

GALLERY COPY

“Raid the Icebox”: From the Collection of the Davis Museum and Cultural Center, New and Less Exhibited Works on Paper by Women Artists

Organized from the museum’s permanent collection, this relatively impromptu exhibition presents an eclectic mix of several recently acquired and less exhibited works on paper by 16 women artists. It takes an expansive view of feminist artistic production and begins from the premise communicated through *Global Feminisms* that feminisms and feminist strategies are and ought to be complex, multiple, varied, even “messy,” that the project of supporting and advancing the status of women is enhanced by diverse approaches, and that an inclusive, human rights-based feminism must permit ostensibly divergent feminisms. The works on view in this gallery span two centuries and have been produced by women whose identities are markedly divergent, and from such sites of difference, these objects communicate multiple feminisms. Through difference-based understandings, as “subjects” whose identities are bound up in the world in which we act, we can potentially identify informed, sensitive ways of enacting resistance to injustice not only against women, but also all others.

For those who would like to read a little bit more about a particular work or works on view, the following alphabetically arranged texts have been prepared.



Janine Antoni (b. Freeport, Bahamas 1964)

Touched by the Artist, from the portfolio ***Way In Way Out*** published by Exit Art 1996

Ink on cardstock

Overall: 9 3/4 x 3 1/8 in. (24.8 x 7.9 cm)

Museum purchase with funds from the Roy and Niuta Titus Foundation, Inc. 1997.19.1

Produced by Antoni for a limited edition portfolio, *Touched by the Artist* issues a wry critique of the notion of artistic genius, which has historically been deemed the domain of men.

Reportedly worn by the artist, these innersole-like paper objects bear an impersonal stamp made legible by their aestheticized re-arrangement (such that one is facing “forward,” the other “backward”). Any practical function communicated by them is subsumed through this formal re-positioning, and their debased quality as innersoles is facetiously transformed into preciousness, salability, and collectibility through contact with “the artist.” That as a well-known artist, Antoni would contribute to a portfolio a work whose value depends upon her artistic reputation, while it also critiques the practice of establishing a work’s valuation primarily, if not solely, on the reputation of its producer heightens the power of her gesture.



Judith Black (b. Salina, Kansas 1945)

Laura and Self (First Day of School)

1980

Gelatin silver print

Gift of the artist in honor of Marian Aschaver Buckholdt and Sr. Maureen Flynn. OP

1995.88

At first glance and on first read, this work and its slightly ambiguous title would seem to refer to Black’s daughter Laura’s first day of school. Although it does, this autobiographical work is much more suggestive and rich. In 1980 when this work was produced, Black had recently (one year earlier) entered graduate school at MIT. Then a recently divorced mother struggling to raise four children, she demonstrated the sort of lesser-recognized “feminist” strength and mettle that working women revealed long before modern feminisms were conceptualized. The relative sparseness of this work’s setting and the tatteredness of the chair within it hint at less than flourishing financial circumstances if not hardship. Black has noted the counterpoint of Laura’s clearly-rendered, composed, confident mien to her own, which is blurrily described and seems to register a sense of parental responsibility for her children’s and her own well-being in a “moment” of beginning and becoming.



Blythe Bohnen (b. Evanston, Illinois 1940)

Self-Portrait: Vertical Motion Up, Medium

1983

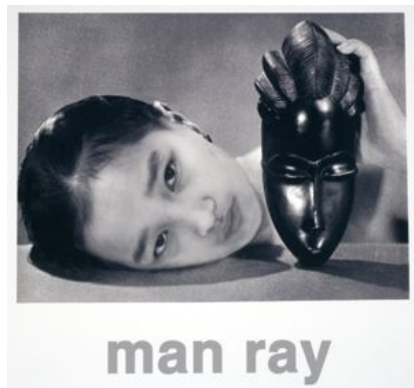
Gelatin silver print

Sheet: 15-15/16 x 19-13/16 in. (40.5 x 50.3 cm); composition: 15 x 18-7/8 in. (38.1 x 47.9 cm)

