

# global feminisms

NEW DIRECTIONS IN CONTEMPORARY ART

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**MERRELL**  
LONDON • NEW YORK

Brooklyn Museum



## Women Artists Then and Now: Painting, Sculpture, and the Image of the Self

Linda Nochlin

Looking back at the catalogue of *Women Artists: 1550–1950*,<sup>1</sup> the first big show of women artists at the Brooklyn Museum that I curated with Ann Sutherland Harris in 1976, I was struck by the great differences separating it from the Museum's present exhibition of women artists. Some of these differences are obvious. The first show was historical rather than contemporary. From this it followed that it consisted almost entirely of drawing and painting; even sculpture was omitted in the interest of consistency. Clearly, back then, the word "artist," female as well as male, implied that the individual was primarily a painter. In the present show, however, painting and traditional sculpture take a backseat to the less traditional media: photography, video and the moving image, installation, and performance have gained center stage. Clearly, *what* the work is made of is now very different. But *where* the work comes from, the nationality and ethnicity of the artists who made it, is equally important in establishing the difference between *Women Artists: 1550–1950* and the present exhibition. Exciting and innovative as it was, the Brooklyn show of the seventies consisted almost without exception of work by women from Europe and America. Today's exhibition includes a plethora of women artists from non-Western countries, women from all over the world, in fact. These contemporary women artists, not just from Europe, Britain, and the United States, but from Africa, Asia, Australia, and Latin America, have insisted upon the validity of their own experience, both personal and artistic, creating new formal languages that often incorporate national and ethnic traditions in surprising or nontraditional ways. They are included in the exhibition not only out of a benign desire to expand the field in the interest of justice, but because non-Western women artists are among the most influential movers and shakers in the international art community, acknowledged creators of the most original and influential art that reaches the public. Women artists were among the stars of the 2005 Venice Biennale, for example, and names like Shirin

Neshat, Mona Hatoum, Miyako Ishiuchi, and Regina José Galindo were as prominent as those of major male artists participating in the Venice show.

Yet the path to public recognition and professional success has been a long and arduous one, and both the goals and achievements of women artists during the thirty-five years since the beginning of the Women's Liberation Movement in art, as embodied in the work of such pioneers as Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, Martha Rosler, Hannah Wilke, Eleanor Antin, Joyce Kozloff, Carolee Schneemann, Lynda Benglis, and many others, need to be acknowledged. Indeed, the work of women artists well before the momentous 1970s needs to be examined with specificity and critical insight in order to provide a meaningful historical context for the work and ambitions of younger women artists today. For contemporary women artists, sometimes consciously, but often unconsciously, incorporate, modify, and struggle against the examples of the past, their putative foremothers. It is only in the light of historical precedent that the achievements of the present assume their full meaning: as fulfillment, transformation, or resolute deconstruction, as may be the case.

### Women and Painting

#### *Setting the Stage*

History and mythology part ways, as they so often do, when it comes to the issue of women painters. In mythology, women were associated with the very origins of painting. According to the charming legend of the Corinthian Maid, it was a young woman, Dibutades, who, dismayed by the impending departure of her lover, traced the outline of the shadow he cast upon the wall and, with Cupid guiding her hand, thereby invented painting.<sup>2</sup> If we turn from allegory to historical reality, however, we find that women have, for the most part, had a hard time of it in the field of painting, as in all the realms of high art. The dramatic fate of the seventeenth-century painter Artemesia Gentileschi has recently been revealed in

Opposite:  
Detail of Jenny Saville, *Passage*,  
2004–5 (see fig. 5)



Fig. 21 (top left)  
**Pinaree Sanpitak** (Thailand, b. 1961), *Temporary Insanity*, 2003–4. Silk by Jim Thompson, synthetic fiber, battery, motor, propeller, timer, sound device, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist

Fig. 22 (top right)  
**Leung Mee Ping** (Hong Kong, China, b. 1961), *Memorize the Future*, 1998–2006. Installation with 10,000 shoes made of human hair (various races), dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist. (Photo: Joel Lam)

Fig. 23 (above)  
**Kiki Smith** (U.S.A., b. 1954), *Tale*, 1992. Wax, papier-mâché, dimensions variable. Collection of Jeffrey Deitch. © Kiki Smith. (Photo: courtesy of PaceWildenstein, New York)

I would say that some contemporary installation art may indeed be thought of as a kind of expanded sculptural field, in which several objects coexisting in space, coherently and meaningfully related, constitute a postmodern version of the traditional heroic sculptural group or monumental public complex. Installations like Pinaree Sanpitak's *Temporary Insanity* (fig. 21), made out of silk, synthetic fiber, a battery, motor, propeller, timer, and sound device, can evoke emotional dissonance and extreme disarray as effectively as the flailing and lamenting marble figures in the Classical Niobid group. The seemingly endless procession of empty children's shoes constituting Leung Mee Ping's *Memorize the Future* (fig. 22) evokes the national destiny of twenty-first-century China as effectively as François Rude's *La Marseillaise* could invoke the heroic post-revolutionary future of nineteenth-century France.

Yet women sculptors have not completely abandoned the human figure in recent years. Kiki Smith has created memorable examples of the male and female nude that evoke the sculptural precedents of the past and at the same time break away from the constraints of both the classical and the medieval traditions. The first Kiki Smith piece that I remember seeing created a visceral shock like almost no other. I can still summon up the intensity of the feeling, as though the bottom had suddenly dropped out of the sedate world of the gallery and my own place