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“...That Women Tend To Make”: The Female Gaze at the Pennsylvania Academy

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Report from...Philadelphia

The Female Gaze: Women Artists Making their World at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, November 17, 2012 to April 7, 2013.



Ann Agee, *Birthing Class*, 2001. Porcelain, china paint and gold luster, 15 x 15 x 24 inches. Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

In his now notorious remarks in the *New York Times*, [Ken Johnson](#) invited anyone with a theory about the kind of art “women tend to make” to test it out by visiting the exhibition, *The Female Gaze*, at the Pennsylvania Academy. My 13-year-old daughter, who has attended many contemporary exhibitions, revealed her theory when she quipped, “Dad, are there going to be a lot of vagina paintings in this show?”

In fact, the sole match for her particular view of women’s art was an untitled test plate from Judy Chicago’s *Dinner Party* (1976). The works in the show might fit any description or label that has been applied to art: abstract, representational, conceptual; personal and political; militant and conventional; academic and outsider. Anyone who attends this show with theories—or better put, stereotypes—of women’s art in mind is bound to be disappointed.

The Female Gaze celebrates an inspired addition to the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts’ venerable holdings. Collector, philanthropist, and artist Alter Linda Lee Alter has donated over 500 works in every style and medium imaginable. In the same gallery one finds Daisy Youngblood’s gorilla sculpture; Barbara Takenaga’s swirling, jewel-like abstract painting; Catherine Murphy’s hyper-real painting of a gun target stapled to a tree; Kara Walker’s silhouettes of antebellum figures; and an enameled metal sign by Jenny Holzer.

The bequest is all the more important when understood side-by-side with the Academy’s existing collection, enshrined next door in its landmark Furness building. Despite efforts to tout a 200-year history of friendliness toward women, the Academy’s past accessions are rather one-sided, and might just as aptly be called the *Male Gaze*.

During an interview, Alter explained to me that most of the institutions on the short list for this bequest were male-dominated. She believed, however, that her gift to the Academy would be transformative. The size of the existing collection meant that the donated works would be visible, and the bequest came with a commitment by the staff to take care of them and display them alongside existing art.

While *Female Gaze* reveals no clear tendency among women artists, it does evince the collector’s preferences. The persistence of painting, and especially figure painting, is deeply felt in this selection of work. Greeting us very directly at the entrance are Diane Edison’s painted *Self-Portrait* (1996) and pastel *Nude Self-Portrait* (1995). In this second piece the artist gazes down haughtily at the viewer from between her pendulous breasts. The African American artist is known for her intense portraiture, and in this case gives us a rich expanse of brown hues rarely seen in museum nudes. Alice Neel’s palette is quite different in *Claudia Bach Pregnant* (1975), with contrasting pinks and greens representing flesh and fabric. The painter keeps the eye busy with a lively cadence of curved lines and culminating black tresses falling over the sitter’s shoulder.

There is also a strong interest in art which turn old idioms to new uses. Judith Schaechter’s stained glass works, for example, project nightmares of the contemporary urban world through the colors and graphic styles of this medieval medium. Like a cathedral window image of the baby Jesus, *Child and Toy* (1989) is organized according to the decorative geometry of its frame, with figures in the central space and a chain of symbolic elements on the periphery. The artist uses brilliant red and yellow glass to depict a doll-like child



Diane Edison, *Nude Self Portrait*, 1995. Pastel on black paper, 44-1/4 x 30 inches. Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, courtesy of George Adams Gallery, New York.

menaced by toys: candy and stuffed animals on the one hand, and the more adult amusements, money, drugs and guns on the other. Looking at an entirely different reality, Ann Agee uses the style of the ceramic tabletop knick-knack to commemorate a middle-class ritual in *Birth Class* (2001). Colorfully dressed pregnant women listen to a demonstration by a nurse while their hipster-ish husbands look on with excessively cheerful smiles. Glints of light on the glazed surface underscore the overwrought optimism of the scene.

With the emphasis on representational work, the exhibition shows a clear bias toward the retinal and away from the conceptual. There are the occasional objects, however, that raise questions about the boundaries between art and life, image and representation. One is the 1993 painting *Target* by Catherine Murphy. Easily mistaken for a photograph, this bullet-ridden image brings an object into the gallery that, particularly amidst current debate over gun control, we would rather not see. It also offers a connection to the Academy's nineteenth century collections, which include a section of tromp l'oeil painting, and a focus on the science of collecting and categorizing lived experience.

Finding other points of connection to the Academy's historic collection will determine whether *Women Artists Making their World* is indeed transformative. If the displays in the old gallery had a subtitle, it would be “Male Artists Making the World”—for the artists there, like Benjamin West, Gilbert Stuart, George Inness, John Singer Sargent and Thomas Eakins, have taught us how to see. The question for me, then, is not how women artists create their own world, but how they complete our picture of what the world looks like.

One indication of how this might be done is in *Female Gaze's* inclusion of works from the Chicago art milieu of the late 1960s and 1970s. This radical scene saw the participation of men and women in collectives like the Hairy Who, and spawned the careers of artists such as Nancy Spero, Christina Ramberg and Suellen Rocca, alongside of men like Roger Brown, Ed Paschke, and Jim Nutt. Ramberg's painting *Hereditary Uncertainty* (1977), exhibited in *Female Gaze*, contains the jagged shapes and colors found in work by Roger Brown. Yet Ramberg's subject, the straightjacketing of women's

bodies through clothing, is distinctly feminist. Significantly, this painting was also included in a 2012 Academy exhibit on the influence of famed Art Institute of Chicago teacher Ray Yoshida. It was displayed in the historic Furness building, only footsteps away from Thomas Eakins' monumental surgical scene, *The Gross Clinic*. On that occasion, the female gaze revealed to us a way of hacking up a body that Eakins overlooked.



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