

REVIEW

The Rebels Among Us

Friday, September 4, 2015 | by **AMANDA MANITACH**



The most recent exhibit to open at Seattle Art Museum is easy to miss. It takes up a single hallway laced between a labyrinth of third-floor galleries. But in it you'll see work unlike anything else at SAM: A watercolor rendering of hermaphrodite mermaids whose rosy lips and nipples and thickly-veined penises touch in a glancing, underwater embrace. One of Joey Veltkamp's genre- and gender-bucking Pendleton Park Series quilts spangled with plaid fabric swatches and John Deere tractors. Jane Hammond's faux-gold sarcophagus printed with wishbones, butterflies and little pinafores girls. A lo-fi video of Wynne Greenwood in which she shellacks her body with goeey paint, gradually effacing herself into a cardboard, cartoon version of a girl getting ready to go out.

The teacup-size *Rebel Rebel* is the result of a project by Seattle artist Matthew Offenbacher and his wife Jennifer Nemhauser called *Deed of Gift*. After winning the \$25,000 Neddy award in painting in 2013, Offenbacher took the bulk of the prize and purchased art with it. All of that art consisted of works by women and queer-identifying artists, including Daft Kuntz (Dawn Cerny and Victoria Haven), Anne Focke, Klara Glosova, Wynne Greenwood, Ann Leda Shapiro and Joey Veltkamp. They then gifted it all to SAM. The gesture was both a calling-out and a last-ditch guerrilla effort to rectify the shortage of work by female artists in the museum's permanent collection.

Two of the pieces donated to SAM through *Deed of Gift* are paintings by [Ann Leda Shapiro](#). The hermaphrodite mermaids are hers. She painted the piece, titled *Two Sides of Self*, in 1971. The New York City native has multiple degrees in art history, has held teaching positions in universities across the nation and had a solo show at the Whitney in 1973. But she's never had much of a career in Seattle. For years she's been living and working quietly on Vashon Island, still making paintings and practicing acupuncture for a day job. Since *Deed of Gift*, the trajectory of her career is beginning to shift; people are starting to recognize her work and seek her out.

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Ann Leda Shapiro, *Two Sides of Self*, 1971, watercolor on paper

For that reason alone, you could say this show and of Offenbacher and Nemhauser's offering have succeeded. Other aspects are nagging. To see the exhibit cordoned in so liminal a space—literally mounted in a hall designed for transition between big galleries—suggests the work doesn't quite fit or play well or belong with the rest, at least in the institutional narrative. Still, it's there. It's a start. With the blackest of humor, the word stitched across Veltkamp's quilt provides a scorching critique of the whole process: GLACIER. If things are moving in the right direction, they're moving because of the sacrifice of the zealous. And they're moving painfully slowly, impeded by the institutional hoops and committees and tastemakers with deep pockets who determine the eventual canonization of art.

Last Thursday, before the official opening of *Rebel Rebel*, I walked the hallway with Shapiro. Glosova's giant watercolor painting of soccer moms and dads watching from the sidelines has been framed marvelously. A pink, softcover copy of Anne Focke's *a pragmatic response to real circumstances* lies ceremoniously (yet untethered) atop a plinth. As we perused the little collection, we discussed what this means in terms of advancing the conversation about women artists in 2015. Before I have a chance to start, Shapiro turned the tables and asked about my own T-Shirt Girls series of

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drawings, which places crass, come-hither statements on female bodies.

Ann Leda Shapiro: I have to know what you mean by these. Your works are seductive. That's my interpretation. I don't know the intention. Do you consider them critiques? Are they feminist statements? Personal statements?

Amanda Maniach: I think I'm playing with the confusion of language. There's a lot of dialogue happening around feminist art and feminism right now and even threads of discordant feminisms. Hashtag feminism. White feminists vis-a-vis feminists of color. The youngest generations finding their anti-slut-shaming spokesperson in figures like Miley Cyrus. Using seduction as a way to provoke is part of that conversation and the confusion is intentional but also inherent in the current language of feminism, I think.



Amanda Maniach, Fuck Me Like It's Summer Camp, graphite on paper, 2015

ALS: Do you think your work is seductive?

AM: I guess so. I'm playing off the prettiness of traditional odalisques and pinups and other art that was mostly painted from a masculine point of view. With the T Shirt Girls, many are literally referencing images of girls in t-shirts that I've found online. Some of the shirts are made up, but many actually exist in the world, so I'm interested in women who advertise these statements, whether they hint at irony, seduction or straightforward aggression. I think it's often mixed.

For me the line is so wavering that I can't tell if it's a critique or a perpetuation. It could be my age.

I like to put it out there with my intentions fuzzy and leave it for others to provide interpretation. I like for it to be provocative in that way.

That's one reason I like to have work in public like this here [in *Rebel Rebel*], so that people can have dialogue around it and interpret what they want. Because, you know, at this point I'm not even sure why I did some of the things I did. I know I was asking questions.

Your work certainly has some elements of genderfuck.

