HOME WORK:
The domestic environment reflected in work by contemporary women artists

Syracuse University Art Galleries
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National Women's Hall of Fame
Seneca Falls, NY
May 10-September 10, 1981
Reception May 10, 1-4 P.M.

Joe & Emily Lowe Art Gallery
Syracuse University
September 27-November 1, 1981
Reception September 27, 3-5 P.M.
In the last ten years, a body of work by women has appeared which contains images, materials, or processes (activities or techniques) that are associated with the domestic environment. This is the visual reflection of an examination of women’s roles and experiences in this culture that has been taking place within the feminist movement. Until very recently these experiences have been absent from mainstream art. In the past, creative work that was done in the home (and which was therefore usually by women) was ignored or put down as “craft.” Since women and their experiences were not considered important, any work that was reflective of the home, the place where “women’s work” was done, was considered unimportant or irrelevant.

Today, women are approaching their domestic experience as artmaking. In doing so, they are reclaiming and affirming women’s lives and daily experiences as important and interesting. Others, through their art, critique these culturally imposed roles.

Obviously household images have been and are used by male artists. But when we look at how they are used, when we look at what the concerns are, and what the particular statement or feeling of the piece is, they usually appear quite different than work by women. For instance, it is interesting to note that most Pop artists (and certainly the most popular of them) were men, and while they chose the commonplace object as their subject matter, the work generally was about the media and marketing of these objects. They were presented in a detached way, objects in the world at large rather than in the privacy of the home. It is as if the home was purged to make a statement about culture out there as opposed to the home which was not considered to be part of the culture. As Lucy Lippard points out, if the first Pop artists had been women, chances are that Pop Art as a movement would probably never have gotten off the ground or out of the closet since it would have been dismissed as too personal, or merely genre.

When we begin to examine the work being done today by women that deals with the domestic environment, we begin to see several recurring approaches to the subject matter. As Lippard writes, women “...seem to be taking off from, rather than getting off on, the implications of floors, brooms, and dirty laundry.”

The main way that domestic imagery appears is in a renewed interest in the still life, a form that can be simultaneously personal, intimate, and political. Women have been redefining the traditional still life in a number of ways. Instead of the classical arrangement of fruit and wine bottle (usually arranged in a studio) we are presented with the reality of what surrounds women in their daily lives—sinks full of dirty dishes, unmade beds, laundry, appliances to be used or polished, food cooked and put up in canning jars, orcellophone wrapped from the grocery store. Sometimes these still lifes are presented neatly put away on shelves or in drawers, but usually the objects take on more meaning, as if to say a woman’s work is never done. The images fill the canvas as the chores fill the day. The artist’s perspective, and therefore our perspective as we view the work, is directly over the sink looking down, the edge of the canvas framing and limiting our range of vision, or objects viewed from the floor as we were done there scrubbing away. Even what would seem to be traditional diorama studies have the added content of unmade beds, folded clothes, and dirty laundry.

Other still lifes are like visual scrapbooks, with fragments of women’s lives coming together. These are often autobiographical and intimate in nature, including grandmother’s china or needlework, a photograph, textiles, favorite jewelry, other special momentos or objects from collections. They are arranged like knock knock on a coffee table or alons on a dresser top. Many women are collectors, and their collections seem to find their way into their art.

Sometimes, but rarely, women are actually pictured within the domestic scene. More often we, the viewers are left to project ourselves into this private world. When women are depicted they are usually alone having a quiet cup of coffee, isolated, or perhaps looking out a window. Always a private world is alluded to—sometimes hope, escape, transformation, or connection.

Perhaps it is women’s use of the grid that most implies connections and ties. Women have used the grid as a means of organizing and controlling their art much in the same way that lets organize their lives. When combined with marking, the grid is transformed from its reference to weaving to design, decoration, and patterning.
Even the materials that women use to make their art often reflect activities that normally take place in the home. In addition to traditional art materials such as paint, pencil, chalk, and clay, women are using such materials as cloth, thread, sequins, beads, ribbons, ric-rac and yarn, which refer to women's traditional needle arts. Or, they are utilizing lint, shopping lists, newspaper and magazine clippings, coupons, kitchen shelving paper, patterns, tiles, linoleum, wall paper, aprons, napkins, food itself, and all sorts of left overs, odds and ends, and hand-me-downs. Indeed it seems that their ability to make use of everything extends to their art.

