

WOMEN NETWORKING IN THE ARTS

Jessica Cerasi opines on the importance of women's clubs for networking in the arts

The Guerrilla Girls' recent exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery *Is it even worse in Europe?* showed that while some improvements are being made in terms of the inclusion of women artists in museum exhibitions and collections, there is still no parity. But what about the issue of gender equality among museum and gallery professionals?

When asked to comment on this recently, Frances Morris replied, "It's still a boys' club, there's no question in my mind." Though her appointment as the first female Director of Tate Modern, along with that of Maria Balshaw as director of Tate, and Victoria Siddall as head of Frieze, suggests that the days of women struggling to reach the highest level positions may be behind us (in the UK at least), the glass ceiling may not have shattered entirely. Morris added, "It has taken me a long time to work my way up the institutional hierarchy, which I suppose typifies the situation for many women... They're allowed to do great projects and author individual aspects of their work, but to take institutional responsibility has been much more difficult."

Having worked in a number of museums and galleries over the years, this is certainly something that has felt very apparent to me. While at assistant curator or exhibition management level I have encountered very few male colleagues, the museum directors and gallery owners have tended to be men. I think this partly speaks to how the study of art history has changed over time, as art history degrees were more gender-balanced thirty or forty years ago, and not as was the case during my Master's degree, where a course of 60 people included only five men. While a change may now be afoot, it has been disheartening that broadly speaking, the top levels of management have rarely reflected the broader employee base, and it does prompt the question of why and, what can we do about it?

A growing number of women's clubs worldwide are seeking to address this issue. Women's groups are coming back into vogue across the board as a place to discuss work, exchange ideas and to



Marguerite at *Uniqlo Tate Lates* by Dunja Opalko

encourage each other on the rise to the top – and the art world is no different. One of the oldest of these groups, Art Table, is based in New York and has been running since 1980 with chapters all over the United States.

In London, newly launched Marguerite seeks to unite a network of influential women working in the arts through a strong programme of inspiring, informative and most importantly, fun events. Over the past two years, the group has grown into a membership organisation with close to 200 members and a programme of 20 annual events, which range from talks by the likes of Julia Peyton-Jones (formerly director of the Serpentine Gallery) to artist studio visits with the likes of Celia Hempton, Idris Khan and Annie Morris, and exclusive visits to the homes of important collectors like Valeria Napoleone.

And yes, it's true that for the most part these events are just as likely to be of interest to men, and can feel a little exclusionary. However, having attended a number of them, it's not so much about the events themselves but more the forum that they offer. There's something that feels defiant about it all: an exhilarating and empowering shared sense of purpose. I've often found that the men I've come across in the art world speak with a greater sense of gravitas and certainty, whether warranted or not. This air of confidence is a quality that I think many of us women could benefit from.

Having this kind of a support network can be just as important for women artists. Making a

living as an artist takes a tremendous amount of self-belief, courage and determination, whatever your gender, but as artists like the Guerrilla Girls have shown, there remains a problem of representation. While great strides have been made, there is still a long way to go in terms of incorporating women artists into museum collections, monographic and group exhibitions. While it may be hard to perceive how gender can still matter when we are presented with equality of opportunity, these numbers are important for morale in a profession where the odds can already feel stacked against you.

As a curator working in the public sector and also building the exhibitions programme at a commercial gallery, I have always made a concerted effort to seek out more female artists for inclusion. It's never the deciding factor, but it's surprising how often this can get overlooked unless it is forced into consideration. Speaking from my own experience, consciously or otherwise, people seek out artists they can closely identify with on a personal level. Having more women at the top of institutional hierarchies, as museum directors, gallery owners, biennale curators, and perhaps most importantly, as collectors holding the purse strings, will naturally filter through to female artists in terms of programming decisions and market clout. Things may be moving in the right direction, but let's not rest on our laurels and think of gender equality as a thing of the past: it's just as important as ever.

IS ART A WOMAN? Radhika Khimji questions gender notions in art

Such a question explicitly creates a division based on gender. One wonders if the next questions might be: Is art a man? Is the artist a man? Is art an animal? We cannot even begin to answer the initial question without first defining what a woman might be, asking whether she is wild or free. Or if she is conditioned by society, if she is Mother Earth, or even if she is feminine. Is art feminine and female? Art cannot be limited by gender.

For me, art is a process that renders a thought, emotion or concept tangible. Within this framework, the art may be described in various ways: political, nostalgic, feminine, masculine, decorative, poetic and beyond. We could visualize art as a kind of shadow, a dark shape that falls where light does not, a silhouette to make evident the presence of a form or feeling. The Roman naturalist and writer, Pliny the Elder, attributed the origins of painting to the shadow of a man's face against the wall. It is the story of a young man going off to war and his lover – out of desire to keep a part of him with her – traces the outline of his silhouette. Perhaps the man dies, or never returns from battle, because the woman's father, who is a potter, makes from this outline a ceramic bas relief, which was later found in a temple.

