, laptop, pizza box, baseball mitt, and an unpaired flip-flop. While helping Rebhan “restore her comic sensibilities,” the series also amplified both the realities of everyday life and broader reflections on consumption and artistry in the mundane. The final image of the section, *Cords* (2015), presents a grid of electrical cords she found in his room, neatly tied and organized, satisfying her “impulse to clean up” (98). Only an artist could render such ordinariness so visually compelling.

More recently, Rebhan extends her gaze beyond the domestic sphere to her neighborhood and land rights, which Stein documents as “a history that is decidedly unsentimental” (112). Stein, however, does not fully articulate how this work diverges from her earlier domestic-focused series or what prompted the shift. Here, Rebhan employs “rephotography,” a technique that superimposes historical photographs onto contemporary scenes, highlighting gentrification. Beyond documenting change, the series conveys “no definitive authorial message,” as

Stein notes, though she helpfully situates Rebhan’s approach alongside the photomontages of Barbara Kruger (b. 1945) while noting that Rebhan lacks Kruger’s “punchy verbal condensation” (114). Returning to her roots as a first-generation American with immigrant parents, Rebhan also interweaves personal memories with clippings and photographs of sites, connecting back to themes explored in her work on her father. Stein provides rich historical context but offers little analysis of the aesthetics. In *Political Act* (2021), for example, Rebhan presents five newspaper clippings about a public pool and its integration. Her accompanying text recounts an incident from when she was ten. Her father had taken her and a friend’s daughter, a child of color, to a public pool and, she recalled, “Nobody bothered them. I didn’t realize it was a political act until about 55 years later” (123). The background is notably abstract, a blue watercolor with a white form that might suggest a swimsuit, alongside a small clipping of a girl lying in a swimsuit and cap. Again, Stein does not comment on the aesthetics, though the background here seems to compete visually with—and perhaps even elevate—the clippings and text, a curious inversion worth noting.

This section’s overtly political work reflects Rebhan’s broader family memories and upbringing, including attending a speech by Martin Luther King, Jr., and her response to the recent removal of an African American cemetery. Stein aptly observes this as “quite a pivot for Rebhan, who long maintained a stance of neutrality in her work” (130), highlighting a significant shift in both tone and engagement. Similarly, the final section focuses on Rebhan’s *Living* series (2022; Fig. 1), a title that feels on point. Here, Rebhan shifts from observer to observed, presenting enlarged depictions of parts of her body against stark black backgrounds, a visual impact that resonates both in person and on the page. Stein offers engaging context on the history of self-portraiture, noting that in Marxist sociology “photography was needed to satisfy the sense of self-worth of the rising bourgeois class with

a corresponding demand for mass portraiture” (136). After the nineteenth-century portraits, which often served as tools for social promotion, Stein situates Rebhan within a lineage of provocative female self-presentations, citing artists such as Hannah Wilke (1940–1993), Lynda Benglis (b. 1941), and Adrian Piper (b. 1948), though notable figures like Anne Brigman (1869–1950) and Francesca Woodman (1958–1981) are unfortunately omitted.

Stein provides a lively account of Rebhan’s unflinching aesthetics: raking light that refuses to soften the traces of time on her skin, and the now notable absence of text, leaving the images to speak for themselves. She imagines these portraits framed in terms of opprobrium, yet their unsentimental force asserts, in Stein’s words, that “she is still here, very much so, and capable of holding her ground against rote dismissals” (138). The book closes with a striking self-portrait of the artist’s back and head, her hair streaked with gray—“She insists on being noticed,” Stein observes (138). This image powerfully bookends Rebhan’s decades-long journey: from the tentative self-acceptance of her earlier self-portrait in college, through the assertion of independence shaped by the feminist movement, to this present moment of quiet, resolute presence. Notably, the final series echoes the early work—sans clothes, never fully exposed—creating the sense that Rebhan is turning back to herself, reflecting with honesty and grace. It is a tender, resonant conclusion, both an intimate self-acknowledgment and a testament to a lifetime of artistic inquiry. •

Sally Jane Brown is an artist, writer, and curator. With a passion for women and feminist artists, her writing is published in *W&J* and *Panorama*, among other publications. Her art is in public and private collections, and included in exhibitions in the US. She curates independently and for West Virginia University Libraries.

Diana Al-Hadid: unbecoming

Edited by Rachel Winter and Molly Taylor
Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at
Michigan State University/
Kasmin Books, 2025

Reviewed by Şeyma Müge Iba

Diana Al-Hadid's distinct artistic profile emerges in the comprehensive mid-career survey and exhibition catalogue produced by the Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University. In *unbecoming*, essays by Rachel Winter and Cassie Packard, an extended interview with the artist, and extensive visual documentation construct a multilayered intellectual framework through which Al-Hadid's work is presented and contextualized. Bringing together more than two decades of sculptural production, from 2006 through 2025, the catalogue maps the artist's practice through selected bodies of work, emphasizing material experimentation, architectural fragmentation, and process-based making.

Within this framework of "becoming and unbecoming at critical life junctures," (13) Al-Hadid comes into view as a sculptor whose work resists resolution, privileges instability over completion, and consistently engages historical and architectural forms through acts of erosion, inversion, and dissolution. Rather than foregrounding biographical narratives or fixed identities, *unbecoming* frames the artist primarily through her methods of making—accretion, trace, impermanence—and through recurring visual and iconographic motifs drawn from sacred imagery, mythology, and architectural history. As Al-Hadid recalled her early motivations after graduating with her MFA in sculpture from the Virginia Commonwealth University in 2005: "I didn't want to make things.... I wanted to make places. I wanted to make whole environments" (76).

Born in Syria and raised in the United States, Al-Hadid has developed a sculptural language that engages architecture, the body, and historical imagery through sustained processes of transformation, elements largely approached as formal and symbolic strategies with



Fig. 1. Diana Al-Hadid, *Spun of the Limits of My Lonely Waltz* (2006), wood, polystyrene, plaster, fiberglass, and pigment. Courtesy of the artist.

room for continued analysis through deeper existential or ontological inquiry. While *unbecoming* succeeds in articulating the coherence and breadth of Al-Hadid's practice, it remains comparatively cautious in probing the underlying impulses that drive her persistent return to fragmentation, disintegration, and states of perpetual becoming. In her introductory essay, divided into sections of "becoming," that is, motherhood, subservience, and purity, versus "unbecoming," taking up space, unavailability, anger, and aspiration, respectively, Winter creates signposts for scaffolding Al-Hadid's practice, the negative "un" paired subversively with the "processual" state of "becoming's" completion to emphasize the metaphorical importance of "undoing" and unexpected transformation for growth as well as for questions of gender and femininity (17).

