

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

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PAINTING IN NEW YORK: 1971-83

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Cynthia Carlson, *Bitchy Virgin*, 1975. Acrylic on canvas, 70 x 60 inches.

The feminist movement in art is often associated with artistic mediums like installation, video, and performance that rejected the orthodox modernist tradition, associated as it was with the heroic male artist and larger structures of patriarchy. These ways of working lent themselves particularly well to explorations of the body, and set the stage for a broader emergence of identity politics in the 1990s. Yet an exhibition currently on view at KARMA Gallery demonstrates that women by no means stopped painting with the advent of feminism, and that painting does not imply any lack of investment in the movement. Curated by Ivy Shapiro, *Painting in New York: 1971-83* brings together thirty women artists working in painting during this period. The omission of “women” from the title is a refreshing gesture, emphasizing that the figures on view are representative of the larger currents of the New York art world, even if they were not acknowledged at the time. The majority of artists included are established names today—Mary Heilmann, Faith Ringgold, Ree Morton, Joan Semmel, Howardena Pindell, Dorothea Rockburne, Pat Steir, and Louise Fishman, for example—and many have had museum retrospectives recently. Others are yet to receive their due recognition, and this exhibition is a needed reminder that much is still left to uncover.

1971 was a critical year for women in art. Linda Nochlin published her groundbreaking essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists,” exposing the underlying power structures that historically prohibited women from succeeding in the artworld. Lucy Lippard, another feminist icon, organized the exhibition *Twenty-Six Contemporary Women Artists* at the Aldrich Museum, providing a

curatorial model that continues to inform exhibition-making to this day. As Shapiro shares in an essay she wrote for the forthcoming exhibition catalogue, she herself grew up in the trenches of the New York art scene: the sculptor Joel Shapiro is her father. She spent time in the studios of Elizabeth Murray and Jennifer Barlett (both of whom are included here), went to parties at Paula Cooper's, and was dragged along to the Spring Street Bar and Fanelli's. Shapiro writes that she could sense the energetic rage of women artists, particularly those that were single mothers. This exhibition is a personal ode to the women who may as well have raised her. One might say, even, that it is autobiographical.

What became clear to me upon seeing the show is the unfortunate degree to which art historians have left painting out of feminist history, when in fact the paintings gathered together here share a lot of the sensibilities conventionally acknowledged as central to the feminist canon. Cynthia Carlson's *Bitchy Virgin* (1975), for example, recalls Hannah Wilke's *S.O.S. -Starification Object Series* (1974–82), the textural smudges of acrylic reminiscent of pieces of gum—the canvas in lieu of the body. The assertive strokes of red in Mary Heilmann's *Landscape Cupboard (Landscape Closet)* (1972), evoke the carnal exploration of Carolee Schneemann's *Meat Joy* (1964), the brushstroke slick and bloody like an organ. Yet Shapiro's choice of works does not suggest an imposed stylistic or conceptual framework, rather seeming to take stock of the variety and multifaceted character of painting in the 1970s. The works on view feature a range of materials, too, illustrating the fact that painting is not contained to traditional oil on canvas. However, while some figurative compositions are featured (most notably a large, erotic painting by Joan Semmel provocatively hung in the gallery's window), the emphasis does appear to be on abstraction. In her catalog essay, Shapiro identifies the grid as an important point of interest in conceiving this show. While this motif has notoriously been understood as a rejection of narrative, and therefore meaning, reading it this way misses its true complexity. But I do have to wonder whether the very rhetoric of silence associated with the grid might have offered women artists an opportunity to move beyond gender, taking as their point of departure a structure defined by its lack of distinction and hierarchy—a feminist gesture at its very core. Jennifer Bartlett's *1 Point Plane to 9 Point Plane* (1973) beautifully illustrates this. Here, Bartlett subjects an image (likely of a house, a motif she has been invested in since the later 1960s) to a grid-based system of serialization and numbering, resulting in a series of seemingly abstract, geometric forms. In nine panels, Bartlett produces compositions of tiny squares, created by filling in the modules of a consistent grid background, each composition expanding further across the grid field. Inevitably, a kind of narrative emerges, simultaneously through and despite the relentless logic of the grid.

Much ink has been spilled on the question of whether or not it's problematic to assign a distinctly female aesthetic to the work of women artists. As Lawrence Alloway has noted: "At the start of the 1970s one assumed that women's art had no specific feminine properties and that to attribute them was a discriminatory act."¹ Others, however, fully embraced such readings.

Joan Snyder has said that artwork by women holds “a kind of softness, layering, a certain color sensibility, a more expressive work than any man is going to do right now, and a repetitiousness—use of grids, obsessive in a way.”² While I am deeply aware of the limitations of gendered readings, I must advocate for the meaningfulness of feminist ones less firmly tied to gender (*feminist*, then, not *feminine*). As a queer art historian, I strongly believe that art is critically informed by artists’ experiences of adversity. As I walk through KARMA’s crowded exhibition space, having turned these questions over and over in anticipation of the exhibition, I catch a poem by May Swenson, published in 1970, stuck in my head. It begins like this:

Stop bleeding said the knife.
I would if I could said the cut.
Stop bleeding you make me messy with this blood.
I’m sorry said the cut.

When I arrive at a large mixed-media painting by Joan Snyder titled *Vanishing Theatre/The Cut* (1974), my thoughts line up. This visceral composition is structured as a triptych, with one panel emphasizing language, one violence, and one order. At the center, there is a deep cut. It is hard not to think of this violent gesture as representative of the abusive relationship between women and the history of painting as it has been claimed by men. What did it mean for artists to identify as women between 1971 and 1983? I believe that to a great degree it meant reclaiming a genealogy of male repression.

“Whenever I smell turpentine, I feel at home,” Shapiro writes in her essay. I cannot help but feel envious of this statement. I, too, was surrounded by the smell of turpentine as a child: my aunt was the director of an art gallery in Arkhangelsk, where I spent many afternoons when there was no-one to watch me. Yet the makers of the paintings that surrounded me were all men, and I never encountered a female artist until I moved to the Netherlands years later. What would it be like, I have wondered, to grow up among artists whose experiences better reflected my own? What would it mean to feel truly at home in the smell of turpentine? Shapiro shows us exactly this.

1. Lawrence Alloway, “The Uses and Limits of Art Criticism,” in *Topics in American Art Since 1945*, 270.
2. Joan Snyder, quoted in Lucy Lippard, “What is female imagery” (1975) in Lippard, *From the Center*, 86.