

FEMINISTS UNDER FORTY: NEW MEXICO FEMINIST ART EXHIBITION

THROUGH THE FLOWER
107 BECKER AVENUE, BELEN

The basic format of this show was that of a juried—by Judy Chicago—invitational with a twist: the theme of Feminism—so easily misunderstood and misused—added to the shot-in-the-dark quality that selecting art by images alone can cause. Overall the exhibition worked, but it is important to note the persistence of a sense that young women continue to invent the wheel, as it were, by exploring themes of gender and “women’s work” in ways that we’ve seen repeatedly since the second wave of feminism rocked the sixties and seventies in the USA—particularly in white, educated, and upper and middle classes. Frequently in the *Feminists* show, images of the body as both subject and object—truncated, molded from lint, faceless and disembodied—appeared in the show. As Chicago notes, “Feminist theorists tell us that gender is a changing construct. But for most women it’s not. We see the same issues as in earlier Feminism coming up: body image, issues of sexuality, identity, for example. Young women don’t learn about what’s happened before them.” Chicago confirmed, through her jurying of the exhibition, that many women today, despite training in art schools, find themselves without time to work. Feeling that “their identities have been obliterated, they work with the detritus of their lives.” The plain and simple fact for many women is that parenthood still falls to mothers. And motherhood doesn’t leave much in the way of time or vigor for anything else. Like Georgia O’Keeffe, many women artists still have to make tough choices between their art and their desire for children. That doesn’t make a terrific case against old notions of biology as destiny.

When Feminist art is successful, we see its critical themes woven into artworks with panache, pathos, and audacity. Where it doesn’t work, or at the least is tediously repetitive, is reflected in all the “I am defined by my body” imagery and the trope of absence therein that has been investigated beautifully and thoroughly in the past: read your art history, artists! Not that we women are *not* defined by our bodies; the point is to make good art about that brutal fact. But there lies part of the problem: any artist who lacks a decent college education is not going to know about the recent history of women in art, because that history remains covert, and certainly it is not a part of the general population’s knowledge base. They’ve heard of Georgia and Frida (maybe), and that’s about it. One (or two) women do not a history of Feminism make. And the word itself, like the word liberal, has gotten such bad press that it’s a relief to see the work of fourteen younger artists, struggling with what really matters in their work, willing to call themselves Feminists. (Full disclosure: this writer considers herself both a raving Feminist and a bleeding-heart liberal.)

Several works were standouts in this show: Kimberly Hargrove’s *Beaver Shot*—a beaver skin on a padded, toilet-seat size base with an odd platypus-like head; Shara Hannah Finerman’s *Pillowfaces* and *Get Inside*—second-hand pillowcases printed with Plexiglas etchings of family members; Merce Mitchell’s felted and yarn *Cape of Protection*, with its symbols of refuge; and Kelsy Waggaman’s photograph of herself dressed in a pink lingerie-style jumpsuit with the word FAG printed across her ass: all of these works brought meaning to the exhibition through the use of, respectively, humor; cultural identity as narrative; historical references to goddess-based, pre-patriarchal societies; and sexual empowerment through individualism.

Two artists garnered special recognition for their work: Maureen Burdock and Sheilah Wilson each won a cash prize and the right to a solo exhibition at Through the Flower later in the year. Burdock’s graphic novel—inspired *The F Word Art: Five Feminist Fables for the 21st Century* is a stunning spin-off of comic book art, Victorian novels, Spanish *telenovelas*, and profound personal narrative. Wilson’s neon words and phrases convey some of the tenacity (*STILL HERE*), wistfulness (*sigh*), and confidence to continue moving forward in life (*Forget Your Past*) that defines, on many levels, the characteristics necessary to being a young female artist.



Kelsy Waggaman, *Fag*, digital archive print, 32" x 14", 2008