Al-Hadid's *Spun of the Limits of My Lonely Waltz* (2006; Fig. 1) is one of the key works framing this concept of *unbecoming*, positioned as the artist's earliest extant sculpture that functions

as a form of self-portrait within Al-Hadid's practice (*August, after the Seventh Month*, of 2025, is conceived as the show's bookend, also a self-portrait) (13). According to Winter, the work emerged from a bodily process that began with the artist dancing a waltz alone and barefoot in her studio (the exposure of one's soles a disrespectful act in the Arab World, as Packard notes [79]); the footprints left on the floor formed the ground plan of a simulated Gothic cathedral. These traces exceed the status of residual bodily movement; they become foundational elements structuring both the formal and conceptual dimensions of the sculpture. The structure was subsequently burned and inverted, a gesture that deliberately destabilizes the historical claims of solidity, transcendence, and sanctity traditionally associated with Gothic architecture.

Winter interprets this act of inversion not merely as a formal intervention but as a productive strategy of unbecoming. She argues that *Spun* makes visible the

dual character of Gothic architecture as both “magnificent” and “monstrous,” a concept taken from Sheila Heti’s reflections on motherhood, holding tensions of power, vulnerability, and gender within a single structure (14–16). In this reading, the cathedral ceases to function as a transcendent site of faith and instead becomes a bodily metaphor that carries inner conflict, solitude, and the capacity for transformation. Rather than representing a completed form, the structure operates as the material residue of an identity in the process of dissolution.

The material production of the work is examined in detail. Composed of pigmented polymer gypsum and characterized by dripping, suspended surfaces, the piece emerged through an additive process. This material choice is linked both to the capacity to mimic architectural forms and to a deliberate desire to translate historical structures in a consciously imperfect manner. Through this approach, Al-Hadid repositions architecture as a temporary field that bears the traces of time, memory, and the body rather than fixity. The artist’s assertion in her interview with Winter, that “a line can be many things”—a trace, a boundary, or a remnant eroded by time—forms the conceptual basis of her sculptural process (8–9). Although the catalogue does not explicitly invoke Jacques Derrida’s concept of deconstruction for *Spun of the Limits of My Lonely Waltz*, it opens up another interpretative reading for engaging his theoretical proposal, advanced here through the suspension of Gothic architecture’s claims to wholeness, origin, and presence via acts of burning, inversion, and fragmentation.

Cassie Packard’s essay, “Various Possible Histories,” interprets the bodily act of Al-Hadid’s dancing in her studio as an archaic mode of inscription, recalling the marks left by ancestral figures on cave walls and the “geologic formations the artist traversed as a child” (79). The footprints function as witnesses to both movement and the ritual dimension of creation. As the process unfolds, the artist’s body undergoes a transformation, drawing associations from a collective reservoir of memory and collapsing

past and present onto the same plane. Packard situates this corporeal inscription within a historical framework by referencing the Beauchamp–Feuillet dance notation system developed by Pierre Beauchamp, published in 1700 (79). This system translates bodily gesture into spatial notation, viewed from above, privileging trace over movement. Similarly, the footprints formed on Al-Hadid’s studio floor function as a form of corporeal writing, transforming transient motion into architectural structure. In this context, the “waltz” is neither a representational device nor a metaphor, but a direct bodily action—an embodied gesture that bears witness to the process itself.

While not observed in the catalogue, this footprint-based process may also be read in relation to the Surinam-born Dutch artist Stanley Brouwn’s *Pedestrian Footsteps on Paper* (1960), a conceptual work that recorded footprints of pedestrians on the pavements of Amsterdam. As in Brouwn’s work, also curious about line, bodily movement becomes a system of measurement, testimony, and record, rendering process more determinative than final form. In Al-Hadid’s practice, however, these traces do not resolve into conceptual Minimalism but evolve into a sculptural language densely charged with architectural, historical, and corporeal associations.

Al-Hadid’s installation *Smoke Screen* (2015) is positioned as one of her most immersive works at thirty-foot long, a threshold space composed of suspended elements, dripping surfaces, and fibrous façades. Both Winter and Packard emphasize that the sculpture operates not as a discrete architectural object but as a permeable environment that absorbs the viewer’s movement and bodily presence. The viewer encounters and activates *Smoke Screen* by circulating around and through it, witnessing the dissolution of space both physically and conceptually. While the visual delicacy of these elements suggests fragility, the unexpected solidity of the materials deliberately disrupts this perception. As its title implies, the installation functions as a smokescreen that both conceals and deceives: form, ornament,

and narrative remain unstable and in continuous transformation. Winter reads this instability as a conscious refusal of completed form within the logic of unbecoming (25). Packard approaches *Smoke Screen* through its historical and cultural references, identifying botanical and calligraphic motifs that recall ornamental traditions in Islamic art and architecture (79). By detaching these motifs from architectural surfaces and allowing them to hang freely in space, Al-Hadid challenges reductive Western readings of ornament. Packard underscores the artist’s assertion that such readings often constitute an attack on her cultural heritage.

Beyond the catalogue’s scope, *Smoke Screen* may also be read through the metaphor of the cave. When considered alongside Plato’s cave allegory and Jean Baudrillard’s postmodern notion of simulation, a collapsing between reality and representation, the installation emerges as a space in which perception, illusion, and inner truth are staged simultaneously. The cave is no longer a place of refuge but an active site of consciousness, where reality is continuously negotiated.

Unbecoming offers a strong academic framework through which Al-Hadid’s work is examined, concentrating on defining the contours of the artist’s production and artistic identity and rigorously supported by close readings of individual works. When Al-Hadid’s early experiences of migration, displacement, and fractured belonging are taken into account, a deconstructive approach may also offer a particularly productive critical lens through which to understand her sustained resistance to stable form and closure, opening a space for a perspective precisely through what it leaves unsaid. Similarly, the maternal archetype, sacred body imagery, and mythological narratives emerge as recurring themes throughout the publication; however, these elements are primarily addressed through a Western art-historical and iconographic framework. Considering Al-Hadid’s upbringing within a Middle Eastern family structure—where female figures, particularly mothers and

grandmothers, often occupy a central and formative role—it becomes evident that the model of womanhood informing her practice diverges significantly from familiar Western representations of it. This multilayered, authoritative, and complex feminine presence constitutes a crucial backdrop for Al-Hadid's sustained engagement with sacred bodies, fertility, and corporeal dissolution. By deliberately

leaving these interpretive pathways open, *unbecoming* heralds a critical field by which relationships among artist, artwork, and viewer remain dynamic, indeterminate, and generative. •

Şeyma Müge Iba is a sculptor and associate professor in the Department of Sculpture, Faculty of Fine Arts, Selçuk University. Her practice involves working with diverse materials such as

clay, plaster, wood, polyester, ceramic, and metal. The thematic framework of her sculpture centers on archetypes, rituals, mythological figures, artistic creation processes, and formal analysis. In addition to her sculptural work, she produces digital drawings and conducts theoretical research exploring the intersections between contemporary sculpture, photo-manipulation, digital form, and the collective unconscious.

