

*In 1971 the pioneering art historian Linda Nochlin posed the question, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" - opening the door to a wave of Feminist inquiry that has changed the face of art and art history. Within the more narrowly defined history and practice of collage, one can also ask the question, "Why have there been so many great women collagists?" **Daughters of the Revolution: Women & Collage** brings together over thirty artists, whose work has helped to re-define this quintessentially Modernist art form. While the exhibition is by no means a definitive survey, it is our aim to invite questions on the subject and continue a dialogue.*

Nora Aslan, Alice Attie, Sarah G. Austin, Hannelore Baron, Lynda Benglis, Biala, Marietta Ganapin, Ginnie Gardiner, Ilse Getz, Louise Erhard, India Evans, Addie Herder, Hannah Höch, Lee Krasner, Elaine Lustig Cohen, Louise Nevelson, Judy Pfaff, Penny Rockwell, Martha Rosler, Judith Rothschild, Anne Ryan, Miriam Schapiro, Carolee Schneemann, Holli Schorno, Ann Shostrom, Donna Sharrett, Karen Shaw, Gail Skudera, Stella Snead, Maritta Tapanainen, Dodi Wexler, Charmion von Wiegand, Hannah Wilke, May Wilson

When Clement Greenberg wrote of the "Pasted Paper Revolution" in his 1958 essay on Cubist collage, it is unlikely that he would or could have conceived of that revolution as being largely fought by women. Employing a wide range of visual and material strategies, each of these artists raises important questions about the unique connection between collage and women's experience. This generally intimate art form has historically been more accessible to women, who for many years were excluded from a conventional studio practice - collage was the medium that could be done "on the kitchen table". Collage has important roots in craft traditions dominated by women (e.g. scrapbooks, 19th century Valentines, quilting, decoupage, etc.). The importance of memory and a decidedly preservationist impulse also has particular resonance for women, who are often the keepers of their family histories and mementos. While each of the artists represented here owes much to the achievements of the Feminist movement, their identities as artists reflect a broad spectrum of attitudes and experiences, ranging from deeply political engagement to an expressed ambivalence. Regardless, their unique contributions have opened up a fundamental cultural and aesthetic dialogue, further bridging the gap between art and life.

The following is excerpted from a conversation between Pavel Zoubok and painter Melissa Meyer, who in 1978 co-authored the groundbreaking essay "Femmage" with fellow artist Miriam Schapiro, first published in the Feminist journal Heresies.

PZ: Can you tell me what led to this collaboration with Miriam Schapiro and the writing of "Femmage"? The article makes a strong case for the birth of modern collage not simply as a response to the innovations of Synthetic Cubism, but as a natural evolution of so-called craft traditions pioneered largely by women in the 19th century.

MM: In 1977 I was invited to a meeting at Joyce Kozloff's loft for a preliminary discussion about the fourth issue of the Heresies Collective entitled "Heresies :Women's Traditional Arts: The Politics of Aesthetics". We sat around in a circle and each of us was asked to speak about what she was interested in. When it came time for me to speak, I said nervously with my little, low voice, "I'm interested in why so many women made collages". At the end of the meeting Miriam Schapiro came up to me and said, "I want to work with you on that". I thought "Oh my God" she is going to swallow me up - this strong, forceful woman! But actually at some later point in our collaboration, she said to me "Melissa, do you think you could keep quiet for a minute so I could get a word in?"

Before I voiced my question at that first meeting, I remember sitting there waiting for my turn to come and thinking about the scale of collage, of Hannah Höch's physically small but visually and conceptually large works and of Lee Krasner getting the kitchen table to work on while Jackson Pollock got the studio.

PZ: There are certain qualities that are commonly associated with the medium of collage (e.g. intimate scale, the recycling of commonplace images and objects, hand work). Although these qualities are not gender-specific, do you think they have a special significance in the lives and work of women artists?

MM: Yes, women do the repairs – darn the socks, save, recycle and transform. Take for example the tradition of the quilting bee, where women artists sat around working, probably telling stories, confessing private thoughts and deeds, making emotional bonds and creating narratives – I can't imagine that they sat around quilting in silence!

PZ: I think one reason that the role of women in collage has so often been marginalized has as much to do with a general and pervasive attitude toward collage as a “minor” art form compounded by the identification of so-called “women’s work” with craft rather than fine art.

MM: When in the 19th century people such as Oscar Wilde proclaimed, "Art for Art's sake", useful, functional objects were considered less important and ultimately disposable. Women have traditionally been the keepers of the intimate - the small personal objects, the confessional – secret letters, visual diaries and the like. What women were making prior to the 20th century – quilts, devotional objects, scrapbooks, decorated painted furniture with cutouts of flowers, etc. predated what became known as "high art" collage. Also, women did not enjoy and receive patronage in the ways that men did.

PZ: What was the art world's response to the position you and Miriam Schapiro took regarding pre-Modernist collage by women? Looking back on that time, what do you think has changed with regard to the general attitude toward collage and so-called “women’s work”?

MM: The art world response was not much initially but the piece has been anthologized and cited quite a bit. Now with the Internet and search engines like Google, it is accessible and available! My take on the art world in 1978 was that it was not interested in supporting “women's art” and giving women a lot of credit for predating anything aesthetically in the canon - but this is now 31 years later, and a lot has changed. Today, collage is like any other palette – something to choose from in addition to all the other media available to visual artists: photography, film, video, computers, etc. We live in a collage world; collage environments cobbled from disparate sources, websites are collages, how we put ourselves together is collage. We are walking collages! Everyone knows and uses recycling literally or visually. Your gallery is proof of the importance of this. The art world likes to control responses one way or another by marginalizing women and other groups (e.g. Gays and Lesbians, African-Americans, etc.) but in the margins is where corrections are made.

PZ: Collage has often been employed by artists as a vehicle for political and social resistance. What special opportunities and/or challenges do you think this has created for women?

MM: Photo-collage and digital collage can be powerful, satirical tools that enable artists to combine and juxtapose lots of imagery by manipulating scale and perspective. There is a history of women artists working in graphic design – doing paste-ups and mechanicals, techniques that became obsolete with the advent of computers. Women artists like Hannah Höch, Mary Beth Edelson, Martha Rosler and Barbara

Kruger, often used these techniques to talk about identity and politics while others, like Elaine Lustig Cohen and Addie Herder, took a decidedly abstract approach.

PZ: The artists in this exhibition come from different generations and backgrounds and as such have divergent relationships and attitudes toward the Feminist movement. How would you characterize the changes in this relationship since the 1970s?

MM: I'm guessing, but I sometimes think that younger women artists – and I have noticed this in my students – accept Feminism and reject it at the same time. They take it for granted and do not always realize what opportunities have been created for them by the older women artists. While there has been a great deal of progress in terms of women showing, selling and being written about, a lot still has to be accomplished!

Melissa Meyer lives and works in New York City and teaches painting at the School of Visual Arts and the National Academy of Design. Her work is represented by Lennon Weinberg Gallery.

TO BE PLACE AT THE BOTTOM OF THE CHECKLIST PAGE:

Daughters of the Revolution: Women & Collage is dedicated to Addie Herder, an extraordinary woman whose art and friendship continue to inspire and inform my love of collage.