

VULTURE

Jerry Saltz, "Right Now Is a Blockbuster Moment in New York for Female Artists", Vulture, May 19, 2017. <https://www.vulture.com/2017/05/right-now-is-a-blockbuster-moment-for-female-artists.html>

Right Now Is a Blockbuster Moment in New York for Female Artists

I love art by men. In fact, let's start using that as a category; call all the group shows of art by all or mostly men "Men's Art," the same way we do when it comes to "Women's Art," "Black Art," "Outsider Art," and all the rest. Maybe that will help level the playing field — a bit, anyway. Or maybe men could just sit out exhibiting their art for the next 24 months, as we endure this extended political emergency more in need than ever of other voices. For two years only women should show. That way we'd get a good long look; maybe we'd even adjust accordingly. For real.

We are, of course, a long way from that. But look around New York and you'll see that the city is having an amazing moment just the same — 40-plus excellent exhibitions by women that temporarily charge the metaphysical atmospherics of the art world with an overall sense of what's possible if the system opens up. Just the current show of Florine Stettheimer's extraordinarily gorgeous, inventive, kaleidoscopic paintings at the Jewish Museum suggests that there are a thousand aesthetic aromas, ideas of color, composition, surface, subject matter, metaphysical attitudes, body postures, and optical domains that have been cut out of the canon (probably because certain "qualities" have forever been considered too female, or "girly"). My wife wondered to me the other day if perhaps one or two of Stettheimer's works are among the most flat-out ravishing paintings ever made? Alice Neel's recent two-gallery David Zwirner exhibition showed her painting the faces of her neighbors in Harlem as insightfully as anyone ever rendered the royal kings and queens of yore. For my money, these two are among the five best American painters in history, along with Marsden Hartley, Bill Traylor, and Kara Walker. Never mind that Mary Cassatt, always cast as second-rate for painting mothers and infants, may be the only painter in history to portray babies as individual, feeling human beings and not just as chubby lumps.

The Critics Newsletter

A weekly dispatch on the cultural discourse, sent Fridays.

Then there is the current New Museum quad-fecta of four one-person shows by women, each of which kills. In one building, you have the late, Italian visionary Carol Rama, whose drawings bring us into the optical inner sanctums of sexuality, self-doubt, and female power; the wild-style, Mike Kelly-like dandy

and dynamism of Kaari Upson (who in one video fake-shops for a Las Vegas tract house and inspects the home by crawling on the kitchen counter and rubbing her hair on the stucco ceiling); Elaine Cameron-Weir's utterly alchemical, materially masterful installation; and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, plying her still-developing portrait skills in the spirit of Neel herself.

Up the group-show alley, meanwhile, is "Midtown," a totally daring exhibition curated by three great art-world women, all of whom should get mini MacArthur genius grants: Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn, Michelle Maccarone, and Ali Subotnick. Seen on the sprawling, raw second floor of Lever House, one of the best buildings in New York, "Midtown" attempts to breach one of the most formidable invisible walls set up around women's art — one that segregates, shuns, or pooh-poohs anything suggesting even an ounce of craftiness, design, the decorative, or God-forbid, functionality. But see if your heart doesn't pitter-patter at some of these embroidered, sewn, and carved works. Meanwhile, on the ground floor of the same building are the super-optical fabulous-monsters of painter Katherine Bernhardt. With artists like Dona Nelson, Jessica Jackson-Hutchins, Cecily Brown, Amy Sillman, Charline von Heyl, Jackie Saccoccio, and Dana Schutz, Bernhardt shattered one of the last taboos of women's art: to paint messy, expressionistic, garish things. It's a taboo that goes all the way back to Georgia O'Keefe, who gave up trying to beat down that door in the early 20th century when her radically abstract, viscous paintings were described as "great painful, ecstatic climaxes," "an outpouring of sexual juices," "loamy hungers of the flesh," "the very essence of woman as Life Giver." It's amazing she didn't shoot someone on Fifth Avenue. Whether or not you are a fan of these women's work, we have to collectively say, "Fuck that last painterly prohibition."

The 40-plus shows by women take place just as more and more people claim that shows in New York are dying. Whenever genies get out of bottles this starts to happen. In the 1980s, just as women and artists of color were starting showing more, the big new theory of the day proclaimed that the author was dead. Then, when women started working with historical images in the 1990s, historians declared that history was dead too. So many in academia need to get over acting like undertakers. Whatever, these days the dirge we hear is that New York is dead and nothing but a trading floor for art, and honestly, almost every city outside New York castigates us as this. Stop that! We love you; we show art from everywhere, and then we get dissed as being "only about money." Grow up!

The diversity up right now is dizzying. You can see women artists like Becky Suss, Shara Hughes, Yiadom-Boakye, Betty Tompkins, and Sarah McEneaney blazing trails around figuration. Showing some of the more wild-looking paintings and sculptures out there right now are Dona Nelson, Pensato, Lisa Alvarado, Patricia Treib, Juliana Huxtable, Jess Fuller, Johanna Jackson, Sahar Khoury, Lee Relvas, Mira Dancy, Keltie Ferris, Rachel Harrison, Alice Mackler, Aki Sasamoto, Rochelle Goldberg, Stacy Leigh, and the joker herself, Bernhardt. If you want historical examples, see shows of Diane Arbus, Joan Jonas, Anne Harvey, Flora Crockett, Barbara Bloom, Sarah Charlesworth, Lygia Pape, Louise Bourgeois, Nancy Spero, and one of the great visionaries of the last 100 years, Rei Kawakubo. I am not mentioning the big

survey of Cindy Sherman at Mnuchin Gallery. I can't say what it's like because I have been boycotting this big Upper East Side blue-chip gallery since the owner's son, Steve Mnuchin, became a Trump adviser last summer. I know I could boycott 25 other art-world venues for compromising connections to the current president. I love the brilliant co-owner-director of Mnuchin Gallery, Sukanya Rajaratnam. Nevertheless, I plead a pigheaded no defense. I chose this one to suffice for all and decided whatever one I picked had to hurt. This one does — now with Sherman; last summer with their David Hammons show.

But as good as this news about all these show is — well, back to bad numbers. Even as efforts have been underway to correct the lack of women in art galleries and institutions, women still make up a far lesser share of solo gallery shows. In September 2014, I tallied some numbers. Back then just 11 of the 73 full-page ads in Artforum were for solo shows by women — about 15 percent. The September before that, the numbers were even lower — only 13 percent. Using full-page ads in Artforum isn't an accurate template, but it touched on big problems. That's why this spike in shows by women is more than noteworthy. Regardless of your taste, I'd venture that the percentage of these shows that are good defies all the usual odds that hover around 15 percent, and jumps close to 75 percent.