



Art

An Expansive New Show Celebrates Five Decades of Feminist Art

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Installation view of "52 Artists: A Feminist Milestone" at The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum. Left: Catalina Ouyang, *Recourse*, 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Lyles & King, New York. The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, June 6, 2022 to January 8, 2023. Photo by Jason Mandella.



Installation view of "52 Artists: A Feminist Milestone" at The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum. Left: Kiyari Williams, *Sentient Ruin 7*, 2022, Courtesy the artist and Lyles & King, New York; right: LJ Roberts, *Anywhere, Everywhere*, 2022, Courtesy of the artist and Hales, London and New York; outdoors: Alice Aycock, *Untitled Cyclone*, 2017, Courtesy of the artist and Marlborough Gallery, New York, The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, June 6, 2022 to January 8, 2023. Photo by Jason Mandella.

At the beginning of the 1970s, American artists were demanding more equitable representation in institutional shows. Organizations such as the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition and the Ad Hoc Committee of Women Artists staged protests over the Whitney Museum's omission of Black and women artists in their exhibitions. Against this landscape, the writer, critic, curator, and activist Lucy Lippard mounted "Twenty-Six Contemporary Female Artists" at [The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum](#) in 1971 in Ridgefield, Connecticut. With this show, Lippard hoped to help shift the white, patriarchal paradigm that had long pervaded American institutions.

In her accompanying exhibition essay, Lippard wrote: "Within the next few years, I expect a body of art history and criticism will emerge that is more suited to women's sensibilities. In the meantime, I have no clear picture of what, if anything, constitutes 'women's art.'" Lippard hoped that the show would offer a platform for emerging female artists of the time and midwife a new generation of even more liberated female artists. "52 Artists: A Feminist Milestone," a new show at The Aldrich, curated by Amy Smith-Stewart and Alexandra Schwartz, tracks the evolution of feminist art practices in the decades since "Twenty-Six."

The exhibition unites work by the original 26 exhibiting artists and that of a new cohort of 26 female-identifying and nonbinary artists. Lippard believed in the idea of an aesthetic “parthenogenesis”—that supporting more women artists was a kind of reproductive process that would help more female artists enter the field and give them more ideas to work from. The show is designed to prove Lippard’s case, demonstrating how feminist art has begat its own visual language, which has blossomed over the past five decades.

The sprawling exhibition, which spans the entire museum, features works shown in the original exhibition, works from the new cohort of emerging artists, and recent works from artists who exhibited in the original show. Altogether, the pieces demonstrate how women work from, in Lippard’s words, the “embryonic history of other women’s art.”

Lippard’s exhibition was partially a rejoinder to the lack of female representation in the 1970 Whitney Sculpture Annual; she exhibited numerous female sculptors in her own show. Land art was at its height, and many of these artists used the Earth as their primary medium. Works including Audrey Hemenway’s animate ecosystem (*Swamp*, 1971), Alice Aycock’s meditation on erosion (*Clay #2*, 1971), and Reeva Potoff’s life-scale reproduction of Central Park rock formations (*Mica Schist*, 1971) underscored Lippard’s ideology of feminist art as a world-building practice—these artists shaped and mimicked the natural world in order to suggest alternate modes of existence and different relationships with the land itself.

Many of the pieces in “52 Artists,” in fact, consider what an alternate world might look like. In the Project Space room of the museum, Potoff’s recent installation, *8Veil & B&G mold & GreyStucco* (2017–2021), features photographs unspooling from the ceiling. They depict micrographic images of mold grown on coffee, blown up to a size that prevents the viewer from discerning the original subject matter. Despite Potoff’s act of obfuscation, a sense of decay remains in the pictures’ splotchy, gray-blue textures, which invoke vaguely dystopian photo studio backdrops.

Decay is also evident in LJ Roberts’s *Anywhere, Everywhere* (2022). The piece features a rusty light box, which sits within a bed of rocks sourced from The Aldrich museum campus and the surrounding town of Ridgefield. The lightbox features one image on each side: One depicts a white brick building graffitied with the word “dyke.” Altogether, the piece offers an homage to the Stonewall Riots.

Nearby, Tourmaline’s photograph *Coral Hairstreak* (2020) depicts the artist, dressed as an intergalactic traveler, standing contrapposto in front of a corn field. The piece is part of a series that tells a speculative story about Seneca Village, a free Black community that was destroyed to build Central Park. Here, Tourmaline practices excursive mythmaking; in her images, she eliminates the decay created by oppression, racism and colonialism, instead offering a vision of a utopia shaped by a Black, queer, and trans imagination.

In other parts of “52 Artists,” a feminist utopia feels distant, especially when considered against the political climate and the stagnation of women’s rights. The original “Twenty-Six Artists” show coincided with the fight for bodily autonomy, as feminists across the country pushed for the legal right to abortion. In the decades since, feminist art has also attempted to reclaim the the femme body—even if national politics haven’t always reflected the same values. In “52 Artists,” the body remains a site for pleasure, rage, and healing.

Astrid Terrazas’s entry is a surreal portrait that suggests female catharsis: Her painting features a woman, rendered in reds and aquamarines, who screams as she straddles a skinned, pale pink horse and holds a glowing braid above her head. The figure transforms pain into power.

Elsewhere across the show, the body appears in fragments. Detached limbs feature in Maryam Hoseini’s diptych, while Erin M. Riley has created a woven tapestry that depicts a floating leg and a cut-off webcam snapshot of someone in the middle of self-pleasure. Waxy, fleshy forms appear to melt from the

nickel-plated tines in Hannah Levy's sculpture *Untitled* (2020). These works are biting and deeply personal, a necessary reproof to the white-washed, commodified, and defanged visual language of mainstream feminism today. They are so much more powerful than the pussy hats and infographics that have come to symbolize the movement.

In the weeks after the Supreme Court's demolition of *Roe v. Wade*, the celebratory show takes on a new, existential bent: As we face systemic onslaught against feminism and non-male bodies, where does the future of feminism, and feminist art, lie?

For Lippard, female representation in institutional shows was simply a beginning. As she wrote, "Until that society is clarified, feminist art must struggle to define itself within the art system as it stands—a capitalist system already appropriated by and probably more appropriate to male art."

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