# Worlds Apart

## HELEN MOLESWORTH ON GENERATIONS OF FEMINISM

Eve Fowler, *Untitled*, 2005, color photograph, 40 x 30".

**If the artists in "WACK!" sought to change the world, then the artists of "Shared Women" seek to make their own, to create a counter-public sphere.**

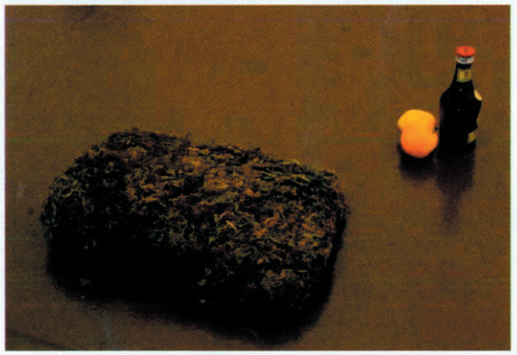
**TAKING THE SIXTH STREET EXIT** off the Harbor Freeway in Los Angeles these days puts you square in front of an enormous mural featuring a group of well-dressed lovelies. When I saw it, my heart skipped a beat—was it the cast of *The L Word*, fittingly grown to *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman* proportions in their hometown? Nope, it was an ad for the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, the members all dressed in black tie—a uniformity that accounted for the freeway-enhanced gender confusion. It was as if all of LA, seen through the lens of *The L Word*, were engaging in a reconsideration of gender. One woman, with a sultry gaze and a mane of dark, wavy hair, stood apart from the group, jauntily holding a violin. Good thing for the company's marketing department that the first violinist is a looker, I thought.

Such was, for me, the opening frame of a recent weekend spent in LA, the purpose of which was to see two exhibitions: "WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution," curated by Connie Butler, at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, and "Shared Women," organized by artists Eve Fowler, Emily Roysdon, and A. L. Steiner at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions. The two shows are hardly equivalent: "WACK!" was years in the making, includes hundreds of works dating from the 1960s and '70s by 113 artists, and is nothing short of a Herculean (or maybe Sisyphean) attempt to write and rewrite the history of the notoriously underrepresented and heterogeneous feminist art movement. "Shared Women," on the other hand, couldn't have felt looser, more of the moment. And while the approach to LA MOCA was framed by the relatively demure sexing up of the orchestra, the walk to LACE, located on Hollywood Boulevard, reeked of sex of a different kind—the down-and-dirty, condoms-on-the-pavement, hookers-on-the-corner variety. Segueing from this environment to the gallery was a fairly porous experience: The show was replete with sex and souvenirs (in the form of artists' multiples).

Context aside, there are, not surprisingly, many similarities between the two shows. Both are exclusively all-women exhibitions, messy to the core, with no explanatory wall texts and with a dizzying array of media. Both are exuberant, filled with a palpable fight-the-power energy that, during wartime, feels like just the thing. Both are filled with nudity in a decidedly realistic vein. No John Currin here, folks, no talk of paint handling when what's really at issue is tits and ass. But in the sex lies the difference between the two shows. "Shared Women" is a queer affair. This doesn't mean all the artists are lesbians, but all the work is queer—by which I mean the work colonizes preexisting positions in order to subvert them with pleasure. The logic of drag was in full effect as the younger artists of "Shared Women" riffed on the feminist elders of "WACK!" To wit: Eve Fowler's 2005 portrait of artist K8 Hardy squarely facing the camera with her bush sprouting out of a hole cut into the crotch of her jeans, à la Valie Export's *Action Pants: Genital Panic*, 1969. True to the transformative power of drag, however, this image, with its lush palette and the sitter's sweet and direct gaze, felt like a contemporary parody of a John Singer Sargent society portrait—a far cry from Export's gun-toting attack on patriarchal scopophilia.

The most remarkable attribute of "WACK!," for me, was the artists' complete and total belief that they were going to transform the world. At stake in every work was the problem of how to live as a complete, whole, and free human being. Fuck Minimalism, these women had real problems to solve—problems that demanded new aesthetic forms, new communities, new identities. Hence Tee Corinne's 1975 *Cunt Coloring Book* (these were the days when no one knew what pussies looked like) or the Berwick Street Film Collective, where artists formed an alliance with cleaning women to fight for better labor standards (these were the days when women earned much less than men—hmmm, this parallel construction might not hold up). Similar imperatives animate Senga Nengudi's sculptural explorations of the effects of gravity on the abstracted black female body; Mimi Smith and Sylvia Plimack Mangold's application of the laws of single-point perspective to everyday reality (their own domestic environments, which they mapped with mathematical precision); and Harmony Hammond and Faith Wilding's reinvention of sculpture in the language of softness, craft, and daily procedures. In these and literally a *hundred* other instances, what was being demanded was a massive and complete revolution of the self and of the culture at large.

