Sculpture

Essays »
Book Reviews »
Artist Reviews »
Introduction »

RESOURCES
Recommended Reading »
Submission Guidelines »
Web Links »

RECENT ESSAYS
The Passions of Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux
by Meredith Bergmann

Sculpture Through the Prism of Gender
by James F. Cooper

Out of the Past
by Gail Leggio, Daniel T. Schultz

Glorious Victorian Art at Yale
by James F. Cooper

David d'Angers and the Making of the Modern Monument
by Meredith Bergmann

More Essays »

Sculpture Through the Prism of Gender

by James F. Cooper

Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1964
Courtesy Hauser Wirth & Schimmel Gallery
Los Angeles, California

The inaugural opening at Hauser Wirth & Schimmel, a 113,000 square-foot gallery, located in Los Angeles, is an important, monumental, museum-size exhibition of one hundred abstract sculptures created by thirty-four well-known contemporary women artists during the last seventy years.

Why, the reader might ask, does this journal —dedicated to the renewal of Realism—raise the issue of abstract art, especially abstract art created solely by women? For two reasons: First, the exhibition challenges our collective conception of what art *is*. But more importantly, the exhibit (and the handsomely produced catalogue) inadvertently raises the question: what is *great* art?

The first question can be answered by focusing on the purpose and process of art. Why do we create art? Why do *these* women create art? Paul Schimmel, curator and editor of the catalogue, writes:

Feminism changed the course of twentieth-century art by altering the very notion of what art could be. Hewing to sensuous materials and the intimate processes of the handmade, women sculptors began to turn away from the dominant masculinist language of art in order to articulate female sensibility and experience in their work....The late 1940s and 50s saw women asserting their own content....the 1960s and 70s witnessed women making their boldest breakthroughs and pioneering a "no going back" course for subsequent generations of the 1980s, 1990s and beyond.[1]

In short, women's art today communicates to women on a variety of important levels. Schimmel stresses the "organic" nature of women's home-studio space, working methods, organic materials, rope, cloth, wire, sponges, plywood, glass, light, rubber tubes, zippers, debris, hemp, branches, leaves, velvet, burlap, rags, fabric, nets, stones, earth, mud and wood.

Installation "Revolution in the Making:
Abstract Sculpture by Women 1947–2016"
Courtesy Hauser Wirth & Schimmel Gallery

In the hands of gifted artists such as Lee Bontecou (b. 1931), there is a lot of visual communication demonstrated between her six constructs (all titled *Untitled*) displayed at Hauser Wirth & Schimmel. There is a feral ferocity about the zipper-like hooks implanted between the rubber lips embedded in hammered shafts of wood and metal, delicately honed in shape and texture to form well-designed abstract patterns, anchored by hinges, bolts and screws. The designs of this wall-construct series are balanced concentrically around mysterious looking oval portals, which suggest unknown inner dimensions and sinister spaces. All of these parts and portals, of varying texture, materials and size are stitched together with surgeon-like skill, resembling the body parts and flesh of a Frankenstein monster. Hundreds of pieces of metal and material are interconnected by thin wires and cable, composed as carefully as an

interior scene in a Vermeer painting. The dates of these handsome works correspond to the metal constructs by another gifted abstract (and figurative) artist, Nancy Grossman, who should have been included in this exhibit. Both artists demonstrate a superb awareness of formal aesthetic composition. A third artist, Louise Nevelson, is inexplicably represented by only one work, *Sky Cathedral/Southern Mountain* (1959). It is composed of dozens of wooden crates, interiors filled with hundreds of dowels and shafts of wood, all painted black. It looks like an alien temple to an unknown deity. These three artists use many of the organic feminine techniques—sewing, stitching, cobbling, weaving—noted by the exhibit's curators, but with ferocity, creativity, formal elegance and spirituality. Many of the other artists and curators would describe this resolution as "aesthetics" or "male dominant."