Both materials and techniques have been used with a consciousness that contributes to the meaning of the works. For instance the tools used to do cooking and housework are often used to apply paint or manipulate other materials used in the art. Activities that are associated with women's work are utilized in a creative way. Gardening, ironing, cleaning, resting, sewing, weaving, knitting, quilting, crocheting, interior decorating, cooking, keeping family histories, polishing, china painting, and cake decorating, used as techniques, are all ways of giving reference to domestic roles. Creative possibilities are expanded. Repetitive acts reflect the tediousness or take on a new activeness that place in the home. In addition to traditional "Home as Its Subtitle" exhibit, All three materials and combined together as a whole, are combined in various ways by each woman. While there is a common denominator of shared experience as women in this society, the works are varied as each individual woman and her experiences and feelings. While the work takes on different forms, there is a literal as well as metaphorical and political level. The plans for what is now the National Women's Hall of Fame began in 1968 when a group of women from the Seneca Falls area met at a founder's tea to discuss establishing an organization designed to honor American women. Up until that time, no such institution existed. The Hall became and remains the only organization whose purpose is to honor in perpetuity those women, citizens of the United States of America, whose contributions to the arts, athletics, business, education, government, humanities, philanthropy and science, have been of the greatest value for the development of their country.

The Hall is especially pleased to have the opportunity to display "Home Work" as its 1988 summer exhibit. This exhibit, created especially for the Hall by artist/curator Harmony Hammond, was organized around the theme of the domestic environment. The domestic issues and imagery as reflected in the work of these individual women artists is vital and current. Yet, some of the issues surrounding women's experience in the home are not new to the seventies and eighties or even to the twentieth century. In 1858 Elizabeth Stanton was spurred in her own domestic situation and that of other women. In her words, "I now fully understood the practical difficulties most women had to contend with in the isolated household... The general domestic I felt with woman's portion as wife, mother, housekeeper, physician, and spiritual guide, the chaotic conditions into which everything fell without her constant supervision, and the wearied, anxious look of the majority of women impressed me with a strong feeling that some active measures should be taken to remedy the wrongs of society in general, and of women in particular"

If Elizabeth Cady Stanton were here with us today, she would undoubtedly be pleased with this creative outpouring of domestic imagery that has been brought together here in the special exhibit by Harmony Hammond and Creative Artists: Public Service Programs (CAPS). On behalf of the Officers and the Board of Directors of the National Women's Hall of Fame, I want to thank Ms. Hammond, Isabelle Fernandez, Executive Director, CAPS, Ellen Weider, Director of Visual Arts, Referral Service, & Lisa Peters, VARS assistant, for creat- ing and organizing this exhibit, and all the artists who have shared their work with us. We also want to thank Fashion Institute of Technology for designing the exhibit catalog and poster and Gouda Pumps, Inc., Seneca Falls, New York, for printing the poster and catalog.

Carol N. Stallone
Executive Director

Syracuse University Libraries
The Origins of this Exhibition...

The Creative Artists Public Service Program, CAPS, is a non-profit organization funded by the New York State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts. CAPS awards fellowships in poetry, music, film, fiction, painting, sculpture, graphic, photography, multi-media, choreography, video, and new music composition to professional artists who are residents of New York State. The Visual Arts Referral Service (VARS), a part of the CAPS program, is a slide and information registry. VARS contains slides and biographical material on visual artists who have been fellowship recipients, and others who have been recommended for inclusion by the panelists during the application review procedure. VARS can be used by any organization or individual wishing to purchase, exhibit, or commission an artist’s work. VARS also coordinates an exhibition program and mounts shows in exhibition spaces throughout New York State. Artists from the file are chosen by guest curators to participate in different theme exhibitions.

The staff of the Visual Arts Referral Service and the CAPS Program are happy to have this opportunity to collaborate with the Women’s Hall exhibition, and your suggestions for those to come.