Samia Halaby: Centers of Energy

Edited by Elliot Josephine Leila Reichert and Rachel Winter with contributions by Samia Halaby, David A. Brenneeman, and Steven L. Bridges, Elliot Josephine Leila Reichert, and Rachel Winter. Hirmer Verlag, 2023

Reviewed by Roja Najafi

Samia Halaby's (b. 1936) work operates and occupies a distinctive space within contemporary abstraction; a space rooted in geometric and organic forms that equally reflect natural processes and principles of motion. From the beginning of her career, Halaby has approached painting as a dynamic system, emphasizing growth, transformation, and energy rather than static composition. In the 1980s, she began exploring "kinetic painting," incorporating early computer programming to introduce movement and sound into her practice. For Halaby—who was born in Jerusalem under the British Mandate and immigrated to the United States in 1951—abstraction is not an end in itself but a method for capturing the rhythms and entanglements inherent in the natural world, producing forms that exist in continuous interaction rather than isolation.

Her process is characterized by conscientious, close observation and translation of patterns, whether drawn from the environment, architecture, or geometric systems. She frequently deploys layered forms, shifting perspectives, and subtle variations in color and scale to evoke the flow of energy within a com-

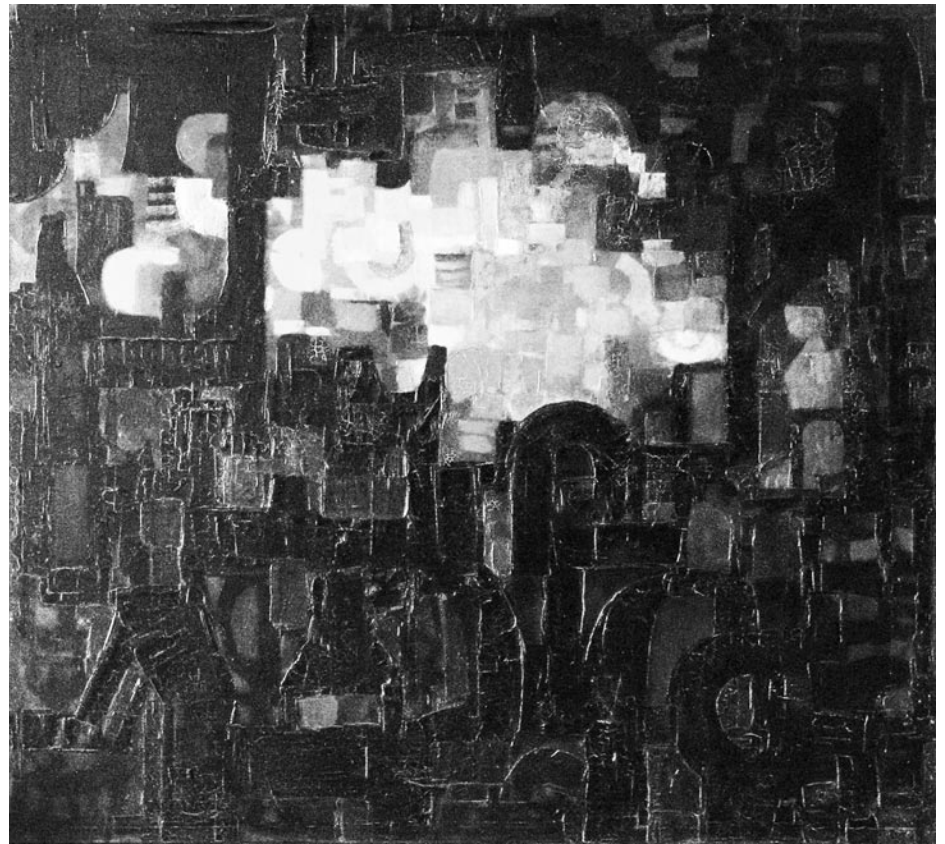


Fig. 1. Samia Halaby, *The City (Al Quds)* (1959), oil on canvas, 39" x 44 1/4". Courtesy of the artist, New York. Photo and © Samia Halaby, New York.

position. In this way, Halaby's paintings are simultaneously analytical and sensorial, balancing precise formal structures with the unpredictability of natural phenomena. Halaby often begins with ordered systems: geometric shapes, repeated patterns, or compositional grids that give her paintings a deliberate structure. Yet she resists rigidity by introducing irregular rhythms, protean, modulating colors and variations that suggest organic growth and change. This tension between order and unpre-

dictability mirrors the way nature itself is patterned but never entirely fixed. Through this approach, her work positions abstraction as a means of inquiry, a way to represent movement, force, and relationships rather than strictly serving as an arrangement of shapes or colors.

The exhibition catalogue, *Samia Halaby: Centers of Energy*, named an outstanding monograph by the Midwest Art History Society, brings together curatorial essays, interviews, artist writings, and visual documentation to

illuminate Halaby's practice across six decades. It opens with a director's foreword and curators' preface that situate the exhibition's themes, followed by a critical essay examining her engagement with abstraction. A conversation with Halaby offers firsthand reflections on place and artistic process, while a significant plates section (some with extended labels) demonstrates the breadth, scale, and scope of her work. The catalogue also features two essays by the artist on digital art and abstract picturing, alongside a detailed biography, timeline, and comprehensive bibliography, providing both scholarly context and intimate insight into her career.

The foreword by directors David A. Brenneman and Steven L. Bridges highlights the collaborative origins of the project, Halaby's first American museum retrospective, between the Eskenazi Museum of Art at Indiana University, Bloomington (IU), and the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University (MSU).¹ They emphasize Halaby's deep personal and professional ties to both institutions and frame her practice as emblematic of their shared commitment to fostering experimentation and dialogue in contemporary art. In doing so, the foreword situates Halaby's work within the institutional missions of these museums—engaging identity, cultural landscapes, and social justice—while also repositioning her as an alumna whose contributions to abstraction and kinetic art have been historically underrecognized. Halaby obtained her MA in art from MSU in 1960, followed by an MFA in painting from IU, in 1963. Their statement underscores the rarity of such an ambitious partnership while acknowledging the artist's active involvement in shaping both the exhibitions and catalogue.

In their preface, Elliot Josephine Leila Reichert, Curator of Contemporary Art at the Eskenazi Museum, and Rachel Winter, Assistant Curator at the Broad Art Museum, further extend this framework by reflecting on their individual encounters with Halaby's art and prolific career and their eventual collaboration at the artist's prompting. Tracing Halaby's practice, from her early abstractions and printmaking to her

large-scale canvases and kinetic digital works, they emphasize her deep connections to *place*, particularly her time in the American Midwest. This preface foregrounds the methodological choices for the exhibition: a chronological and thematic approach that frames Halaby as both a pioneering abstractionist and a socially engaged thinker, and ensures her practice's presentation as a complex synthesis combining her development of aesthetic vision, technological experimentation, and cultural rootedness.

