

Mother Lode – Some Thoughts on the ‘Older Woman Artist’*

Christina Barton

Without doubt, one of the most poignant works I’ve seen this year is Saskia Leek’s contribution to *Help Yourself*, a show orchestrated by Grace Ryder and Turumeke Harrington at Enjoy Contemporary Art Space in Wellington (28 May–10 July 2021). The work consists of a short text she had typed on a sheet of A4 paper pinned to the wall alongside a hand-spun, naturally-dyed, knitted wall hanging in tones of ochre, burnt orange and earthy red made by Kristen Leek, her mother. This was Leek’s response to the curators’ invitation to contribute to an exhibition developed out of and responding to the usually unacknowledged forms of mutual support that sustain and are sustained by women. Leek’s text moved me not just because she had chosen to honour her recently deceased mother as a creative maker who was never acknowledged as an artist, but because of Leek’s painful honesty as she admits her feelings as an art-school-trained painter who understood the distance her practice put between her and her parent. She describes the “competitive tension” between them; how she “cringed” when her mother compared their work. Yet by the end of her statement, having had to sort her mother’s possessions and reflect on all that she had had to give up to raise her daughter alone, Leek rails against her “double erasure” and offers up her space in the exhibition to one of her mother’s productions as a public acknowledgement of the creative life Leek had been gifted by her forebear.

Contemporary art has the capacity to intervene critically into the histories we have inherited, to illuminate the structures that condition who is recognised and how value is assigned. Leek’s simple presentation proved this. Drawn to her honest ambivalence, I was struck by Leek’s decision to open up that old debate about the hierarchies that determine the value of women’s work, in the context of a small contemporary space that usually serves as a platform for new art by emerging artists. It reminded me that something is afoot in the art world that is affording our artistic ‘mothers’ new attention.

What is driving this new interest in older women practitioners? On thinking through this question, I volunteer the notion that it is a by-product of the seismic shifts taking place in society at large. These are impacting art from two opposing but inevitably interdependent directions, both of which are entangling women artists and shifting the ways their works are being received. On the one hand, a rampant neoliberal capitalism is fuelling a buoyant art

market that has become increasingly heated as the wealth gap precipitously widens even during a global pandemic. On the other, we are witnessing a social and cultural rebellion against the ‘West’ and all it stands for. This is galvanising emerging generations of artists, curators, writers, and thinkers who have had enough of the inequities of a system built with patriarchal and colonial force, who are becoming louder in their demands that institutions review their commitments to a narrow canon of so-called ‘great’ art.

On the market side of the equation, we’ve seen this internationally with unprecedented attention being paid to senior women—such as Paris-based Lebanese artist Etel Adnan (born 1924) and Cuban-born Carmen Herrera (born 1915), who did not receive mainstream critical attention until well into their 80s and 90s—or the belated re-evaluation of women artists who had been overlooked as the histories of art were being written in the 1950s through to the 1970s (like Lee Lozano, Joan Mitchell, and Ana Mendieta). There has been a marked uptake by high-end galleries of older women, several of whom are non-Western or from the global South (for example Senga Nengudi, and Mira Schendel). We are also witnessing rising prices for figures who a few short years ago were receiving relatively modest sums for their works and are now achieving prices in the millions, and a burgeoning number of museum shows and publications designed to fill in the gaps created by the art world’s inherent sexism. The extent of this trend is pertinently evident in Tokyo at the Mori Art Museum, where the exhibition *Another Energy: Power to Continue Challenging—16 Women Artists from around the World* (22 April–26 September 2021) took the artists’ age as its rationale, selecting women artists aged between 71 and 105 to celebrate what organisers called these artists’ “special strength”, a quality they attribute to the “resilience and determination” born of long careers out of the limelight. While the thesis of this show is problematic – turn the gender tables and would we applaud a show of old men? – it is a summary instance of the trend.

Aotearoa New Zealand has not been immune to this phenomenon, with new attention paid to overlooked or underrepresented artists like Louise Henderson (1902–1994), Emily Karaka (born 1952), Vivian Lynn (1935–2018), Fiona Clark (born 1954) and Maureen Lander (born 1942). And we are eagerly anticipating the arrival of the Hilma af Klint exhibition in Wellington later this year. Touted as City Gallery Wellington’s next blockbuster, this will expose local audiences to the little-known paintings of the Swedish artist-mystic who worked in virtual isolation at the turn of the twentieth century.

