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WEEKEND Arts

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Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia

Global Feminisms Rebecca Belmore's video installation "The Named and the Unnamed" is among the works in the first exhibition at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum.

They Are Artists Who Are Women; Hear Them Roar

The combination of the "Global Feminisms" exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum and its Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, whose inauguration this show celebrates, is like a false idea wrapped in confusion.

ROBERTA SMITH

ART REVIEW

The false idea is that there really is such a thing as feminist art, as opposed to

art that intentionally or by osmosis reflects or is influenced by feminist thought, of which there is plenty. Feminist art is a short-hand phrase that everyone uses, but institutionalizing such an amorphous, subjective qualifier should make us all reconsider.

The center seems to have been created mostly for its publicity value. It isn't necessary in order to showcase the only jewel in its crown, Judy Chicago's unruly, inspiring installation "The Dinner Party," a landmark in feminist history that occupies around 5,000 of the center's 8,300 square feet. Made by Ms. Chicago and scores of volunteers from 1974 to 1979, this immense piece is in many ways the perfect storm of

second-wave feminism and modernism: it is lashed together by pride, fury, radiating labial forms and numerous female-identified crafts, most prominently painted ceramic plates and needlework. Whatever you think about it as a work of art, it amounts to one-stop consciousness-raising and historical immersion: an activist, body-centered tribute to 39 important women. Study "The Dinner Party" close enough and your bra, if you're wearing one, may spontaneously combust.

What is confused is the exhibition, a sprawling, sometimes energetic assembly of recent work by nearly 90 women from nearly 50 countries that has been organized by Maura Reilly, the founding director of the Sackler Center, and the veteran art historian Linda Nochlin. It seems worth noting that the show's organizers don't use the phrase "feminist art" in its title. The same goes for what might be called its sister exhibition, "Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution," which has just opened at the Museum of

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They Are Artists Who Are Women

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Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and will travel to the P.S. 1 Contemporary Arts Center in Long Island City, Queens, next February.

While "Wack" examines art made by about 120 women in the late 1960s and 1970s, "Global Feminisms" concentrates on the present and, by implication, the future. It is restricted to artists born since 1960 and works made since 1990, although most date from 2000 or later. It is energetic, illuminating and irksome, and in all ways worthy of careful study. But it should have been much better.

In her catalog essay Ms. Reilly emphasizes the second "s" in the word feminisms. To wit, there is more than one way to be a feminist these days; feminist goals and issues are different in different places, as is the rate with which they are realized. Still, the show itself feels narrow. Nearly devoid of significant painting and sculpture and thoroughly dominated by photography and video, with a documentary slant to many of its better works, it is more about information, politics and the struggle for equality than it is about art in any very concentrated or satisfying sense.

The curators have treated New York like just another spot on the globe, which is healthy. Nonetheless, "Global Feminisms" jumps cannily back and forth not so much between

Opening Events

"Global Feminisms" continues through July 1 at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, 200 Eastern Parkway, at Prospect Park, (718) 638-5000; brooklynmuseum.org. Special events, including talks by artists and curators, concerts and film screenings, are planned through June in conjunction with the opening of the center. Unless noted, events are free with museum admission, \$8, \$4 for students and 62+, free for members and children under 12. Events this weekend include a lecture with the artist Judy Chicago and the philanthropist Elizabeth A. Sackler (tomorrow at 3 p.m.); and a performance by the Brooklyn Philharmonic (Sunday at 3 p.m.; tickets, \$15 or \$10 for students and members, include museum admission; 718-488-5913).

mainstream and margins as between the two not completely separate success platforms of the marketplace and the institutional stage. To one side are those who sell like hotcakes, among them Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood, Sarah Lucas, Pipilotti Rist and Kara Walker. To the other are those known mostly from the international biennial circuit, like Tracy Rose, Arahmaiani and Katarzyna Kozyra.

The show begins in the Sackler Center in the space around Ms. Chicago's opus and then advances through an adjacent wing of galleries. But in many ways it never gets too far beyond the world according to "The Dinner Party."

Most of the work here is essentialist, body-oriented and familiar to the point of old-fashioned. Again and again women fall back on making art from the thing nearest at hand that separates them from men: their bodies — and often echo their predecessors rather literally. One example will suffice: Ana Mendieta's charged earthwork/performance art is absent from the exhibition because the artist was born before 1960. Instead we have younger artists doing work similar to hers. Some, like Bernie Searle, take possession; others, like Iskra Dimitrova, offer tame indoor versions of Mendieta's.