[We pass by one of Shapiro's paintings that depicts a female astronaut clad in a silvery suit, with bright, wide eyes peering out of a helmet. Pendulous breasts point downward, as does a phallus emerging from a slit in the crotch of the suit. It's festooned by an American flag. Miniature dicks jet across the horizon and the words "one needs a cock to get by" are scrawled overhead. Shapiro bends close to read the information cards mounted beside it: *With an irreverent humor, Shapiro takes on the facts of life—in 1971, gender prejudice is acutely felt by women from all backgrounds. Like other artists of her generation, Shapiro puts the body front and center. Her gender-bending drawings defy norms and conventions and question the existing limitations.*]



Ann Leda Shapiro, *Woman Landing on Man in the Moon*, 1971, watercolor on paper

How do you feel seeing your work described like that?

It's fun. I don't know if I get it really. I guess most of what it's saying is true. There was no such word as "gender-bending" in those days. *One needs a cock to get by*. It's kind of a joke but it's true. Many generations later there was a woman astronaut, but there was nothing like that then. This painting, it never saw the light of day. I never showed it to anyone. Then 40 years passed and Catharina [Manchanda, SAM curator] went through all my boxes of work. When she came across these two paintings, she stopped and took pictures. *Two Sides of Self* is one of my favorites. Questioning basic aspects of what is male, what is female. Not even in terms of sexuality—though it looks

like it is! I remember thinking in terms of the male side of how to be out there in the world. Now we have so much more language for it. Since then I've studied much Chinese medicine and become familiar with Jungian terminology.

It was more intuitive symbolism for you back then.

It was more about characteristics than the sexual act. It's interesting to be known as a queer artist. I have queer envy, but it's not been my direction.

But people can identify as queer in many ways, apart from a distinct sexual orientation. Your work depicts bodies that might be intersexed, or a kind of gender fluidity...

Some of my best friends on Vashon are a couple that includes a transgendered man and I've learned so much from them about living with authenticity. Increasingly I want to make paintings that deal with authenticity.

What was your experience with [the Guerilla Girls](#)? You have mentioned working with them.

Some of my best friends were among the original Guerilla Girls. It was inspirational. I helped do a lot of research for them in the libraries—in the days before computers! My mom and I would go to the libraries in New York and do research on discrepancies, institutional sexism and racism in the arts. In the era when I went to art school I never had a woman as a teacher, undergraduate or graduate. I think it was before I even became friends with the Guerilla Girls, I actually threatened lawsuits against some of the universities because of this. As a result I was blacklisted so I couldn't teach in the Bay Area. That's why I ended up moving around so much, to teach around the country and the world.



Klara Glosova, *Life on the Sidelines*, 2014, watercolor on paper

I kind of see *Deed of Gift* in the same spirit as a lot of what the Guerilla Girls were doing—a grassroots spirit with tactics that undermine or force the hand of an institution. But how does it feel to you, having been a part of this kind of effort from the '70s to the present? Are we still stuck in the same place, more or less?

I don't think so. The example I just gave of women teaching, even—there are so many more women teaching now. Some of my contemporaries are having these massive careers now, being rediscovered. There's been change. It's more than I can analyze right now, but there's way more attention paid to women and attention paid to women who are putting content in their art. So things have changed... yet they haven't changed. I still hear—even among the younger circles—women voicing concern about expressing the full extent of their authentic opinions, signing their first name. At least regionally in Seattle, now that I'm more engaged lately, I think people are definitely aware in a different way, and when people identify something that needs to be changed, they work to effect that change.

A few years ago the [Elles](#) exhibit sparked a lot of conversation—and even *Deed of Gift* was arguably a direct result of that. What did you think of the

show?

I really enjoyed it of course, partly because I had good friends with work on display, like Martha Rosler.

I'm always a little wary of the ghettoizing aspect of lumping all the female-made art into one room. Even the work in *Rebel Rebel*. What will happen to it after this exhibit?

What I think the *Elles* exhibit showed Catharina—when she tried to fill the walls with women's art from their own collection, they had to beg, borrow, and... well, I don't know if they *stole* the art to show. It's interesting—I wouldn't have thought of the term "ghettoize" but I do wonder what's going to happen to these paintings in the long run. The Guerilla Girls do have this poster about museums owning more works by women, but they're locked away. I think of how in my mid-20s, when I had my experience with censorship at the Whitney, I withdrew the pieces in question. I wouldn't do that now. One of the interesting parts of this exhibit is people taking interest in my work now, collectors taking interest, which has caused me to reconsider the course of my career. That's one of the most "plus-iest" aspects of this exhibit for me, one of the sweetest parts. It's beyond recognition. It's appreciation. It's really nice. I've been working steadily for more than 45 years without this amount of attention.

It's part of art culture and the market to be vetted by an institution like this, despite how effective we consider DIY tactics.

You know, I would've wanted to say no way, but you have to admit, it does help certain people look at my work and others' work in a different way.

Images courtesy of Seattle Art Museum. Top image: Daft Kuntz (Dawn Cerny and Victoria Haven), So Good It Could Have Been, 2012, silkscreen on paper

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