

ARTS & CULTURE

How X-Rated Feminist Art Came Into Power (NSFW)

Pioneering artists Carolee Schneemann and Marilyn Minter share their stories.
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Warning: This article contains explicit imagery. If you don't like it, leave!



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Carolee Schneemann, "Eye Body (From 36 Transformative Actions for Camera)," 1963/1985, Black and white photograph

The year was 1993. Artist Ellen Cantor, then 32 years old, curated the exhibition “Coming to Power,” made up entirely of sexually explicit feminist work made by women artists, which was on view at David Zwirner Gallery.

Slick, drooping phallic forms by Louise Bourgeois hung from the ceilings, while Joan Semmel’s psychedelic-colored sex paintings were mounted on the walls. Wads of rolled-up gum arranged by Hannah Wilke resembled disembodied vaginas, while Nancy Fried’s sculpted scenes of erotically charged lesbian domesticity, upon closer look, revealed themselves to be carved out of bread.

Visitors left the exhibition riled and confused. “The show opened and I was excoriated,” contributing artist Marilyn Minter explained in an interview with The Huffington Post. “The worst nightmare for an artist. Many of the other women in the show had already been thrown out of the art world.”

Minter, now 68 years old, creates lush, decadent paintings that ooze with lubed-up glamour. Her style, which has been referred to as “realism in drag,” exaggerates textures with a contagious hunger, bringing the fuzzy surface of a tongue or sticky strings of semen into sharp detail that supersedes real life.



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND SALON 94 NEW YORK
Marilyn Minter, “The Supremes,” 1990, Enamel on metal First Aid Kit Box

n 1993, the reviews of her work were terrible. “It was a nightmare,” she said. “I was feeling pretty beat up.” Yet in 2017, a retrospective spanning 40 years of Minter’s work is heading to the Brooklyn Museum for a massive show called “Pretty/Dirty.”

Radical feminist performance artist Carolee Schneemann had a similar recollection of the 1993 show. “Some women [who] were upset by the art walked out, saying it was pornography,” she said in an email to HuffPost. “[The response] was varied, uncertain, but also excited. The work on view was on this threshold of context. It didn’t have an art historical shape around it yet. And this was 1993 - which was relatively late.”

It does seem pretty late, especially for an artist like Schneemann, who had been making body-centric work since the ‘60s. Her 1964 video “Meat Joy” is a writhing and raw celebration of flesh, a tangled mass of men, women, chicken legs, paint, sausages and fish. In her 1975 performance “Interior Scroll,” she crouches atop a table, her body painted in mud, reading a feminist scroll pulled from her vagina.

And yet, nearly 20 years post-scroll, sexually explicit work like Schneemann’s was still way out on the margins, even compared to the mainstream feminist dialogue. In the ‘90s, feminist ideology was dominated by individuals like Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, who believed that pornography was unequivocal sex discrimination and should be banned completely.



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND SALON 94 NEW YORK
Marilyn Minter, “Flurry,” 1994, Enamel on metal

“It was the pinnacle of political correctness,” Minter said. “It was traitorous, according to them, for women to recapture images from an abusive history and try to own them. It made me crazy. Why don’t we own our bodies? Why can’t we make sexual images for our own production? It’s a way to own power.”

Minter was staunchly committed to creating images purely designated for women’s pleasure, taking control of her own sexual agency in the process. At the time, she didn’t realize just how alone she was in her mission. “I thought everyone thought like me,” she laughed. “Like, nobody has politically correct fantasies. I thought I was part of a larger segment of the population, I didn’t realize I was an outlier.”

Twenty three years have passed since “Coming to Power” made its contentious New York debut, and Minter is an outlier no more. On Sept. 9, a re-staging of Ellen Cantor’s monumental 1993 exhibition opened at Maccarone Gallery. The show features the work of the same 25 feminist artists, many of whose names have shifted from the fringes of art world fame to their rightful spots as rebel goddesses.