What is intriguing about this narrative is the way the work transitions. It starts as a drawing, becomes sculpture, and then finally is seen as sacred. It's a

Sitting. 2009. Oil and acrylic on plywood. 170.18 x 88.36 cm. *Circle*. 2009. Ink on paper in a metal frame. 43.18 cm in diameter.



Lifting Leg. 2008. Oil and acrylic on plywood. 236.2 x 81.28 cm. All images courtesy of the artist. Photography by Thierry Bal

journey with a start and an end, and within this continuum, something has happened. The 'work', which began as a nostalgic keepsake, took physical shape. It assumed form as sculpture, moving from trace to object and during this transference, it also changed hands from daughter to father, shifting slightly the perspective through which the initial line was drawn. When the woman's father makes the sculpture, there is a move away from the private moment that initiated the need to outline another person's presence. The ownership of the silhouette is mutated and now belongs to two people, father and daughter. When the bas relief is found later in a temple, the portrait further morphs in meaning to become part of a collective memory or a memorial to those who fought in a war. It is now part of history. The agency or desire to make the work twisted and turned, and a transformation took place from private to public.

For me, art is this very transformation. The initial spark of an idea which may be quite personal, or significant to the artist, must shift in some way. It must metamorphose and be absorbed by this process to become something else, all the while always keeping alive the original impetus to make the work, as Pliny's story highlighted. The artefact we see now will always be that drawing on the wall made by a woman sad to say goodbye to her lover. Yet it's also the image of a soldier who fought for his country. It belongs both to her and to his country and now, to our vision of the past. Is art a woman? Only ever in part, and temporarily, because art is forever changing and must necessarily remain unrestricted, undefined and unlabelled.



Hayv Kahraman, *String Figures*, 2010. Oil on wooden panel, 147.3 x 204 cm

THE MANY WOMEN OF HAYV

Hayv Kahraman waxes poetic about the “She” in her paintings

People often ask me who She is. My response: She is someone who dwells in the margins, surviving and navigating a life of spatial and temporal displacement. She lives in the now, which is tainted by a ghostly yesterday. You know, “*sfumato*” is an Italian word describing a painting technique of thinly layering colours on top of each other to create a blurred, whole surface. Leonardo da Vinci described the technique as blending colours “*to evaporate like smoke*”, without the use of lines or borders. My figures are extensions of my own body blended with the aesthetics of the Renaissance. They are painted transparently on brown panels, resembling ghosts that are neither here nor there. You see, as an immigrant or refugee, I find that the best method of survival is imitation, and maybe I do it too well, as I sometimes forget my former self.

She first emerged when I was in Florence, Italy. I went to every single museum, made copies of paintings by Old Masters and was engulfed by the techniques of that era. Her emergence,

her white diaphanous flesh, her contrapposto, was an embodiment of someone who was colonized, someone who was taught to believe that European art history was the ultimate ideal. She became an expression of who I had become as an assimilated woman.

There are some common threads that appear throughout Her evolution. In a nutshell, Her ecology is that of a border dweller suffering from PTSD. She started violently shedding Her ink on paper. She was asleep at the time and “art” became a refuge or a direct communication line. Honour killing, female genital mutilation and violent works that overtly butcher the female body.

Then there was the domestic, the mundane and the expected. Perhaps it was a phase of resignation. But it quickly turned into the flaying of a lamb and the slitting of its throat. Which then turned into physical disembodiment and fracture where limbs were cut, displaced and extracted; a renewal and a rebirth. And so as I stood there, my nude body being photographed by a man operating a scanning device, I felt a loss of agency. A resignation and submission that made me somehow feel domesticated, comfortable and... familiar. The results of looking at my body through a computer screen were cathartic. She became a surface to dissect and divide and analyse. The

coercive and nonchalant aspect of sectioning a body into planes speaks to a similar detachment and separation that occurs in diasporic peoples. But it was also something I needed to do as a woman. And so I needed to cleanse my body with water and scrub it down. I needed to erase my old body, and I needed to restore and rebuild it after waking up. Never will I let myself sleep as my brown skin grows back again.

This period set the precedence for a ghostly meditation on the loss of my childhood home in Baghdad. The figures roamed the rooms in a spectral dance.

Then there was an actual birth; a birth of a child in Northern California and the need to archive a history so ever fleeting. The burning question was: How Iraqi am I?

Silence. I don't listen to music in my studio. I don't like loud sounds because it reminds me of the war. Researching sonic violence led me to accept the embodied wounds caused by sound during the war.

Then I remember that moment we packed our suitcase before fleeing the country. That one object that followed us into a new life as refugees in Sweden. The *mahaffa*. I like the sound of cutting my linen and weaving a new piece of linen through it. It's an endless process of mending. 🧵



Would You Like to Play 2, 2016. Wood panel and magnets, 108 x 80 cm
Images courtesy of the artist and The Third Line