

Femme F(r)iction

What a piece of work is a woman!
 How noble in her reason, how infinite in her faculty,
 In form and moving how express and admirable,
 In action how like an Angel,
 In apprehension how like a goddess!¹

Women – those real ‘pieces of work’ (*pace* Hamlet) — are the F(r)iction.

Friction is a force: atomic, molecular, static, kinetic, fluid, lubricated: it makes things work: it is the essence of the caress and of pleasure. Without friction no ecstasy, as Valentine de Saint Point knew when she wrote her pioneering ‘Manifesto of Lust’ in 1913. This dreamed-for constellation of women artists, extending beyond a century in time, continues the lineages celebrated in Judy Chicago’s *Dinner Table*: from Cleopatra and Sappho, to artists Artemisia Gentileschi, or Georgia O’Keeffe. It expands on Peggy Guggenheim’s Art of This Century ‘Exhibition of 31 Women’ in 1943, and Anke Kempes’ pioneering rediscoveries of female avant-gardes at Broadway 1602 in the 2000s. For the centenary of Futurism in 2009, the work of Valentine de Saint Point, solo star at the Metropolitan Opera House in 1917, returned to New York. Her *Metachoric Gestures*, the earliest pieces in this show, have again traversed the ocean, this time from the Venice Biennale’s female and gender-fluid *Milk of Dreams* exhibition of 2022. The composite, elegant Academy Mansion, with its columns, stucco mouldings chandeliers, the New York frame for this homage, is a fitting tribute. Victoria Golembiovskaya’s London tradition of the ‘House of the Nobleman’ continues here — but with no men, another compelling *détournement* of the ‘Story of Art.’²

As Hilma af Klint challenges Mondrian to a spiritual contest in the double retrospective currently at London’s Tate Modern, so she finds her century-distanced sisters in New York. Calli Moore’s *Sun Sisters*, rhymes lemon glows and split rays with pale mirror-images of purple irises, recalling Hilma af Klint’s flower paintings, while the love of mystic triangles and painted pie charts resurges in Claudia Wieser’s works on paper. In planetary mode, Rachel Garrad’s mystic *Radiant Light*, 2022 or Lita Albuquerque’s gold sphere glowing on blue are less complex images in this idiom. Geometric and biomorphic thought forms, with their complementary colours and wavy energy lines, animate Elisabeth von Samsonow’s *GEOPSYCHE* series of 2021. A subtitle brings us back to Gaia: ‘The Intertwinement of Water and the Human Field; New Species Applying for Incarnation on Earth, Underground Water Currents in Gaia’s Body’. Here, the ‘Spiritual in Art’ revived as

Wassily Kandinsky's mantra in 1912, encounters new green and queer ecologies — and with Andrea Bowers' *Eco-Grief Extinction Series*, the anticipation of our future annihilation. The 'Gaia hypothesis' with its human-nature synergies so relevant today, chimed with New York's first-wave feminism and love of goddess-heroines. Remember that Gaia was the mother not only of Uranus but all the Titans, parents of the Olympian Gods.³

A green planet is also suspended in Leonora Carrington's late work circa 1959 where mysterious riders — escaped from a painting by Carpaccio — encounter each other in a craggy rockscape: its decalcomanic dimensions and stretched horizontal format echoes the landscapes where Max Ernst depicted Carrington's own appearances and disappearances in *Europe after the Rain*, 1942. Together with the wicked and parodic Leonor Fini, Carrington is our historic bridge to the surrealist movement in this exhibition. Surrealism never dies... nightmare landscapes and morphing forms represent troubled identities in the work of Clarina Bezzola; Sofia Borges paints levitating phallus shapes with dreaming faces; her collages fragment and juxtapose body parts. Body parts and the play of profiles reappear in Elizabeth Strong-Cuevas' symmetrical bronze sculptures, while anthropomorphic readings are central to the Toni Ross stoneware and slip couple, *Beloved I*, 2011. With a heritage looking more to Magritte, there is a joke element — strictly uncanny of course — in the empty room inhabited by the ghosts of Velázquez and his *Meninas* by Sophie Matisse, who also has audacity to spiralise Marcel Duchamp's sacred staircase (without a *Nude descending...*) taking us back to the pre-surrealist moment of Cubism and New York's first Armory Show of 1913.

