

EASTERN CONNECTICUT STATE UNIVERSITY



LAURA ELKINS, *Self as Greta at Seaside*, 2020, oil on canvas, 24x36 inches. Image courtesy of the artist.

# HEROINE-ITY:

Laura Elkins, Karen Finley, Katya Grokhovsky, Suzanne Lacy & Andrea Bowers, Cindy Sherman, Martha Wilson

January 27 — March 5, 2021

Opening Reception, Wednesday, February 17 from 4-7 P.M.



## HEROINE-ITY

**HEROINE-ITY** brings together a group of women who have been in the vanguard of feminist art making. They deploy their creative agency through role-play, costume, impersonation, and self-transformation to confront culturally entrenched forms of misogyny. They have in common a performative anchor: their bodies are the center of their work – a personal act of resistance to a repressive patriarchal society.

**HEROINE-ITY** proclaims that we must embrace the life-affirming qualities of our heroines and the fierce power they wield. They testify to the intertwined roles of gender, race, class, and sexual identity. Laura Elkins appropriates the reverence bestowed on our first ladies to confer honor and dignity to the low-wage working women that are essential to our economy – committing her own body to that transmutation. Martha Wilson reveals Melania Trump’s artificial youth by morphing her own face into that of Mrs. Trump and back again – her hard won wrinkles, a sly comment on the systemic ageism of the cosmetic industry. Katya Grokhovskiy shares the demeaning remarks she receives as a woman artist, demanding recognition now, not when she is old or dead.<sup>1</sup> Karen Finley appropriates the actual pages from *Gone With the Wind* on which to inscribe a most unladylike invective decrying the many sins of the Confederate era. Similarly, cookbook pages from the 1960s are overwritten by her accusations that they are traps for newlyweds.<sup>2</sup> Collectively, they demand all genders fight shoulder-to-shoulder to combat the sexism that continues to thrive.

One of the most unifying features of their art making is that they deploy the agency of their own bodies as subject, to explore physical life in the most affirmative, active sense. There is a longstanding tradition of women artists who privileged their bodies as a way to insist on their existence (Carolee Schneemann); to redefine spiritual connectivity to nature and ancestors (Anna Mendieta); as a site of rape (Lynn Hershman Leeson, Emma Sulkowicz); radical vulnerability (Yoko Ono, Marina Abramovic), to refute the male gaze (Valerie Export) and the “third gaze” of media (Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger); and to assert their sexuality (Karen Finley). To illustrate this legacy, we are showcasing Sherman’s recent work *Untitled, #566* (2016), in which the artist poses with exaggerated makeup and clothing meant to evoke the silent films of the 1920s – a deep dive into the semiotics of feminine style.<sup>3</sup>

Today, as we confront the alt-right conservatism ushered in by Donald Trump’s presidency, and his administration’s hostility to women’s and minority rights, these artists enthusiastically grab the torch that has passed down through 170 years of women’s struggle for equal rights.



CINDY SHERMAN *Untitled #566*, 2016, dye sublimation metal print, 48 x 50.5 inches; 121.9 x 128.3 cm.

Auspiciously, the exhibit coincides with the recent centennial of the 19th amendment granting Women’s Suffrage.<sup>4</sup>

**HEROINE-ITY** proclaims a feminine counterpart to the conventional male “hero” who seeks victory and power for himself. In its stead, Heroines create communities that protect and empower others.<sup>5</sup> Grokhovskiy gives voice to non-American artists through The Immigrant Biennale that she founded.<sup>6</sup> Wilson directs Franklin Furnace, the pioneering archive and exhibition space that, since the 1970s, has supported hundreds of avant-garde artists.<sup>7</sup> Finley teaches performance activism at NYU, and Elkins paints low-wage women workers on salvaged cardboard to simultaneously highlight and reject their perceived worthlessness. They are all vigilant guardians, safeguarding those women who have not yet found their own **HEROINE-ITY**, or whose claim to its dignity is refused. They challenge the societal constraints women endure across economic, racial, and political lines. In **HEROINE-ITY**, the suffix “ity” symbolizes the deep and permanent outcomes of our heroines’ actions, which are grounded in women’s role as life-givers: intimately concerned with nurturing and reproduction.

Our heroines echo Linda Nochlin’s call for women to “be fearless, speak up, work together, and consistently make trouble.”<sup>8</sup> They refute the taken-for-granted knowledges that have thrived on consensus about who

speaks and who doesn't. They overwrite the histories written in authoritative voices by male critics, curators, collectors, and gallerists. A Nigerian proverb says: "Until the lioness speaks her stories, tales of hunting will always be told by the hunter."<sup>9</sup>

Finley writes *The Most Popular Female is a Victim, We Love a Woman in Trouble*, over the pages of old women leisure magazines, confirming that victimhood and lack of power are the roles reserved for women in our society. Elkins expresses her support for the #metoo movement with self-portraits as Christine Blasey Ford, or as Salma Hayek in the role of Frida Kahlo. Grokhovsky amplifies the voices of those who are not proficient in the lingo of the New York art scene by exhibiting their work in highly regarded venues. Wilson's series, *A Portfolio of Models*, challenges ideals of beauty that define and circumscribe women's roles in patriarchal culture. Elkins, Grokhovsky, Finley, and Wilson continue to take account of and seek out Herstories.

Herstories are not always heroic. **HEROINE-ITY** challenges the clichés of women subjects as vulnerable, emotional, and disappearing. Elkins says "This sense of loss is something that often obsesses me, that life is continually disintegrating in my hands." Wilson observes, "As women, we find ourselves performing all the time to meet society's and the culture's expectations about what we're supposed to do, how we're supposed to look, what we're supposed to think."<sup>10</sup> Grokhovsky echoes: "Society tells women to settle down, shut up, be fragile, vulnerable, and cater to what men apparently want. It is exhausting, exasperating and I am not interested in partaking."<sup>11</sup> They look closely and honestly at the injuries that have been done to all women – eternally and without acknowledgment or accountability.

Joseph Campbell notoriously stated that women are the prize awarded at the end of men's heroic journey. His student, Maureen Murdock wrote an alternative journey for a heroine, which abandons the hero binaries: win/lose/; success/failure; good/bad; male/female; leader/follower. While the hero's journey is focused outward, the Heroine makes

her journey inwardly, seeking unity of mind and body.<sup>12</sup> Our exhibition highlights this introspection: Grokhovsky fights with spaces that do not fit her body, thus creating a metaphor for feminine and immigrant experiences. In *Many Wrinkles*, Wilson presents a tongue-in-cheek look at the aging process and our own mortality, fragility, and individuality. Elkins' *Pussy Paintings* reminds the viewer that favors are expected as part of the job of being female and, in many cases, are still the only way to get ahead in this world.