Gift of Herbert and Paula Molner

1992.38

From the series entitled, "Self-Portraits: Studies in Motion," this work presents a curious depiction of Bohnen in that this self-portrait seems to present distinctively different views of the artist—the upper view that of a composed, attractive, confident young woman—the lower that of an older woman with thickened skin and an unsettled expression suggestive of fear. Bohnen has said that the works from this series communicate "the paradox of time, movement and stable form." A founding member of the first women's cooperative gallery in the United States, A.I.R. Gallery, which was established in 1972, Bohnen and her work are closely linked to feminist artistic practice. Read through a feminist lens, *Self-Portrait: Vertical Motion Up, Medium* seems to register the instability of the physical body over time and encourages the viewer to engage in a self-critical consideration of his/her responses to the respective appearances "two" women represented in this photograph, to norms and ideals of beauty, and to the physical appearances of actual women.



Carole Harmel (b. Washington, DC 1945)

Man Ray Bookplate

2005

Archival ink jet print

The Nancy Gray Sherrill, Class of 1954, Collection

2006.59

Derived from a series of works produced by some 72 artists, who were asked “to design a bookplate for someone else” and entitled “The Art of the Bookplate,” *Man Ray Bookplate* issues an understated critique of the treatment of female and indigenous bodies within surrealism. An altered re-presentation of Man Ray’s *Noire et Blanche*, Harmel’s ink jet print is virtually identical to its referent but for the replacement of the face of Man Ray’s close-eyed muse, Kiki, with that of a young Asian woman, whose intent gaze is directed back at the viewer. By cropping all but the head of her figure and the mask, which here acts as an objectified figuration of an indigenous body, Harmel has also placed greater emphasis on them and brought them nearly flush with the picture plane and, confrontationally, closer to the space of the viewer. Eroticized, exoticized, even arguably misogynistic images of female and indigenous bodies were common within surrealism and appeared frequently in the work of Man Ray. *Man Ray Bookplate* exposes the colonialist, misogynist underpinnings of such work, invites viewers to reconsider such work in this light, and subtly issues the warning that oppressors may, to their detriment, one day be confronted by those whom they have oppressed.



Amanda Heng (b. Singapore 1968)

Singirl, from the portfolio **Asian Contemporary Art in Print**
2006

Silkscreened and embossed lithograph

Sheet: 19 7/8 in x 24 1/8 in

Museum purchase, The Dorothy Johnston Towne (Class of 1923) Fund
2007.36.8

The work of an artist born, raised, and based in Singapore, *Singirl* refers to the iconic image of the Singapore Girl, longtime emblem of Singapore Airlines, and addresses the construction of cultural ideals of beauty and norms of behavior as well as the use of female bodies, particularly exoticized ones, as a token of commercial exchange. Of this work, Heng has stated, “I look at myself and many girls born [in Singapore] and often wonder who decides who the Singapore Girls are?” Heng’s statement registers the social significance of physical appearance within her country and suggests that the bodies of many Singapore women lie outside of the restrictive ideals implied by the age and physical requirements established by Singapore Airlines for Singapore Girl candidates. Heng emphasizes this physical objectification by further reducing the “Singirl” represented in her print to a naked bottom and also seems to link to the body of the Singapore Girl sexual availability, even sexual impropriety, as implied by this work’s title, which closely resembles “Sin girl.” Attired in Pierre Balmain’s westernized, fitted adaptation of a traditional Malay garment called a *kebaya*, a motif of which encircles *Singirl*’s form, Singapore Girls have been criticized as “packaged” to suit a stereotypical heterosexual male fantasy for an exotic, submissive, sexually available Asian woman. In 2007, as if in response to such charges, Singapore Airlines considered remaking the image of the Singapore Girl, but as of this writing, she still appears in her iconic form on the airline’s webpage, and Heng’s work remains relevant and highly charged.



Gertrude Stanton Käsebier (Fort Des Moines, Iowa 182-1934 New York, New York)

"Where there is so much smoke, there is always a little fire."

