

# Through the eyes of women

*'Fusion Cuisine,' at the Deste Center, shows the diversity and openness of post-feminist art*

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In her seminal essay "Why have there been no great women artists?" of the early 1970s, feminist art historian Linda Nochlin asked a rhetorical question only to answer by negating its very premises. The problem with such a question, she argued, is that it rests on an uncritical, gendered assumption about what great art is and that it also fails to consider vital issues about the production, acceptance and canonization of art. Attempts to answer the question by showing a different kind of female greatness poses an added risk, according to Nochlin, since it only works toward marginalizing women artists.

Nochlin's views echo the concerns that informed both feminist art and art criticism in its early phase. They expressed a political awakening to how gender was the basis of discrimination and paved the way for much of protest-oriented, raw and visceral art that emerged throughout the 1970s.

Although the polemical spirit of such art now seems outdated, it is thanks to its conquests that subsequent generations of feminist artists could advance into more nuanced and varied artistic expressions, including that of contemporary post-feminism. Indeed, when considering difference, feminism-oriented artists are nowadays more prone to incorporating further categories such as race, ethnicity and culture. Gender is no longer narrowly defined and it is probably the spread of a multicultural ethos that largely accounts for this.

Just as there is no single definition of gender, there is also no single way of expressing it artistically. Post-feminism is varied, diverse and open; perhaps because of this lack of dogmatism, it is also respectful of the advances made by its predecessors.

It is precisely this flexibility of post-feminist art that "Fusion Cuisine" calls attention to. Currently



*In her digitally manipulated computer collages, Fatimah Tuggar juxtaposes Nigerian daily life with Western images drawn from the world of advertising. In 'Hot Water for Tea,' a bride pouring tea is set against the background of an African outdoor kitchen.*

on display at the Deste Center for Contemporary Art and curated by the center's director Katerina Gregos. "Fusion Cuisine" assembles the work of 20 women artists, the majority of whom are some of the most renowned contemporary artists internationally. The exhibition aims to show the heterogeneity of contemporary production, to disrupt the essentialist, monolithic perspective of traditional feminist art and to show that "feminisms" have now replaced "feminism." The exhibition's playful title sets the mood. It shows a sensitivity toward multiculturalism and cultural difference and seems to suggest that just as the experience of being a woman cannot be approached by gender alone, the art produced by women cannot be appraised through a single feminist perspective.

Seen from a certain angle, this openness compromises the edginess that we traditionally associate with gender-based inequalities and the kind of feminist art that these produce. But from another, post-feminist perspective, the fact that the male-female rivalry is not as tense as it used to be, suggests that we might be moving a step closer to a non-sexist world or at least, to a world in which being a

woman is becoming much too intricate to narrow down to gender alone.

The detached coolness of the exhibition's title seems to suggest the same. It offers a dispassionate sophistication and an unbiased, open viewpoint that is welcome, but which somehow lacks a focus.

Post-feminism is here paired with multiculturalism. This is what explains the broad selection of artists across different cultural, ethnic and racial backgrounds, and of different ages.

The visual variety is here and so are the shifts in mood, from the punk, self-confident brashness in the work of Tracey Emin, to the morose atmosphere in Eliza Jackson's video, the ironic playfulness in Maria Papadimitriou's "sucksex-full" and Camilla Dahl's strange appliances and to the distanced, cool and slightly ironic take on consumerism in the work of Sylvie Fleury.

Despite their differences, the works share a concern with so-called women's issues but also have common roots in the feminist tradition in art.

The tradition of performance and process art, both extremely pronounced in the feminist art of the '70s, emerges in Patty Chang's

physically strenuous performance (of which a video and several photographs are included in the exhibition) in which the artist engages in obsessive maneuvers to criticize the stereotypes of femininity imposed on women. Like Chang, Tania Bruegera also emphasizes physicality and the body, but through actions that refer to history, trauma and collective memory.

Gender roles and familial relationships, another vital issue in feminism, are addressed in Catherine Opie's photographs of lesbian families and Janine Antoni's photographic triptych of her parents depicted in shifting roles.

Like Sylvie Fleury, Despina Meimaroglou and Liza Lou consider the effects of consumerism and the representation of women on the female identity. In her mock salon paintings, Lisa Yuskavage hints at the exclusion of women artists from the history of art but also brings out the depiction of women as objects of desire.

Lee Bull and Kiki Seror consider the effects of technology in conditioning women's sexuality. In her paintings of kinky, female industrial workers, Hilary Harkness reverses traditional female roles and draws a connection between power and sexuality. In her installation

of sleek, leather-bound chairs, Monica Bonvicini reminds us of a male-dominated workforce. In her video, Lina Theodorou combines images of middle-aged women shopping at one of Athens's open-air food markets with phrases describing criminal acts. Again, the idea is to disrupt stereotypical gender roles.

Elaha Massumi and Fatimah Tuggar offer a view into women's lives beyond the Western world. Tuggar does so by creating strange juxtapositions between images of the West and those of the so-called Third World countries. Her view is both playful and optimistic as it seems to suggest that inequalities exist in both worlds.

The notion of cultural difference in shaping gender identities also informs — although in a more subdued manner — Jitka Hanzlova's elegant photographs of women of diverse race and nationality against varied urban backgrounds.

Also wonderfully subdued, but both visually powerful and moving, is Cosima von Bonin's installation. A fence made of Laura Ashley fabric is set against the background of a "fabric" painting on which images of cowboys have been subtly sewn on. Von Bonin juxtaposes the feminine and the masculine but does not openly prioritize either. She draws a male picture through feminine eyes, thus giving women a right long denied to them. But the picture is still one associated with the masculine world. Gently assertive, her work captures both the self-confidence and patient endurance of contemporary women artists.

Feminism and feminist art has come a long way. The question "Why have there been no great women artists?" is no longer a burning issue and the works of so many feminist, or post-feminist artists (the label does not seem to matter) have made sure of that. "Fusion Cuisine," although not a retrospective exhibition on feminism, is in many ways, a tribute to the advances it has made.