Reichert's essay, "Samia Halaby: Centers of Energy," offers a thorough examination of Halaby's career, tracing her evolution as one of the most dedicated and visionary abstract painters of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Reichert shows how her identity as a Palestinian émigré and her lived experiences of displacement intersect with her relentlessly analytical and experimental studies of abstraction. Halaby's concept of "enriched repetition"—the recursive revisiting and refinement of prior approaches (156)—supports these arguments, demonstrating how her work develops continuity and depth without sacrificing innovation. From her earliest oils on canvas, such as the abstracted landscape of her birthplace, titled *The City (Al Quds)* (1959; Fig. 1), to her later geometric studies of helicoids and helices, diagonal flights, monumental triptychs, and computer-generated images, Reichert emphasizes the technical rigor and formal interplay of color, form, gesture, and political consciousness that defines Halaby's oeuvre. Paintings such as *Black Is Beautiful* (1969) and *Worldwide Intifadah* (1989) exemplify the inseparability of aesthetic and political engagement, linking feminist, anti-racist, and Palestinian solidarity in visually dynamic compositions. *Black Is Beautiful* is an abstract study of the perception of form, creating spatial relationships and tensions through the interplay of luminous purples, pinks, and deep blacks, while simultaneously serving as a tribute to the Black liberation movement in the United States (22); *Worldwide Intifadah*, an ambitious "reimagination" of a world map in curved canvases, was invited to the third Havana Biennial and incorporates

hand-drawn text honoring "the heroism and sacrifices of the revolutionary Palestinian worker" (27). Reichert further details Halaby's sustained interest in motion, time, and perception, showing how her acrylic, papier-mâché, and digital experiments expand the painterly field into three-dimensional and kinetic realms.

Lastly, Reichert situates Halaby within a global narrative of abstraction, emphasizing the intellectual and material sophistication of her late works, including the large *Simultaneous Depth* (2019), a vast composition of interlocking diamonds and squares rendered in layered blue, white, yellow, and red. The painting generates an optical rhythm that continuously shifts between surface and depth. Built from countless short, rectangular strokes, the work invites the viewer's eye to oscillate across luminous planes where color itself becomes the agent of motion and perception. Halaby transforms abstraction into an immersive field of fluctuating spatial energy, achieving a synthesis of precision, vibrancy, and visual dynamism. Reichert convincingly argues that Halaby's practice embodies a holistic philosophy of art and life, combining technical mastery, conceptual depth, and political engagement. For readers of the exhibition catalogue, this piece is a compelling account of an artist whose abstraction continues to challenge, inspire, and redefine contemporary art.

In "On Place: A Conversation with Samia Halaby," Winter documents the painter's reflections on her life, training, and artistic development, highlighting the ways Halaby's experiences of place have shaped her work both physically and conceptually. Winter frames place and space as central to Halaby's practice, emphasizing that the artist's early experiences—in Palestine, Lebanon, and along the Mediterranean coast—cultivated her sensitivity to color, light, and visual expansiveness, which continued to inform her abstract language.² The Midwest's different landscapes and built environments prompted Halaby to reconsider composition, geometry, and texture, while her time in New York introduced

dynamic, lived spaces (urban streets, textures, and atmospheric conditions) that influenced her depictions of motion, growth, and relational dynamics. Early works, such as *House* (1959), reveal her sensitivity to texture and color, gestures that later evolved into a distinctive language propelled by her own mechanics of abstraction.

While her formal training at Michigan State University and Indiana University provided a technical foundation in classical figurative painting, it simultaneously challenged her to navigate systems of abstraction. At MSU, she explored texture, composition, and color in works like *The City (Al Quds)*, and at IU, she developed a personal visual language by pushing against prevailing aesthetics, experimenting with brushwork, gestural mark-making, and structural form. Winter highlights how these formative experiences allowed Halaby to understand abstraction not as a stylistic choice but as a conceptual tool for expressing relationships, movement, and spatial dynamics.

Halaby's teaching experiences in Hawaii, Kansas City, and Michigan further shaped her engagement with penetrating close observation, gesture, and the physicality of materials—evident in works such as *Green Leaf* (1965), bridging realism and abstraction, and geometric studies, such as *In Two Parts* (1967), translating spheres, cubes, and cylinders into complex compositional structures. Winter underscores Halaby's argument that abstraction conveys principles, structures, and temporal-spatial experiences that extend beyond literal representation. Recent works, including *Carrying the Moon* (2015), synthesize decades of exploration in color, form, and place, demonstrating a painterly language that is rigorous, responsive, and deeply rooted in lived experience.

In "My History with Digital Art," one of her two essays for the catalogue, Halaby illuminates the intersections of painting and digital media, revealing how her longstanding practice of abstraction informs her work in kinetic computing. Beginning with her experiments on the Amiga 1000 personal computer in the late 1980s, Halaby describes a meticulous translation of

painterly gesture into digital form. Using Deluxe Paint, she manipulated the mouse and keyboard to apply color and line, recording every movement to observe the rhythms of her creative process. This allowed her to experiment with scale, luminosity, and spontaneity without the physical constraints of oil paint, offering a unique lens into the iterative and wave-like nature of abstraction that she had long cultivated on canvas.

Halaby's methods extend beyond the studio into performance and collaboration. By developing her Kinetic Painting program, she converted the keyboard into a visual instrument capable of generating complex, time-based abstractions in real time. She structured her work around multiple color palettes, timer-driven functions, and interdependent visual elements, producing compositions that are both generative and responsive. Collaborations with musicians, dancers, and other artists shaped her thematic explorations (from her childhood city of Yafa to patterns of natural growth), highlighting how improvisation and structured programming can coexist within the same abstract framework. Her process demonstrates a consistent logic: abstraction is a system of interrelated variables, whether in pigment, gesture, or algorithm.

Throughout her practice, Halaby emphasizes the interplay between materials, tools, and perception. The luminosity of the computer screen inspired her to rethink color on canvas, while digital timing and movement expanded her understanding of rhythm and spatial composition. By documenting both the physical and virtual stages of her work, she bridges oil painting and programming, revealing abstraction as a continuum of experimentation, iteration, and synthesis. Halaby's essay is a testament to the rigorous engagement of material, process, and conceptual inquiry that underlies her practice, offering readers an intimate view into how contemporary abstraction evolves across media.

In her second piece, "Reflecting Reality in Abstract Picturing," Halaby advances a compelling thesis: abstract

painting, often mischaracterized as self-referential, is in fact a visual language that reflects the complexities of social and natural reality. Drawing on her extensive practice and teaching, Halaby frames abstraction as a methodical process of observation, intuition, and recognition. Her creative process operates like a spiral—cycling through delight in seeing, experimentation with forms, critical reflection, and repeated refinement—and produces works that encode patterns of movement, growth, and interaction. Materials, from traditional crayons to oil and acrylic, are not merely vehicles for expression but active participants in this process, shaping the evolution of forms and textures in dialogue with her observations of life, nature, and urban environments.

