

CULTURED

Confronting the Norm

by Rachel Small

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Curator Alison Gingeras is behind a provocative new section at Frieze London. Titled “Sex Work: Feminist Art & Radical Politics,” participating galleries will collectively stage solo presentations of nine women artists whose formative years unfolded alongside the feminist upheaval of the 1960s and ’70s—and each of whom didn’t quite fall in line: While second wave feminists took a hardline stance against pornography, the artists in “Sex Work” experimented with a declarative form of eroticism. They used, as Gingeras explains, “sex—not only coitus, but also the politics of gender—in their work, very frontally and explicitly.”

Take Mary Beth Edelson’s “Women Rising,” a 1973 series to be exhibited by David Lewis gallery, in which the Chicago-born artist altered photographs of her nude figure with illustrations and collage. Transforming her body with emblems and patterns, she recreates herself as, in one rendering, a Hindu goddess; in another, a bull’s head superimposed on her lower abdomen traces the shape of the female reproductive system, imagining the traditionally masculine symbol as a feminine form.



Mary Beth Edelson’s “Double Shells,” 1973.

Tapping into the spirit of sexual liberation, such imagery was nevertheless deemed incompatible with feminist goals of the era. And most women artists who perpetuated it were essentially marginalized by the movement that had initially given them footing. Meanwhile, spurred by landmark legal wins, the core tenets of feminism appeared to gradually receive widespread acceptance, normalized through media and advertisements. Accordingly, feminist art history began to take shape around figures like Judy Chicago and Yoko Ono, for instance, whose artistic and feminist merits were generally beyond reproach.

Only since the mid-aughts have certain female artists, whose sexually bold work had been an affront to feminists in prior decades, been experiencing a surge in popularity. Betty Tompkins made her original “Fuck” paintings, a series for which she is now celebrated, around 1970; but the up-close depictions of genitalia and intercourse were too risqué for the New York art scene. Tompkins ultimately languished in obscurity until 2003, when a solo show of the same paintings became a turning point in her career. As a curator, Gingeras first outlined this trend in “Black Sheep Feminism,” a 2016 exhibition at Dallas Contemporary. While Tompkins was one of the three American artists in the four-person show, “Sex Work” develops the thesis to include European artists like Polish native Natalia LL, and Austrians Birgit Jürgenssen and Renate Bertlmann, both part of the performance-driven Viennese Actionist art scene in the ’60s.

“These artists, by being received so late, have had a much bigger impact on contemporary art practices,” says Gingeras. “Especially younger women artists, who have received this legacy,” and, unlike their forebears, “haven’t had to struggle with issues of censorship.”

With an eye-opening array of works—from Dorothy Iannone’s stylized depictions of graphic yet emotionally rich sexuality to Penny Slinger’s surrealist-inspired collages that take sexual exploration into dream states—“Sex Work” will demonstrate the previous generations dealt with gender and sexuality on their own terms.

More broadly, Frieze London, being the rare art fair that regularly attracts an interested public, will mark the “first time that this challenging, explicit work gets seen in such a mainstream context,” adds Gingeras.

The curator emphasizes the importance of public interaction by spotlighting A.I.R. Gallery, a nonprofit space dedicated to promoting women artists. A.I.R. opened in 1972 on Wooster Street in Soho, and since 2008 has operated out of Brooklyn. As part of “Sex Work,” its presence serves to “highlight not only the artist but the galleries that have supported these underdog figures,” says Gingeras. “[It] has not had the means of a mainstream gallery or a commercial gallery,” making it difficult to maintain a high profile in spite of its storied past. But, at this year’s Frieze, the history of A.I.R. Gallery will unfold across a nearly 40-foot-long timeline, that is, the length of four booths.

“I think it’s important to have alternative, historical, conversations about feminism that are not rooted in corporate American discourse,” says Gingeras. “Because so much of feminism is couched in ‘leaning in,’ or this kind of appropriation of feminism by pop cultural icons like Beyonce or Ivanka Trump. This will give a younger audience an opportunity to see some artifacts from where feminism began, and its most radical proponents.”