Ruth Asawa
Untitled, 1958–62 (series of four)
Courtesy Hauser Wirth & Schimmel Gallery
Los Angeles, California

In the minds of some female artists, particularly feminist art-historians and critics, "aesthetics" is the cudgel males have used to whip women into line. Modernism, ironically, with its "art-for-art's sake," has elevated aesthetics—beauty, form—above subject matter. Edouard Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863) and Edgar Degas' *The Bellelli Family* (1863) were among the first two works to consciously, demonstrably elevate formal aesthetic standards above subject matter. Of course, the public, the Academy and many critics of the nineteenth century were shocked and revolted by such travesty against "good taste" when these paintings were displayed in 1863 at the Salon des Refusés. For centuries, male artists had focused upon narrative subject matter, primarily religious. By the nineteenth century, women depicted in art had been reduced to visual "objects." It is natural that revolutionaries, in this case women, would want to control or influence how society viewed them. Unfortunately, even modernism continued to depict women as objects, only now they were "Cubist" or grotesque. Look at paintings by Picasso.

During the past fifty years, because twentieth-century postmodernist art eschews aesthetics, women were freed to carve out a large part of the art world for themselves, by focusing on their own narrative and processes. However, an interesting question has arisen, introduced by some of the most talented women artists and writers. "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" asks historian Linda Nochlin.

When Georgia O'Keeffe was asked by Nochlin to participate in the breakthrough 1976 exhibition "Women Artists: 1550 to 1950," she refused. I'm not a "woman" artist, she groused. "I am one of the best painters," period.[2] It's something Louise Nevelson might have said to the curators at Hauser Wirth & Schimmel, if they had asked her. This reminded me to ask the director of communications at HW&S why the gallery hadn't included perhaps the greatest living woman artist today. Who is that, the director inquired. Beverly Pepper, I replied. "Oh, you have a point," she said, "I must ask."

In 1986, I received a telephone call from Beverly Pepper. She had read my review of her work at the André Emmerich Gallery in New York City. The spiritual vibrations I'd received from Pepper's powerful totemic works of Corten steel had literally shaken me. She insisted on meeting; she had an important question to ask me. An hour later, we were settled in her daughter's apartment in Brooklyn. I had never met her before, but Beverly Pepper was already a famous sculptor. She was born in 1922. Today she is 94. Why, she wanted to know from me, had the art world—*The New York Times*, the Museum of Modern Art—dropped her? *The Times* had blasted her latest exhibit, the very one I had just reviewed.

Until the 1986 exhibit, I had never much cared for her sleek, shiny steel constructs. The cultural establishment, however, loved them. These works were installed all over the United States and Europe. Then she and her husband travelled to Angor Wat, Cambodia, where she experienced a spiritual epiphany upon seeing the ancient religious sculptures in the jungle. She chucked the gimmicky works which made her famous and created the powerful religious, aesthetic works I had just seen. Isamu Noguchi created abstract works out of marble that are beautiful in a formal way. Pepper's solitary totemic icons are also beautiful, but they have a ferocious, spiritual quality that still moves me thirty years later. Beauty and spirituality were anathema to the cultural establishment, then, as they are today.

There is much that is interesting to examine in the Hauser Wirth & Schimmel exhibition, despite omissions of works by important artists such as Pepper, Nancy Grossman and Anna Hyatt Huntington. But even if there is a demonstrable evidence of "the alternate strand of art history" to justify their conclusion that *Revolution in the Making* does demonstrate the tectonic and theoretic agenda of femininity and feminist aggressiveness of materiality ("through stacking, layering, cutting, sewing, rubbing, gouging, and other tactile processes," which initiate an alternative view to the dominant white Western male viewpoint), does this conclusion answer the question raised by Linda Nochlin's landmark 1971 essay, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?"

Nochlin offers an explanation, which still resonates. She postulates that the woman's experience—having been relegated to unequal, diminished roles in society throughout history—is different from the man's. This is certainly true of the time of Artemisia Gentileschi and Camille Claudel. Neither was "great." But what about Beverly Pepper, Georgia O'Keeffe and Louise Nevelson? They are very good artists, near great, perhaps. But are they equal to Michelangelo, Leonardo, Raphael, Cézanne and van Gogh? Pepper and Nevelson come close in quality to existential works by Alberto Giacometti, Giorgio de Chirico and Daniel Chester French (America's greatest male artist). Perhaps Nochlin has it right when she writes: "The problem lies with feminists'...misconception of what art is." The fact remains, Nochlin states: "there have been no supremely great women artists"...*ever*. A harsh judgment, indeed, coming from a feminist scholar. Her essay gives lengthy reasons why this is so. The bias, misogyny, brutality, patriarchy, rape in the case of Gentileschi, educational restrictions—there are many valid reasons. Nevertheless, it is a fact; or, perhaps, to be more accurate, it is a critical judgment pertaining to excellence. *New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter once criticized classical Greek art on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art as "imperialist," "xenophobic" and "racist." Perhaps true. But he neglected to mention its great enduring quality. Quality, excellence and aesthetics are the criteria for great art.

