

WOMEN IN ART: WHERE HAVE WE GONE?

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L'auteure, artiste et professeure d'art, nous fait remarquer que malgré le nombre considérable d'étudiantes en Beaux Arts au niveau collégial, l'on ne voit pas représenté, ni dans les revues d'art ni dans les expositions importantes, un nombre proportionnel d'artistes femmes. Quelques-unes des raisons pour cette anomalie sont discutées.

In the spring of 1971 I taught my first drawing class at what was then Douglas College and is now Kwantlen College. It was a small class. There were, I think, eight students, and of these only one was male. I thought this strange imbalance was because everything was new and that things would even out as time passed. But they haven't. Over the years the number of male students has increased, as have our class sizes, but the bulk of the students in the Fine Arts Department continues to be female. Janet H. Patterson, in her paper "Achieving Gender Equality 1984," shows the female student population of Kwantlen College Fine Arts Department to be 63.5% (p.21). In a random count of three sections of drawing classes only, my own figures show an average of 67.7% female students for the spring semester, 1985 (no students "overlap" in these courses). We can therefore safely say that we have an average of 65% female students at the college level.

When they leave the college, many of our students go on to art school and often

advanced fine arts courses elsewhere. Of those who do go on to art schools, the percentage of women is again high – possibly in the region of 70% to 80%. Most of those students are talented and bright – both male and female – and in some cases the women are more talented than the men. They apparently do well in these advanced courses, and then they graduate.

What happens to them then? What happens to women artists in general out there in the Big Wide World? Where do they go? Surely, with such a high percentage of women as students, we should be seeing the work of, and hearing about and reading about, at least a similarly high proportion of women in the galleries and the magazines. But we don't.

So it seemed worth checking out. Because of shortage of time (knowing just over a week before the conference date that I was to be on a panel and address a group) it was easier to work from "convenient knowns" outwards, taking the college as the centre then moving towards the community based areas, and extending in a widening circle, so to speak, towards the provincial, the national and, ultimately, the international art world.

I started locally, from the Surrey Art Gallery which is situated right in the college region, only about a mile from the main Surrey campus. It is a fine gallery. Its climate controls are of the highest standard, which means that it is capable of exhibiting in its Main Gallery the most sensitive works in terms of conservation and security. It also has a Theatre Gallery for groups and other more local works, although local artists of standing also exhibit in the Main Gallery. I asked one of the curators, Jane Young, if she could give me access to the gallery lists of exhibitions for, say, the last three or four years. She did more: she gave me all the listings for the Main Gallery scheduled shows right back to 1976. This was an unexpected boon, and gratefully I got down to checking out the figures.

These figures show that between 1976 and 1985 the gallery scheduled an average of 115 shows. Of these shows, 37 were group shows of which only 2 had names listed and 78 were, for want of a better term, "personal" shows. The "personal" shows included 1-person and up to 4-people shows. This accounts for what might seem a discrepancy in the figures. I did not count certain shows, for example

those containing works by artists such as Toulouse-Lautrec and Matisse. But I did count Emily Carr. The average percentage of women exhibiting over the years was 38.2% – although it is interesting to see that between 1982 and 1984 things have been improving. In 1982 there were 11 personal shows with 13 men and 9 women. In 1983 there were 10 personal shows with 7 men and 7 women. Even-steven. And in 1984 there were 9 shows with 7 men and 10 women. The totals of males and females exhibiting over this later 3-year period are now almost identical: 27 males and 26 females.

These figures, of course, reflect one gallery only. How that gallery shows up in relation to the other municipal galleries or the Vancouver Art Gallery is not shown. But the possibility exists that women artists fare well in Surrey in comparison to elsewhere, especially in light of the more recent figures cited above.

Then, working on my premise of the ever-widening world, I decided to check reviews. This would give a picture of what occurs at the smaller but exciting galleries and the "parallel" galleries across the country. I chose as my source *Vanguard*, the glossy Vancouver-issued art magazine, and used all nine issues from February 1984 to April 1985.