Such projects firmly build on the existing respect shown towards figures like Frances Hodgkins and Rita Angus, both painters who service our needs for female equivalents of

modern ‘masters’. At their best they deliver new scholarship, genuine respect, and greater visibility: if COVID had not struck in 2020, Rita Angus would by now have had a solo exhibition at the Royal Academy in London. But care must be taken to distinguish between the appetites of an increasingly voracious market and the system of values, expectations and desires that drives it, which treats a new category—in this case, the older female artist—as the next ‘big thing’, and the disruptive ambitions of critical voices who want to upset the applecart of high culture.

As much as I am looking forward to seeing Klint’s “secret paintings”, I cannot help but be turned off by the spurious assertion that the artist discovered abstraction before Kandinsky and Mondrian, not because I doubt the dates when her works were completed, but because her opaque symbolism is here being co-opted to Modernism’s teleological narrative of the heroic progress away from naturalistic representation as the single dominating goal of twentieth-century art. My point here is that Klint is being marketed in terms that match the need to build large audiences. As her exceptionalism is being lauded, she is in fact being tied into conventional art history, which provides a lineage for her painting at the expense of allowing viewers to delve deeply into her larger imaginative system. While this is likely the decision of the marketers not the curators, it is symptomatic of the simplifications demanded by the economic drivers that fuel the culture industry.

Feminist art historian Griselda Pollock makes this point in her contribution to *Frieze* editor-at-large Jennifer Higgie’s hugely successful [Bow Down podcast series](#) that focuses on retrieving women artists who have been lost to history. Talking about the Czech/Canadian artist Vera Frenkel (born 1938), she recalls Frenkel’s project for *Expo ’86* in Vancouver, to which she was invited as one of four of Canada’s ‘greatest’ artists (the others were all men). Here, instead of allowing herself to be lionised, Frenkel introduced “Cornelia Lumsden”, a writer she invented, who she convinced audiences was a real figure forgotten by literary history. Pollock describes this intervention as a pointed critique of our need for hero figures; Frenkel’s ploy to deflect attention from herself. She goes on to describe why she chose Frenkel as the artist to whom she wished to ‘bow down’.

Pollock applauds Frenkel for the seriousness and wit of her work in video, performance and installation. The art historian suggests that Frenkel’s practice is critically important, and, indeed, those invested in the notion of art as a deeply conceptual project have accorded her the respect she deserves. But, and this is key, she is not well-known. Pollock maintains it is the artist’s very seriousness that ensures her marginalisation by a culture that lusts after celebrity and is resistant to anything that cannot be turned into a commodity. Her

point is that we must check our unquestioning approval of the attention paid to women artists if it is still bound to the rule of the market.

In a local context I see this embedded myopia at work in the reception of women artists who fail to produce works that collectors might want in their homes. It takes courage and conviction to resist the lure of the market and its cult of personality, as it has career consequences. I think of Vivian Lynn, who early on (by the late 1960s) decided to abandon painting, turning to printmaking, then a multi-media practice that made use of abject substances like hair and skin. She refused to comply with the dictates of a defining 'signature' style, and had on-again-off-again relations with dealers. All of which had consequences for her reputation (until recently). Or et al., and the debacle of their selection for the Venice Biennale in 2005, when the elusive collective, who everyone knew was a woman artist who refused to comply with the requirement that 'she' be named and therefore identified, drew such opprobrium that even then-Prime Minister Helen Clark questioned the decision. How is et al. doing in the market now one might well ask?