Halaby's methods of abstract picturing, discussed in her seminal *Leonardo* essay of 1987, "Reflecting Reality in Abstract Picturing," reprinted in the catalogue, emphasize general principles over particular representation.³ By employing cyclical forms, helices, and layered rectilinear shapes, she generates compositions that mirror natural and human systems, from the growth of leaves to the layout of city blocks. *Boston Aquarium* (1973) and *Position Exchange* (1981) reveal how she manipulates color, texture, and light to create illusions of depth, motion, and reflective surfaces, while the relative positioning of shapes conveys rhythm and spatial relationships. In later works, such as *For Niihau from Palestine* (1985–86), Halaby expands the scale of abstraction to encompass entire walls, allowing the viewer's movement to participate in the temporal and spatial unfolding of the work. Through these methods, abstraction becomes a tool not only for aesthetic engagement but for connecting visual experience to broader social realities.

Throughout, Halaby situates her practice within a historical and social framework, linking contemporary abstraction to developments in Suprematism, Constructivism, Cubism, and Futurism. She underscores the capacity of abstract form to reflect changing technologies, environments, and human perception, and to convey

patterns of collective life that extend beyond immediate visual particulars. Her work demonstrates how abstraction can embody cycles, transformations, and relational dynamics, offering a complex and sophisticated means of picturing reality in motion. Halaby's essay emphasizes that the rigor of process, the intentionality of materials, and the structured yet generative methods of abstraction are central to the capacity of painting to register both natural and social phenomena.

Samia Halaby: Centers of Energy offers an expansive and meticulously documented account of an artist whose commitment to abstraction is inseparable from a deep engagement with both the natural world and social experience. The catalogue, alongside the exhibition, demonstrates how Halaby's practice consistently bridges abstraction, technological experimentation, and conceptual

inquiry. Across seven decades, she has shown that abstraction is not merely a formal or visual language but a method of understanding and representing the rhythms, patterns, and energies of life itself. By foregrounding process, materiality, and movement, Halaby's work challenges conventional boundaries between aesthetic and social realms, inviting viewers to witness a dynamic interplay of form, light, and relational structures. Ultimately, *Centers of Energy* stands as a testament to an artist whose visionary approach continues to expand the possibilities of painting in our time. •

Roja Najafi is an art historian, translator, educator, and curator. She received her PhD in art history from the University of Texas at Austin in 2016. Her research, concentrating on the reception of avant-garde and counter-cultural practices in Iran and the US,

explores materiality and evaluates the fluidity between abstraction and figuration in postwar and contemporary studio practices. She currently leads the art history program and serves as a curator at Chandler-Gilbert Community College (CGCC), Arizona.

Notes

1. Due to the highly politicized climate at that time, the exhibition opened only at MSU, titled *Samia Halaby: Eye Witness* (June 29–December 15, 2024).
2. See Rachel Winter, "Placing and Spacing Abstraction: The Life and Work of Samia Halaby," *Woman's Art Journal* 46, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2025): 25–36.
3. Samia Halaby, "Reflecting Reality in Abstract Picturing," *Leonardo* 20, no. 3 (1987): 241–46: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/600498/summary>.

Drawing (in) the Feminine: Bande Dessinée and Women

Edited by Margaret C. Flinn with essays by Armelle Blin-Rolland, Véronique Bragard, Michelle Bumatay, Benoît Crucifix, Isabelle Delorme, Jacques Dürrenmatt, Margaret C. Flinn, Alexandra Gueydan-Turek, Jennifer Howell, Jessica Kohn, Sylvain Lesage, Catriona MacLeod, and Mark McKinney.

The Ohio State University Press, 2024

Reviewed by Natalie J. Swain

A series of papers gathered by comics scholar Margaret C. Flinn, this collection addresses a long underrepresented area in the study of *bande dessinée* (the French and Belgium comic): the historical role of women in the creation of and narratives within the medium. A subcategory of sequential, graphic art (that includes comics, manga, and *manhwa*, among others), as Flinn addresses in her introduction, *bande dessinée* has long been seen as an almost exclusively male (usually white) domain. *Drawing (in) the*

Feminine seeks to fill the large gutter (pun intended) left by this traditional history of the medium through a series of papers that address individual female creators (such as in Benoît Crucifix on Nicole Claveloux and Isabelle Delorme on Catel), historical trends (Jacques Dürrenmatt and Mark McKinney), the role of *bande dessinée* in activism around the world (Jennifer Howell and Alexandra Gueydan-Turek), and other portrayals of women that explore social/political concerns (Catriona MacLeod and Armelle Blin-Rollands). Although the chapters align along these themes, instead Flinn divides the book into three parts ("Industry, Audience, and Platforms"; "Geographies of Identity"; and "Representation and History [Herstories]"). As such, the chapters sometimes feel incongruously placed, and I suggest that there are more intuitive categories that could have been used. Nevertheless, this is a small critique and speaks to the quality of the title overall.

Indeed, the volume integrates its diversity of topics well, brought together particularly through Flinn's introduction. There, Flinn sets the stage

for the subsequent studies, reviewing the history of women in *bande dessinée* and the history of academic studies of *bande dessinée*, both of which have historically omitted or ignored female contributors. Her introduction frames the work well, clearly establishing the necessity of this publication while simultaneously uniting the papers around this theme.

The volume, moreover, is refreshing in the breadth of its scope. While *bande dessinée* are traditionally defined (at least in North America) as "Franco-Belgian comics," the contributions to this volume reveal that it is, in fact, a global medium that thrives throughout many former-French colonies. Indeed, several of the contributions that focus on non-European *bande dessinée* overtly address the medium as a method of postcolonial resistance and empowerment, such as in McKinney's survey of representations of the Dahomey "Amazons," and Michelle Bumatay's discussion of *bande dessinée* written by women belonging to the African diaspora.

Although representing the global diversity of women's appearance in and creation of *bande dessinée*, there is a

notable lack of discussion of the experiences of trans women in the form. Flinn opens her introduction by telling the story of Sophie Labelle (b. 1988), a Québécois woman whose webcomic *Assignée garçon* (Assigned Male) retells her experiences as a trans girl and woman, and which led to her targeting by a campaign of harassment and threats of violence. Yet this is the last time we see the experiences of a woman who was not assigned female at birth represented or discussed. While certainly never overtly excluding trans women from the discussion (as is aptly evidenced by Flinn's inclusion of Labelle's story), there is space throughout for further recognition of the complexity of gender identity and what it is to be a "woman."