Of 246 reviews, there were 191 personal reviews (again including more than one person, as for the galleries); 33 group reviews; and 22 which were not appropriate to this study. Of the 191 personal reviews, 136 men and 67 women were reviewed. In the group reviews, 137 men were mentioned and 122 women. It would appear that at this level women do better in groups. It is also interesting to note that women were reviewed most of the time by women. Nor did any men cover either predominantly female or predominantly male group shows. Female personal shows were reviewed 55% of the time by women; female group shows were reviewed 100% of the time by women. Women also reviewed predominantly male group shows. Of the 44 main articles in the *Vanguard* magazines issued over this period, only three concerned women artists.

In terms of really major national exhibitions connected with Canada, women fare much worse than they do locally. The figures I use here were cited by Nell Tenhaaf in her article "The Trough of the Wave Sexism and Feminism" (*Vanguard*, September 1984, pp. 15-18):

Major Exhibitions/Canada 1980 – 1983

	Female	Male
Pluralities, National Gallery, Canada 1980	2	19
Repères, Art Actuel du Québec, Musée d'Art Contemporain, 1982	1	9
Okanada, Berlin 1982-83 (installations)	1	2
(performance)	2	12
(video)	19*	15*
Kunstler Aus Kanada, Stuttgart, 1983	3	15
Total	28	72

*the only positive figures

From these miserable figures, out of the total of 100 exhibitors it would appear that only 28% of those chosen to represent the country at major exhibitions, both at home and abroad, were women.

In the international art world, things are even worse. Here I use Kate Linker's figures from *Art Forum* (April 1983):

Major Exhibitions, World, 1982

	Female	Male
Italian Art Now (Guggenheim)	0	7
New Works on Paper (MOMA)	0	5
Zeitgeist, Berlin	1	44
Venice Biennale	30	190
Documenta 7	25	155
Total	56	401

We see from this that an average of only 12.25% – and in some cases 0% – of those artists exhibiting in true world terms are women. And this, dear readers, is in turn a whole lot worse than the figures for the Paris Salon of 1801 which show that out of 192 exhibitors, 28 or 14.6% were women! In 1810, things looked even rosier with 17.9% of the exhibitors being female; in 1835 there was a whopping 22.2% of women exhibiting.¹ And here we are in 1985 with a choice of 12.25% or 0%!

So what happened? Where did we go? "You've come a long way baby," they said a few years back. Like hell. Nobody's gone anywhere. Things look just the same. But *surely* we can do something about our lives and our futures as artists. We fought to get into the galleries. We fought to get into the art schools. And now we *do* have women galore in art institutions. What is it that happens to them? Why have the ultimate figures for galleries

and major exhibitions apparently not changed one whit in over one hundred and eighty years?

It is easy to see what happens at the college level. These women come from all backgrounds and all age groups. They range in age from 18 to their late 60's. Some have come directly from high school, others have attended after years of being housewives and mothers at home. Some have young children, some have grown families. Some are single mothers funded by Manpower, some are holding down jobs elsewhere as well as looking after their families. Some have no education beyond grade 12 – or even less, others have had previous postsecondary education which was interrupted by marriage and family. Some have had previous art training, most have had none. Many enter the studio courses after having first done an art history course, others come because the studio courses seem a 'safe' entry to

the outside world. But almost all have ability of some sort. Some indeed are highly talented – more so than their male peers. *All* want to achieve something.

The younger women students are open-minded and don't seem to care what exactly it is they want to achieve. They change their minds freely. Some of them head off for graphics and fashion and interior design; some later veer back into fine arts. A few of the more mature women in their late 20's and 30's want to "do" something with their art, and some of those have gone in for teaching and related occupations like art therapy. But many of the mature women do not have a clue what to do. And this is where the real problem lies. They cannot get rid of that domestic phantom Virginia Woolf called "the Angel in the House." They don't know how to. Even Woolf herself says "She died hard . . . it is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality."² We all know the Angel exists, and we all do what we need to do to get rid of her. Some are more successful at it than others. Some of us banish her to the nether regions of our minds where she sulks and stares, balefully creating guilt; others maim her and put her out of commission for months on end; most of us have her under some sort of control. There are a few who really and truly and thoroughly kill her. They know, with Woolf, that if they do not kill the Angel, she will kill them and "pluck the heart out" of their art. But they are the few. The majority are coping with everything the Angel lays on them.

