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HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

City of Women

by [Thomas Micchelli](#) on October 13, 2012



Installation view, "To Be a Lady," Vanessa German, "Toaster"(2011). Mixed media, 31 ½ x 14 x 12 inches. (photo by Hrag Vartanian for Hyperallergic)

There is something ineffably comforting about [To Be a Lady](#), the exhibition curated by Jason Andrew and subtitled *Forty-Five Women in the Arts*. The second time I visited the show, on a misty, autumnal afternoon, the light-filled bays at 1285 Avenue of the Americas seemed to lead back to a once intimate, now forgotten place.

I specify my second visit because my first was preoccupied with the show's startling scale, ambition and quality: a museum-caliber exhibition unenclosed by museum walls.

In his [review](#) of *To Be a Lady* in Monday's *Hyperallergic*, Howard Hurst compares its significant presence of artists associated with the New York School to the Museum of Modern Art's blockbuster *Abstract Expressionist New York* (October 3, 2010-April 25, 2011) and its paltry smattering of women.

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Nancy Grossman, "Potawatami" (1967). Leather collage using horse harnesses and chain, 63 x 37-3/4 x 13 inches. (Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York.)

The current exhibition, as Hurst suggests, may be viewed as a corrective to that show, and Andrew, in his [catalogue essay](#), makes a similar allusion. But the differences go well beyond proportional representation.

One of the points of discussion about *Abstract Expressionist New York* as well as MoMA's recent *de Kooning: a Retrospective* (September 18, 2011-January 9, 2012) was how difficult it is to hang a Pollock or a DeKooning in the same room with other artists.

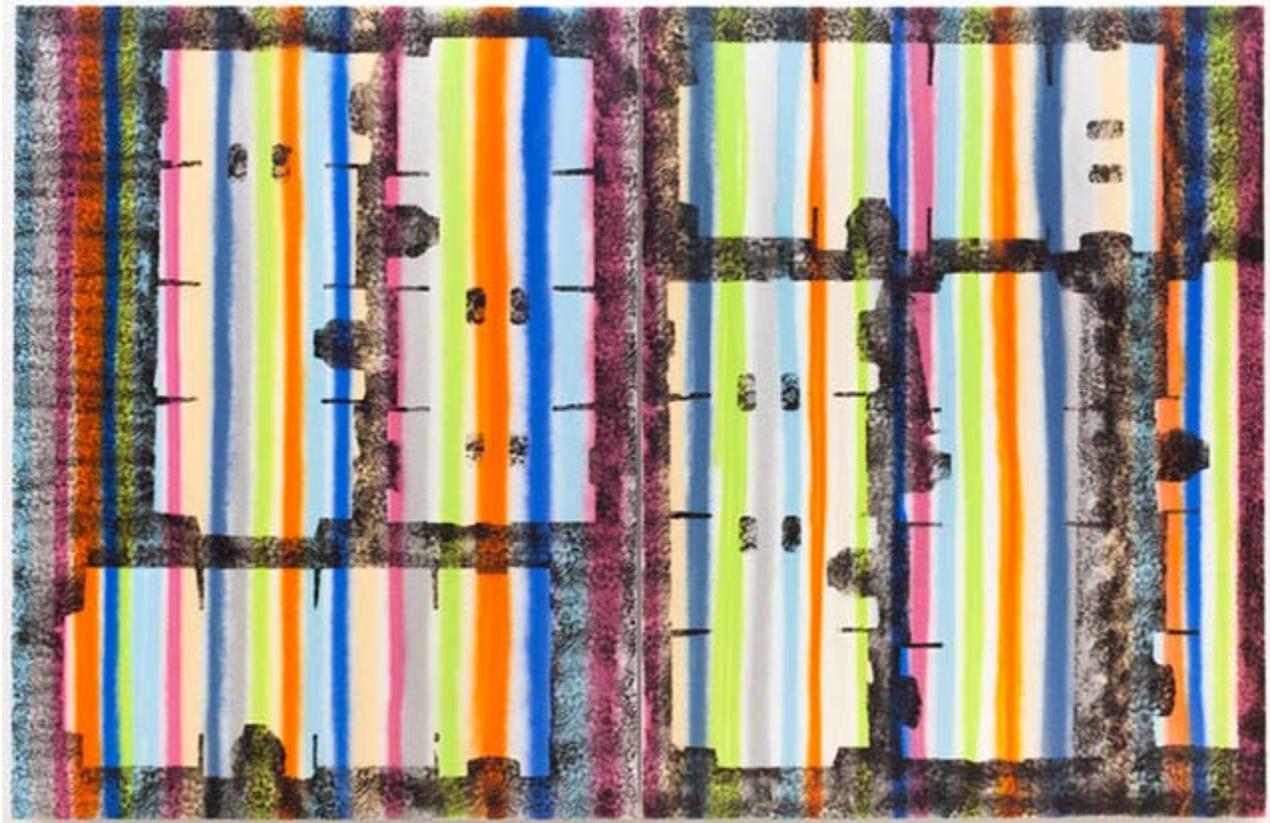
I would venture that the same could be said, to a greater or lesser extent, of just about any major male figure from that era — Still or Rothko or Motherwell or Kline, who never seem to tire of jostling each other. Their machismo is integral to their aesthetic power as well as to their postwar historical context.