Embodiment is a unique feminine practice in which their power is made visible. Embodiment leaves our heroines exposed and vulnerable. According to Judith Butler, there is an ambiguity within vulnerability; the body's remarkable openness achieved through a work of art, both enables connection and growth, but also leaves it simultaneously open to the often cruel vicissitudes of the other.<sup>13</sup> Grokhovsky, Elkins and Wilson investigate the vulnerable, the emotional, the hysterical, and the failing body by combining sculpture, costume, video, and performance. They leave themselves open to critique and exploitative media. They push against a tide of crass, right-wing, and rabid patriarchy. There is a new, emergent form of **HEROINE-ITY** we are witnessing: today's heroines are vulnerable, confident, and ultimately even more powerful.

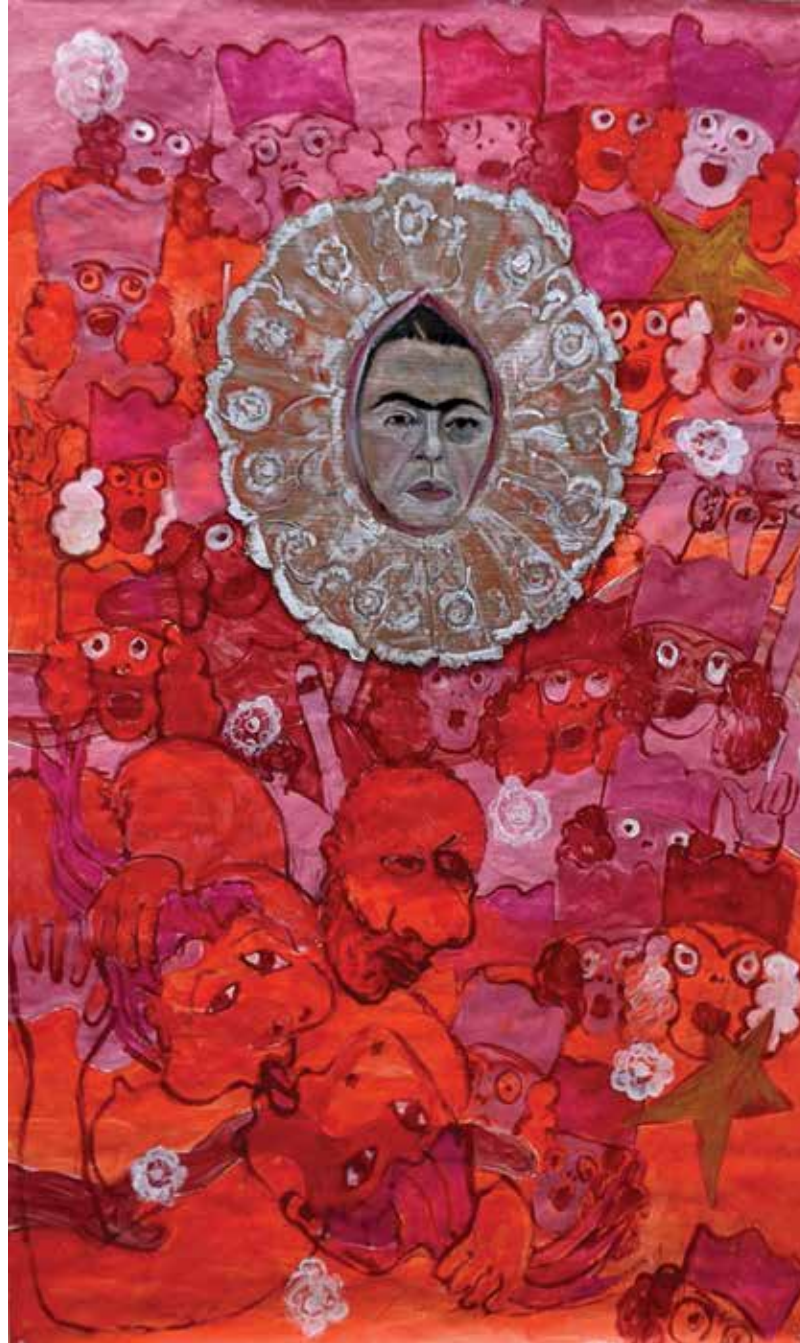
**HEROINE-ITY** foregrounds women's solidarity that drives a performative model of embodied politics. They are building feminist (nonpatriarchal) relationships, having fun, negotiating conflicts, sharing pleasure, and shaping our spaces. They affirm, after Emily Roysdon, LTTR co-editor, "We are not protesting what we don't want, we are performing what we want."<sup>14</sup> **HEROINE-ITY** defines a discursive space to inform, to laugh, to share, to contradict, to infect with an attitude. This exhibition communicates the interdependence that is necessary for each of us as we work together toward equality and justice. ■

*Yulia Tikhonova*

*Coordinator of Gallery and Museum Services, 2021*



## LAURA ELKINS



**LAURA ELKINS** *Self as Salma as Frida*, 2017/2020, oil on cardboard mounted on acrylic on Tyvek, 78x48 inches.

In addition to her politically-charged large-scale installations, **LAURA ELKINS** has developed the self-portrait-as into a distinct genre of figure painting that embraces the complexities of contemporary life. The artist is best known for her self-portraits-as First Ladies, which she has painted for over twenty years. By dangling between the images of First Ladies and her own reflection, an inherently performative act of painting, Elkins explores the American riddle. She subsequently has added other personae to her self-portrait-as portfolio including Christine Blasey Ford, Frida Kahlo, Greta Thunberg, and now, Kamala Harris. Through these self-portraits-as, Elkins explores hot-button topics such as global warming, social justice, handguns, and abuse of power.

The Covid pandemic nudged Elkins to broaden her exploration of portraiture – portraits of actors as their characters. After seeing *The Line*, a riveting piece about frontline workers by Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen that streamed through The Public Theater site, Elkins created portraits of all the actors who performed in *The Line*. Painted from video stills, the paintings are as much about the emotions the actors evoked in Elkins, as they are portraits of the individuals. To emphasize this dynamic relationship, Elkins looked for frames with a sense of movement to catch the actors mid-thought, mid-sentence, and played the video, as long as it was available, while she painted.