There are still women today who can do only one course in a semester because their husbands won't allow them to do more, women who have never been asked by anyone to have a thought beyond making marmalade and minding their children, and women who vote the way their husbands tell them to. These are the women who have the hardest time advancing beyond the level of skills only. Many of them panic when they reach the advanced levels and are challenged to do something with their skills – which are frequently excellent – beyond the level of the literal or the mundane. Very often it is the first time in their lives that they have had to venture beyond their safe "knowns." Their struggle is hard. Women who have more education are better able to cope with this; those who have done more than one course in the programme, or are doing the full programme, respond much more inventively to these chal-

lenges and produce exciting work. These, of course, are the ones who usually go on to advanced studies at other institutions. The others, when their time at the college is over, tend to paint by themselves or to join local art groups, seldom exhibiting beyond the immediately local level. For them, really, the twentieth century is not much different from the past: to enter it directly would be too painful for them and would involve too much destruction of what they implicitly believe in.

For others the struggle to make the leap into the contemporary scene frequently involves divorce and sometimes, too, the loss of their children. The lucky ones are those who can manage to do everything without losing anything. It has never been easy. In the early seventeenth century, Artemesia Gentileschi, after the famous rape trial in 1612, married in 1618 a man who apparently treated her badly and whom she later left. Sybilla Merian stuck with her marriage for 20 years, then left her husband in 1685. Adelaide Labille-Guiard divorced her first husband in 1779 and remarried, her second husband was a painter and an old friend and their marriage appeared to work.

Women *have* managed to achieve things and still remain married and have children. The past is peppered with them, but possibly Lavinia Fontana and Rachel Ruysche have pride of place in that department by producing 11 children and 10 children respectively – while continuing to work. Elizabeth Vigée-Lebrun flatly refused to admit that her pregnancy was happening and is said to have been dragged from her easel in the throes of childbirth, stoutly insisting that she couldn't possibly stop working. And of course in our time women continue to have children as "always." Of those with "names," Kathe Kollwitz and Barbara Hepworth are obvious examples. Barbara Hepworth in fact had triplets and is said to have worked in a studio festooned with such natural clutter as diapers and plants.

Over the centuries women have had to live with condescending male attitudes like this, from the fifteenth century: "Women", says Alberti, the influential art theorist of the Italian Renaissance, "are almost all . . . soft, slow and therefore far more useful when they sit still and watch over things;"³ or this, from Walter Bagehot in the nineteenth century, in a letter to Emily Davies who had asked for his help in founding Girtin College: "I assure you," the gentleman says, "I am

not an enemy of women, I am very favourable to their employment as *labourers* or in other *menial* capacity;" or this pleasant little thought from Octave Mirbeau around 1898: "woman is not a brain", he proposes, "she is a sex, and that is much better." Best of all is this gem from the Reverend J.W. Burgson in a sermon preached at New College, Oxford, in 1884: "Inferior to us God made you," says he, "and our inferiors to the end of time you will remain." Ah well, you say, but that's history. Is it indeed? How close does history come to us? As recently as 1962 Reg Butler, the sculptor, in a lecture at the Slade School of Art said:

*I am quite sure that the vitality of many female students derives from frustrated maternity, and most of these, on finding the opportunity to settle down and produce children, will no longer experience the passionate discontent sufficient to drive them constantly towards the labours of creation in other ways. Can a woman become a vital creative artist without ceasing to be a woman except for the purposes of a census?*⁴

