



Bad Girls to the Rescue

An exhibition of feminist art from the 1990s has much to teach us today

By Maura Reilly

In my new book *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating* (Thames & Hudson), I devoted a chapter to exhibitions that have lingered in the historical record for their commitment to “Resisting Masculinism and Sexism.” As what constitutes sexual prejudice continues to evolve, it’s imperative that curators continually query and challenge the gender norms by which we are all confined. “Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon,” a recent exhibition at the New Museum in New York,

did just that—and within a lineage worth revisiting as the present adjusts for oversights of the past.

Though most commonly associated with a notorious run at the New Museum in 1994—in a tradition that would directly influence “Trigger” decades later—the first iteration of a series of shows titled “Bad Girls” was organized separately the year before for the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London (followed by a presentation at the Centre for Contemporary Arts in Glasgow). Curated by Kate Bush,

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Emma Dexter, and Nicola White, the exhibition celebrated a new spirit of playfulness, tactility, and perverse humor in the work of six British and American women artists: Helen Chadwick, Dorothy Cross, Nicole Eisenman, Rachel Evans, Nan Goldin, and Sue Williams—each of whom was represented by several works.

The term “bad girls” was defined in the London catalogue as “sly, in-your-face, disturbing, provocative, haunting, subtle, sensual, shocking, sexy.” The exhibition sought to celebrate the multiplicity of feminisms in the 1990s, undermining tendencies toward the essentialist and didactic voices of early feminist work. “Irreverent, personal, shocking, funny, and fey,” the curators explained, the show “dares to attack on two fronts at once: offending proscriptive feminism as well as the reactionary forces of patriarchy.” The curators’ aim was not to present work in the lineage of 1980s artists such as Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, and Jenny Holzer—whose works, they argued, “put a feminist gloss upon the power and manipulations of the media, movies, and advertising”—but rather to harken back to “the surrealist traditions of Louise Bourgeois and Meret Oppenheim as well as the aggressive camp of Judy Chicago’s *Dinner Party*.” It did not purport to be a definitive survey of current trends within feminist art, but rather a “sympathetic grouping” that allowed for “intriguing and provocative correspondences” between the works.

Highlights of the London exhibition included Eisenman’s drawing *Betty Gets It* (1992), which parodies the happy heterosexuality of the characters Betty and Wilma—from the 1960s animated television series *The Flintstones*—as a lesbian couple, and Williams’s *A Funny Thing Happened* (1992), which depicts a series of rape scenes in stark black acrylic on white canvas with scrawled texts reading, “We don’t know if she enjoyed it or not.” Also featured were Chadwick’s sculpture *Glossolia* (1993)—a circular table on which several golden pelts are arranged like a trophy below a cone centerpiece with lapping lambs’ tongues cast in glistening bronze—as well as photographic portraits by Goldin of drag queens and those living with AIDS. And then there were images of Amazons castrating pirates (Eisenman), platonic romance (Evans), and surrealist juxtapositions (Cross). In all, it was a selection of powerful works exemplifying what one critic called “the very highest fuck-you-fem Mae West tradition.”

The London exhibition received mixed reviews. Brian Sewell, writing in the *London Evening Standard*, complained that the works on view demonstrated “anti-male prejudice at its silliest and most obsessive—hysterical and violent propaganda utterly contemptible as art.” Laura Cottingham, writing in *Frieze* magazine—but who, ironically, also wrote for the ICA catalogue—was fiercely critical of the exhibition, taking particular issue with the title itself, as did Iwona Blazwick, who noted that it stressed an “infantile, naughty, rebellious posture whereas there was actually a very serious and powerful thrust to a lot of the work in the show.” Cottingham argued that the exhibition presented



some of “the artistic products of feminism’s partial success in the form of an apology, a laugh.” The curators, she said, attempted to appeal to “the tritest cliché of male chauvinist charges—that feminists have no sense of humor.” The “girlie giggle,” she continued, “an unconscious social signifier women deliver as a sign that you (men) need not take us seriously, is put forward as the controlling rhetoric. This ‘It’s So Funny!’ curatorial posture betrays both feminism and art: none of the artists included in this exhibition is either a failed or an aspiring comedian and all are undeservedly trivialized by this mockery.”

Others were more forgiving. Ekow Eshun wrote in *Elle* magazine, for example, that while the images were disturbing and confrontational, they also challenged a history of art in which women are merely passive subjects: “And bleak as their subject matter is, the cumulative effect of the new generation’s work is liberating rather than depressing.”

A year later, in 1994, curator Marcia Tucker organized a two-part “Bad Girls” exhibition at the New Museum in New York, and Marcia Tanner curated “Bad Girls West” at the Wight Art Gallery, University of California, Los Angeles, as a “sister exhibition” to Tucker’s. Although the two curators inspired and assisted each other, and shared the same catalogue, the two exhibitions were organized independently. Both examined a phenomenon they had observed in the early 1990s: “a new wave of female artists who were using humor (often bawdy, raucous ‘unladylike’ humor) in their work as a strategy to engage viewers with feminist issues.” Tanner explained that what distinguished this new wave from earlier feminist work was its use of humor as a subversive strategy operating outside the bounds of feminine propriety. In both curators’ catalogue essays, laughter is presented as “an antidote to being silenced, defined, and objectified,” and as these artists’ “most transgressive strategy.” Tucker’s concept for the exhibition called for art that is “funny, really funny,” and that goes “too far”; Tanner’s was to

OPPOSITE Installation view of “Bad Girls (Part 1).” The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1994. ABOVE Deborah Kass, *4 Barbras (The Jewish Jackie Series)*, 1992, which appeared in the Bad Girls London show.

showcase work that is “irreverent, anti-ideological, non-doctrinaire, non-didactic, un-polemical and thoroughly un-ladylike.”

