**ART REVIEW**

**Women Artists: Up To, Including, and Exceeding Their Limits**

How American Women Artists Invented Postmodernism, 1970-1975 is a title with an attitude, one that one should demand at least one "Oh yeah!" or "Prove it!" from viewers of the exhibit at the Mason Gross Galleries in New Brunswick, Friday, January 27, 2006. Such a title also suggests that the works should be approached according to the terms set forth. For me, the problematic work is "Invented." How about "ignored" or "broken," or something closer to "tail-blazing," the adjective used in the press release? The idea that women artists invented postmodernism calls to mind Jenny Roll Morton's seductive painting that, on such, and such a day in 1902 she "invented" Jazz. My only issue with a show where the title states an opinion as if it were fact is that it might get between me and the art. As a result, my instinct is to ignore the "Invented" and the accompanying information and look at the art as a piece of art. As a collection of evidence arranged to validate the title statement. It's a debate I'd prefer not to enter, especially since my knowledge of the development of postmodernism is limited.

I should shout at the outset that no one who comes to the Mason Gross Galleries is going to be bored. The exhibit has been imaginatively organized by Judith Brodsky and curator Ferris Olin, who sees the event more as a "celebration" of women artists than as a testimonial to the inventors of a movement.

As hard as I tried to avoid thinking of the art as evidence, however, there was no way to tune out the background noise that Martha Rosler and other artists. The exhibition is an inventory of functional domestic trivia, including a hamburger press, ice pick, and a picture of a bedroom. In a room that has to be a postmodern bedroom, with no one around to do it, you'll see Rosler's performance video, Semiotics of the Kitchen, in which she displays and identifies various mundane kitchen utensils while speaking in a desultory monotone. The effect is that of being followed around by the relentless repetition of a single word, a laundry list of items that are used to make a meal. If you think about these images, you'll notice the date (1975), and observe that Rosler's way of demonstrating the function of the utensils is to make a weapon of it, stable the cutting board as if it were intimately connected to whatever confines her to this particular prison.

The voice of feminism also follows you around the adjoining room as Martha Wilson uses various makeup techniques to form and deform her own face in Deformation, another video performance from 1975. Again, it's as if the text inherent in the exhibit's title is echoing in your ears as you stand in front of works like Faith Ringgold's charmingly girlish-size soft sculpture, Wild Chamberlain, or Sylvia Stabler's not so charming painting of a nude male lounging in a centerfold pose. It's as if I'm being prod- ded to read the performative nature of a basketball superstar as a feminist critique of male power, and then to state the obvious about the sex object role reversal in the work.

What comes down to is the difference between art-as-a-text and the illustration of a text-as-art. The primary value of Sieghardt's male nude as a text. When you see the piece, you think "Oh, right, it's a feminist artist." And then, when you see Joann Smeall's oil on canvas of two nude bodies, you stretched out side by side, in bed, male and female, large as the surface of the earth, and you don't think about a text. Instead, you think about the well-known male nude, the male nude in a landscape, the landscape created decades ago by a master like Picasso. You see, a formally and conceptually different interpretation of the same statue.

Another example of text containing with art is in the same room where you have Joan Snyder's two bodies and in no way explicitly or even implicitly, "female" oils on the wall to the left, one facing a sloppy brown mess that seems to have been left in the middle of the floor. In fact, it's a bronze by Leonardo that, according to the posted com- mentary, "fits" with the phallic monumentality of sculpture. This rationale for its presence necessarily stresses the "hermaphroditic" and "interchangeable" element of the show. And when you look up from this congealedpuddle of matter, there's the television monitor with Martha Rosler demonstrating the function of a juicer as if she were wringing someone's neck.

**VICTORY OF GENTLENESS (ROSA PARKS):** Betye Saar's mixed media assemblage is in a window box behind a sheet music background ("Alabama Lullaby"), haunted by the absence of the late Rosa Parks, who refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus. Curated by Judith Brodsky and Ferris Olin, How American Women Artists Invented Postmodernism, 1970-1975 will be on display at the Mason Gross Galleries in New Brunswick through Friday, January 27, 2006.

**The Living Text**

Carolee Schneemann comes closer than anyone else to bringing the message of the show to life. She puts her body on the line, literally. Both object and artist, she's a self-portrait in action. What she serves the defenders of mainstream aesthetic decorum is almost as notorious as Robert Maplethorpe. In the mid-1970s, when her performances showed here on film, she must have embodied the threat represented by Women's Lib. In action, the naked woman spins a wheel in a crotch, crawls in hand, turning, and twisting on her own version of a high-wire, a kind of goat-like, dancer, human sculpture, hypno- notizing the spectator, the filmmaker and editor all in one. It makes one kind of sense that to see her you have to jump the film from the show proper. You might miss her altogether or mistake the entrance to the personal theatre for the door of a closest you have to pass a fire extinguisher, a yellow fire extinguisher (room to get there). You'll know you're in the right place when you see the sign warning you that the video in the next room contains "explicit sexual imagery."

Go through the door and you find yourself in a dark room watching a film Schnemann put together from half a dozen different performances. Unlike Interior Scroll, The Case, the simple video the sign warns you about, Up and Including Her Limits is more a mood piece filled with "breathtaking" moments that challenge gender, and the ultimate message is art.

How American Women Artists Invented Postmodernism, 1970-1975 is the inaugural exhibition in a nationwide series, "Renewing Art and Feminism." The series of exhibitions and events, continuing through 2008, will celebrate the stature and increased visibility of art by women in America.

The Mason Gross Galleries are located at Civic Square, 33 Livingston Ave., New Brunswick in Rutgers Mason Gross School of the Arts. The opening is Monday through Friday, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., and by appointment.

—Stuart Mitchner