Ellen Weider
Director
Visual Arts Referral Service

ARTISTS

IDA APPLEBROOG
LINDA BASTIAN
CYNTHIA CARLSON
DONNA DENNIS
SARAH DRANEY
LENORE GOLDBERG
RUTH GRAY
HARMONY HAMPSON
JANE KAUFMAN
JOYCE KOZLOFF
PAT LASCH
MARION LERNER LEVINE
KAREN LIGHTNER
DIANE MARSH

KATHLEEN MIGLIORE NEWTON
PATSY NORVELL
ELAINE REICHEK
MIRIAM SCAPIRO
LAURA SCHRADER
DEE SHAPIRO
LOPETTA MENCHEL SHAPIRO
HARRIET SHERR
KATHERINE SOKOLNICKOFF
JOYCE STILLMAN-MYERS
PAULA TAVINS
MIMI WEISBORD
MELANIE WYCOFNIK
IDA APPLEBROOG

"It Isn't True"
rhodex and ink on vellum
Courtesy of Ronald Feldman/Downtown
1979
60" x 12" x 1"
LINDA BASTIAN

"Garland"
hand painted silk
1981
75" x 60"

CYNTHIA CARLSON

"Rusty Trifle"
acrylic and canvas on wood
1973
47 1/2" x 45"
DONNA DENNIS

maquette for "Two Stories with Porch"
1977
8 3/4" x 8 3/4" x 6 1/2"

SARAH DRANET

"Fish Dish"
porcelain
1980
8" diameter
LENORE GOLDBERG

Untitled
wax, thread, oil paint on paper
1980
1 x 3'

RUTH GRAY

"Beach Cottage"
oil on canvas
1976-77
48" x 72"
HARMONY HAMMOND

"Bag VII"
acrylic and cloth
Courtesy of Lerner-Heller Gallery
1971
54" x 22"

JANE KAUFMAN

"Untitled" (pair)
bugle-beads on velvet
1978
17½" x 17½ x 4" (each)
JOYCE KOZLOFF

Untitled

ceramic tile, plywood, grout

Courtesy of Barbara Gladstone Gallery

1980

24" x 24"

PAT LASCH

"White cake Sculpture"

wood with paint and paper

1980

6" x 6" x 6"
MARION LERNER LEVINE

“The Flowered Border” (diptych)

watercolor
1977
18" x 48"

KAREN LIGHTNER

“Apron Piece”
apron, SX-70, embroidered text
1980
17" x 23"
DIANE MARSH
“Red/Green”
oil on canvas
1979
48” x 60”

KATHLEEN MIGLIORE NEWTON
“Bread and Roses: A Portrait of Elizabeth Gurley Flynn”
ceramic painted with acrylic
Courtesy of Carol Ruane
1978
5” x 7”
PATSY NORVELL

"Vinyl Shelving Quilt"
v vinyl shelving, ruffle, paper, glue
1972
40 1/2" x 41"

ELAINE REICHEK

"White Bonnet"
yarn, paper, photo and book
1979
42" x 55"
MIRIAM SCHAPIRO
“The Architectural Basis”
fabric and acrylic
1976
80" x 72"

LAURA SCHECHTER
“Still Life by the Night Window”
pencil on paper
Courtesy of Forum Gallery, NYC
1976
63½" x 9½"
DEE SHAPIRO

“Paper Quilt”
xerox on paper
1978
8 x 8’

LORETTA MENCHEL SHAPIRO

“Branded Fruits”
oil on canvas
1976
3 x 3’
HARRIET SHORR

"Primary Polka"

oil on canvas

1980

60" x 90"

KATHERINE SOKOLNIKOFF

"Rose House"

low fire white clay

1979

13" x 11" x 14"
JOYCE STILLMAN-MYERS

“Pinwheels”
oil on canvas
Courtesy of Louis K. Meisel Gallery NYC
1976
50” x 75”

PAULA TAVINS

“Great Eagle”
magna on canvas
1972
52” x 49”
MIMI WEISBORD

"Flower Wallpaper Fragment"
gouache on paper
Courtesy of Getzelli/Gall Gallery
1979
38" x 30"

MELANIE WYGONIK

"Just Desserts"
Ballpoint pen and watercolor on paper
1980
22" x 30"