Subversive humor was the connecting force between the more than 100 artists, performers, and filmmakers—women and men—featured in “Bad Girls” and “Bad Girls West.” The works ranged from sculptures to wall texts to photographs, and videos to comics, and addressed such issues as marriage, child-rearing, food, genitalia, lesbianism, motherhood, gender identity, role reversal, aging, sex, race, class, and violence. Standouts from the New York presentation included Xenobia Bailey’s *Sistab Paradise’s Revival Tent* (1993), a tent of brightly colored, beautifully patterned knitted wool that is part shelter, part headdress, part woman’s head, and Renée Cox’s larger-than-life photograph *Mother and Child* (1993), a nude self-portrait of the artist holding her son. Jacqueline Hayden’s images of heavyset elderly women in the nude pointed up the obsession with beauty and youth, while Portia Munson’s *Pink Project: Table* (1994), reinforced femininity by way of a large table laden with an orderly, densely packed array of some 2,000 pink objects—from combs, brushes, and hair slides to children’s toys, dildos, and a garbage can. The stripper/photographer Cammie Toloui’s *Lusty Lady Series* (1992) presented a slideshow of patrons masturbating, snapped in her place of business, “The Pleasure Palace,” which viewers could ogle through a set of peepholes. And Yasumasa Morimura showed *Portrait (Futago)*, 1988, a photographic self-portrait of the artist playing the role of both maid and model in a scrupulously reconstructed image of Edouard Manet’s *Olympia* (1863).

West Coast highlights included Lutz Bacher’s 1993 work titled *Feminist Movement* (“*Sure I’m for the feminist movement. In fact, I’m pretty good at it.*”), which was based on the sensual, large-breasted, and blithely smiling pinups by illustrator Antonio Vargas that appeared in *Playboy* in the 1960s and 1970s, and Deborah Kass’s *4 Barbras* (1992), a Warhol spoof with a Jewish twist. Rona Pondick showed a wacky sculpture, titled *Double Bed* (1989), comprising a mattress, pillows, and dozens of baby bottles, and Sue Williams presented *Manly Footwear* (1992), which featured a series of squashed-in faces made of silicone rubber, referring to violence against women.

The “Bad Girls” exhibitions in the United States drew mixed reactions from critics. Most took aim at the title, arguing that it was “trendy,” “angry,” “a cheap hook,” and that it “eclipsed any real debate around the work.” Some claimed that the exhibitions were based on a weak idea and actually trivialized the work of women artists. Others stated that the concept was backward, or like “a byline

ABOVE The book jacket for Maura Reilly’s forthcoming book, *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating*.

for a fashion magazine.” As Jan Avgikos explained in *Artforum*, “Once feminist-oriented art has been disparagingly categorized as the work of ‘bad girls’ it can be laughed off, crated up, and shipped out to sea.” She continued, “This curatorial misadventure . . . is particularly egregious, given that the show’s organizers happen to be women.”

And while some praised the quality of the work on view, others claimed that it was “not ‘bad’ enough.” Benjamin Weissman from *Artforum* agreed: “The badness is elegant, safe, conventional, and, most important, museum-ready.” Roberta Smith of the *New York Times* was disappointed by Part I of the New York City exhibition. She had hoped for a “reasonably accurate view of the new, angrily ironic feminist art . . . that has been percolating up through the galleries and alternative spaces in the last few years.” She argued that this third generation of feminist artists to emerge since the 1970s “built on the attitudes of the photo-appropriation feminists of the 1980s (Barbara Kruger, for example), confidently branching out into painting and sculpture and installation art. It’s a good time to assess their efforts and consider the issues they raise.” She believed the exhibition fell short of doing so. Yet, a critic from the *New York Observer* argued that “Bad Girls’ satirical sendup of feminism is refreshing . . . excess and outrageousness is the rule.” And Elizabeth Hess of the *Village Voice* declared, “Tucker should be congratulated for staking her territory smack in the middle of current feminist debates.”

It is too soon to know how “Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon,” which closed this past January after a four-month run, will be regarded by history, particularly within its lineage of other gender- and identity-probing New Museum shows that included “Bad Girls” as well as “Extended Sensibilities: Homosexual Presence in Contemporary Art” (1982), “Difference: On Representation and Sexuality” (1984–85), and “HOMO VIDEO: Where We Are Now” (1986–87). But it will be intriguing to see how its conception of gender as malleable, variable, and nonconforming comes to age. In the catalogue assembled in advance of the exhibition’s run, the show’s curator, Johanna Burton, explained that “Trigger” and its devotion to work by trans and queer artists “synthesizes channels that take up the instability of gender and the forms that gender might temporarily coalesce into—or refuse altogether. If there is a shared impulse among the practices included,” Burton wrote, “it is toward this idea of the impossible as a space of potential, and a place of *other* futures.” ■

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