Perhaps one of the positive upsides of the shifts I'm describing is that younger (mostly female) curators, dealers, and critics are beginning to seek out older figures exactly because such women have doggedly and resiliently stayed true to an alternative set of values that is now resonating with their own ethical outlooks. Vivian Lynn, for example, has recently been re-discovered. Dephne Ayas and Natasha Ginwala, the curators of the 13th Gwangju Biennale, *Minds Rising, Spirits Tuning*, selected two of her sculptural installations from the 1980s and 1990s for their exhibition in South Korea. And Phillida Reid, a New Zealand-born dealer who runs the up-and-coming Southard Reid gallery in London, now represents the artist and is about to feature her work at London's Frieze Art Fair this October. Having taken Reid through Lynn's studio in Newtown when the gallerist visited just before our borders closed, I know that her interest has little to do with making money, though this will be necessary to sustain her commitment to working with an artist on the other side of the world. Instead, she sees in Lynn's intensely thoughtful, sometimes frightening, and always materially rich work something that resonates in this particularly fraught and precarious moment: a woman's rage at patriarchal injustice mixed with a distinctively female erotics.

It is also possible that women artists of earlier generations did not yearn for the kind of attention that suits media sound bites; their reasons for making work were not always directed to the conventional rewards of the art system. Robin White, whose long-anticipated retrospective is due to be staged at Te Papa in 2022, offers a very different version of how to think and be an artist in the [short video](#) accompanying her presentation in *Another Energy* at

the Mori Art Museum. Drawing on her involvement with Pacific communities and her upbringing in the Bahai faith, she talks about being “liberated from the confines of the self” and “sharing the joy” of working with others, seeing her role as “making a contribution to society... serving a community”, even being “no-one special”. These are sentiments that rhyme with the outlooks and strategies of much younger artists who have come of age in a world that is crying out for alternatives to the selfishness and triumphalism that has created the crisis conditions we currently face.

Such humility might be the hard-earned reward for the fulfilment of a long and modestly successful career. It may not suit the demands of the contemporary scene with its wilful ability to overlook and forget. That is where art history and good exhibition making have a role to play, by providing the discursive and contextual frameworks for the sensitive redressing of women’s absence. Not forgetting the vibrant legacy of feminist art history, recent exhibitions curated by Melanie Oliver (*Embodied Knowledge*, Dowse Art Museum, 2018); Nina Tonga (*Pacific Sisters: Fashion Activists*, Te Papa, 2018); Felicity Milburn, Lara Strongman, and Julia Waite (*Louise Henderson: From Life*, Auckland Art Gallery, 2019); and Jaenine Parkinson and Kirsty Baker (*Jacqueline Fahey: Suburbanites*, New Zealand Portrait Gallery, 2020) have all brought considered attention to bear on their subjects. There are other initiatives too, like Contemporary Hum’s collaboration with Paris-based AWARE: Archives of Women Artists, Research and Exhibitions, ‘[Championing Aotearoa New Zealand Women Artists](#)’, or independent projects like the new website constructed by Barbara de Lange dedicated to the work of [Flora Scales](#) (1887–1985). Hopefully, amongst other outcomes, one end result of these efforts will see not only a deepening understanding of the contributions women have made, but a recalibration of the market so that a deeper array of work by women—beyond the safe bets of painting and large-scale photography—is better appreciated and achieves fairer prices.

I’d like to end this essay by focusing on a subset of this curatorial activity that does more than celebrate or deliver senior women artists for market reappraisal, which is driven, rather, by critical impulses that nuance feminism’s own totalising tendencies or which tackle essentialist positions to highlight the structural and systemic causes of gender and racial inequality. I am thinking here of previous Artspace director Misal Adnan Yildiz’s support of the Taranaki-based photographic artist Fiona Clark, whose documentation of the lesbian and transgender community she was part of in Auckland in the 1970s was brought into conversation with a range of works by other often younger artists from New Zealand and elsewhere in *The Bill* (2016), on the thirtieth anniversary of the passing of the Homosexual

Law Reform Act. This not only brought Clark's work to wider attention (in *For Fantastic Carmen*, 2016), but also helped open Artspace to Auckland's rainbow community, linked art to political history, and added a powerful backstory for non-binary, queer and transgender artists. And Hanahiva Rose's exhibition, *Stars Start Falling*, that has recently closed at Govett-Brewster Art Gallery (22 May–15 August 2021). That show brought a substantial selection of paintings by Teuane Tibbo (1895–1984) together with works by contemporary artists Ani O'Neill and Salome Tanuvasa. Here, Rose invited two female Pasifika artists of different generations to not just align themselves with someone who came before them, but to revel in the painterly world Tibbo created and to find synergies within their individual practices as a remedial process of cultural connection. (And there are numerous other examples I could draw upon here.)