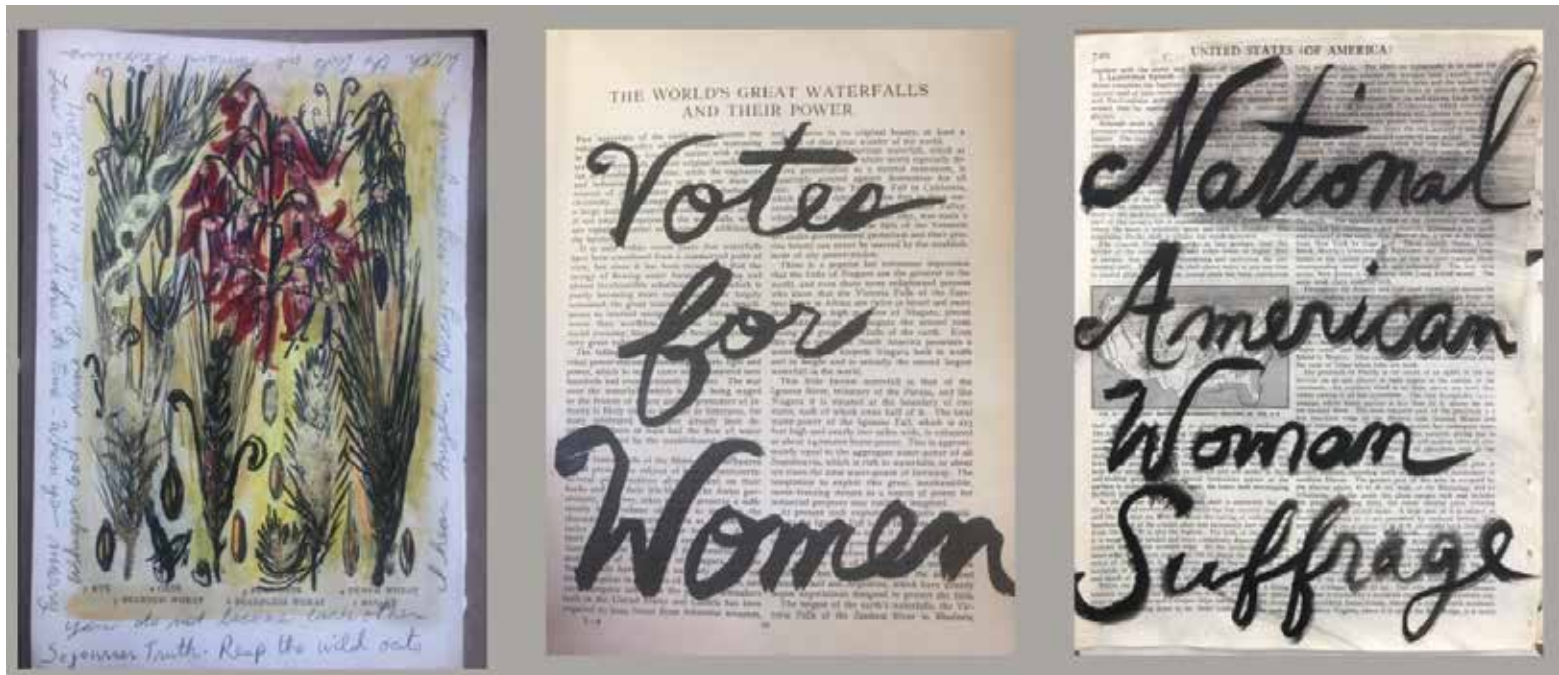
*This and other work is available on her website — [lauraelkins.com](http://lauraelkins.com) and through her Instagram handle @lauraelkins.*

## KAREN FINLEY

100 Years | 100 Women is part of Park Avenue Armory's Public Programming series, *Interrogations of Form*, which is supported in part by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the city council. The Armory's Artist-in-Residence program is made possible by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

**KAREN FINLEY** works in many mediums, including installation, video, performance, public art, visual art, entertainment, television and film, memorials, music, and literature. She has presented at world-class venues, such as Paris' Bobino, London's ICA, and Lincoln Center. Her

work is in collections such as the Museum of Contemporary Art and the Pompidou. Books: 25th anniversary edition of *Shock Treatment* (City Lights 2015); *Reality Shows* (Feminist Press 2011); and *George and Martha* (Verso, 2008); plus five others. Recent work includes *Artist Anonymous* (Museum of Art and Design, 2014); *Written in Sand*; *Open Heart* (Camp Gusen, Austria); *Broken Negative*; and *Sext ME if You Can* (New Museum). Awards/grants: Guggenheim, NYSCA, and NEA fellowships; Richard J. Massey Foundation Arts and Humanities award (2015). MFA, San Francisco Art Institute.



KAREN FINLEY *The Female Condition*, from 100 Years | 100 Women project, 2020.

**IN HER OWN WORDS** “This is a clever title; **HEROINE-ITY** is an invented word. It takes a double take to consider – it is a combination of the word heroine and [the conditional suffix] ity, which brings to mind – city, pity, witty, itty bitty or titty. Maybe that is really the combo portal for me: to offer a parody word – HeronineTITTY. Hahaha!!!” In the curator’s title **HEROINE-ITY**, a generated un-meaning, an abstracted deconstruction of the word. **HEROINE-ITY** is dynamic and plural and should also embody beyond biological gender. We can also consider the word as heroin, a dangerous addictive substance, an illegal narcotic, contraband with the suffix of eity, such as in deity which means a divine status. Or HeroWIN – **HEROINE-ITY** is a hybrid concept turning the hero into a verb, an active femininity. Or perhaps, may I propose a fluidity instead of a binary [relation] of the hero versus heroine?

The female body is portrayed in dominant culture to be “dangerous.” Men just can’t help themselves around her. The female body is a controlled substance and needs to be legislated or regulated. The reproductive body is criminalized. These are the approaches to consider [regarding] my entrance into the exhibit, [which] inform my selections.

My personal language is that I speak several to approach and subvert misogyny, policy and other forms of oppression. I use humor, direct action, and also emotion to compel and challenge society. I work in various mediums (whether theater, performing, music, visual art installation, memorials or humor) that will best portray my intention.

*Karen Finley, 2021, in email correspondence with James Holland*



## KATYA GROKHOVSKY

**KATYA GROKHOVSKY** was born in Ukraine, raised in Australia and is based in NYC. She is an artist, independent curator, educator and a founding director of The Immigrant Artist Biennial (TIAB). Grokhovskiy holds an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, a BFA from Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne University, Australia and a BA (Honors) in Fashion from Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Australia.

Grokhovskiy has received support through numerous residencies and fellowships including The Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts (EFA) Studio Program Subsidy, NYC; School of Visual Arts (SVA) MFA Art Practice Artist in Residence, NYC; Kickstarter Creator-in-Residence,

NYC; Pratt Fine Arts Studio Residency, NYC; Wythe Hotel Residency, NYC; Art and Law Fellowship, NYC; The Museum of Arts and Design (MAD) Studios Program Residency, NYC among the others.