Ca. 1906

Platinum print

Sheet: 6 1/16 x 8 in. (15.4 x 20.3 cm)

Museum purchase

1973.33

The only woman founding member of the Photo-Secession group, Käsebier is often described as a proto-feminist. Photography's status in the early twentieth century as less than "high art" made it easier for women, such as Käsebier, to engage in photography at both the amateur and professional levels, although commercial photography was still viewed as the domain of men, and art historian Kathleen Pyne notes that a woman's entering the marketplace in this way was viewed as "unfeminine." Pyne further suggests that through this work in which women are presented engaging in the "masculinizing" practice of smoking in the male domain of a commercial studio, "Käsebier satirizes the idea that this unconventional behavior threatened the old social order and could result in the masculinization of women and the overthrow of the old feminine model."



Joyce Kozloff (b. Somerville, New Jersey 1942)

Italy and the Balkans #2

1999

Etching and monotype with hand coloring

Overall: 7-1/4 x 10-1/2 in. (18.4 x 26.7 cm)

The Nancy Gray Sherrill, Class of 1954, Collection

1999.31



Italy and the Balkans #8

1999

Etching and monotype with hand coloring

Overall: 7-3/8 x 10-1/2 in. (18.7 x 26.7 cm)

The Nancy Gray Sherrill, Class of 1954, Collection

1999.32

Among several cartography-based works produced Kozloff, a feminist artist, who earned early recognition for her involvement in the Pattern and Decoration Movement, *Italy and the Balkans #2* and *#8* are richly patterned, brilliantly colored works whose superficial beauty belies their complex content. Kozloff produces work such as these by copying old maps, including their errors, which Kozloff states, “reinforce [her] skeptical attitude to concrete knowledge,” at least as transmitted through human minds and hands. Kozloff further notes that maps can reveal “the cultural attitudes expressed in the naming of places: who was in power, what residues were left by former colonists, how borders were [often violently] in flux.” In some works, Kozloff transforms “masculine” place names to “feminine” ones in a

feminist gesture that emphasizes the kind of power-based social attitudes often “sublimated” in cultural objects.



Sherrie Levine (b. Hazelton, Pennsylvania 1947)
Untitled (Absinthe Drinker), from the portfolio ***After Degas***
1987
Photolithograph
Museum Purchase

Levine’s re-presentation of Edgar Degas’ *Absinthe Drinker* issues a pointed critique of notions of genius and creativity, both of which have historically been considered to be the domain of men. Before second wave feminism and the feminist art movement of the 1970s, the work of women artists was often viewed as “derivative,” “good, for a woman,” at best. Famously, Degas once quipped about the work of Mary Cassatt, who would become his colleague and friend, “I am not willing to admit that a woman can draw that well.” Levine’s “anti-creative,” appropriative quotation of the work of this “great” male artist undermines and reformulates the notions of what makes artists and artistic production “great.” Here, as in other of Levine’s works, cultural and art historical inquiry and commentary critically assert themselves as that which makes this work worthy of exhibition, sale, and collecting. *Untitled (Absinthe Drinker)* re-presents an apparently intoxicated, forlorn-looking turn-of-the century young woman, whose “undone” presence in a café before a bottle of absinthe suggests her precarious social standing—in turn-of-the century Paris, women who participated in café culture were often viewed morally suspect, and as such, were socially denigrated. Through the re-presentation (of a male artist’s presentation) of such a sexist, arguably faulty notion, this work’s feminist assertions and position are intensified.



Hung Liu (b. Changchun, China 1948)

Wildflower (Orchid)

1999

Lithograph

Sheet: 25 1/4 in x 19 1/8 in

Museum purchase, Mary Chamberlain Art Fund

2007.18

Wildflower (Orchid), almost seductive in its loveliness, re-presents, according to Liu, a troubling photograph of an unknown Chinese prostitute identified only by her professional alias. Liu states that the images from which this and several related works derive “are taken of young Chinese prostitutes who are being displayed in a photo-studio setting like products in a mail-order catalogue. Unlike the pictures taken by tourists and journalists, these turn-of-the-century images were taken by Chinese of Chinese . . . With these photographs . . . Chinese men adapted the lenses of the West for the purpose of selling their own young women.” Liu’s haunting image raises questions about exploitation—not only by men of women in a patriarchal Confucian society, but also by the West of the East as well as the repercussions within China of colonial encroachment and domination, particularly with respect to identity and its alteration, erasure, and loss.