To some extent, this is the nature of pioneering. Just because land has been cleared and houses built in one part of the world does not mean the same techniques can be avoided when trailblazing elsewhere. Nor does this rule out originality, as exhibitions devoted to the international repercussions of Cubism and Constructivism have proved.

But feminism is not a style, or a formal approach. It is a philosophy, an attitude and a political instrument. It is more important than Pop, Minimalism or Conceptual art because it is by its very nature bigger than they are, more far-reaching and life-affecting. In addition feminism is not of itself an aesthetic value. It is an idea that can assume an organic force in some artists' work, but others just pay it lip service without much exertion or passion.

Divided into four convention-bound thematic sections, the show swings from the familiar to the sensational to the familiarly sensational and back again. In "Life Cycles" you may wonder just how many more naked breasts and other body parts female artists will expose, replicate or exaggerate in order to get even for those depicted over the centuries by male artists. Lots, it would seem. But Anna Gaskell's photographs spook just because the feet of the model's pantyhose are tied together. Milena Dopitova evokes the strange isolation of older women with an arresting photograph of what may be a set of matronly twins or just one woman, alone with herself.

In "Identities," the issue of gender identity, volatile enough in Western cultures, is tackled by women working in photography and video in other parts of the world who dress like



Yossi Milo Gallery

"Study of a Boy 2" (2002), a photograph by Loretta Lux.



Polshek Partnership Architects/Brooklyn Museum

"The Dinner Party" (1974-79), by Judy Chicago, is the centerpiece of the exhibition "Global Feminisms."

men, shave like men and sit like men. But the most compelling move across genders and cultures is "Tagged," a straightforward three-channel video by the German artist Julika Rudelius, in which a succession of young Muslim men show and tell their spiffy wardrobes, trying on clothes while talking about prices, favorite brands, working out and, finally, how they won't have to worry about their looks once they marry.

In "Politics" the work alternates between harrowing and oblique, and labels often trump art. On video Tania Bruguera hangs a dead lamb from her neck and eats dirt; Sigalit Landau makes a hula hoop out of barbed wire and twirls it till her torso starts to shred. Arahmaiani's "Display Case" may look innocent enough, but when exhibited in Indonesia in 1994, its juxtaposition of religion and sex (evoked by a Buddha icon, the Koran and a box of condoms), set off such a furor that she fled the country for several years. Parastou Forouhar's "Thousand and One Day" wallpaper is inherently hard-hitting, sprinkled as it is with schematic scenes, in a style that seems part Persian miniature and part Robert Gober, of women in burqas being tortured and killed. The

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More images from "Global Feminisms" at the Brooklyn Museum:

nytimes.com/design



Sikkema Jenkins & Company

From "The Emancipation Approximation" (1999-2000), a series of prints by Kara Walker.

wall label hits harder still: In 1998 her dissident parents were assassinated by Iranian secret agents in the family home in Tehran.

Rebecca Belmore's 2002 video installation "The Named and the Unnamed" may get your attention first for the intensity of the ritualistic performance piece it documents, which protested and mourned the abduction and murder of more than 50 women, many of them sex workers, in Vancouver. But ultimately it is that the video is projected on a wall gridded with small light bulbs, and the way the image shifts but the lights don't, that hold the eye. A more straightforward yet quirky docu-

mentary is Emily Jacir's "Crossing Surda (A Record of Going to and From Work)"; it gives a low-tech, knee-level, careering account, using a hidden camera, of her repeated crossings of an Israeli checkpoint, and conveys a mordant, depressing view of an already desolate limbo.

"Emotions," the final section, begins with the claim that "in the history of art women have always dominated the representation of emotions," an idea that seems almost as idiotic as the notion that men are better at science. It includes Julia Loktev's strange meditation on relationships, a dual-screen video piece made with Vito Acconci that has excellent camera work; Tracy Moffatt's exhilarating "Love," a fast-moving compendium of love (and hate) scenes from Hollywood movies that would never be seen on Oscar night; and last, and very much least, Patricia Monge's cell-like "Room for Isolation and Restraint," which is lined on all six surfaces with sanitary napkins.

After the press releases proclaiming a "museum within a museum," the smallness of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art is surprising. But perhaps it will become unnecessary: it will certainly never be able to accommodate all the art, by women as well as men, that has feminist consciousness somewhere in its DNA. The word feminism will be around as long as it is necessary for women to put a name on the sense of assertiveness, confidence and equality that, unnamed, has always been granted men.

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