

HYPERALLERGIC

Perspectives on Female Identity, Inspired by Nancy Spero

An exhibition at Wave Hill features artists from Australia to the Dominican Republic who, like Spero, make work that subverts archetypal depictions of women.

By Bansie Vasvani
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Zanele Muholi, "Zibuyile" (2015) (all images courtesy of Wave Hill)

The serene landscape of Wave Hill, which overlooks the Hudson River in the northern enclaves of the Bronx, seems like a stark contrast to the exhibition *Outcasts: Women in the Wilderness* currently on view at the Wave Hill House, built in 1843 on the lush grounds. Removed from the hubbub of Manhattan, the voices of the "outcasts" in the exhibition provide an emancipatory perspective on female subjects, especially in light of the current administration's alienation of women and people of color.



Nancy Spero, "Masha Bruskina/Vulture Goddess" (1996), handprinting and printed collage on paper, 72.5 x 19.5 in

Guest curators Deborah Frizzell and David Weil's impetus for the exhibition comes from the American artist and activist Nancy Spero's representations of the female subject in her printed collages on paper. Long considered an outsider herself, Spero's use of ancient art, mythology, folklore, porn, and magazines that conflated histories and cultures from across the world resonate with what other women artists around the globe are doing today. Spero's scrolls "Masha Bruskina/Vulture Goddess" (1996) and "La Folie III" (2002) form the backbone of this expansive group exhibition. The first depicts Bruskina, a Russian Jew who was hanged for being a partisan during World War II, surrounded by vultures, which were symbols of femininity, maternal strength, and power in Egyptian mythology; this mirrors multiple perspectives on female identity that mine personal and ancient mythology in the show. Here artists from Aboriginal Australia, Afghanistan, Dominican Republic, India, Indonesia, Iran, Native America, Pakistan, South Africa, Taiwan, and the US combine culture-specific motives with modern forms to create female figures that fulminate in a realm that defies easy narrative and interpretation.

Take Samira Abbassy's "Autobiographical Confessions through effigies, idols, saints and Martyrs. A journey through the stages of a life: sex, love, marriage, childbirth, betrayal, rage, revenge, illness, healing and redemption" (2017). The piece, comprising four shelves full of small surreal sculptures made up of doll parts, dentures, a goat's head, hair, pantyhose, wings, glass, ceramic, clay, fabric, jewelry, and toothpicks, mines Abbassy's subconscious to reveal experiences from her native Iran and her life in the West. Amid this amalgamation we see an arched woman with identical heads dangling from her neck and vagina, a tiny bust fitted with dentures for a head, a headless woman with splayed legs giving birth to a shapeless form, and an Abu Ghraib-like torture subject. These female sculptures subvert archetypal depictions of women while creating bizarre narratives that suggest the subjugation of women outside the Western periphery.



Samira Abbassy, “Autobiographical Confessions through effigies, idols, saints and Martyrs. A journey through the stages of a life: sex, love, marriage, childbirth, betrayal, rage, revenge, illness, healing and redemption” (2017)

One also sees this knack for reinvention and making the familiar fresh in Jaishri Abichandani’s small clay sculptures of the Hindu goddess Kali, who is traditionally portrayed as a larger-than-life destroyer of evil forces. In Abichandani’s works, Kali appears with animal heads, amputated limbs, enticing voluptuous breasts, and an open vagina. Seen strumming the traditional *tanpura* instrument with a male head at the base, Abichandani’s Kali joins a league of female forms that enter the wilderness of unexplored territories, undaunted by a fear of commingling mythology with her conception of the tortured but strong female form.

For such artists, Spero’s trailblazing path of feminism that initially shocked and embarrassed her audiences has been particularly inspiring. When Yee-I-Lann first encountered Spero’s work in 1997, as she states in her essay in the catalog, she realized that “it’s okay to conflate personal storytelling with politics and current affairs.” In her three-channel video, “Imagining Pontianak: I’ve Got Sunshine on a Cloudy Day” (2016), I-Lann uses the image of the popular Indonesian female ghost to give voice to young women in her country who discuss their bodies and sexual experiences.



Jaishri Abichandani, “Before Kali”



Yee I-Lann, stills from “Pontianak: I’ve Got Sunshine on a Cloudy Day” (2016)

Even the landscape in Tracey Moffatt and Huma Bhabha’s photographs is imbued with the beauty of otherness. Moffatt’s celestial images reference the sky above her aboriginal ancestral lands, while Bhabha culls some sense of serenity from desolate strips of Pakistan that she returns to periodically. And Kris Grey gains strength from positioning himself as a “self-designed hybrid” who uses “hormones and medical technology to craft a defiant body.” Grey’s gender-bending figure, which challenges categorization and prevents the formulation of specific conclusions, best sums up many of the artists in this exhibition, who, like Spero did, continue to make work despite their adversaries. Much like Zanele Muholi’s portraits of the LGBTI community in South Africa that appear to repeatedly stand up to their naysayers, women from the wilderness are welcomed as insiders in the calm, unflappable quarters of Wave Hill for their tenacity and for empowering collective memory.



Khris Grey, “Greenhouse”



Outcasts: Women in the Wilderness, installation view (photo by Stefan Hagen)



Outcasts: Women in the Wilderness, installation view (photo by Stefan Hagen)

Outcasts: Women in the Wilderness continues at Wave Hill House (West 249th Street and Independence Avenue, Bronx) through July 9.