Sheridan Eve MacKnight (b. Southern California)

Blessings

2006

Acrylic and watercolor

Sheet: 13 1/8 in x 8 3/8 in

The Nancy Gray Sherrill, Class of 1954, Collection

2006.175

Lyrically rendered, this drawing, which mixes Native American and Christian imagery, was produced on antique ledger paper and registers the dynamism of Native American culture, which has selectively adapted over time and through interaction with other cultures. Through the brush of MacKnight, who is of Native and Anglo-American descent, a Catholic image of the Virgin Mary, identifiable by her halo and pious expression and gesture, is transformed into a figure identifiable as Native American by her hairstyle, attire, and Native American, cherub-like attendants. The prominence of *Blessings*' colorful imagery at once enhances the elegant script that forms its backdrop and also renders it of lesser significance. Through the appropriation of European-introduced paper, MacKnight and other ledger artists draw attention to European incursion and domination and transform symbols of a difficult history into objects that record the persistence and adaptability of their culture. In doing so, these artists also challenge the myths that indigenous cultures are static, in danger of "dying out," and in need of preservation. And through *Blessings*, MacKnight reinforces the significance of Native American women in cultural production.



Sally Mann (b. Lexington, Virginia 1951)

The Two Virginians

1988

Gelatin silver print

Sheet: 7 7/8 x 9 7/8 in. (20 x 25 cm)

Gift of Maria Morris Hambourg (Class of 1971)

1999.13

Mann's *The Two Virginians* presents what appears to be a disturbing view of poverty and its trans-generational effects, particularly with respect to women. Edematous feet, legs, and hands suggest that the older woman here depicted lacks access to adequate health care. Her inexpensive-looking slippers and garment reinforce a reading of her as impoverished. The physical relationship between the older woman and the little girl, who sits by her feet, suggests that their relationship is an intimate one, perhaps that of grandmother and granddaughter. Although adequately attired, the little girl's appearance, with her smeared face and careless, almost revealing posture, hints at another sort of poverty—of possible neglect. Large and broad, the left hand of the elder woman rests on, nearly wraps around the head of the young girl perhaps lovingly and protectively, but also heavily and gravely as if to suggest the resistance and difficulties that the child is likely to face should she attempt to transcend her social, economic, and perhaps familial circumstances.



Andrea Modica (b. New York, New York 1960)
Treadwell, NY
1995
Platinum print
Sheet: 10 1/8 x 8 1/8 in. (25.7 x 20.6 cm)
Gift of Maria Morris Hambourg (Class of 1971)
1999.12

Photographed in Treadwell, NY, this work depicts a young woman named Barbara, whom Modica photographed repeatedly between 1986 and her premature death due to complications from juvenile diabetes in 2001. Subtly and compellingly beautiful, Modica's loving depiction of her young friend defies and undermines Euro-American ideals of female beauty and aestheticized thinness and invites viewers to reconsider and potentially revise their perceptions of socially-constructed ideals and norms.



Shirin Neshat (b. Qazvin, Iran 1957)

Untitled, from the series "Women of Allah" and the portfolio *Way In Way Out* published by Exit Art

1994

Resin-coated gelatin silver print with hand applied ink

Overall: 12 1/16 x 9 1/16 in. (30.6 x 23 cm); composition: 11 x 7 1/4 in. (27.9 x 18.4 cm)

Museum purchase with funds from the Roy and Niuta Titus Foundation, Inc.

1997.19.7

A self-described feminist, Neshat distinguishes a western feminist desire for gender equality with what she describes as the dominant feminism among Iranian women—one that supports the preservation of circumscribed social roles for women and men but which also advocates certain legal rights for women, specifically with regard to divorce, child custody, and voting. Of the "Women of Allah" series from which this work derives, Neshat, who is Iranian by birth but was exiled from her country during the Iranian Revolution, has stated, "I was deeply invested in understanding the ideological and philosophical ideas behind . . . the origin of the revolution and how it had transformed my country . . . I chose to concentrate on the meanings behind 'martyrdom,' a concept which became the heart of the Islamic government's mission at the time . . . Mostly I was interested in how their ideas of spirituality, politics and violence were . . . inseparable from one another." On works from this series, Neshat has inscribed excerpts of Farsi poetry. The text adorning the garment of figure in this work has been translated as, "I give a hand so that I can be held," a simple, yet evocative and provocative statement, particularly in the context of this series as it is applied to the category of women and the subject of self-sacrifice. In the context of Neshat's feminism, however, such a statement becomes more "legible."