Part one ("Industry, Audience, and Platforms") collects chapters that engage with figures in the industry and the relationship between industry/creatives and audiences. This part opens with a chapter from Jessica Kohn in which she expands her existing scholarship on the historical women who worked in *bande dessinée* in the postwar period in Europe (from 1945–68). Here, she draws attention to examples of the medium that are usually omitted from "canon." Specifically attending to the *bande dessinée* aimed at children and girls (in *illustrés*), often published by Catholic presses, Kohn reveals that these publications—which frequently included female creators—are an important part of *bande dessinée* history that should be re-integrated into our accounts.

In chapter two, Sylvain Lesage continues the examination of overlooked contributors to the medium, focusing on the role of colorers. Using the example of contributions by colorer Isabelle Merlet (b. 1967) to *Les grands espaces* (The Great Outdoors) by Catherine Meurisse (b. 1980), Lesage explores the historical legitimization of *bande dessinée* in France that relied on *auteur* theory to centre an often-male creator. As Lesage writes: "The collaborative nature of the colorists' job undermines the mystique of the *auteur* that predominates" (49). She demonstrates that the very path towards legitimacy for *bande dessinée* led to the continued lack of public recognition of

the contributions of colorists (and others) who are—in contrast to the same roles in North American comics—still not recognized in *bande dessinée* festivals and awards.

Benoît Crucifix, in chapter three, turns his attention to the work of a specific creator of *bande dessinée*: Nicole Claveloux (b. 1940). A writer and artist of both *bande dessinée* and children's literature, Crucifix explores the contrast between Claveloux's long-standing reputation in children's literature against the twenty-five years it took for her to gain a widely visible reputation in *bande dessinée*. Crucifix focuses on Claveloux's output in the 1970s in order to explore the development of the *bande dessinée* during this period when creators were increasingly attempting to gain legitimacy for the medium by appealing to adults instead of children. Crucifix suggests that it is through an examination of Claveloux's work that historians can expand our understanding of *bande dessinée* in the 1970s, when the form was doing far more than simple "maturation," instead experimenting with form and intermedial boundaries that would become entrenched by the early 1980s.

The final chapter of part one from Jennifer Howell turns from historical *bande dessinée* to explore the contemporary use of the medium in gender activism in Morocco, specifically *Hshouma: Corps et sexualité au Maroc* by Zainab Fasiki (b. 1994) and *Paroles d'honneur* by Leïla Slimani (b. 1981) and Laetitia Coryn (b. 1984). Studying comics that directly address feminist concerns, such as gender-based violence and gender inequality, Howell examines the ways that female Moroccan artists are using *bande dessinée* to challenge patriarchal oppression within Moroccan society. Emerging as part of an educational comics culture in Morocco, Howell argues that these *bande dessinée* seek to actively engage with youth cultures in Morocco (and throughout the Middle East and North Africa) to create a new language that challenges traditional gender norms in hopes that this will be translated into political and social change.

Part two ("Geographies of Identity") broadly turns to the bodily experiences

of women as represented in *bande dessinée*. The first contribution to this section from Armelle Blin-Rolland explores images from modern comics centered in Brittany that represent both women and the natural world. The most ambitious and theoretical chapter in the volume, Blin-Rolland suggests a new direction for studies of sequential, image-based narratives (like *bande dessinée*), which she calls "ecographics" (119), and explores the representations of environmental humanities in graphic narratives. Bringing together environmental, feminist, and comics theory, she emphasizes (using the locus of Brittany as the spatial focus) the "entanglement" or the "inseparability of the human and the nonhuman" (119), which can be particularly interrogated through sequential graphic narratives (like *bande dessinée*).

The next chapter in part two, chapter six from Michelle Bumatay, turns towards West Africa to examine two female creators originating in the region and their *bande dessinée* series: *Aya de Yopougon* by Marguerite Abouet (b. 1971) and *La vie d'Ebène Duta* by Elyon (b. 1982). Through comparison, Bumatay discusses the way both creators are able to pursue their individual artistic goals and maintain very different public images while supporting other West African comics creators and women. Contrasting Abouet as a writer engaged largely with comics communities in the Global North and Elyon as part of a network of African creators, Bumatay demonstrates that both women actively support and celebrate African women's diversity and community through their work.

Alexandra Gueydan-Turek's following chapter addresses the comics produced by the Lebanese comics collective, Samandal. Similar to Howell's discussion of the works of Zainab Fasiki, Leïla Slimani, and Laetitia Coryn, Gueydan-Turek argues for Samandal as a contributor to comics activism, examining how the sequential form of *bande dessinée* is used by Samandal to examine and challenge issues of gender and sexuality. As a collective, Gueydan-Turek argues, Samandal includes a diverse group of artists from different political, geographical, and linguistic back-

grounds and, as such, contributes to comics activism that questions traditional categories of gender and sexuality in an attempt to inspire political and social change.

In the final chapter of this section, Catriona MacLeod turns to the subject of abortion as represented by female creators in *bande dessinée*. As MacLeod indicates in her opening, abortion has long been associated with *bande dessinée* in France, after the wide circulation of a satirical cartoon by Cabu (1938–2015) criticizing pro-life politicians in the 1970s. Despite this, abortion is not a frequent topic of discussion in the medium. Discussing three recent examples of abortion in *bande dessinée*—including Tonino Benacquista and Florence Cestac's (b.1949) *Des salopes et des anges*, a French wordplay "on whores" and "angel makers," Désirée and Alain Frappier's *Le choix*, and Aude Mermilliod's (b. 1986) *Il fallait que je vous le dise*—MacLeod explores the way that these comics take a pro-choice stance while continuing to wrestle with the ongoing taboo of abortion. Unfortunately, MacLeod's chapter at times feels out of place, not because of the subject matter (handled well), but because it is the least well-integrated of the volume's chapters. MacLeod, for example, claims that there was a historical paucity of female creatives in the medium before 2000. As part of a collection that intends to correct this misconception and overtly seeks to foreground the unseen historical contributions and presence of women in the medium, these claims feel incongruous (9–12). Regardless, MacLeod's contribution is an important one, and what she reveals about the ways in which *bande dessinée* are beginning to address the difficult topic of abortion are important.

Finally, part three ("Representations and History [Herstories]"), attends (as the title suggests) to the history of the form and the way that women have often been represented therein. In the first chapter, Jacques Dürrenmatt goes back to the origins of the medium, looking at the *bande dessinée* and caricatures of the early-mid 1800s. In doing so, he seeks to interrogate the stereotypical

representations of women that dominated until the 1960s. Revealing what he calls the "triple heritage of the treatment of women in the early *bande dessinée*" (195), he examines the formation of the tropes through press readership that divided along gender lines, and the largely male-audience of early caricature.

The second chapter from Mark McKinney turns to representations of the Dahomey "Amazons" in both French and African postcolonial comics and traces the appearances of these historical women which work to highlight precolonial Dahomey culture and African resistance to French colonization. Along with these trends, however, McKinney argues that within non-African (or Franco-African) *bande dessinée*, these women are heavily eroticised as part of the effort to legitimize the form by signalling (through sexuality and the male gaze) that *these bande dessinée* are for adults. By contrast, as McKinney demonstrates, this eroticism is not found (or found to a significantly lesser degree) in the *bande dessinée* emerging from Africa, where the Dahomey "Amazons" are used to remember European colonial violence, African resistance, and the place of women in prequest and modern African societies.

