

PAINTING THE VISIBLE WORLD: AMERICAN WOMEN REALISTS

It has been more than half a century since Linda Nochlin's famous essay, "Why Have there been no Great Women Artists?" (1971); yet only since the new millennium have a cache of museums reconsidered male-dominated displays and programming relative to major postwar styles in the United States.¹ As the pluralism of the 1980s set in, art press on an array of trends still focused on male artists and generally ignored related work by women, who could only (or at least) be noted within a cadre of feminist art, compartmentalized. Even low-profile directions like "Contemporary American Realism," loosely coalesced around 1980, has been referenced, retrospectively, mainly through the names of male artists—exclusively in Wikipedia in 2016 (since amended).² In fact, I recall that women painters were highly visible in the many galleries dealing with representational art in New York and elsewhere through the 1980s, well into the 1990s.

In the mid-1970s, renowned critic Lawrence Alloway wrote about "the contribution of women to the renewal of realism," most likely influenced by the figurative paintings and feminist criticism of his spouse, Sylvia Sleight.³ Along with Nochlin, Grace Glueck, Irving Sandler and Hilton Kramer were among other well-known art writers who paid attention to re-emerging realism and covered women practitioners. Yet, "the record" indicated a gender gap—as Frank Bernarducci and I discussed in an informal conversation; generating an enthusiastic collaboration on this exhibition. In one sense, we approached the project as a kind of reunion. We also, in the end, mean to suggest one recent lineage within a persistent painting tradition based on its early theoretical conception as a reflection on and of things seen.

Although none of the featured artists have explicitly worked towards shared artistic goals, each has exhibited with and looked carefully at the work of several of the others, intermittently, and some became good friends through the roughly three decades covered. Some institutional connections have circulated among them, despite few direct overlaps; for example: Yale University studio art alums include Audrey Flack, Sylvia Plimack Mangold, Janet Fish, and Nancy Hagin; Pratt Institute comes up in the backgrounds of Flack, Jane Wilson, Martha Mayer Erlebacher, Joan Semmel, Catherine Murphy, and Leigh Behnke; and the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture for Fish, Murphy, and Lois Dodd. The geographic range skews to plenty of time within New York as a base; also, the northeast broadly, and, crucial for the respective oeuvre of Wilson and Jane Freilicher, the Hamptons.

We want to revisit and highlight, through the juxtapositions of the selected paintings, aesthetic links, as well as distinctions. Within pragmatic limitations, our choices were funneled partly through past documentation; or put another way, from among artists who have exhibited somewhat regularly and been critically recognized to some degree (as suggested above). Especially due to mainstream art world exclusions in the era beyond gender—prominently race and ethnicity—the paintings gathered are not and cannot not be posited as paradigmatic of the artistic concerns they encompass. Indeed, a relatively narrow demographic, delimited by a few intertwined personal and professional networks, is our exhibition's collective matrix and scope.

Jane Freilicher (1924–2014) and **Jane Wilson** (1924–2015) emerged in a milieu of Abstract Expressionism, turning to expansive, atmospheric Hamptons landscapes as one way out. Through the downtown co-op gallery scene they crossed paths early with **Lois Dodd** (b. 1927), also a plein air—or through the window—purist, noted for the sparse cubistic structure beneath her on-the-spot views of Maine and the Delaware Water Gap.

Photorealism, which coalesced in late 1960s, was an obvious starting point for the broader turn toward naturalist as well as mimetic representation. **Audrey Flack** (b. 1931), the only widely acknowledged woman contributor to its early airbrush incarnations, introduced "personal as political" feminist imagery into its abundant

iconographic mix, continued in her subsequent sculpture. **Idelle Weber** (b. 1932) followed suit with gorgeously gritty Photorealist street scenes, after exploring a Pop mode recalled in her recent work. Although composed from observation, early paintings of floor boards and rulers by **Sylvia Plimack Mangold** (b. 1938) appear photographically precise while broaching abstraction through geometric organization. This orientation has ceded to an intuitive, oblique framing of nature subjects rendered with shifting, Cezanne-like passage. **Catherine Murphy** (b. 1946) has pursued, from the start, detailed effects through meticulous brushwork in familiar, domestic-oriented subjects and scrutinizing portraiture.

Joan Semmel (b. 1932) has sometimes used photographs as compositional inspiration for her chief subject of women's naked bodies, which nonetheless convey fleshy realities no less than Rubens. **Martha Erlebacher's** (1937–2013) oeuvre is populated with more classicizing "nudes" and vanitas-type still life with neo-Baroque surface polish and chiaroscuro; in stark contrast to the sprawling, gestural contours of **Janet Fish's** (b. 1938) bright tableware and the ordered partitioning and patterning of **Nancy Hagin's** (b. 1940) studio set-ups.

Yvonne Jacquette (b. 1934) brought the New York cityscape prominently into this picture, since expanding her repertoire to global locales. Her aerial perspective night scenes have been especially compelling, picked up on and stabilized in the neon-tinged street-level scenarios of **Jane Dickson** (b. 1952). **Leigh Behnke's** (b. 1946) take on building facades and interiors reaches back to seventeenth-century Dutch realism—camera obscura effects included via Photorealist technology for split-screen compositions. **Martha Diamond** (b. 1944), on another track, has typically transformed the modernist grid into evocative swaths and slices of urban skyline infused with fragile panache. Close-up urban genre looking back to pre-war Regionalism is the focus of **Sylvia Maier** (b. 1969). Like many women (and men) continuing in a realist vein, she was trained in part at the New York Academy of Art, established in 1980, where Erlebacher taught late in her career.

Across these paintings viewers will discover palpable attention to climate, lighting, textures, and the artist's bodily perspective vis-à-vis the visible world. Many will rightfully recall peer male artists, stylistically. For our part, we have hoped to provide another context, for the record.

¹ Arguably accelerated in just the last two years (2016–17), with women-centered Abstract Expressionist exhibitions at MoMA; Denver Art Museum; Virginia Museum of Fine Arts; Museum of Contemporary Art, Jacksonville; and the "Year of Yes" (2016) dedicated to woman at the Brooklyn Museum

² The figurative-leaning, artist-established Artist's Choice Museum (1976–86) was one marker of the development. Relevant national travelling exhibitions with catalogues include: "Real, Really Real, Super Real: Directions in Contemporary American Realism"; organized by San Antonio Museum Association, 1981; and "American Realism: Twentieth Century Drawings and Watercolors," organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1985. See also Mark Strand, Robert Hughes, *Art of the Real: Nine American Figurative Painters* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1983).

³ As in Nigel Whiteley, "The Realist 'Revival,'" in *Art and Pluralism: Lawrence Alloway's Cultural Criticism*, 348–55 (Liverpool University Press, 2012).

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