Finally, the recent exhibitions of Berlin-based New Zealand artist Ruth Buchanan, who has developed a unique way of working that blurs the boundaries between artistic production, curatorial practice, and exhibition design, exemplify a deconstructive effort to rethink connections between artists across time and in relation to the powerful structures that condition them. Her decision to bring works by two older artists, Marianne Wex (1937–2020) and Judith Hopf (born 1969), into *Bad Visual Systems*, a 'solo' exhibition at the Adam Art Gallery in 2016, saw the artist identifying a history of practice with which she identified, using the building as a physical means to map the relations she wished to establish. This, for me—the instigator of Buchanan's exhibition—was an education, not least because it wrested away my curatorial control as the institution's director. I saw her strategy at work again at the Dowse Art Museum in 2018, when, as her contribution to the exhibition *Can Tame Anything*, featuring works by Sriwhana Spong, Alicia Frankovich and Mata Aho Collective that was the 'sister' project to curator Melanie Oliver's *Embodied Knowledge* exhibition, she located her work across the threshold spaces of both exhibitions. Hanging two of her aluminium chain 'screens' across each doorway and arranging reading material relating to the artists in both exhibitions between them, Buchanan defined a corridor that linked and divided the two distinct generations. It was as if she understood that history is not seamless, our 'mothers' can be strangers to us, and that our reconstructions are but inadequate and partial processes of remembrance and connection. And again, in 2019, in *The scene in which I find myself/Or, where does the body belong* at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, she staged a collection show installed according to a range of categories drawn from her reading of the gallery's records, that subtly but incontrovertibly proved the biases and omissions of which all institutional collections are guilty.

Buchanan's tactics activate spaces with what I'd dare say is a 'woman's touch'. She builds support structures from which other art works are hung, creates alternative taxonomies that privilege minor and incidental details over 'big' concepts, and seeks out her own genealogies that privilege female forebears. Her resuscitation of Marianne Wex—for the memorable body of work she made in Hamburg in the 1970s that exposed the ways that men literally take up more space than women (*Let's Take Back Our Space: 'Female' and 'Male' Body Language as a Result of Patriarchal Structures*, 1977–79)—is exemplary of the critical revision that is currently taking place. Aside from the market hype, but always with an understanding that under the sway of neoliberal capitalism, money is one currency for determining value, it is somehow gratifying to know that the Museum of Modern Art in New York has finally purchased Wex's work. Securing her photographic archive for its collection just two years before the artist died, this is in part due to the recuperative efforts of much younger artists and curators like Buchanan. There is hope yet, that what Griselda Pollock calls the "serious" and "important" work of women artists will find its way into our major institutions and the 'lost' women from earlier times will be addressed with subtlety and care; that this current fascination for such figures is more than either a new instance of co-optation or a passing fad.

* A companion read to this essay is Frances Loeffler's recent essay on Contemporary Hum ['Talk, Protest, Revolt, Some thoughts on feminisms, parenting in the artworld, and 'Revolt She Said' by Louise Lever'](#).

Christina Barton is director of Te Pātaka Toi Adam Art Gallery. She is an art historian, curator and writer with a strong commitment to supporting women artists. She has curated exhibitions on the work of Louise Henderson, Vivian Lynn, Kim Pieters, Ruth Buchanan, Joyce Campbell, and Kate Newby, and written on artists including Pauline Rhodes, Maddie Leach, Marie Shannon, Edith Amituanai, Pip Culbert, Ans Westra, Maria Olsen, Caroline Williams, and Julia Morison, amongst others. She co-curated *Alter-Image: Feminism and Representation in New Zealand Art 1973 – 1993* with Deborah Lawler-Dormer a touring exhibition organised by City Gallery Wellington for the 1993 centenary of women's suffrage, and *The earth looks upon us / Ko Papatūānuku te matua o te tangata* (with Ngahaia Harrison, Ana Iti, Nova Paul, and Raukura Turei) at Adam Art Gallery in 2018.