In 2019 she established The Immigrant Artist Biennial, the premiere edition of which she curated in 2020 in venues across NYC including Brooklyn Museum, EFA Project Space, The Green-Wood Cemetery and online. Her past curatorial projects include Art in Odd Places: BODY, a Public Art Festival and Exhibition at Westbeth Gallery, NYC; Lesley Heller Workspace, NYC; and NARS Foundation, NYC among the other places.



**KATYA GROKHOVSKY** *The Future is Bright*, 2019, photo Walter Wlodarczyk.

### KATYA GROKHOVSKY: A BAD WOMAN?

My dear friend, Katya!

It feels like your 2015 performance at Dixon Place happened yesterday. I see it in front of my eye: You were rehearsing in a dim, overcrowded entranceway between café tables and chairs. The space was dark, with only two lights on you. Your partner, Anya Liftig, was in a white top and pants, you were in a pink blouse and a black skirt – unpretentious attire, but your performance was far from restrained. You were like two cats/ lovers fighting, making out, jumping on the chair, piano and table and back to the floor, disheveled, sweating, purring, eyeballing, dueling - all in silence. You were playing out your feline badness. You were engaged in a kind of intimate love/hate relationship, to which the audience would bear witness. Your performance was part of the exhibition *Fabrications: Constructing Female Identity*. Neither of us knew at the time that it was merely a prelude to **HEROINE-ITY**.

Since that time, your work has spread exuberantly into performance, painting, sculpture, curating, and writing. You are eager to produce more, faster; there is almost nothing that you can't do, or will not try! Rumor has it you will direct a film or opera soon. Brava! Performance as your métier allows you to explore various alter-egos: diva, bad girl, witch, who want to be heard and respected. You are cracking open the canon, demanding space for your *badness*.

You borrow from male artists and crush them under your feminine black high heels.

You appropriate Mike Kelley's stuffed toys, Paul McCarthy's bulbous nose mask. You absorb Ilya Kabakov's total installations and alter them into Jason Rhoades' garbage dump of an affluent society; transform Robert Gober's limbs into female extremities; and Robert Rauschenberg's Combines into a pulsing ecosystem that is both artificial and alive.<sup>1</sup> These "borrowings" are liberally sprinkled with references to women's domestic labor à la Mika Rothenberg. Is something missing from this list? Probably so. All of these borrowings are fired in the oven of your own playful, rascal creativity. They are your naughty alter-egos.

Having graduated from the café tables and chairs at Dixon Place, you are performing now in spaces that you fashion with tarps, scrap wood,



KATYA GROKHOVSKY *Bad Woman*, 2017, video still.

cans of house paint, note pads, industrial paper jammed into large spheres, step ladders with ropes tied between them supporting torn plastic trash bags, fabric, clothes hangers, wigs, stuffed toys, mannequin heads and limbs, paper masks, beach balls, and recycled parts of your own artworks. You follow Allison Smith's assertion: "Props are actors, furthering action ... It's a double, rubber-edged sword. Comedy and tragedy. Exaggerated and non-operable. You have to respect props properly."<sup>2</sup> You pay respect to your props by carefully arranging them over on the floor, hanging them from walls and ceilings, or on chairs and pedestals. These controlled ensembles bring to mind a mix between an artist's studio that has been over-run by political protesters. This is a site for a serious drama choreographed by imperial diva.

You follow Michel de Certeau's claim that "space is a practiced place."<sup>3</sup> You transform these spaces by directing objects, signifiers, and agencies into *mise-en-scènes* and *tableaux vivants* that represent failures of various systems: socialism, capitalism, modernity, Post-Colonialism, Gender (your "System Failure")<sup>4</sup>. You transform these failures into your own creative successes. If there were no failed socialism in your county, Ukraine, you may never have left for Australia, and consequently arrive in the U.S. to study for your MFA at the Art Institute of Chicago. Kudos for being a rebel and embarking on the immigrant journey. Today, you are nourished by the critical mass of artists in NYC. You know that each newly arrived artist faces a tremendous challenge and you generously support those newcomers. Your work demonstrates that, owning only your body, memories, and courage, artists have the power to overcome any roadblock.

You fight established hierarchies, claiming your personal space despite the barriers women must overcome. In "*Woman Untitled. In the Woods*" (2017), we watch you awkwardly struggling to free yourself from the branches of a fallen tree. The enlarged nipples of your bra are a constant naughty focus of the video camera. For ten minutes you struggle, but only further entangle yourself in the bushes.<sup>5</sup> As de Certeau put it, people are haunted by their memories in the places they live. In your case, the spaces you create are haunted by the obstacles that women need to overcome, over and over.

Your *mise-en-scènes* are the physical spaces that also function ideologically and fantastically to represent your unique femininity, which strives to flourish outside of masculine demand.<sup>7</sup> Your playful and naughty feminine desire is fashioned with candy colors, hand-sculpted paper masks, and tutu skirts. You play in your spaces and re-enact your cunning wickedness. An early version of your capacity for mischief and seduction was already on view at Dixon Place. I want to be part of your *mise-en-scène*. Teach me how to be a Heroine and a *Bad Woman* at the same time.

Most affectionately yours,

*Yulia*

1 Robert Rauschenberg *Combines*, 1953-1964. <http://mediation.centrepompidou.fr/education/ressources/ENS-Rauschenberg-EN/ENS-rauschenberg>. Accessed 5 December, 2020.

2 Allison Smith, *Prop*, in *In Terms of Performance*, The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, Philadelphia, Arts Research Center, University of California, Berkeley. <http://intermsofperformance.site/keywords/prop/allison-smith>. Accessed 15 December, 2020.

3 Michel de Certeau "There is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits one can 'invoke' or not." In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press; 2011, p. 117.

4 Katya Grokhovskiy: *System Failure*, February 14 - April 10, 2018, Martin Art Gallery, Baker Center for the Arts, Muhlenberg College, Allentown, PA. <https://www.muhenberg.edu/gallery/pastexhibitions/katyagrokhovskiy/>. Accessed 19 December, 2020.

5 Katya Grokhovskiy, *Woman Untitled in the Woods*, 2017, performance for video, 9:57 mins, filmed at OxBow School of Art. <https://vimeo.com/272121114>. Accessed 15 December, 2020.