For Schneemann, the most striking element of the exhibition’s reprisal was the choice to paint the massive gallery space entirely black. “It was almost like entering a forbidden cave, or a coven,” she said. Or perhaps a pornographic theater. “That became a metaphor for me, about how before, the work was in a darker place that didn’t belong in the definitive art culture, one that was male, heroicized. Like we were off in some kind of a cave. But the work is now being appreciated and illuminated.”



COURTESY ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES NEW YORK © 2016 JOAN SEMMEL ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY ARS NEW YORK
Joan Semmel, “Purple Passion,” 1973, Oil on canvas

This current iteration of “Coming to Power” exists in a far less controversial climate than its predecessor. Over the past 13 years, sex positivity has become a widespread pillar of contemporary feminism. As Minter would put it: “My side won.” The art world reflects this glorious shift.

Artists like Narcissister, Leah Schrager and La Chica Boom incorporate their bodies - naked, sexual and in control □ into their photographs and performances, earning money, power and prestige through their own manipulated image. Others like Rebecca Goyette, Faith Holland and Leah Emery explore the boundaries of porn, re-imagining pornographic imagery by and for women. And then there are photographers like Petra Collins, Olivia Bee and Sandy Kim, documenting femininity from the perspective of the female gaze.

“I’m a big supporter of those girls,” Minter says, in reference to Collins and Kim. “They’re doing this post-punk backlash, I love it. They’re going against all the robotic images — the bikini lasering and face contouring - who has time for this shit? What are you, crazy?”

In part, Minter credits the internet with the recent rise of sex-positive femininity. To an extent, Schneemann agreed. “It’s oceanic,” she said. “It spreads information like crazy, so radical impulses can become more popular. It’s not as hierarchical as art history has intended itself to be.”



COURTESY THE ARTIST
Nancy Fried, “Victorian Lovers,” 1976, Flour, salt and acrylic

However, context is the major factor Schneemann deemed necessary for the rise and acceptance of erotic, feminist art. “In the ‘60s, we had no context,” she expressed. “How brave it was to build one. Ellen Cantor did that as a young artist who was not part of any authoritative realm. And now, the influence of the female gaze has transposed the traditional male gaze, which was assumed to be authenticating what we should look at and think about.”

When it debuted in 1993, “Coming to Power” was something of a battle cry, gathering up the few women artists speaking a similar language in an attempt to sway the overwhelmingly male perspective of the art world establishment and larger society surrounding it. Today, the exhibition operates more as a living history lesson, commemorating the pioneering artists that changed the trajectory of contemporary art. Judy Chicago’s “The Dinner Table” and feminist group exhibitions like “WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution” were also central to creating historical precedents and frames of reference where none existed before.

That’s not to say, however, that the mission offered up in 1993 is fully accomplished. If anything, the progress made is currently under siege. “I was thinking that political correctness was over, but it came back this year!” Minter said. “Everything is based on policing women’s bodies □ politics, advertising, religion. There’s this huge backlash trying to stop the progress. If we start owning our own sexual agency, we have all the power. Keep us innocent and we’ll get plucked like little flower virgins, we get controlled by the patriarchy.”

Schneemann, whose practice currently revolves around the atrocities taking place in Syria, hopes that feminist strides yield integrated results, penetrating other issues like ecology and militarism instead of merely, as she described, pleasurable junk. “Complicated things have become commercialized and commodified,” Schneemann said. “There is so much of everything that the sense of purposeful rigor is lost, and the more challenging issues are swamped. We’ve got to get strict and formulate a community to protect aesthetic values as they have a potentiality to contribute socially.”

If “Coming to Power” were to be exhibited again in the future, say, in another 15 years, that is the world Schneemann hopes it would inhabit. As for Minter, the future is looking pretty damn sweet. “We’ll look like geniuses then!” she laughed. “Yesterday’s smut is today’s erotica.”

“Coming to Power: 25 Years of Sexually X-Plicit Art By Women” is on view until Oct. 16, 2016 at Maccarone New York.



DAVID AND MONICA ZWIRNER NEW YORK
Patricia Cronin, "boys," 1993, 24 color polaroids mounted on board



DAVID AND MONICA ZWIRNER NEW YORK
Patricia Cronin, "girls," 1993, 24 color polaroids mounted on board