The regimes of many Renaissance popes and princes may have been terrible in hindsight, but the works they commissioned from Donatello, Michelangelo, Raphael, Bernini and El Greco are still great masterpieces. Other regimes, such as those of twentieth-century Nazis, fascists and communists, produced mediocre, grotesque works of art, public monuments and architecture. The monstrous "classical" buildings by Hitler's architect Albert Speer, the "heroic" figures by Arno Breker remain aberrations. Our challenge is to see works of art for what they are, no matter what political, moral or ideological ideals (rightly or wrongly) inspired them.

Marcus Aurelius advised in his *Meditations*: "Simplicity. Observe the thing. What is it in itself, in its own constitution? What is its substance and material?" In other words, he was suggesting that we focus on the object at hand; examine, understand and observe its perfection and its flaws. Ignore distractions. See it for what it is. Ruskin put it this way: "The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to *see* something...to see clearly is poetry, prophesy, and religion—all in one."[3] Compare Alfred Hitchcock's cinema masterpiece *Psycho* (1960) with its copycat remake *Psycho* (1998). The director, Gus van Sant, boasts that he copied every lens shot from Hitchcock's original. However, the original film is a masterpiece of photography, editing, lighting, sound; the copy is a mess. Even the public knew the difference.

Examine the hundred works at Hauser Wirth & Schimmel. Is it true, as some feminists claim, that there is a difference between the feminine and masculine style, different in its formal and expressive qualities and based upon the special character of women's situation and experience? Well, of course. But where is that special spark of genius that can transform a single block of marble into the *Pietà* by Michelangelo? Is it to be found in Magdalena Abakanowicz's *Wheel with Rope* (1973)—two parallel, thick burlap and hemp ropes, 190 feet long, attached to two eight-foot-high wooden cart wheels, stretched across the gallery floor? The artist explains: "Rope is to me like a petrified organism, like a muscle devoid of activity."[4]

Wings (1970), by Lynda Benglis, is a six-foot-high armature made out of plastic and chicken wire, covered with many large buckets of liquid polyurethane, "poured slowly in a custardy stream" until it sets. Professor Anne M. Warner writes in the catalogue: Benglis knew she "was not making a monument, and did not design it to last. It will not."[5]

Magdalena Abakanowicz
Wheel with Rope, 1973
Courtesy Hauser Wirth & Schimmel Gallery
Los Angeles, California

The Hauser Wirth & Schimmel Gallery is housed in a revamped industrial complex, a flour mill built in the nineteenth century. Like MASS MoCA in Massachusetts, its nineteenth-century architecture and spacious interiors are ideal settings for twentieth-century constructs of similar materials. The exhibition is accompanied by a richly illustrated catalogue with informative essays, edited by Paul Schimmel and Jenni Sorkin (Milan, Italy: Hauser & Wirth Publishers, Skira editore, 2016).

"Revolution in the Making: Abstract Sculpture by Women 1945–2016" is on view at the Hauser Wirth & Schimmel Gallery, Los Angeles, California from March 13 to September 4, 2016. **hauserwirthschimmel.com/**

NOTES

1. Press Release, hauserwirth.com

2. As quoted in Hilarie M. Sheets, "Female Artists Are (Finally) Getting Their Turn," *The New York Times*, March 29, 2016, n. pag. **http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/03/arts/ design/the-resurgence-of-women-only-art-shows.html**

3. John Ruskin, *Modern Painters 3* (New York: Bedford, Clark & Company, 1873), 286.

4. *Revolution in the Making: Abstract Sculpture by Women 1947–2016*, curated and edited by Paul Schimmel and Jenni Sorkin (Milan, Italy: Hauser & Wirth Publishers, Skira editore, 2016), 84.

5. Anne M. Wagner, "The Poetics of Sculpture" in *Revolution in the Making*, 90.