## SUZANNE LACY & ANDREA BOWERS

THIS EARTH-What She Is to Me, is a new (mid-covid) collaboration by **ANDREA BOWERS AND SUZANNE LACY** honoring the work of eco-feminist poet Susan Griffin in a collective reading from the 1978 book, *Woman and Nature, The Roaring Inside Her*. It was made for Create Art for Earth, a partnership between Judy Chicago, Jane Fonda, Hans Ulrich Obrist and the Serpentine Galleries, Swoon, National Museum of Women in the Arts, Fire Drill Fridays and Greenpeace.

Performers in order of appearance: Andrea Bowers, Catherine Opie, Kristina Wong, Chelo and Luna Montoya, Mónica Mayer, Hyun

Kyung Chung, Susan Griffin, Leslie Labowitz-Starus, Juno Stille and Jess Gooding, Lucía Sanromán, Kelly Curry, Patty Chang, Asia Gonzalez, Barbara T. Smith, Cauleen Smith, Laverne Woods Dunn, Zut Lorz, Lauren Bon, Simone Forti, Ellen Sebastian Chang, Donna Deitch and Terry Jentz, Judy Baca, Mary Weatherford, Beatriz Cortez, Jodie Evans, Ingrid von Sydow, Lauren Halsey, Suzanne Lacy, Nao Bustamante.

*The artists acknowledge Lindsay Mofford for editing, Bill Russell for color grading, Tasha Skotniki for sound and Julieta Gil for graphic design.*



SUZANNE LACY & ANDREA BOWERS *This Earth, What She is to Me*, video, 3:36 duration, 2020.

### THIS EARTH-WHAT SHE IS TO ME

As I go into her, she pierces my heart.  
As I penetrate further, she unveils me.  
When I have reached her center, I am weeping openly.

I have known her all my life,  
yet she reveals stories to me,  
and these stories are revelations  
and I am transformed.

Each time I go to her I am born like this.  
Her renewal washes over me endlessly,  
her wounds caress me;

I become aware of all that has come between us,  
of the noise between us, of the blindness,  
of something sleeping between us.

Now my body reaches out to her.  
They speak effortlessly,  
and I learn at no instance does she fail me in her presence.

She is as delicate as I am;  
I know her sentience;  
I feel her pain and my own pain comes into me,

and my own pain grows large  
and I grasp this pain with my hands,  
and I open my mouth to this pain,

I taste, I know,  
and I know why she goes on, under great weight,  
with this great thirst,

In drought, in starvation,  
with intelligence in every act  
does she survive disaster.

This earth is my sister;  
I love her daily grace, her silent daring  
and how loved I am

how we admire this strength in each other,  
all that we have lost, all that we have suffered,  
all that we know:

We are stunned by this beauty, and I do not forget:

What she is to me,  
What I am to her.

Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*, 2016, excerpt.

## MARTHA WILSON

**MARTHA WILSON** is a pioneering feminist artist and gallery director, who over the past four decades created innovative photographic and video works that explore her female subjectivity through role-playing, costume transformations, and “invasions” of other people’s personae. She began making these videos and photo/text works in the early 1970s while in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and further developed her performative and video-based practice after moving in 1974 to New York City, embarking on a long career that would see her gain attention across the U.S. for her provocative appearances and works. In 1976 she also founded and continues to direct Franklin Furnace, an artist-run space that champions the exploration, promotion and preservation of artists’ books, installation art, video, online and performance art, further chal-

lenging institutional norms, the roles artists play within society, and expectations about what constitutes acceptable art mediums.

Wilson, a native of Newtown, Pennsylvania, who has lived in New York since 1974, is esteemed for both her solo artistic production and her maverick efforts to champion creative forms that are “vulnerable due to institutional neglect, their ephemeral nature, or politically unpopular content.” Described by New York Times critic Holland Cotter as one of “the half-dozen most important people for art in downtown Manhattan in the 1970s,” Wilson remains what curator Peter Dykhuis calls a “creative presence as an arts administrator and cultural operative.”



**MARTHA WILSON** *Makeover: Melania*, 2017, single-channel video, edited by Nancy Burson, TRT 1:00. Courtesy of Martha Wilson and P·P·O·W, New York.

## BAD WOMEN IN DARK TIMES

The curator Marcia Tucker, founder of New York's New Museum, began her catalogue essay for the legendary 1994 exhibition "Bad Girls" by gleefully invoking Lorena Bobbitt, then in the headlines for (as Tucker put it) separating her abusive husband's body from its penis. Bad girls, Tucker went on to say, "aren't polite, they're aggressive ... They use language that's vulgar or downright obscene ... They curse, rant, and rave, and make fun of and mimic whomever they want." Citing Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's promotion of the carnivalesque "as free invention, as mastery, as mockery, as parody ... as transgression," Tucker named a few exemplary women who refused to "shut up because they were making waves"; they included Betty Friedan, Angela Davis, Anita Hill, and the exceptionally courageous – and transgressive – performance artist Karen Finley.<sup>1</sup>

Still speaking out loudly and impolitely more than twenty-five years later, Finley is represented in "HEROINE-ITY" by blunt provocations ("God Counts on Cunt"; "Time for a Revolution") boldly inked on pages drawn from, among other sources, old atlases, cookbooks and Walt Whitman's exultant poetry. Similarly raising hackles, the protagonist of Katya Grokhovsky's videotaped performance *Bad Woman* surrenders her dignity as a preemptive act of resistance. Dressed in a leopard-printed coat with a plush blue parrot tacked to its shoulder and a clownish white mask, its gouged eyes ringed with black, Grokhovsky signals balked ferocity. Silent throughout, she alternately pushes a pink broom ineffectually across a suburban backyard and reclines, odalisque-style, but sullenly, on a thin flowered mattress. In another video, Grokhovsky, again as *Bad Woman*, slowly snips away at a layer of her own clothing while reciting a litany of frustrations. Recalling Yoko Ono's 1964 *Cut Piece*, in which the artist sat stoically while audience members stepped up one at a time to cut her clothing, Grokhovsky considerably ramps up the emotion, in part by inflicting the damage herself.

Less confrontational but equally sharp, Laura Elkins's extended series of painted "self-portraits as" hybridizes her own identity with a variety of women whose considerable power has been forcefully checked. Climate activist Greta Thunberg is melded with Elkins in a deft, graceful portrait of a wary young woman menaced by mosquitos big and black as military drones. In another group of paintings, Elkins merges her own features with those of American First Ladies, portraying, for instance, Hillary Clinton as a nearly nude warrior (she's in transparent lingerie) standing in front of a three-paneled folding mirror and brandishing a Kalashnikov. Reflected there is an angry Michelle Obama, also armed; additional weapons drift down the mirrors like flowers on a Japanese screen.