And perhaps Cindy Sherman's toothy grinning alter ego, *Untitled #362* — neither film still, historical parody, nor victim display — could take its place on the darker shores of surrealist nightmare, as could the cloven hoof, horsetail and blowing veil imagined here by Louise Lawler. Lawler continues to surprise with new nightmare images: look twice at *Red Face, White Flowers*, 2004. It is significant how ugliness, dysfunctionality, horror and nightmare have heritages far more resonant than that, for example, the beauty of a female nude — even by a woman artist, though a certain distortion and hint of blasphemy in the drapery is precisely what powers the erotic neoclassicism of Tamara de Lempicka's *Seated Nude*.

A token male: Salvador Dali. His *Cosmic Madonna* with fragment of Van Gogh's ear is the exception which proves the rule. While Dali's late 'atomic period' reworked a lifetime of themes and reiterations, let us see the painting as an emblematic explosion of the male tradition, master and master-piece. Call in Sophie Matisse! Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* evaporates! Leave us just the sky!

Hardly surrealist is Françoise Gilot. Picasso's femme *f(r)iction*, she symbolises both resistance and longevity: she is now over 101 years old. She features strongly in this show as both early post-cubist and delicate portraitist, a vibrant abstract artist, and mother of Paloma and Claude whom we see in her work as children. Self-liberated from her lover-'genius', she has lived and painted through decades of struggle in the arts, much as a New Yorker.

But other geographies have pressing messages today, again fusing political and ecological concerns. Sophia-Yemisi Adeyemo's *The Rose of Sharon* and *Ginger Root, Golden Hour* showcase protagonists who seem so recognisable (often photograph-based, often from a troubled past). Yet the specifics of land (with luxuriant vegetation, or barren) and conflict (militarised individuals, children in danger) are not specific. There is pride, poignancy and resilience in this work, a rendering of moments of tenderness and responsibility. It is demanding, confrontational: a call for action.

In contrast, consider the dynamic, abstract work Esther Mahlangu. Her geometrically-patterned Ndebele houses featured in the celebrated exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre*, (Paris, 1989) — and again in its unknown sequel, *Partage d'exotismes*, (Lyons, 2000). Here artists and spectators were linked through acts of sharing: hybridities linked to criss-crossings of the globe — the travelling of people, ideas and images, the persistence over times and spaces of friendship, love and solidarity, of complex and beautiful desires.⁴ This sharing is the oppositional counterpart to may seem optimistic In today's society of hatreds, wars, disasters where the political and environmental catastrophes converge in circles of fear and of fire.⁵ But *Femme F(r)iction* contains a message of hope. It fills the Academy Mansion with energy, colour, form, and precious materials, works to be inscribed within the histories of art, new, old or without men. It engages with a century-long tradition and new practitioners, new intersectional understandings of its communities and urgencies today —with queered ecologies and the synergies of Gaia. *Femme F(r)iction* artists come together in a celebration of visual power, sexuality, and solidarity.

¹ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1601, Act II, scene 2 (*The Globe illustrated Shakespeare*, 1986), subjected to femme f(r)iction by the present author.

² Katy Hessel, *A Story of Art without Men*, London, 2022 (the title parodies of E.H. Gombrich's *The Story of Art*, 1950).

³ James Lovelock, *Gaia. A New Look at Life on Earth*, Oxford, 1979.

⁴ *Partage d'exotismes*, Fifth Lyons Biennale, 2000, directed by Jean-Hubert Martin, who also directed *Magiciens de la Terre*, Paris, Centre Pompidou, 1989.

⁵ Paul Virilio et al., *Paul Virilio, Unknown Quantity*, Paris, Fondation Cartier, 2002.