And it worked, sort of. Post–Title IX women are empowered beyond their mothers' wildest dreams—they play sports, speak up in class, and go on to have high-power jobs; some even choose to be stay-at-home moms, forgoing the '80s fantasy of "having it all." They are often so empowered, in fact, that they eschew the word *feminism*, associating it with the trauma of lack of parity with men (who wants to go there?) and the similarly daunting problem of the locution's association with ye olde time man-hating bull-dagger lesbians, usually referred to as dykes. This "whither feminism" anxiety permeated the Museum of Modern Art's recent "Feminist Futures" symposium in New York, a two-day affair in which the big question was whether or not the term *feminism* was now purely historical, emptied of the world-changing potential it once held—and therefore ready to be safely embraced by the mainstream. Many of the younger women in the audience

From top: **A. L. Steiner, *The Women's Room*, 2007**, photocollage, dimensions variable. **Daphne Fitzpatrick, *Everyone's Different, Except Me*, 2007**, moss, whiskey, and fruit. Installation view, LACE, Los Angeles.

seemed to think of feminism as a historical period, like the Civil Rights movement, ripe for big museum shows and documentaries. I'm not there yet. For one thing, I find it hard to imagine the parades, the renaming of major thoroughfares after Gloria Steinem. But I also kind of see their point. Certain aspects of feminism *are* historical. Battles were fought, and what was won was a profound sense of entitlement. And even if such personal freedoms have not been accompanied by equal wages, the elimination of rape, or universal child care, the entitlement has produced a new kind of feminism, one decidedly queer in affect and without a name as such.

So was Betty Friedan right about the Lavender Menace? Did lesbians drive a wedge between straight women and their feminism, between men and their "tolerance," between radical aspirations and their everyday outcomes? I don't want to offer a narrative based purely on generational rupture. The younger artists in "Shared Women" don't diss the *F*-word (indeed, they identify themselves with it in the press materials, calling the show an exhibition that "champions a dynamic group of queer feminist artists"). But Lord knows they wear it lightly. Mostly, they appear to be having a lot of fun, and in doing so they have joyously and unambivalently claimed their inheritance, which is nothing less than the "feminist" mantle. Consider Sharon Hayes's brilliant and hilarious 2005 slide-projection piece, *From in the Near Future*, documenting her numerous one-person protests in downtown New York. In one image she stands forlorn and defiant, holding up a handwritten poster that says RATIFY ERA NOW. This work goes to the heart of the matter. Second-generation feminists sought to reimagine and completely overhaul the public sphere by insisting that society make a place for women and their experiences, exactly as it did for men. Utter equality was the goal. The Equal Rights Amendment was to be the crowning legislative achievement of these struggles. The participants in "Shared Women" are not afflicted with amnesia when it comes to this particular failure, but they don't regard it as traumatic, either. By understanding feminism precisely as a historical formation—rather than denying it—they seek to retool its aims. If the artists in "WACK!" sought to change the world, then the artists of "Shared Women" seek to make their own. Given that the public sphere under the current political regime is so bankrupt, why, much of this work asks, would we even want "equality" within it? Better to create a counter–public sphere, one interwoven with the existing world (pop-culture and high-art references abound in "Shared Women"), but nonetheless a self-generated framework. This is what the artists at LACE have established for themselves and their activities, with journals like *LTTR*, exhibition spaces like Reena Spaulings Fine Art and Orchard, where they are an integral part of a diverse roster, and performances like Alison Smith's *Muster*, 2005, or K8 Hardy's mud-wrestling events. (Despite my New York provincialism, I am sure such formations are happening in other cities as well.)

Certainly, the avant-garde has always engaged in radicalizing the production and distribution of culture—how better to think about Womanhouse? But one enormous difference between the two generations is that the completely legitimate rage that fueled many of the artists in "WACK!" is decidedly lacking in "Shared Women." Far from the anger of separatism, the affective address of "Shared Women" is "Join us!" The work is funny and gentle, imbued with equal measures of poetry and slapstick. Listen as Ulrike Müller's sound piece recasts a trip through an unnamed city as a psychic breakdown, or take, for example, Daphne Fitzpatrick's reimagining of the commodity as a kind of Surrealist-inflected game piece: Fitzpatrick uses the castoffs of spectacle culture to create delicate, Lilliputian tableaux inflected with visual puns (e.g., a Tropicana carton lovingly preserved in a Plathian bell jar). And then there is A. L. Steiner's raw photographic chronicle of the sexual antics of this new world. If the women of "WACK!" wanted to dismantle the mechanisms of objectification, Steiner's pictures of naked women suggest that desire and pleasure are not possible without some form of objectification—the question becomes: Objectification by and for whom? Hence the "shared" of the title.

Such world-making is not exclusive to the art world; let's remember that the local hangout on *The L Word* is called the Planet. (Who can forget Tina's longing for what she called "the secret world" after leaving Bette for a man?) This season saw Shane inherit parental responsibility for her preadolescent brother. Unable to pay for the treatment of a broken arm he incurred while skateboarding, she begrudgingly agrees to pose seminude in an underwear ad that winds up on a billboard dominating the Sunset Strip. Enter the real world when Shane's evil father, patriarchy personified, comes to take custody of her brother. Distraught and racked with grief, Shane finds herself underneath her ridiculous image on Sunset. Her double entry into the reality of patriarchy and spectacle culture is simply too much to bear. The antidote? She and Alice shimmy up the billboard and gleefully graffiti Shane's "stolen" image, giving it a big cock and mustache, performing their own version of "take back the night." Like their real-life counterparts in "Shared Women," the girls in *The L Word* decide that making your own world is highly preferable to living in this one. This trumping of rage by glee—a modality that offers pleasure as a form of politics—appears to be the lavender-tinged legacy of feminism. □

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