For this body of work, an essential forerunner is Martha Wilson, who began taking on the roles of First Ladies in the 1980s, with Nancy Reagan. Wilson went on to perform, hilariously and unforgettably, as Barbara Bush; most recently she has transformed herself, in a sequence of digitally altered images, into Melania Trump. Wilson is also represented in this exhibition by early black-and-white photographs for which she used clothing, makeup, posture and attitude to transform herself (several years before Cindy Sherman's famous "Film Stills") into a range of "models": Working Girl, Earth Mother, Goddess, Professional, Housewife.

More than forty-five years later, the questions raised by Wilson's early work remain open. They include, how can we be the heroines of our own lives? Is identity always a performance? If so, should our best efforts be bent on exploring the terms of that unyielding condition? At present, as we are all asked to shelter in isolation amid a worldwide pandemic, some aspects of these challenges have shifted. With the digital web growing ever bigger and stickier, we increasingly find ourselves trapped in its smoke and mirrors. Freedom from the social demands of the art world, which Grokhovsky skewers in her dress-snipping video, has benefitted some studio-based artists with unwonted quiet and solitude, but it also vitiates the kind of active presence vital to social action. How, during this time, can women be bad, be glorious, be heard? "Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact,"<sup>2</sup> Virginia Woolf wrote, with reference to writing about gender, in *A Room of One's Own*. Her advocacy for the right to a safe, solitary space to marshal one's thoughts and recruit one's imaginative and practical resources, still urgently needed, runs up now more than ever against the imperative to place them in public view. The artists in "HEROINE-TY" powerfully articulate their equal importance.

*Nancy Princenthal is a writer whose book Agnes Martin: Her Life and Art (Thames and Hudson, 2015) received the 2016 PEN America award for biography. A former senior editor of Art in America, she has also contributed to Artforum, Parkett, The Village Voice, and The New York Times. She has taught at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College; Princeton University; and Yale University, and is currently on the faculty of the School of Visual Arts.*

1 Marcia Tucker, "Attack of the Giant Ninja Mutant Barbies" in *Out of Bounds: The Collected Writings of Marcia Tucker* (Getty Publications, 2019), 126-129

2 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Harcourt, 1989), p. 4



## THE HEROINES WE CHOOSE

Classical myths offer heroines with superhuman qualities, women favored by the gods. It is interesting to revisit that narrative during a pandemic, which forces us to think about our public health. Our individual movements, and their consequences, shape our daily news. We might find ourselves considering others' breath as weapons, our own bodies as vulnerable in ways we didn't anticipate. After months of hypervigilance about our collective mortality, I find it difficult to revere the classical model of a heroine as an exceptional individual. That admiration is a difficult ask.

Instead, I follow writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's challenge to remember the "danger of a single story." Adichie, an Eastern alumna, explains her position: each of us embodies a collection of stories and experiences that shapes who we are. When we insist on a singular narrative, we risk dehumanizing people. For this exhibition, then, let's consider the stories that matter to the heroines we conjure and to us.

After taking Adichie's invitation, here is my collage of heroines. My list includes Bree Newsome, who challenged gravity and white supremacy when she removed the Confederate battle flag from the South Carolina State House on July 27, 2015. The documentary *Crip Camp* shows

Judy Heumann's pivotal role in the historic 504 Sit-in and in securing the Americans with Disabilities Act. Yuri Kochiyama drew on her experiences of incarceration at Camp Jerome. The trauma of internment informed Kochiyama's commitment to the Black Power movement, to Latinx and Asian-American communities, and to confronting Islamophobia. *I May Destroy You* (a series that offers a compelling representation of trauma and consent) showcases the introspection and creativity of its creator, writer, and lead actor Michaela Coel. I hope that Coel and Hannah Gadsby (a performer who lacerates comedic genres) enjoy careers that honor their artistic vision and choices. The last "name" on my list is a collective noun: my students and fellow teachers, who merit inclusion for their diverse stories of resilience, vulnerability, and creativity.

You know best what your stories may be and who deserves your admiration. Perhaps your stories uniformly inspire you or unsettle you in ways that you value. This exhibition offers us additional ways to think about those legacies and what we most want to share with our world.

*Maureen McDonnell, Ph.D.*

*Professor of English, Director of Women's and Gender Studies  
Eastern Connecticut State University*



SUZANNE LACY & ANDREA BOWERS *This Earth, What She is to Me*, video, 3:36 duration, 2020.



History is replete with swashbuckling, hagiographic tales about heroes. That the vast majority of the heroes of history tend to be men is not a coincidence, of course. Because it is a compendium of stories most often written about men, by men. “His” story, if you will. A neat trick, really, if you consider that every human life owes the fact of its existence to an unbroken string of women that recedes beyond history’s conceivable horizon. **HEROINE-ITY**, for its part, can therefore be seen as a kind of corrective to, and contestation of, this fact – that is, the default instantiation, or normativity/ mastery, of the male perspective. And the exhibition does so by handing the reins of ‘storytelling’ over to four women artists (Laura Elkins, Karen Finley, Katya Grokhovsky and Martha Wilson) whose bold and pioneering work unapologetically speaks for itself. And “work” in this instance is simultaneously singular and plural, signifying equally each separate work of art and the brave persistence that makes each work possible. By way of introduction, therefore, and in furtherance of allowing each artist’s unique voice to resonate on its own terms, the four artists were provided the same four questions, and their responses are provided here below.

*James Holland, MFA*

Let’s begin with the show’s title: **HEROINE-ITY**.

*What might the title bring to mind as it relates to the development of your personal artistic language, and the arc of your career, as an artist?*

*To what degree might your experience as a woman artist constitute a refiguration of “heroism,” and the “hero’s journey,” in a manner consistent with your own embodied subject position?*

### **MARTHA WILSON**

**HEROINE-ITY:** To me, the title of this show is ironic. To be born a woman is to be born second-class; all of my work springs from this understanding. As a result, every woman in the world is a heroine because if she is alive today, she has overcome constant emotional and physical onslaught.

### **KATYA GROKHOVSKY**

The title activates my idea of heroism as it relates to women. I think possessing agency and autonomy of your own destiny as a woman is heroic, because of the patriarchy we live in. One of my early bodies of work was titled *Untitled Heroic* and referred to small heroic ongoing acts women, particularly artists, performed their entire lives. To simply continue practicing, let alone succeed in any way, in the face of erasure, sexism, ageism, unrelenting underestimation, silencing, undervaluing, etc is an act of a heroine.

