

Iwona Blazwick 'Unfathomable, repellent, delightful',
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'Unfathomable, repellent, delightful'

Iwona Blazwick on why women artists need prizes of their own

Is there such a thing as "women's art"? Do we any longer need to think of women as a special group? Should there be a prize for women artists? For many, the terms female and male are simply cultural. They may also seem dangerously binary and – in the context of prizes or exhibitions such as a forthcoming show celebrating Margaret Salmon, the first winner of the MaxMara art prize for women at the Whitechapel – likely to create a ghetto of Otherness, a special pleading that supports the old patriarchal order.

At least 50 per cent of art students are female. Why is it that over the 19 years of the Turner prize, only three winners have been women? At least 50 per cent of architectural students are female. Why is it, then, that the architectural profession remains dominated by men? Why in the world at large are there so few women leaders? And why is it that, in the 21st century, violence continues, as artist Barbara Kruger depicted in an installation at the Glasgow Gallery of Modern Art in 2005, to "kill or incapacitate more women aged between 15 and 40 worldwide than cancer, malaria, accidents and war combined". Most would agree that we should not define ourselves in terms of gender, but the context in which we live and work remains profoundly structured by it.

In 1871 the poet Arthur Rimbaud made a prophecy that would not be fully realised until the 20th century: "When women's unmeasured bondage shall be broken, when she shall live for

and through herself, man – hitherto detestable – having let her go, she, too, will be poet!

Woman will find the unknown! Will her ideational worlds be different from ours? She will come upon strange, unfathomable, repellent, delightful things; we shall take them, we shall comprehend them." Perhaps the greatest of the modern avant gardes came with the rise of women artists, writers, film-makers and performers. Having been excluded from the canon, women artists had no choice but to embark on the strange, the unfathomable, the repellent, as well as the delightful.

But it was only from the 1960s onwards that feminism and art really joined forces. Through a series of radical actions and experiments, women artists ranging from Louise Bourgeois to Mary Kelly made the transition from object to subject. With all the oedipal drive of the modernist avant gardes, some took direct aim at the enemy. In



Experiment in form
... Niki de Saint
Phalle's Nana

1961 Niki de Saint Phalle attached bags of paint to a wall and shot them: "The painting was the victim. Who was the painting? Daddy? All men? Small men? Tall men? Big men? Fat men? Men? My brother John? Or was the painting me? ... The new bloodbath of red, yellow and blue splattered over the pure white relief metamorphosed the painting into a tabernacle for death and resurrection. I was shooting at myself, society with its injustices. I was shooting at my own violence and the violence of the times. By shooting at my own violence, I no longer had to carry it inside of me like a burden."

Women declined the role of the naked muse and of the countless variations on the madonna/whore riff that have played throughout western art, to reclaim their bodies. In 1975 Carolee Schneemann appeared naked in a Long Island gallery. Having first adopted the pose of a life model, she then read out feminist texts inscribed on a scroll that she pulled slowly from her vagina. In 1979, at the Whitechapel Gallery in the East End of London, audiences could witness Eva Hesse's redefinition of painting and sculpture in installations that fused the two. Others jettisoned the paintbrush and the chisel in favour of the camera, pioneering a new vision in film and photography – we have only to think of Chantal Akerman's meticulous portrait of a widow's survival strategies in *Jeanne Dielman* (1975) or Cindy Sherman's uncanny self-portraits. Women artists also insisted on the place of political

thought, anthropology and, perhaps most significantly, psychoanalysis within art theory; and that issues of gender could not be seen in isolation from issues of race, class, sexuality and geography.

Representations of women continue to reinforce their absence from spheres of power. And on an individual level, it is without question a challenge for women to continue making work, to earn a living and to remain visible in the art world while having children. Being available to take up residencies, travel to biennales and openings, can be out of the question. It can be pretty spooky just walking home at night from a studio in an old factory in Hackney. If a group exhibition features only men, it passes without comment. If it features only women it is immediately described as "a women's show". Once you have made it into the commercial gallery, other factors come into play. It is the financial sector that is fuelling

the current art market boom. Almost exclusively male, does it privilege art that shares its ethos of machismo?

Many extraordinary women today have transcended these challenges to make a major contribution to the art of our times – in Britain, we have only to think of Tomma Abts, Fiona Banner, Tracey Emin, Susan Hiller, Sarah Lucas, Cornelia Parker, Paula Rego, Bridget Riley, Eva Rothschild or Rachel Whiteread. However, I would argue that there is still a need for a prize for art, or literature (celebrated now by the Orange prize for fiction, which marked its 10th anniversary last year), or architecture created by women. Prizes do many things. They are a fantastic way of scanning a huge field of creative production and sifting out significant practitioners. They introduce the judges, the media and the public to new work. They can help us all navigate the great cultural proliferation of the 21st century and focus on something that has been judged worthy of attention by a group of peers. Perhaps most importantly, they can make the difference for someone who has struggled against the odds to succeed. Critically, prizes for women artists will encourage those who have just started out to pursue their dream, and offer all of us a vision – strange, unfathomable – that has not yet been seen in the dominant order of things.

The first solo exhibition of American artist Margaret Salmon, winner of the inaugural MaxMara art prize for women in association with the Whitechapel, is at the Whitechapel, London E1, from January 25 to February 11.
Details: www.whitechapel.org Tel: 020-7522 7888

Images of women still reinforce their absence from spheres of power