

“Better Than Ever: Women Figurative Artists of the 70s SoHo Cooperative Galleries”

INTRODUCTION to Catalog

by Sharyn Finnegan, Curator

Dotty Attie tells all her promising students that, when they are ready, they should get a space and a group of like-minded artists together and put together a show themselves. Daria Dorosh thinks the digital age is made for artists to DIY! And Marjorie Kramer said, “It was fun, wasn’t it?” The “it” is collective action, and this is an exhibition of works by women in whose lives that has played out powerfully.

In 1972, ninety-eight per cent of the galleries in America did not represent a single woman artist. In New York, the commercial art world was uptown, elitist and male dominated. The exception had been several cooperative galleries downtown on East 10th St. starting in the 50s and into the 60s, but women were still a minority although not as extreme. It was a time when there were no women artists in the history books, and almost all the faculty of art schools were men. As the anti-authoritarian spirit of the period bloomed into the Feminist Movement late in the 60s, newly confident women were looking for ways to change the art world’s status quo. A number of them, along with male colleagues, had illegal and cheap studio space in New York City’s dying downtown industrial neighborhood south of Houston St. (“SoHo”). As always, artists gathered in drawing and discussion groups, which yielded ideas for action. Starting in 1969, several artist cooperatives, and a few commercial dealers, pioneered those empty streets with transplanted and new galleries. Half of all the artists involved in the cooperatives were women, a rare percentage in any art scene to this day. Four of the SoHo galleries founded in the early 70s were figurative: Bowery, founded 1969, First Street 1969, Prince Street 1970 and the artist-owned and run Green Mountain 1968. Two galleries were feminist, A.I.R. 1972 and SOHO20 1973, and the others were without stylistic or gender limitations: 55 Mercer 1969, 14 Sculptors 1973, Pleiades 1974, Amos Eno, 1974 and the artist-owned and run Landmark 1972. This exhibition has work from early members of eight of those galleries. Out of the eleven galleries, amazingly, ten are still in existence, mostly in Chelsea, and Green Mountain has become the cooperative gallery, Blue Mountain. A.I.R. and Amos Eno just relocated to the Brooklyn neighborhood of DUMBO, 55 Mercer moved to Long Island City, 14 Sculptors exists online with exhibits at various sites and Landmark closed in 1982.

Figurative women artists were fighting the art world on two fronts: male chauvinism and narrowly defined modernism. Abstract Expressionism had ebbed, but Conceptual Art, Minimalism and Pop Art were dominant, and pluralism, with its acceptance of a variety of styles, was yet to come. As a figurative woman

artist, I saw how the creation of galleries where we could find a community and work together was a compelling and empowering, not to mention subversive, idea. It was a natural extension of the collaborative nature of the Feminist Movement, turning women's cooperative talents into a source of strength. The two feminist galleries expressed this most clearly. The figurative galleries coordinated Friday night openings so we could see as much of each other's work as possible. There would be brief stops to get a bowl of soup at Food restaurant, or a drink at Fanelli's Bar, before going to the Alliance of Figurative Artists on East Broadway for a 9 PM meeting (admission \$1) to argue about what it all meant. These evenings, in addition to the galleries' monthly or bimonthly meetings, helped friendships to develop, and it was common to visit each other's studios or pose for each other's paintings or sculptures. The galleries were also a place where women's work, excluded by the male art world, could be seen: still lifes or installations with women's symbols, toys and lace, explorations of our bodies and identities, small scale work in an era when only large was serious (although, as can be seen in this exhibition, large work was also produced), interiors with women doing ordinary things or images of our children, all in a variety of styles. The exhibitions were very different from the neatly packaged themes with minimal variation that we saw in the commercial galleries. There was an embrace of direct experience and the personal, with a celebration of paint and a sense of touch.

This exhibition was inspired by my formative experience in this exciting period as a member and first director of the Prince Street Gallery. Not long after that, in 1981, I had a potluck dinner party inviting women artist friends to bring an art work for our own little exhibit on a wall of my studio which we could enjoy and talk about while eating good food. Eight of those women are in this exhibit, and others are artists I also have admired for a very long time. It is a small, but very personal, sampling of the figurative women artists who participated in the early 70s in several SoHo galleries. Among the participants are founders of Redstockings, the CAA's Women's Caucus for Art, Artists Choice Museum, New York Studio School, and the Alliance of Figurative Artists, in addition to those who founded or directed artist-run galleries. All of the participating artists have active careers today, careers in which connections and friendships made almost 40 years ago in co-ops are still operative. Each of the nineteen artists has both a work from the 1970s as well as a recent one in the exhibition. Seeing an early and a later work of so many strong artists is a rare opportunity to understand how their unique vision has developed over time. The artists have also provided statements about how the experience of being a part of an artist's cooperative gallery impacted their lives and careers.