### **LAURA ELKINS**

Since I first learned the title of the exhibit, I have been perplexed. What is “**HEROINE-ITY**?” How do you even pronounce it? Have you noticed that heroine and heroin sound the same? Is that a coincidence? I looked it up – the drug heroin is a trademark chosen because it means powerful. Until I learned that, I wanted to eschew the term heroine. Although why not hero for women – literally, why not? Like so many feminized nouns, heroine sounded lesser somehow, because, of course, women are considered lesser in our culture. But now I see power in it. And the more I read about the term heroine, the more I see myself as a heroine. The root meaning is “protector.” I feel a vehement sense of protection towards the powerless (those lacking **HEROINEITY**?) and those who suffer injustice, and that urgency fuels my work.

*To what degree should your work/ scholarship/ overall creative production be understood as an informed response to, and interrogation of, dominant cultural frames?*

### **MARTHA WILSON**

To answer this question, I would like to tell a story about a work I created in 1974, “A Portfolio of Models.” I had myself photographed in

all the models held out by society as appropriate for women to occupy: Goddess, Housewife, Working Girl, Professional, Earth Mother, Lesbian, explaining that I have tried them all on for size and none has fit; all that’s left to do is be an artist and point the finger at my own predicament. Almost 40 years later, my son showed his college girlfriend this work; she looked at the images, read the texts carefully, then remarked, “It’s still like that.” So the dominant cultural frames are still in place, and our work remains relevant.

### **KAREN FINLEY**

It is crucial to consider the artist and their research. For my practice and research, I consider the premise of the artist as historical recorder. Since the beginning of time, the artist has witnessed and represented events and life around them. From the caves of Lascaux to the graffiti on subways to the extraordinary artwork on boarded up storefronts in cities during the BLM protests. So, I look at my practice as traditional in discourse as a historical recorder. My work is in response rather than in reaction to offer perspective and to give voice to the marginalized. In the series that I hope to show in this exhibit – such as *Pussy Speaks Out*, or *Grabbing Pussy* – are a series of painted words that have been used to assault and shame, or [which are] associated with Trump, and in solidarity with MeToo. The way I paint the words – ink on wet paper – allows the language to dissolve or bleed out of its borders.

### **KATYA GROKHOVSKY**

I am interested in undermining the dominators consistently in my work and life, from living an unconventional life as a woman and rejecting societal norms of existence, such as marriage and children, to moving overseas on my own for my art, to practicing as an interdisciplinary, hard-to-define and categorize artist, to creating curatorial spaces for marginalized voices, etc. I tend to work best in opposition to what is considered the standard form of operation.

### **LAURA ELKINS**

In a broad sense, I paint from my experience, thus I cannot avoid responding to and interrogating dominant culture. I live it, and paint through that lived life. I, therefore, paint different phases or aspects of my life and whatever I’m living through influences my response. Some

responses are more specific, such as when I was younger, childbirth and child-rearing dominated my life and, therefore, my work – resulting in *The Birth of Housework* paintings and *Why There Are No Great Women Artists: The Children's Room*, a translation of the paintings into architecture. As an artist I felt compelled to question the cultural assumptions around childbirth and motherhood, to the point that in my desire to understand birth – understand life – I often felt I was receding as a feminist. However, I rightly felt that the male-dominated medical establishment had stolen childbirth from women, and that I needed to reclaim it. The paintings are a reflection of that reclamation. Since moving to the District of Columbia, I have had personal experiences that reflect the broader zeitgeist. For instance, surveillance culture that burgeoned after the 9/11 attacks was especially intense in the District, and for my family in particular. It even dictated the machinations of the local DC government, which at times, for no good reason, watched our every move. Even in work that reflects the dominant culture, but not necessarily my specific experience, there is a kernel of lived truth within all of it.

*In the spirit of providing a glimpse of the continuum of your life as an artist, can you elucidate a linkage between your earliest memory as an artist (however early that may be) with the shape, style and content of your current work?*

#### **MARTHA WILSON**

My earliest memories as an artist involve drawing horses and naked women, both signs that sex was the big mystery that I was trying to comprehend. It is 60 years later, and I'm still trying to comprehend it. The only change is how the added ingredient of age inflects our notions of beauty and power.

#### **KAREN FINLEY**

I don't think I can apply the earliest memory – as an aha moment. Rather I like to consider the development of watching and witnessing US policy and deciding to create a response. How can I use my talents and abilities to make a change? But these can also be personal, as the personal is political, so self-care and embodiment is also important to my work.

As I write this it is just two days after the white terror attack on the capital. This violence and planned coup exposed the racism, the authoritarian, violent dismissal of our democratic process of counting the electoral votes by the president and other leaders. We have all witnessed that the white rioters were given a free pass into the Capital without the National Guard, the police – and they were not stopped or arrested. We live in a society of racism as accepted police response. Whereas with protests during BLM there was a militarized presence.

We as artists and thinkers and scholars must speak out. Hopefully, artists will awaken! Artists, dramatists, actors, poets, writers, dancers, musicians will speak out through art, through culture, to continue to make a difference.

And that is part of my role as an educator to provide approaches to create, research and participate in cultural activism.

#### **KATYA GROKHOVSKY**

My earliest memory as an artist is painting a watercolor still life from observation at a private lesson in a locked room. I was painting a vase with a tea rose in it and I wasn't allowed to exit until I was finished with

particular tasks I had been given by the teacher. I was around six years old. I was taught how to look. To this day, I am a keen observer of the world around me, with a curious and analytical eye – a quality that I utilize in my work.

#### **LAURA ELKINS**

One of my earliest memories was waking up one morning and yelling to my parents in the next room to come lift me out of my crib, to release me. I felt they were ignoring me, so I pulled myself up and over the crib rails, slid down to the floor and toddled into their room. I remember my mother commenting to my father, "Well, that's the end of that," implying my days of sleeping in a crib, and my babyhood, were over. I certainly had no notion of myself as an artist at the time, but that sense of being willing to struggle to get what I wanted remains a fundamental force in my life and work. If only the rest of it had been as simple! That may have also been my first Houdini moment. Houdini believed that the secret to being an escape artist was to practice to the point he did not remember how he got out of his many entrapments. I don't remember how I escaped the crib, as I generally don't remember how I paint much of my work. Generally, if I do remember, I feel the work is no good!

*Your work has emerged in various forms and defies categorical and generic boundaries. How do you determine the artistic medium that best embodies your work at any particular moment?*

#### **MARTHA WILSON**

The artistic medium I use to create a work is the one that best suits the concept. *Makeover: Melania* is a one-minute video which shows Martha Wilson's face turning into Melania Trump's, then back into Martha's, then back into Melania's, ad infinitum. I did this work in collaboration with artist Nancy Burson, who took the picture of me (I bought the picture of Melania from API). Nancy transformed me using software she developed in the 1970s to help residents of Lower Manhattan recognize six-year-old Etan Patz as a seven-year-old, as an eight-year-old; we did not know he had been murdered. She kept developing the software so that we could turn ourselves into Andy Warhol or Elvis Presley, and in 2018 she did a cover of TIME magazine melding the faces of Trump and Putin. So, when I conceived this work, Nancy Burson was the one person in all the world I wanted to work with to bring it to fruition.

