Women Artists

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Women Artists: 1550-1950. Brooklyn Museum, 188 Eastern Parkway (to Nov. 27, closed Mon. & Tues.)

Compliments are rare and a doubt that women artists have been discriminated against? Certainly not. Until recently women have been denied opportunities to be artists. They have been educated at and ridiculed. If somehow they surmounted the obstacle of not being allowed a full education in art and then failed to achieve something, sometimes even financial success, their works were systematically excluded from art history and the museums. It might have helped to be the daughter of a successful male artist, but even this was no guarantee since correct attribution has turned subjects to spotty indeed. Therefore one has more than contemporary complaints as evidence.

The difficulties that Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin faced in hunting down and then borrowing the works that comprise "Women Artists: 1550-1950" are legion. sexist attitudes and behavior are still all too much with us. But as a result of the work of these two artists historians, special exhibitions as well as reputations have been rescued. As far as I

There has never before been an exhibition like this. It is an important event for women, whether or not they are artists. It is also an art world event. Why an exhibition of this caliber is not at the Metropolitan Museum is beyond me. The Metropolitan can make room for contemporary junk from the Soviet Union, as it did last year, but apparently has no interest in good art done by women. In any case, the Brooklyn Museum is to be congratulated. It is becoming a very lively museum.

A large exhibition of contemporary landscape paintings, commissioned by the Department of the Interior, is from artist Stuart Davis's retrospective early next year.

I attended the opening at the Brooklyn Museum last week, along with 4,999 other people. It was a great celebration. It was also an exception to the trend towards exclusive and therefore boring openings. The fact that Jasper Johns was opening, for instance, excludes, among others, even the press. Most artists have given up on going to museum openings, even when they have not been cut from the lists. Too sedate, too boring, too elite. The Brooklyn opening, however, was alive with artists and all kinds of people. I don't want to bore you with long descriptions of paintings I particularly liked, but paintings by Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1653), Judith Leyster (1609-1660), Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669), Maria van Kappel (1741-1807), and Anne Vallayer-Coster (1744-1818) did much more than hold my attention. "Sita and Sarasita" by Cecilia Beaux, a 19th-century American, is just fine. In the 20th century, we have women cubists, women realists, women surrealists, Georgie O'Keeffe, who is of course included, by no means the only important woman artist of the first half of the 20th century.

I am even more interested to me is that so many women attribute special feelings, special content, to the paintings as instead for this show. They see the work as different from work done by men, within various genres and throughout a succession of historical styles.

Form is not always the only content of a painting; it may in fact be of small consequence. The meaning of an art work, which is what we mean by content, is as much a product of what the viewer brings to it as what the artist may have intended. Outside information cannot be avoided. The information that a particular art work was done by a woman is as much a part of the art work as its place in history, its esthetics, and its current context. The fact that it has been so difficult for women artists adds a touch of the

particularly womanly may be developing.

For this we have to turn to a concurrent exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum.

Contemporary Women: Consciousness and Content — Brooklyn Museum

In L.A., I am told, there were city-wide art exhibitions of work by contemporary women artists timed to coincide with the "Women Artists" blockbuster. Here we have a small show selected by Joan Semmel, an artist herself. It may be small, but it packs a wallop: for its own and raise questions that are important and continue to be debated with intensity.

The tone of Semmel's statement is political and feminist. Her choice of works by women has been selected from the cultural mainstream simply because of discriminatory practices by other curators. Has this or any other selection of women's art validated an experience from which the male world feels excluded? Is it not from this very validation that women's art derives its authenticity? The price for entrance to the cultural high art has been conformity to male modes.

Semmel goes on to suggest art that is not only

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Women Artists are now developing a unique iconography. I don't think a male artist would have panned with penises as Lynda Benglis does. Sylvia Sleigh's male nude has a vulnerability that most male artists would avoid or not be capable of capturing. Judith Bernstein's gigantic drawing of a sofa expresses a different meaning if done by a man. Joan Semmel's painting from the selection is excellent — is womanly and/or feminist in context more than by content. The proof of the thesis that there is a distinction is that it is specific and deeply personal. That is the art, exclusively woman's art, is not yet. Part of the problem is that we are still not used to looking at and looking for content of a direct sort. It has been schooled out of us, in order to promote art with form as the major criterion, and because content is socially dangerous. Art that expresses content and sensibilities outside white, male, capitalist ones has a hard time of it; but new languages are developing. "Contemporary Women" is to some extent a forestiere.