



No Man's Land: Women Artists from the Rubell Family Collection

by Joyce Beckenstein

The National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington D.C. is housed within what previously served as a Masonic temple for the Fraternal Order of Freemasons, an organization that has, since its medieval beginnings, barred female membership. How sweet it is, then, that this 1908 Renaissance revival landmark is now “no man’s land”—home to an art museum dedicated to women in the arts! This is the irony, though not the inspiration, for the current exhibition *NO MAN’S LAND: Women Artists from the Rubell Family Collection*. As a smaller iteration of the more extensive 2015 exhibition at Miami Art Basel, this show consists of fifty-nine examples of painting and sculpture, from the 1980s to 2015, by women artists with roots in sixteen countries.

Mera and Don Rubell are renowned collectors of contemporary art, much admired for their discerning eye and their passion. So when Kathryn Watt, NMWA chief curator, and co-curator Virginia Treanor visited Miami to select works for this exhibit, they did so with Rubell abandon: “We were like kids in a candy store...choosing what we liked, not looking for specific themes,” said Treanor as she escorted me through the exhibition. As curators, however, they limited themselves to painting and sculpture because, art-historically, women had scarce access to these fields. This decision, on the one hand, leaves this exhibition bereft of photography and contemporary media (such as digital art and video), and shy of the more fully explored realms of gender identity and ethnicity present in the Miami exhibition. Yet, on the other hand, their selections put forward two cohesive themes—the female body and the art process—both of which are thoughtfully surveyed so as to highlight the many ways that content can relate to form.

A number of figurative sculptures reminds us of the continued pressure women feel to pursue cultural standards of ideal beauty. Isa Genzken’s *Schauspieler (Actor)* (2013) consists of a mannequin, her head and torso partially coated with white paint, her stringy wig adorned with a metal breadbasket, and her shoulder serving as a perch for delicate porcelain birds. Her breasts and belly are incised with surgical guidelines drawn prior to tummy tuck and breast augmentation surgeries, while dark glasses and men’s black gloves conceal both her gaze and



any hand gestures that might betray inner feelings. Jennifer Rubell's *Lysa III* (2014) uses a large-breasted mannequin to deliver a psychic ouch to those who perceive or exploit women as sex objects. This hilariously interactive work has the mannequin configured sideways, with one moveable leg serving as a nutcracker. Visitors may help themselves to a nearby bowl of walnuts and crack them open in the figure's crotch.

Figurative paintings include Cecily Brown's *Black Painting 4* (2003), a sleeping nude on gauzy white sheets, rendered as a pinkish wash, dreaming against a spooky black background punctuated by winged penises and snippets of erotic fantasy. Celia Paul similarly relies on rich and sensuous applications of paint for *Self-Portrait August-September* (2014). As remarkably haunting as it is intimate, this likeness seems almost ephemeral in the way it merges within its neutral-toned, painterly space. Both Brown and Paul are less concerned with realistic renderings than they are with the visionary and pensive stirrings within their subjects.

The most intriguing works dealing with process uncover artists deconstructing traditional media. In *Untitled* (2010), Dianna Molzan shredded the weft of her blue canvas so that it hangs from its support frame like a curtain of silky string. She added a ruler-sharp solid diagonal pink line—seemingly impossible to articulate on such a flimsy surface—leaving one to wonder, has the artist made a painting on canvas or applied canvas to the eviscerated surface? Analia Saban's *Acrylic in Canvas with Ruptures: Grids* (2010) similarly inverts traditional process: Saban separated the canvas from its support and filled the void with paint, creating a stuffed pillow with pigment oozing through slits made in the canvas surface.

A number of artists successfully merge this exhibition's themes of process and body. For Anicka Yi, decay as process relates to traditional female domestic life: In *Life Serves Up The Occasional Pink Unicorn* (2013), she tempura-fried flowers and glued them to Plexiglas. These once colorful blooms fade in time, then die within their crispy wombs. A series of shelves behind the Plexiglas hold chrome-plated dumbbells, a female-empowered backdrop for the bearer of life who mostly finds herself in the kitchen. Sonia Gomes's fabric collage of lingerie, doilies and knitted inserts similarly connect the artist's process to activities that were traditionally considered to be women's crafts.

Other artists blur gender lines as part of their processes. Solange Pessoa's *Hammock* (1999 – 2003), for example, consists of sponges and earth-filled fabric bags, colored the orange of Brazilian soil. These forms hang suspended in a corner niche between two walls. Some of these pendulous objects look like bulbous breasts, others like lewd outsized male genitalia—but together they represent both male and female principles: swelling female forms that gestate life, and the heavy sacks that male field laborers bear on their backs. A male/female duality also informs Cristina Iglesias's *Untitled L-4*, (1986), a series of iron and concrete arches, decidedly masculine, that cede their architectural macho to pink-hued curves reminiscent of soft female flesh, though they relinquish not one iota of inner strength.

It is women's sensibility itself, then, that is central to the works in *NO MAN'S LAND*. In today's world, such a designation may seem to some obsolete. However, those who argue that the "women's art" label discredits it from the art world writ large might pause to consider that as long as inequalities exist—as women still battle men for exhibition space and equal pricing of their work—women and their sensibilities must seize "no man's land" wherever they can find it.

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