#### **KAREN FINLEY**

I am going to answer this by looking back at a way I created work when I was in college, such as the age of our students here at Eastern. When I was in college, there were very few women professors. Women were represented in the museum or gallery in the art by white male artists. The female body was portrayed as a work of art but couldn't be the artist doing the portrayal. We can look at other professions with similar restrictions. So, I knew I could not be accepted ever for my talent – because of my gender. Therefore, I used my disadvantage to my advantage. My work was hysterical, over emotional, over the top.

At the same time – late seventies, early eighties – we were in [the] post-Vietnam war [era]. And performance was a way to subterfuge the relationship with the art market, capitalism. To not have an object to consume. To not depend on a gallery, film, play to be accepted – but rather to have self-determination and agency for one's own artistic promise and participation. That is also why public funding for the arts



is so important to give more of an equal access for the makers and audience. That is why our public university systems are so important and why I am so honored to be here at Eastern Connecticut State University, which is part of the state public [education] system. I honor the faculty, administration and students for their work here during these challenging times with COVID!

I continue to create, perform, write in response to personal and world events, whether directly or abstractly. And, as an educator at NYU in the MA program, Arts Politics, I create and provide space in my classroom to inspire educational and artistic research engagement.

### **KATYA GROKHOVSKY**

The concept I am working on at any given moment determines the medium I use. Each project signifies its own space of exploration and experimentation and I would define myself as an artist who works in a variety of media, in an interdisciplinary manner (including installation, sculpture, fiber, video, performance and painting).

### **LAURA ELKINS**

The specific project determines the medium I use. I try to use materials, and painting support that evoke the content of the work. For instance, *The Birth of Housework* was painted on ironing boards, and *The Children's Room* was the home that sheltered my family as it expressed our life within it. The paintings on canvas in the many different series using self-portraits as First Ladies originated because the official portraits of First Ladies, which inspired the work, are easel paintings. The portraits in the America Povera paintings and *The Pussy Paintings* are on cardboard to reflect the perceived worthlessness of women in our culture. In the recent plein air self-portraits as Greta Thunberg, that address extreme climate, I used the elements of nature to help create the paintings – such as throwing a painting into the waves and dragging it along the beach, or holding a portrait under rainwater running off the roof of the house where I was staying.



**LAURA ELKINS** *I'm lovin' it! (Self as Hillary)*, 2014, oil on cardboard mounted on acrylic on Tyvek, 83x62 inches. BTW there is no page number on #13.

- 1 Katya Grokhovsky in Conversation with Anna Blumberg, Soho20, 2 Sept. 2015, <https://soho20studiovisits.wordpress.com/2015/09/02/grokhovsky2015/>. Accessed on December 10, 2020.
- 2 Schuessler, Jennifer. *The Long Battle Over 'Gone With the Wind'*, New York Times, June 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/14/movies/gone-with-the-wind-battle.html>. Accessed on December 2, 2020.
- 3 Cindy Sherman, Untitled #566, 2016, 48 x 50 1/2 inches, Dye sublimation metal print, Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York.
- 4 **HEROINE-ITY** has been inspired by the Feminist Art Coalition, the Nation-wide group of art institutions formed to impact the next presidential election by the collective power of feminists. This cooperative effort stages a range of projects that together generate a cultural space for engagement, reflection, and action, while recognizing the constellation of differences and multiplicity among feminisms. <https://feministartcoalition.org/about>. My 2014 exhibition *Fabrications: Constructing Female Identity* at DIXON PLACE, NY was an early attempt to grapple with these ideas. Notably, this exhibition included Katya Grokhovsky, Laura Elkins and Coleen Fitzgibbon. <http://www.coleenfitzgibbon.com/opening-reception-friday-jan-10-at-dixon-place-fabrications-laura-elkins-%e2%80%a2-coleen-fitzgibbon-%e2%80%a2-laura-marsh>.
- 5 The queen of the ancient Greek gods, Hera is related to the word hero and, thus heroine, and was also considered a protector. Hera protected women, marriage, family and childbirth — in short, society.
- 6 The Immigrant Artist Biennial (TIAB) is a volunteer, female led, artist run project. <https://www.theimmigrantartistbiennial.com/about>. Accessed 3 January, 2021.
- 7 Franklin Furnace Archive, Inc., on a mission to make the world safe for avant-garde art. <http://franklinfurnace.org/about/>.
- 8 Linda Nochlin "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" ArtNews, January 1971, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/retrospective/why-have-there-been-no-great-women-artists-4201/>
- 9 Viv Golding, *Feminism and the Politics of Friendship in the Activist Museum*, p. 126. In *Museum Activism*, Ed. Robert R Janes and Richard Sandell. Routledge, London, New York, 2020.
- 10 Gomez, Edward. In *Martha Wilson's New Photo Works, Feminism Meets the Absurd*, Hyperallergic.com. October 24, 2015. <https://hyperallergic.com/247053/in-martha-wilsons-new-photo-works-feminism-meets-the-absurd/>. Accessed 5, December 2020.
- 11 Yaniv, Ety. *Katya Grokhovsky's Rigorous Play*, 27, September 2018. <http://artspiel.org/katya-grokhovskys-rigorous-play/#more-2078>. Accessed 1 December, 2020.
- 12 In 1990, Maureen Murdock wrote *The Heroine's Journey: Woman's Quest for Wholeness* as a response to Joseph Campbell's *Hero's Journey*, 1990. Murdock described heroine's Journey that it is oriented toward one's individual wholeness between sensual and cognitive, emotional and intellectual.
- 13 Butler, Judith. *Vulnerability and Resistance*, Profession, Modern Language Association, May 2014. <https://profession.mla.org/vulnerability-and-resistance/> Accessed 10 January 2021.
- 14 Aruna Dsouza, *Float the Boat: Finding a Place for Feminism in the Museum*, Modern Women: Women Artists. The Museum of Modern Art, 2019. by Connie Butler (Editor, Introduction), Alexandra Schwartz (Editor), Griselda Pollock (Introduction). Emily Roysdon was a co-editor of the feminist genderqueer artist collective and annual literary journal *Lesbians To The Rescue (LTTR)*, which remained an active part of the queer art theory community until 2008, along with Ginger Brooks Takahashi and K8 Hardy.

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