Elizabeth Olds (Minneapolis, Minnesota 1896-1991 Sarasota, Florida)

Adoration of the Masters, #2

1940

Brush and ink and yellow ink wash, with white gouache additions, on cardstock

Sheet: 12 x 17 in. (30.5 x 43.2 cm); composition: 12 x 17 in. . (30.5 x 43.2 cm)

The Nancy Gray Sherrill, Class of 1954, Collection

2004.53

For its brief duration, the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project (WPA-FAP) created unprecedented opportunities for women artists, including Olds, who leveraged her position in the FAP to produce works such as *Adoration of the Masters, #2*, which articulates a subtle, "feminist" critique. Produced approximately five years after theorist Walter Benjamin's well-known and circulated essay entitled "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" was published, *Adoration* addresses the "auratic" quality described by Benjamin and attributed to works produced by supposed (male) "genius" artists. Olds' caricature satirizes and exposes the absurdity of "ritualized" devotion to "authentic" works of art. Through the re-presentation of Botticelli's Renaissance work *The Birth of Venus*, which depicts an idealized female nude displayed for the visual exploitation of heterosexual male viewers, *Adoration* further alludes to the difficulties that women artists faced as they attempted to negotiate their lives in a gendered society and in an art world that still canonized the work of white, heterosexual male artists to the near exclusion of all others.



Lin Tianmiao (b. Taiyuan, Shanxi Province, China 1961)
Focus, from the portfolio **Asian Contemporary Art in Print**
2006
Silkscreened and embossed lithograph
Sheet: 24 1/8 in x 19 7/8 in
Museum purchase, The Dorothy Johnston Towne (Class of 1923) Fund
2007.36.6

In contemporary China, where male artists enjoy disproportionate recognition, among her female Chinese peers, self-taught artist Tianmiao is among the best known. As is the case with *Focus*, her work typically contains autobiographical references and very often incorporates thread and/or textile materials (or representations of them), which have both personal and social resonance for Tianmiao and China, respectively. As a child, Tianmiao assisted her mother in the repetitive activity of winding thread, and in China, historically, textile production signified a sexist division of labor in which men retained authority. Tianmiao's use of thread, which she describes as meditative in practice becomes emblematic of memory and continuity with histories that she seems to embrace and resist and becomes a means of connecting those histories to her present life, as she does through the subtle depiction of her husband, artist Wang Gongxin, in this mysterious work.



Lynne Yamamoto (b. Honolulu, Hawaii 1961)

Serv Ice

Ca. 1996

Screen print with hair

Sheet: 9 1/16 x 12 in. (23 x 30.5 cm)

Museum purchase with funds from the Roy and Niuta Titus Foundation, Inc.

1997.19.11

Serv Ice is an enigmatic work, a narrative fragment not unlike a found photograph that evokes some mysterious history made peculiar and curiously tactile and tangible through the hairs that Yamamoto has applied to this print. Yamamoto's family history, particularly that of her grandmother, Chiyo, who emigrated to the United States from Japan, endured hardship and exploitation as a laundress on a racialized Hawaiian plantation, and ultimately took her own life, has frequently entered Yamamoto's work, which, in the words of art historian Carol Armstrong, carries "the poignant baggage of an imagined Japanese-American past." Art historian Ella Shohat notes that a consequence of the United States' bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was hair loss, not only through exposure to the radiation released by the bombs but also through later treatments for cancer linked to the bombings. Yamamoto's inclusion of straight, black hair in this work and others also evokes this harrowing history and the ongoing, collective suffering endured by Japanese as a consequence of the events of World War II.

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