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Maybe Not the First Postmodernists, but Who's Counting?

By BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO

HOW American Women Artists Invented Postmodernism: 1970-1975" is a scrupulously assembled but somewhat misleadingly titled exhibition at the Mason Gross School of the Arts Galleries at Rutgers University in New Brunswick. For no matter how deserving of attention the many pioneering 1970's American women artists are, it is stretching the truth to say that they were the inventors of postmodernism. Let me explain.

Postmodernism, as far as I am aware, and as I confirmed by a little research, refers generally to a wide-ranging set of international cultural developments (crossing literature, philosophy, art, sociology and architecture) often characterized as springing from, or in reaction to, modernism. These developments were first linked together in France in the 1960's, after which the term gained wider traction.

In art, postmodernism is frequently used to refer to stylistic developments associated with the use of irony, parody, collage and pastiche. In pursuit of this, artists rejected rigid genre boundaries and traditional divisions between low and high art forms, and embraced popular media and materials.

Sure enough, American women artists of the 1970's were at the forefront of these activities, as the three dozen works diligently assembled by the curators, Judith K. Brodsky and Ferris Olin, amply serve to show. But these artists didn't invent these activities. Precedents for this kind of artwork include the pioneering efforts of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns in the 1950's, the work of Pop artists in England, America and Germany in the 1960's, and even early conceptual art the world over.

Putting aside these tedious historical qualifications, this is nonetheless an important exhibition, stocked with artists and germinal artworks from a period that really ought to be better known. (To this end, at least, the curators have done us all a tremendous service.) It is also timely, complementing several upcoming national exhibitions and symposia surveying the women's movement and American women's art.

Feminist artists did contribute new and original ideas to the early postmodern movement, for

example by introducing new ways of looking at the female body and the nude. Several works here bear this out, such as a pair of Joan Semmel paintings from 1974, on the far wall of the main entry room. Both paintings are self-portraits of a kind, the artist painting her nude body from an angle that disrupts the traditional voyeuristic gaze. They are very contemporary-looking.

Performance artists also made ideological strides in this area. Carolee Schneemann was one of them, represented here by a bizarre 1975 video titled "Up to and Including Her Limits." Not for the faint-hearted, it shows a young Ms. Schneemann, nude, swinging back and forth in a harness while drawing on a wall. Later, she dips her hair in paint and then flings it against the wall.

Early feminist artists also incorporated into high art the decorative materials and craft techniques often associated with women, such as needlework, pottery and printmaking. Examples of this in the exhibition include June Wayne's early and remarkable tapestries, Faith Ringgold's quilt-style thangkas (Tibetan silk paintings with embroidery) and Harmony Hammond's faux relics of American Indian women's work.

Women artists of the 1970's also pioneered community access to and public participation in the arts. In Los Angeles in 1970, Judith Baca began working with gang members to paint murals on building walls as cultural markers. The exhibition curators couldn't get one of her murals, obviously, so they installed a painting that the artist made of a mural crew member, a 17-year-old high school boy, who was killed in gang violence while working on a mural project.

Then there is the more obviously political material, like a pair of paintings from May Stevens's "Big Daddy" series that caricature self-important male authoritarian social and political figures wrapped in United States flags. Or Martha Rosler's now-classic feminist video, "Semiotics of the Kitchen" (1975), in which she plays a deranged housewife preparing a meal. Mostly, however, she wields knives and bashes saucepans.

There are other great, if lesser-known, early video works here as well, including "The King" (1972), by Eleanor Antin, in which she dresses up like a French king; or a Martha Wilson video, in which she deforms her face by misusing makeup. Both seem a little tame now, but like much of the artwork here, they were radical for their time.

This show calls insistent attention to the vitality and importance of that moment.

"How American Women Artists Invented Postmodernism: 1970-1975", Mason Gross School of the Arts Galleries, Rutgers University, Civic Square, 33 Livingston Avenue, New Brunswick, through Jan. 27. Information: (732) 932 2222, extension 838, or on the Web at www.masongross.rutgers.edu/press/womenartists.

Photos: Eleanor Antin's video "The King" (above left), May Stevens's painting "Top Man" (left) and Carolee Schneemann's video "Up to and Including Her Limits" (above) are included in an exhibition of work by postmodern women artists. (Photo by Electronic Arts Intermix); (Photo by Mary Ryan Gallery)