In Isabelle Delorme's chapter that follows, she focuses on the work of a specific *bande dessinée* creator, Catel (b. 1964). Focusing on Catel's contributions to the prevalence of *la biographie dessinée* ("drawn" biography), a genre often favored by female writers and artists. As Delorme demonstrates, Catel has worked with a team of other female creators to use the medium to bring visibility to under-appreciated women of history. Delorme argues that Catel has demonstrated the possible successes of a woman working in *bande dessinée* who wishes to use her form in support of feminism and increasing the visibility of women both on the pages and on the creative team behind them.

The final chapter of the volume from Véronique Bragard brings together two themes that pervade the issue: activism through creativity and female community. In this chapter, Bragard examines

Emilie Plateau's (b. 1984) comic interpretation of Tania de Montaigne's (b. 1971) *Noire*, which recounts the history of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. Bragard explores the way that Plateau uses the color palette and form of *bande dessinée* to reflect issues of invisibility and racial marginalization. In this way, Bragard suggests, *Noire* decenters the individual in its narrative of creating change, instead focusing on the slow collective change that is brought about by a group of women.

Overall, Margaret C. Flinn's *Drawing (in) the Feminine* is an important contribution to scholarship on the history of *bande dessinée*, taking a step to address the long-ignored contributions of women in the medium. Although there is still plenty more to be said on this subject, Flinn and her contributors have created an important piece of scholarship that will hopefully pave the way for others, just as many of the women these scholars discuss have done in their own field. •

Natalie J. Swain is Assistant Professor of Classics at Acadia University, Canada, where her primary research interests include Roman literature and languages, and the reception of the ancient Mediterranean world in comics and video games. She has publications in *Image[&]Narrative*, *Classical Quarterly*, *Games & Culture*, and *Classical Receptions*, and has two forthcoming books, *Narrative in Ovid's Amores* (2026) and *Wonder Woman: Receptions from Antiquity to Popular Culture* (co-edited with A. Potter and C. Skibinski).



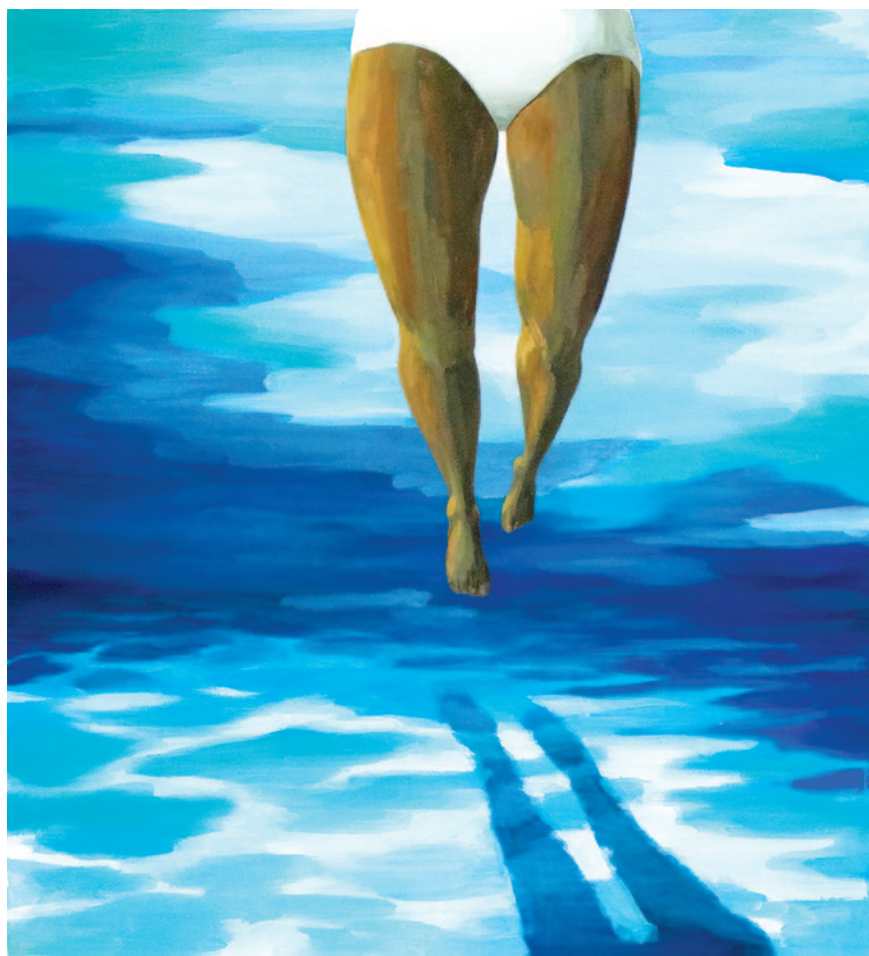
Pl. 1. Firelei Báez, *Ciguapa Habilis (After Carl Linnaeus)* (2010), gouache, watercolor, and ink on paper, 72" x 102".
© Firelei Báez. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.



Pl. 2. Firelei Báez, *Elegant gathering in a secluded garden (or the many bridges we crossed)* (2018), acrylic on canvas, 108" x 192".
The Studio Museum in Harlem; Museum purchase with funds provided by the Acquisition Committee 2018.28.



Pl. 3. Adrienne Elise Tarver, *Secrets of Leaves* (2017), oil on canvas, 36" x 24 1/2". Courtesy of the artist.



Pl. 4. Adrienne Elise Tarver, *Head Above Water* (2018), oil on canvas, 72" x 65".
Courtesy of the artist.



Pl. 5. May Stevens,
Artemisia Gentileschi (1976),
 oil on canvas, 108" x 63".
 © May Stevens and Rudolf Baranik
 Foundation;
 Courtesy of RYAN LEE Gallery,
 New York.



Pl. 6. Kathleen Gilje, *Susanna and the Elders, Restored* (1998), oil on linen and fifteen sheets of X-ray film mounted on plexiglass, 67" x 47". Collection of Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts. Courtesy of the artist.



Pl. 7. Anna Ostoya, *Judith Slaying Judith* (2016), oil on canvas, 78 1/2" x 62". Courtesy of Anna Ostoya and the Bortolami Gallery.



Pl. 8. Betty Tompkins, *Apologia (Gentileschi #3)* (2018), acrylic on book page, 11" x 8 1/4". Courtesy of Betty Tompkins and P·P·O·W, New York, © Betty Tompkins, Photo: JSP Art Photography.



