

Canada

60 Lispenard Street
New York, NY
10013

P: 212 925 4631
E: galler@canadanewyork.com
www.canadanewyork.com

Art in America

Vogel, Wendy. "Double Take: '52 Artists: A Feminist Milestone' at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum." *ARTnews.com*, ARTnews.com, 14 Sept. 2022, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/aia-reviews/52-artists-feminist-milestone-aldrich-1234639327/>.

Double Take: "52 Artists: A Feminist Milestone" at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

This summer has proven a somber time for reflection on five decades of the feminist



Rachel Eulena Williams: *Pedestal Reeducation*, 2021, acrylic, dye, and rope on canvas and wood, 130 by 64 by 3 inches. Photo Jason Mandella/Courtesy CANADA, New York

movement, given the United States Supreme Court's decision to reverse the constitutional protection of abortion rights this past June. That same month, the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Connecticut offered a more empowering commemoration of the heyday of women's liberation: "52 Artists: A Feminist Milestone" revisits the institution's 1971 show

“Twenty Six Contemporary Women Artists,” once hailed the first feminist exhibition in the United States. Organized by Lucy Lippard, “Twenty Six Contemporary Women Artists” presented the work of women who had not previously had solo shows. This revival presentation, organized by the museum’s chief curator, Amy Smith-Stewart, and independent curator Alexandra Schwartz, expands Lippard’s roster—of mostly white, all cis-female artists—with a more diverse list of 26 additional female-identifying and nonbinary artists born in or after 1980. The comparative demographics are indicative of the past half-century of increasingly intersectional curatorial priorities, though the organizers don’t shy away from acknowledging the complexities and blind spots of feminist politics in both periods.

Lippard’s 1971 catalogue statement attested to her nascent involvement in the women’s liberation movement, as she had “recently become aware of [her] own previous reluctance to take women’s work as seriously as men’s, the result of a common conditioning from which we all suffer.” Without reducing “women’s art” to a single aesthetic, Lippard made a sincere attempt to capture the range of formal impulses women artists explored. Many works aligned with her interests in Minimal, Conceptual, and Land Art, while others ventured into eccentric abstraction and material experimentation. “52 Artists” likewise avoids claims and categorizations based on gender or artist’s age, and is organized to intermingle the generations fluidly in smartly designed configurations. The curators’ handling of abstraction shows especially their dexterity in tracking a change in sensibility. The harder-edged work from the 1970s—such as Carol Kinne’s puzzle-like canvas *Bob’s Draw* (1973) or Merrill Wagner’s rectilinear paintings on steel and linen—seemed most distant from the selections of the 2020s. Conversely, paintings like Cynthia Carlson’s semi-abstract gynocentric landscape (*Untitled Inscape #1*, 1970); Mary Heilmann’s *Malibu* (1970), composed of dyed raw canvas and acrylic gel; and Howardena Pindell’s ladderlike rope grid consisting of rolled-up canvases (*Untitled*, 1968–70) spoke to younger generations’ interests in process and bodily textures. The latter theme emerged through Loie Hollowell’s painting referencing the pregnant body (*Empty Belly*, 2021), Rachel Eulena Williams’s wall-hung deconstructed painting (*Pedestal Reeducation*, 2021), LaKela Brown’s plaster relief of geometric doorknocker earrings, and Pamela Council’s vulvar sculptures in ring boxes.

Figuration, meanwhile, has risen dramatically in popularity since the 1970s. The only figurative paintings from artists on the original roster are Susan Hall’s dreamlike, sensual canvas *The Ornithologist* (1971) and two works by Sylvia Plimack Mangold—the hyperrealistic *Floor Corner* (1969), from the 1971 show, and a 2016 painting of a wintry maple tree. The show’s younger artists have taken the style in various erotic, activist, and fantastical directions. Selections include an impressive woven piece by Erin M. Riley depicting the subject pleasuring herself on a webcam; Susan Chen’s bright, textured painting of an Asian American and immigrant teen group that she mentors; and a Mexican-folklore-inspired oil-and-cochineal canvas by Astrid Terrazas, illustrating a rageful female subject astride a horse.

Adrian Piper’s Conceptualism, engaging the politics of race, gender, and liberation, has its own generational legacy in the exhibition. For the “52 Artists” opening, several participants reperformed her *Whistleblower Catalysis*, originally presented during the 1971 vernissage as a semi-covert action in which Piper and her collaborators blew on police whistles while walking through the galleries. This show also includes Piper’s photo-text collage series *Mokshamudra Progression* (2012), depicting nine images of a clenched fist gradually opening. The title combines two Hindu terms referring to spiritual release and ritual gestures, which Piper has studied during her decades-long yoga practice. A list of nine corresponding terms are printed

underneath both the first and last images. Under the fully closed fist, the words include “ego,” “cohesion,” and “possession,” while the last image, of the open palm, is associated with desirable collective values such as “non-ego” and “union.” Echoing Piper’s interest in how wellness practices and politics collide, Ilana Harris-Babou’s video *Leaf of Life* (2022) explores how the dubious claims of the late Honduran herbalist Dr. Sebi have gained traction with a new generation of followers seeking an alternative to Western medical practice, where racism is rampant. Aliza Shvarts’s *Homage: Congratulations* (2017), a printed card declining a wedding invitation because of the violent patriarchal roots of marriage, directly references Adrian Piper’s *My Calling (Card)*, 1986, a business-size card informing conversational racists of Piper’s Black identity.

The 1970s works that engage with matters of ecology and labor appear freshest, particularly when placed in conversation with pieces by Millennial artists who explore land sovereignty and placemaking. The toil inherent in Alice Ayccock’s *Clay #2*, a 1,500-pound installation resembling arid terrain bound by a plywood frame, and Jackie Winsor’s *Brick Square* (both 1971), comprising 300 bricks stacked in the stated shape, is reiterated in several works. For LJ Roberts’s installation *Anywhere, Everywhere* (2022), the artist constructed a “stone wall” from rocks found at the Aldrich and at the nearby property of a friend important to their queer community. Within the structure, they added a video documenting the process of digging up the stones. Adjacent to Roberts’s work, Kiyon Williams shows a life-size figure constructed of mud excavated from sites tied to the Black American diaspora. Tourmaline presents a photographic self-portrait related to her film *Salacia* (2019), which centers on a trans sex worker living in New York’s 19th-century free Black community Seneca Village. The film reimagines the neighborhood, which was demolished to create Central Park. These works suggest that environmental justice cannot be dissociated from displacement struggles that overwhelmingly impact BIPOC and queer people.

Through these and other arrangements, “52 Artists” draws meaningful connections among a great variety of practices, though it does have some gaps. Strikingly, few works fall squarely into the categories of social practice, documentary, or protest art. Direct politics was also overlooked in 1971, when John Perreault of the *Village Voice* observed of “26 Artists” that “there are no neo-Social Realist tirades for day-care centers, abortions, or attacks on male chauvinist-capitalist pigs. There are no burnt bras either.” At a time when women were grossly underrepresented in the mainstream art world, Lippard’s work of championing female artists was itself a political act. Now, when many artists—and curators, not least Lippard—claim activism is integral to their creative work, the exhibition can be seen as favoring traditional forms, even if it presents radical content. As in the early 1970s, we are at a crossroads of civil liberties, in which the core issues of the feminist movement feel connected to the stakes of the world. While this show rightly celebrated how far we have come, it leaves viewers to wonder what transformations feminist art will undergo in the next half-century.