The parade of objects in *To Be a Lady* (and there is a definite sense of movement to the exhibition, with each bay acting as a theatrical reveal) never evinces that kind of territoriality or self-protection.

While generational differences in style and content are readily apparent, the work — primarily painting

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This is art that invites you in rather than brushes you aside. Even something as bilious as Jay DeFeo’s acrylic-on-Masonite “Lotus Eater No. 2” (1974) or as confrontational as Nancy Grossman’s leather-and-chain bas-relief “Potawatami” (1967) feels open and inclusive of its neighbors – Grossman’s yin-yang relationship with the yarn sculpture beside it, “Omega Female” by Ellie Murphy, being a case in point: the latter imparts a degree of levity to the former, while Grossman’s weather-beaten straps and orifices lend visceral intensity to Murphy’s soft trails of fabric.



Tamara Gonzales, “Plastic Fantastic” (2011). Spray paint on canvas, 65 x 100 inches (diptych). Courtesy of the artist. (Photo by Jason Mandella)

One of the ironies of *To Be a Lady* (implicit in its title, which Andrew asserts is meant as a provocation) is that the pieces derived from traditional notions of domesticity — “women’s work” in the not-gender-neutral term — are often the most aggressive: the lace-based paintings of Tamara Gonzales and Judy Pfaff; the ten-foot-high stitched and sewn collage by Brece Honeycutt; Kristen Jensen’s crushed porcelain plates; the monumental black linen weaving by Lenore Tawney, who died in 2007 at the age of 100; and the nightmarish doll assemblages from Vanessa German and May Wilson, who has been called, according to the wall label, the “Grandma Moses of the Underground.”

Aggressiveness is on full display in conventional media as well, with tough and jagged paintings by Pat Passlof, Elizabeth Condon, Grace Hartigan, Mira Schor, Brooke Moyse and, with a marked acidity, Elizabeth Murray.

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Alma Thomas, “Red Scarlet Sage” (1976). Acrylic on canvas, 46 x 36 inches. (Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York.)

That artworks this spiky can make room for Murphy’s yarn or a wacky still-life-with-duck painting by Edith Schloss — not to mention the deadpan readymades of Jessica Stockholder and Nancy Bowen or the sensual abstractions by Alma Thomas, Janice Biala, Lindsay Walt and Judith Dolnick — is remarkable enough, but it also speaks to the communal spirit infusing the exhibition.

In an [interview](#) I conducted with Andrew for *Hyperallergic Weekend* back in February, he described the thriving artists’ community in Bushwick in terms of “collective individuality,” and *To Be a Lady* feels like an extension of that concept, drawing contemporary practitioners and their foremothers into its mutual embrace.

The accessibility of the venue — the street-level lobby of the UBS Building (free and open to the public) around the corner from the 25-bucks-a-pop Museum of Modern Art — plays into the nonexclusive (one might even say anti-elitist) gestalt of the exhibition. The floor-to-ceiling windows flanking the bays bring the city into the art, with the art reflecting back into the city.

The comfort I felt on my second visit — an odd feeling of coming home — came from a fresh sense that the current state of art-making has fully left behind the style wars of decades past to enter a wide-open field upon which all are welcome to make a mark.

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Pat Passlof, "Hawthorne" (1999). Oil on linen, 87 x 75 inches. (Courtesy of Elizabeth Harris Gallery and The Resnick/Passlof Foundation, New York)

The historical continuum populated by the women in this show, which takes note of the commonalities between artists like German, who was born in 1976, and Wilson, who died in 1986, without claiming to much for them, subtly underscores the transmigration of experiences and ideas over time.

Such a narrative, if you want to call it that, has never granted much weight to the old-school idea of aesthetic progress; rather, it turns on circles within circles around a *dishabille* nexus of art and life.

The women I know who are participants in the exhibition (along with Tamara Gonzales, mentioned above, there's Austin Thomas, Julia Gleich, Mary Judge, Ellen Letcher and Nathalie Provosty) bear this out. Each pursues her art-making through a hands-on, empirical and experimental approach that continually intersects the ideational and the experiential, acknowledging the chaos of living while uncovering the stillness at its core.

In his catalogue essay, Andrew quotes the art historian Eleanor Munro's observation that a female artist "would not have to break with her past to become herself as, it seems, the creative male is impelled to overthrow his father by symbolically rejecting his art."

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Judith Dolnick, "Untitled"(2012). Acrylic on canvas, 52 x 108 inches. (Courtesy of the artist)

The seven decades of art encompassed by this exhibition prove what a waste of psychic energy that is. By dispensing with the male model of conflict and domination, these women (along with those who pioneered performance and body art) have afforded themselves the freedom to survey a vastly changing and complex world and respond with art forms that match its complexity and mutability.

Not breaking with the past implies a sense of serenity about the present as well as an acceptance of a future that will continue without us. It proposes a mode of living with no gambits, no endgame and no rules. And it places art, as a means of illuminating who we are, right in the center of it.

[To Be a Lady](#) is on view at the 1285 Avenue of the Americas Art Gallery (Midtown, Manhattan) through January 18.

Tagged as: [Austin Thomas](#), [Ellen Letcher](#), [Jason Andrew](#), [Julia Gleich](#), [Mary Judge](#), [Nathlie Provosty](#), [Norte Maar](#), [Tamara Gonzales](#)

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