Does this kind of discouragement account for the gallery figures? And the review figures? And, appallingly, for those tiny numbers of women at the top of the artistic tree, either yesterday or today? The gallery figures at the municipal level look absolutely marvellous in comparison to what happens at the provincial, national and international levels. They also indicate that things, *mirabile dictu*, are improving. The review figures show us that there are women "out there" working – and that they do better in groups than individually. The articles reflect what the national and international figures show – no change in 180 years. And this is where the big question lies. Is it conceivable that only 56 women in the *world* are indeed capable of international stature under the same conditions as 401 men? Giving birth and baby minding and cooking alone cannot account for that kind of discrepancy. Nor can dropping by the wayside: men drop by the wayside too. Many of them go in for teaching and for taking up jobs with regular salaries in order to keep wives and children and pay mortgages and so on. There are men, too, who cook and look after children. So it can't be just the dreaded Angel again. (Admittedly, she does push. And *somebody* has to cook dinner.) Could Reg Butler possibly be right? Experience at the college level would seem to confirm this.

Or, is it all much more insidious? Are women always going to be victims of male values? Men have, after all, called the shots for hundreds of years. They have either ignored the existence of women as artists – witness the history books – or they have decided that women are capable of doing only certain forms of art. Leon Legrange in 1860 says: "In a word, let men busy themselves with all that has to do with great art. Let women occupy themselves with those types of work which they have always preferred, such as pastels, portraits and miniatures. Or the painting of flowers . . ." ⁵ Ruskin says quite categorically that "women's intellect is not for invention or creation but sweet ordering, arrangement and decision."⁶ And Octave Mirbeau, the gentleman who likes to think that women are a sex, says: "some women, rare exceptions, have been able to give . . . the illusion that they are creative. But they are either abnormal or simply reflections of men."

Fortunately, not all men think this way. There are those who do treat women as equals, but obviously there are not enough of them, for that sense of woman not being good enough on her own still prevails. It is easy to see why "reflections of men" are what many women still try to be. In a sense, they *must* do that in order to be noticed. The very term "woman artist" has pejorative connotations. "Artist" carries with it the possibility of great things: the prefix "woman" puts a stopper on any chance of that. So is it any wonder that women try to emulate men in what they produce? And in so doing they may in reality be producing inferior work. Hence, it is not, indeed, inconceivable that only 56 women produced work worthy of taking its place at world levels. By sublimating womanly instinct and feeling, and endeavoring to transform it into "manly" work, women weaken what is initially strong. Art must be seen to be not only masculine but both masculine and feminine. Back to Virginia Woolf again, who said "it is fatal to be woman-manly or man-womanly." It is also, perhaps, equally fatal to try to become the other to the detriment of the original.

Women are fighting on all these fronts. The problems that defeat them at the college level continue inexorably to exist – they just disguise themselves differently. The Angel continues to thrive, the same values persist, and women – not all, it's true, but countless numbers – continue to inflict the same old damage on ourselves.

Something has to change, and it's up to us to do it. The women's movement of the 70's has broken the ground and stimulated awareness. The times are ready now for a new wave. All women – those in the kitchen or the college or the studio or wherever – are going to have to *do* something. We must get rid of the rhetoric, get rid of the paranoia, get rid of "poor-me" syndrome. And we have to banish that damned Angel. We are going to have to become educated in more than just the basics. We must struggle for acceptance as women *and* artists. We should be free from the clutter of self and yet, conversely, assured and self-aware. We need to develop a spirit that is free enough to allow ourselves to be artists.

And we are going to have to find a way to do all this that *works*; otherwise, a hun-

dred years from now, if the world is still intact, once again women artists will have gone nowhere.

Nancy Spero recently put it perfectly: "Get out of the way, you guys," she said, "there's got to be a new way!"

Let's go for it.

¹Figures quoted by Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin in *Women Artists, 1550 – 1950* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), p. 46.

²Virginia Woolf, "Professions for Women," in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974, pp. 235-242).

³Alberti, from his "Della Famiglia Treatise," quoted in Harris and Nochlin, p. 22.

⁴Reg Butler, reprinted in *New Society* (31 August 1978), p. 443.

⁵Leon Legrange, "Du rang des femmes dans l'art," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 1860 quoted by Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin (above), page 56.

⁶John Ruskin, "Sesame and Lilies," *Works of John Ruskin* (Lib. Ed. Vol. XVIII, 1905), page 122.