Although it is commonplace in our postmodern era to hear pluralism and diversity touted, the current situation is far from equitable despite gains for women artists of all stripes. In the fall of 2006, 20% of the solo shows in NYC galleries were of women artists and the major NYC museums averaged 14%

female artists representation. In 2007, the Guerrilla Girls surveyed the top thirty NYC galleries and prime museums and found similar numbers. As can be seen in this exhibition, the cooperative gallery model has proved itself as a way for women artists to effectively pursue a professional career while connecting to a supportive community. Some of the artists stayed with cooperatives and some moved to commercial galleries but, as you will read, their experience in the co-ops was pivotal. These women provide a variety of answers to young artists wondering about how to be an artist in the world.



About the Artists

by Herne Pardee

In the decades after 1960, the traditional arts of painting and drawing seemed increasingly absorbed by the mass media: paintings were packaged into blockbuster museum shows, while photography, video and other media of mechanical reproduction became the context for visual art. In this period of radical experimentation, some younger downtown artists found renewed possibilities in traditional practices, enlarging the scope of conventional genres of still-life, landscape and figure. For all the artists in this exhibition, the early 1970s inspired intense reflection and the building of new relationships - an ongoing process that's evident in their recent works today. Not surprisingly, their efforts focus on bringing women's perspectives to bear - sometimes with an overtly feminist agenda, but more often simply to further self-discovery and communal action.

As early as the 1950s, painters like Jane Freilicher and Nell Blaine sought alternatives to the dominant style of Abstract Expressionism in working from direct observation. They also were among the first generation of NY artists to exhibit in artist-run galleries, centered at that time on East 10th Street. Inspired by poets such as Frank O'Hara, they responded in an almost journalistic way to people and places in their daily lives. Such response can be seen in Janet Fish's painterly studies of glassware, which import gestural abstraction into a domestic realm. Other artists, such as Marion Lerner Levine, pursue a similar sort of personal sensibility; Levine's depiction of Italian tomato cans, with their sensuously colored labels, inevitably recall Andy Warhol's silk-screened replicas of soup cans, but are grounded in perceptual truth.

In a different medium, Susan Grabel questions consumerism through her painted ceramics, with a humor that recalls the funk aesthetic of Robert Arneson. Shaw

Stuart uses found materials to extend the still-life convention, imbuing everyday objects with a sense of religious mystery. Tomar Levine imparts a similar ritual reverence to the carefully arranged objects in her paintings.

Artists such as Dottie Attie and Daria Dorosh responded to the crisis of representation in the 1970s with their own strategies of fragmentation and repetition, excerpting and recontextualizing older works to suggest new narrative or political meanings. In her new work, Dorosh discards genre traditions altogether, as in her photograph combining a small modeled figure with rusted scissors in an outdoor setting. Landscape merges with domestic space in this work, as it does also in Nancy Beal's depiction of her own garden in New York. Marcia Clark goes to the opposite extreme, in her expeditions to Arctic locations, which she nonetheless endows with the immediacy of direct perception. Temma Bell brings to New York City or to Iceland her combination of detached observation and painterly interpretation. Landscape can also bear political implications, as it does in Cynthia Mailman's carefully refracted images, contextualized by the frames of car windows or within borders carrying ecological commentaries.

Figure painting offers more complex insights into changing attitudes. Sylvia Sleigh's depictions of male nudes reverse conventional gender roles, even as they individualize their models in ways not common in conventional nudes. In her choice of works, Nancy Grilikhes sets up parallels between still life and portraiture, which share a cool objectivity and subdued sensuality. Frances Siegel, in contrast, assumes a theatrical persona in her early self-portrait, while in her current work uses found materials in fetishistic montages. Selina Trieff's works develop theatricality in a thematic way, moving from images of herself to iconic figures emblematic of spiritual values.

Given the masculine orientation of figure painting in general, it is not surprising to find these artists concentrating on self-portraiture, or on studies of friends; beyond questions of expense, there's a discomfort with the exploitation implied in the role of model itself. Barbara Grossman's early portrait of Louise Hamlin falls into a long tradition of painters depicting fellow painters, a tradition to which contemporaries such as Alice Neel often contributed. Grossman's recent paintings feature interactions among women in domestic interiors, which generate an overall orchestration of color and space. Like other artists in the show, she has evolved from particular women's issues to encompass larger concerns. The developments recorded in Sharyn Finnegan's and Marjorie Kramer's frank self-images are not just those of age but of self-awareness and acceptance, an artistic maturation comparable to that of Susan Grabel's recent sculptures of an aging body. Juanita McNeely's more violent and intensely personal images also use her own figure in the expressionistic tradition.

While it's interesting to seek out continuities and contrasts among the works

represented here, considering their diversity and their common roots in the 1970s, the best course is to attend to them individually, valuing each for its specific conviction and its testimony to a particular moment and point of view. As they did in the 1970s, these women artists ask us to suspend conventional expectations and learn with them through their work.