

'WACK!' showcases the reach of feminist works

by Robert L. Pincus

The title alone - "WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution" - tells you the epic-scale exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles is something of an assault on the senses. How could it not be with 450 works by 119 artists from 21 countries that fill 22,500 square feet of exhibition space?

The cover of the exhibition catalog has already caused something of a stir, with its collage by Martha Rosler, "Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain: Hot House, or Harem" (1966-1971), picturing a virtual sea of curvaceous female nudes. It reminds us, right away, that feminist art didn't try to be polite. It threw societal norms right back in our faces. If we objectified the female body, then Rosler was going to highlight it in an extravagant way.

ART AND FEMINISM - Martha Rosier's satirical series 'Body Beautiful' includes 'Jumping Janes.' It is part of the exhibition 'Wack!: Art and the Feminist Revolution' open until July 16 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. CNS Photo courtesy of by Martha Rosier/Wack!

This is a cultural excavation project: Much of the work hasn't been seen in decades. But it's also an argument for the revision of recent art history. Curator Cornelia Butler, who spent about eight years assembling this exhibition, writes, "My ambition for 'WACK!' is to make the case that feminism's impact on the art of the 1970s constitutes the most influential international 'movement' of any during the postwar period."

That is one sweeping statement. It's hard to single out any movement as the most influential in an age when art has moved in so many directions. (The show's parameters are 1965 to 1980.) But it's virtually impossible to see how anyone would doubt the reach of feminist art after taking a grand tour of the show.

Following the exhibition in Los Angeles, "WACK!" moves on to Washington, D.C., New York and Vancouver, British Columbia.

The title itself is not an acronym, though it is partially inspired by some, including WAC (Women's Action Coalition) and WAR (Women Artists in Revolution). At the same time, Butler means, with a little levity, to recall the "bold idealism" that distinguished the movement.

Feminism was, of course, a social phenomenon first, revolving around the intertwined issues of the collective oppression of women and the struggle to change that dynamic. Art became a crucial arena - internationally, as this show makes clear - because this struggle involved new concepts of female identity and new forms of imagery to express them.

The sabotaging of conventional visuals was an important part of this process. Rosler's "Body Beautiful" series is a great example. It slyly subverts the iconography of the pinup nude by presenting bodies in absurd abundance. She also plays on the titillation factor in lingerie ads by exposing the crotches of all the pictured models.

Rosler earned her Master of Fine Arts at University of California San Diego in 1974, at a time when Southern California had become a major center for feminist art. Eleanor Antin, a vital figure in the movement who arrived in San Diego in 1969, began teaching at UCSD in the mid-1970s and her "Carving: A Traditional Sculpture" (1972) is an iconic piece from that era.

Antin brilliantly fused the way the female image has been idealized in art history and in everyday life. In "Carving," with its sequences of photographs, she turned herself into the subject. By dieting, she shaped her body into the more idealized form of the female nude. You see the progression, as it takes place over the course of little more than a month, in pictures taken from different angles.

Cutting against the male-centered idea of the female form that Rosler and Antin targeted was a newfound frankness about the body, both in the guise of performances, like Carole Schneeman's "Vagina Scroll" and in images, such as Judy Chicago's famous fusions of the vagina and flora, including "Through the Flower" (1973). But the show also features figures who haven't generally been categorized as feminists, like the Polish artist Magdalena Abakanowicz. She achieved international acclaim after the heyday of feminism. But back in the late 1960s, she was making innovative woven structures on a large scale and the example on view in the museum, "Abakan Red" (1969), resembles a monumental, stylized and elegant abstraction of a vagina.

Abakanowicz is among many artists whose early histories are presented anew. Another is Faith Ringgold, the longtime UCSD professor (now retired) whose story-quilts and storybooks like "Tar Beach" brought her a wide audience. Back in 1971, she was a co-founder of "Where We At," a seminal group of black women artists. And in such early paintings as "The American Dream" (1964), she took a skeptical, strikingly rendered view of integration, portraying a mournful looking woman as half-white and half-black.

There are enough video works on view to keep a visitor busy for a couple of days. It was a key medium for feminists, in part, we have to conclude, because painting was so male-dominated. Women also began adapting traditional domestic media to art, as Faith Wilding did to fascinating ends in her "Crocheted Environment (Womb Room)" (1972).

Though "WACK!" may leave you feeling exhausted, it is also exhilarating. Butler has presented a history of this period that seems fresh, sometimes revelatory. These artists opened doors for later generations of women, of course. You see a concrete example in the concurrent exhibition "Andrea Zittel: Critical Space," which chronicles an artist who designs everything from domestic interiors to dresses.

But feminism, in its many-faceted form, was a liberating force for artists, regardless of gender. It was a catalyst for rethinking the very materials of art as well as the essentials of gender and human relations.

IF YOU GO

"WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution"

When: Through July 16

Where: The Geffen Contemporary at the Museum of Contemporary Art, 152 N. Central Ave., downtown Los Angeles

Tickets: \$8; \$5, students and seniors; free to children under 12

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