⁷Nancy Spero, quoted by John Bentley Mays, *Globe and Mail*, Saturday, May 4, 1985.

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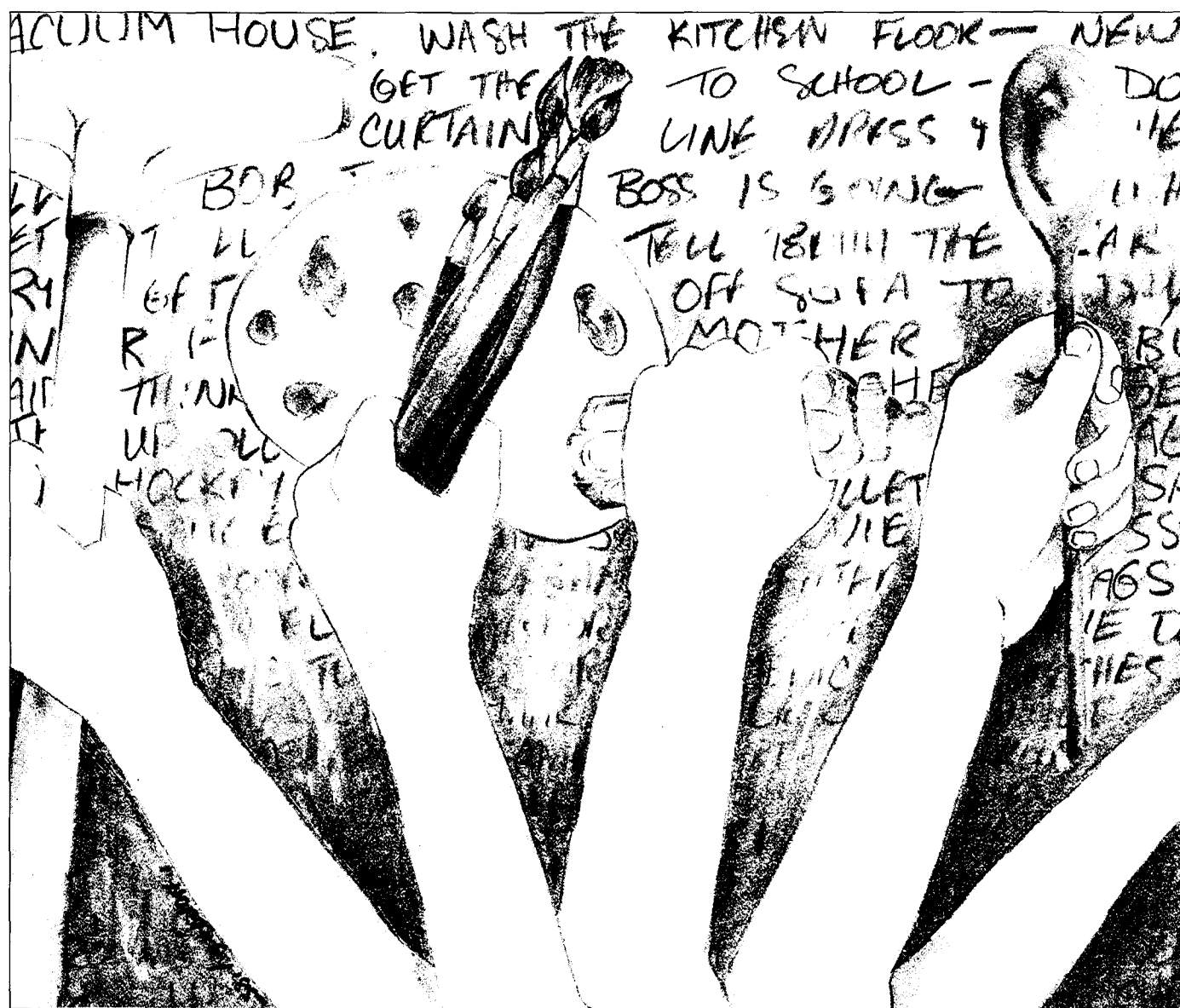


Illustration: Jane Northey