



GIRLS GONE WILD!

DON'T LOOK BACK Feminist art happens now at LACE BY CHRISTOPHER RUSSELL

HEAR THEM ROAR The fight for recognition is over BY ANNIE BUCKLEY

In Margaret Atwood's 1989 novel *Cat's Eye*, a painter named Elaine returns to her hometown for a retrospective hosted by a local gallery. One of her fictional friends makes collages using the lint from a dryer, similar to the actual, ephemeral creations of artist Howardena Pindell. These collages are made not from dust but from the round discards of a hole-punch — an equally utilitarian source; it's as if the fictional works had been realized and were hanging on the wall as a part of MOCA's feminist exhibition, WACK!

The first survey show of its kind, "WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution," currently up at the Geffen Contemporary, features art from the period 1965-1980 that is identified, either by artist, curator, or both, as feminist. Some of the artists are known as feminist, but for others, gender seems to be the only qualifying feature. Their inclusion in the pantheon is imposed after the fact, the result of a history that has been traditionally biased towards men and to which curator Cornelia Butler is, if not re-writing, adding a vital chapter. The collective result embraces, extends, and potentially solidifies the contribution of women artists and feminism. But categories like "feminist" or "woman artist" can stimulate the same marginalization many artists try to avoid, giving rise to a conflicted relationship to the label.

Likewise, in Atwood's novel, Elaine accepts the label of "feminist artist" only grudgingly. Although well established, she feels obliged to be grateful for the gallery's survey exhibition, feminist or not, and her story unfurls complex shades of feminism in something of a chicken-or-egg process. As Elaine recalls how gender identities and assumptions have shaped and thwarted her path, she also remembers being taunted and teased by her best friend Cordelia. This complex relationship pervades the novel with Elaine finally conquering the intricate dance of victim and aggressor through her art.

Butler spent more than eight years researching and developing WACK! In an interview before the opening, the curator relayed how difficult this show was to coordinate, and not only because she lives on the opposite coast. Many of the participants argued, challenged, or bickered with her and each other in a process that sounds reminiscent of the tension that bound Elaine and Cordelia throughout their lives. Women artists have had to fight for recognition and holding a tenuous place in history can create friction which may have played

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With WACK! presenting the first attempt by a major museum to define the canon of feminist art, a myriad of local galleries are presenting shows with related themes. Unfortunately many of the exhibitions responding to WACK! are simply recognizing a moment without exactly committing to it. The impression is that, despite the quality and scope of MOCA's show, once WACK! closes, galleries will consider their duties complete and feminism will, again, receive a question mark instead of an exclamation point.

But Carol Stakenas, executive director of Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, wasn't looking for an obligatory response. She took on an untouchable show whose ambition and vitality adds up to something truly daring. "Shared Women" is a loosely themed group show spanning three generations, delving honestly and abruptly into lesbian and intersex cultures, while still making room for a straight woman and a few men. Curated by Eve Fowler, Emily Roysdon and A.L. Steiner, the show marks an embrace of radical sexuality, reaffirms LACE's renewed commitment to underrepresented artists and pushes to reset priorities in a moment obsessed with art fairs and after parties.

"Shared Women" presents a utopic vision of post-categorization. It celebrates postmodern pluralism in which numerous perspectives are both represented and respected. The result of this openness is physical as well as intellectual promiscuity. From the title of the show to the giant pink trash-pussy in the entrance to the baroque video of an androgynous moonwalking Peter Pan at the back door,

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"Shared Women" delves into an expansive group of friendly associations that teeter between the homosocial and the homosexual. The network of friends and lovers who are participants in the show is too complicated to trace. The common ground for most of the artists is a group of 'zines marking new boundaries in identity politics: LTTR (referred to affectionately as Lesbians to the Rescue), The Third Leg, Ridykeulous, and Fashion Fashion.

The show includes 47 artists packed into LACE's cavernous gallery, and with only a few exceptions, the work is as strong as it is diverse. There are two murals in the show

focus on the solitary and ritualistic. The ultimate expression of Dupuy-Spencer's utopia is equal parts orgy and brawl.

Other notable moments include a tiny Amy Adler picture made during graduate school that has never before been shown: a tiny black and white image of a strapped on strap-on fading into a field of white. It's her signature technique, a photographic print of an original drawing, yet the subject matter is different. It provides insight into Adler as a student and the various roads she traveled while finding her way.

Orgiastic installations by Nicole Eisenman and Al Steiner come physically close to each



Nicole Eisenman



Lindsey Brandt, *Bushwackers*



Celeste Dupuy-Spencer, images courtesy of LACE

whose immanent removal is lamentable. The more remarkable is Celeste Dupuy-Spencer's *Ditch the Zero. Get with the Hero*, which posits lesbian utopia as a combination of Seurat's *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grand Jatte* with Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*. The mural depicts competition, sex and affection for everyone — in an entirely female society. It simultaneously embraces masculine aggression yet eschews notions of top and bottom, leaving no woman unable to take a punch or unwilling to nurse a wounded fuck. All of Dupuy's women tend toward butch, and the bloodier the face the better the painting. Her riotous frolic differs from male depictions of violence that tend to

other, yet maintain their distinct identities. Steiner's proliferation of snapshot aesthetics becomes sexy through its leering, while Eisenman shows a humorous sexuality in her drawings. On the floor nearby is a paper-maché sculpture by Lindsay Bryant: beavers eating beaver. Their craft quality and blissful expressions create ample empathy for the randy little critters.

Kathe Burkhart's pair of images could have easily been the work of a middle-age gay man in the early '90s rather than a middle-age straight woman in 2001. She's the only woman in the show with a strictly heterosexual claim, but her camp sensibility provides continuity

with the show's other work. Burkhart is among the older participants, so her work becomes a chronological bridge between WACK! and the overt sexuality and bodily experimentation seen through much of "Shared Women."

The thing that makes this show work so well is that the curatorial perspective is itself promiscuous. The range of images runs from conceptual to formal, from GB Jones' Tom of Finland-styled renderings of lesbian cruising to Erika Vogt's assemblages that seem to reference Robert Motherwell much more than identity politics. This show just might be a contemporary version of utopia: everybody gets a voice, and everything works out fine. ■