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Feminist Art With an Edge

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The Lyman Allyn Art Museum in New London is not known for displaying feisty contemporary art, which is what makes “femme brut(e), its big fall show of artworks by women, so surprising. Given that this sort of thing is so rarely on display at the museum, it was even more surprising to discover that some of the art comes from the museum’s own collection. This is a terrific show, perhaps one of the best to be staged at the museum in some time.

Nancy Stula, the curator, has assembled an engaging selection of early, confrontational feminist work with more recent, varied offerings by female artists. The contrasts of tone and subject matter between the two groups, spilling across two levels of the building, help illustrate just how far female artists have come.

The title of the exhibition suggests the idea of women who are raw, tough or brutal. But it is more of a metaphor than anything else, characterizing artists who — one way or another — have sought to challenge the historically marginalized position of women. “With the youngest of the artists in this exhibition born in 1959,” Sherry Buckberrough, an art historian, writes in the show’s catalog, “all came of age while the status of women in the art world was still strongly contested.”

The early years of feminism saw female artists embrace numerous strategies to combat art world sexism and discrimination. One popular approach was to reclaim women’s creative histories by adopting materials and art-making practices once commonly, and pejoratively, associated with femininity — needlework, weaving, pottery, printmaking, to name a few. Among the many artists who took up this challenge was Miriam Schapiro, represented here by an ebullient circular collage that draws on patterning and textile traditions.

The design of Ms. Schapiro’s concentric, centralizing composition alludes to women’s genitals, which points to another visual strategy adopted by female artists: an empowering use of sexual imagery and depictions of the female body. Before the early 20th century, women were largely excluded from art academies, and even when they were allowed in, they weren’t allowed to study nude models. Men, in this way, maintained a virtual monopoly on their depiction.

Caricature and satire were also important tools for early feminist artists. May Stevens’s “Study for print ‘Big Daddy’ ” (1969) is an early drawing for her “Big Daddy” series of paintings depicting a thick-necked nude man with a slobbering bulldog sitting on his lap. The figure, whom the artist called “big daddy,” is a cartoonlike personification of male authority and of United States militarism during the Vietnam War era; the paintings are some of the most famous works of early American feminist art.

The tradition of feminist satire is carried on in the work of Alison Saar, who is represented by a color woodcut, “Sweeping Beauty” (1997), depicting an upside-down image of a naked woman with hair like a broom head. It is a caricature of the domestic chores commonly ascribed to women, with the figure mirroring the crucified Christ in religious paintings.

Artists like Nancy Spero, Lynda Benglis and June Wayne, who were involved in the feminist art movement from its early days, also have work exhibited here, but it concerns other issues. Ms. Wayne, a master printmaker, is represented in the show by some “exploratory images of interstellar space,” as Ms. Buckberrough writes in the catalog, but which are really formal explorations of the printmaking medium.

Angry social and political protests about gender are largely a thing of the past. The new wave of female artists are working on issues and concerns similar to those of their male counterparts. Among them is Ellen Carey, a photographer who creates startling abstract colored Polaroid images using random developing emulsion flows. The images depart from standard photographic traditions in much the same way that the work of her feminist predecessors departed from art history.