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Before the Rebellion, Playful Pop Art Novelty

By KEN JOHNSON OCT. 14, 2010

Why have there been no great female Pop artists? That's the question posed by Sid Sachs at the start of his catalog essay for "Seductive Subversion: Women Pop Artists, 1958-1968," a revelatory time capsule of an exhibition that he has organized at the Brooklyn Museum. He is paraphrasing the title of Linda Nochlin's monument of feminist art history, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?"

Like Ms. Nochlin's, Mr. Sach's question breaks down into several smaller queries: Is it true that no female artists did anything with popular imagery as powerful as the work of Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein or James Rosenquist? If so, why didn't they? If there were some who did, who were they, and why are they not more celebrated? And what does "great artist" mean anyway?

Produced initially by the Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, where it opened in January, the exhibition presents an entertaining hodgepodge of paintings and sculptures by two dozen women. If it does represent the best female artists of the first Pop Art generation — and there is no reason to think otherwise — you'd have to admit that there were no women producing Pop Art as inventively, ambitiously and memorably as their male counterparts. That is not to say, however, that there were no interesting women mining the Pop vein.



Paintings by Rosalyn Drexler with figures lifted from news photographs, gangster movies and a Chubby Checker poster isolated on flat, gridded, Mondrianesque backgrounds anticipate the cool neo-Pop art of Pictures Generation artists like Robert Longo and Sarah Charlesworth. Idelle Weber's mural-size painting of silhouetted businessmen riding escalators against an optically buzzing black-and-yellow-checked wall and her small, cast-Lucite cubes with men in silhouette silk-screened on them similarly evoke a shadow world of mechanical representations.

"Seductive Subversion": This all-female exhibition includes Rosalyn Drexler's "Chubby Checker" (1964). Credit Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.

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A neon-light sculpture by Chryssa, with variously colored cent signs blinking inside a box of translucent, dark plexiglass, is a nice marriage of Minimalism and commercial signage. Barbro Ostlihn's Georgia O'Keeffe-like centered painting of a simplified, many-petaled, orange sunflower has a psychedelic vibe, while Dorothy Grebenak's translation of liquor-bottle labels and other sorts of commercial logos into hooked rugs give Pop a sensuously tactile, folk-art spin. **Kay Kurt's** 10-foot-wide painting of a box of white chocolates is a spectacular piece of Photorealism.

A quibbler might point out that some artists in the exhibition are not, strictly speaking, Pop Artists. A Vija Celmin sculpture of a greatly enlarged, stubby pencil, for example, is closer to Magrittean magic realism than Pop. Yayoi Kusama's pieces of furniture bristling with white, stuffed phallic forms are more in a tradition of Surrealist assemblage, and May Wilson's glittery, collaged portraits of masked women resemble works of an eccentric Victorian hobbyist. They have an idiosyncratic strangeness far from the cool modernity of Pop. Including such artists, however, does help capture the general spirit of playful novelty that inspired all kinds of artists in the early '60s.

A self-consciously feminist art movement came after the decade covered by this show, but a few of these women asserted protest against sexism in no uncertain terms. Martha Rosler's collages of Vietnam War imagery, domestic interiors and Playboy pinups are exceptional for their ideological ferocity. May Stevens's "Big Daddy Paper Doll," which was made in 1970 and was added to the show by the Brooklyn Museum, belongs to a later moment. It personifies the patriarchy in the cartoon character of a uniformed, thick-necked authority figure. But most of the exhibition's artists were more ambivalent about the feminine mystique.

Marjorie Strider's painted relief of a beautiful woman holding a basketball-size radish in her teeth is like a work by the lubricious Tom Wesselmann. Her 12-foot-wide triptych picturing a sexy woman in a bikini in three different poses, breasts projecting in three dimensions, seems simultaneously to embrace the sexual freedoms precipitated by the Pill and to mock the commercial exploitation of desire. A bulbous statue of a cartoon giantess by Niki de Saint Phalle, meanwhile, incarnates a zany, retrogressive Great Mother of countercultural revolution.

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Few women of this era, evidently, were ready to challenge male domination in life or in art openly. Mr. Sachs's anecdote-rich essay vividly describes a bohemian art world not unlike the bourgeois milieu of "Mad Men," in which female artists were expected to play the roles of wife, lover, helpmeet and caretaker first and that of professional art maker last if at all.

Some women contributed significantly to their partners' work with little or no acknowledgment. Ms. Ostlihn produced some of the paintings of her husband, Oyvind Fahlstrom, and Richard Hamilton created his seminal collage "Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?" using images that his wife, Terry Hamilton, and the artist Magda Cordell spent several days clipping from magazines.



The Niki de Saint Phalle sculpture "Black Rosy, or My Heart Belongs to Rosy" (1965). Credit Niki Charitable Art Foundation

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Patty Mucha sewed the fabric shells for the early soft sculptures of her husband, Claes Oldenburg. Her essay chronicling her collaboration with Mr. Oldenburg is one of the delights of the catalog. Though notably rancor free, she admits that after they divorced in 1970 she stopped making her own clothes, as she was "suffering from intense burnout."

Then there was what Mr. Sachs called "the beauty trap": Women who were young and pretty could hang out with the boys, but few of them would be taken seriously as artists. Mr. Sachs quotes Carolee Schneemann, who said, "You had to shut up and affiliate yourself with interesting men," and "you had to be good looking." This is borne out in the catalog by pictures of artists like de Saint Phalle, Marisol, Evelyne Axell and Pauline Boty, who happened to be blessed with extraordinarily photogenic looks. It is easy to imagine why such naturally and socially privileged people would hesitate to break out of their gilded cages.

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In light of all this, the exhibition's title, "Seductive Subversion," takes on a shady double meaning. Ostensibly it describes works that smuggle social critique under appealing aesthetic cover. But it also implies an old idea about what members of the so-called weaker sex must do to get what they want: use their charms and wiles to put men off their guard. In most parts of the world, open rebellion is still not an option for women.

That things are better today for female artists working in Europe and the United States is undeniable, though how much better remains debatable. While the highest prices are still reserved for male heavyweights, there were more women than men represented in the last Whitney Biennial. We might suppose, therefore, that some female artists living and working now will one day go down in history as "great." But what would that mean?

It would be hyperbolic to claim that any of the artists in "Seductive Subversion" are great in the sense that Michelangelo and Picasso were. Nor will any of them be found to have eclipsed the kings of Pop. But then again, is the idea of greatness even relevant anymore? Are any artists of the Postmodern era, male or female, truly great? Absent consensus about standards for measuring excellence in art, it becomes an empty term of endearment and a marketing label. (Andy Warhol thought everything was great.) Maybe the Bravo reality television show "Work of Art" has it all wrong. Maybe there will never be another great artist. And maybe that will be O.K.

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