Pl. 9. Betty Tompkins, *Apologia (Mary Shepard Greene Blumenschein)* (2018), acrylic on book page, 11" x 9 1/4". Courtesy of Betty Tompkins and P·P·O·W, New York, © Betty Tompkins, Photo: JSP Art Photography.



Pl. 10. Lili Bernard, *Carlota Slaying the Slaver* (after Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, 1612) (2015), oil on canvas, 72" x 96". Collection of the Artist. © 2026 by L I L I B E R N A R D.



Pl. 11. Zarina Bhimji,
Tiny Pulse (1997), photograph
illustrated in *QJM: Monthly Journal
of the Association of Physicians* 90,
no. 12 (December 1997).
© 2025 Zarina Bhimji / Artists
Rights Society (ARS), New York /
DACS, London.



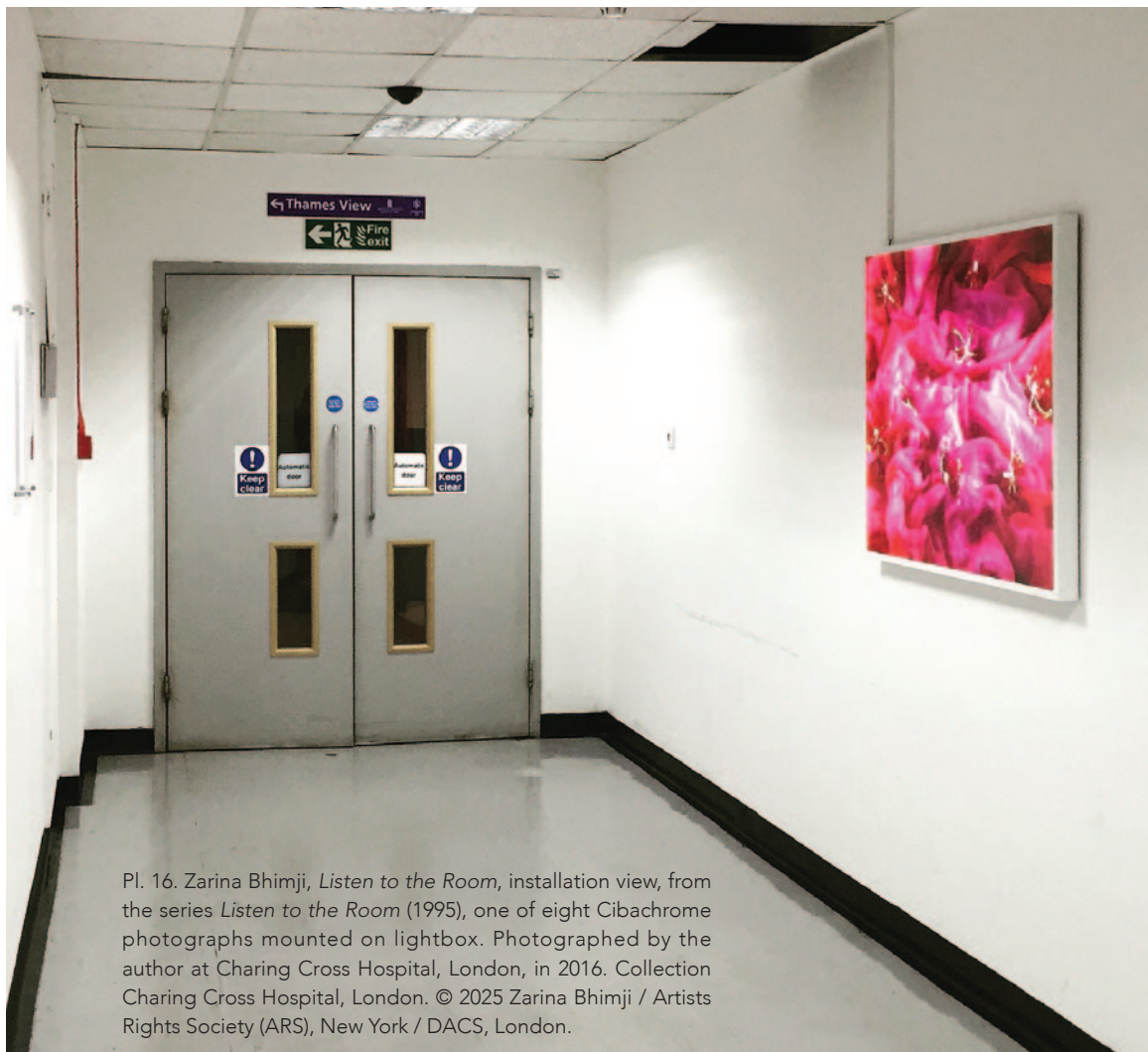
Pl. 12. Zarina Bhimji, *Indelible* from the series *Listen to the Room* (1995), one of eight Cibachrome photographs mounted on lightbox. Collection Charing Cross Hospital, London. © 2025 Zarina Bhimji / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / DACS, London.



Pl. 13. Zarina Bhimji, *Listen to the Room* from the series *Listen to the Room* (1995), one of eight Cibachrome photographs mounted on lightbox. Collection Charing Cross Hospital, London. © 2025 Zarina Bhimji / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / DACS, London.



Pl. 14. Susan Hiller, *From the Freud Museum* (1991–96), glass, 50 cardboard boxes, paper, video, slide, light bulbs, other materials, displayed 86 5/8" x 393 7/10" x 23 5/8". Collection Tate, London. © 2025 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / DACS, London.



*“The minute I started doing sculpture, I felt that it was something I had done all my life.
I had no problems with energy.”*

Dorothy Dehner



Dorothy Dehner (1901–1994), *Sanctum with Window II* (1990–91), painted aluminum, 150” x 156” x 126”. Gift of Dorothy Dehner to The Hyde Collection, 1994.1. © Dorothy Dehner Foundation for the Visual Arts. Photography by Jim McLaughlin.



THE HYDE COLLECTION

BERRY  CAMPBELL



In Keren Anavy's installations, human histories intersect with the currents and movements of water, carrying narratives of strength, memory, and relation. Water emerges as an agent shaping landscapes, a container activating histories and memory across both time and territories.

—Catherine Bernard, Ph.D.

Keren Anavy, *Blood Will Turn into Water: The River Chanel* (2026), 18-foot canoe, found bamboo branches, ink and colored pencils on transparent Mylar, pigment powder color. On walls: *Folded Ocean* series (2021–ongoing), ink and colored pencils on Mylar, found seashell, Plexiglas, 6" diameter. Photo: JSP Art Photography.

KEREN ANAVY

Floating in Three Acts

Amelie A. Wallace Gallery, SUNY Old Westbury

Gallery Director, Hyewon Yi, Ph.D

SPRING 2026



The AMERICAN POETRY REVIEW

POETRY FOR THE PEOPLE

“One of the strongest literary forces of our time” — Ada Limón, U.S. Poet Laureate

Read and subscribe today at aprweb.org