

Isa Genzken and women artists: Defying the boys' club



Jason Farago

Female artists remain sorely underrepresented in museum exhibitions. Jason Farago explains why the problem persists – and how to fix it.

East African art: Brave new world

When the Museum of Modern Art in New York opens its retrospective of the pioneering German sculptor Isa Genzken later this month, it will be a momentous event for more reasons than one. Genzken, a creator of cryptic, grungy assemblages that employ found objects and commercial materials, is one of the most formidable artists in Europe but has never had an exhibition of this size in the United States. She has been especially influential for younger artists, on both sides of the Atlantic, and this show will introduce her perplexing sculpture to a whole new audience.

But the massive Genzken show (which tours in 2014 to Chicago and Dallas) carries even more weight than usual, because when it opens it will be one of the only full-scale exhibitions by a female artist at any of New York's most important museums. Thanks to a combination of scheduling accidents and garden-variety sexism, male artists are occupying pretty much every major exhibition space in town, from Christopher Wool at the Guggenheim to Chris Burden at the New Museum and Balthus at the Met.

None of those artists is objectionable on their own. But when considered all together, the New York museum landscape feels like an art world version of

a frat house. “This is an art season that could make you think the feminist movement never happened,” the critic Deborah Solomon lamented a few weeks ago.

MoMA’s boys

It is ironic that MoMA is the museum offering relief from New York’s boys’ club, because its track record with women’s art has been, to put it mildly, unimpressive. Since November 2004, when MoMA moved into its new building – a \$858m behemoth that barely increased the amount of usable exhibition space – the museum has devoted its principal galleries on the sixth floor to women artists only four times: for the painters Elizabeth Murray and Marlene Dumas, the performance artist Marina Abramović, and the photographer Cindy Sherman. (Other women have received smaller exhibitions elsewhere in the museum, and the Brazilian artist Mira Schendel was featured in a two-artist show.)

If four shows in nine years sounds low to you, and it should, recognise that for MoMA this actually counts as progress. The museum’s department of painting and sculpture, its largest and most prestigious division, went 16 years without mounting a solo show of a woman artist: before Murray, the last woman to get a proper MoMA retrospective was Helen Frankenthaler in 1989. Things get worse when you head downstairs to the painting and sculpture collection, where fewer than 10% of the art in the gallery’s by-the-numbers tale of 20th Century art is made by women. “It amounts to apartheid,” Jerry Saltz wrote a few years back; one art blog recently envisioned suing the museum for discrimination.

It would be one thing if MoMA were an outlier, but in fact it reflects a larger and more enduring inequity. In the 1970s and early 1980s, when the feminist movement was in full swing, artists and scholars mounted a sustained critique of museums and galleries, demonstrating that what looked like a meritocracy in fact belied rampant sexism. The critique stuck – but the action to change that situation has been delayed for decades.

In the market, women remain severely undervalued, with the most successful women just a tenth as expensive as the most successful men. As Sarah Thornton has noted, “depictions of women often command the highest prices, whereas works by them do not.” Women also rarely feature in group shows in sufficient numbers, and sometimes their presence is

laughably thin. At Gagosian in London right now, a show purporting to tell the history of painting of the last two decades includes 35 artists – of whom an obscene 34 are men. (The 35th, if you are keeping score, is Kim Gordon from Sonic Youth.) Dionysiac, an anarchic exhibition at the Pompidou Centre in Paris in 2005, featured fourteen artists, and every single one of them was male.

Women's representation in the art world remains so bad that, on the rare occasions that a show of contemporary art hits gender parity, it actually counts as a news story. The Whitney Biennial of 2010, organized by the Italian curator Francesco Bonami, included 55 artists, of whom just over half were women. It was instantly proclaimed 'the women's biennial,' complete with awkward discussions of allegedly feminine characteristics of painting and sculpture, not to mention a glossy photo shoot in The New York Times' fashion magazine. But as Bonami correctly insisted, a 'women's biennial' would be one that was 100% women. To include men and women in approximately equal numbers is simply doing one's job.

Toward equality

Why do women still get so little attention and credibility at the top echelons of the art world? To answer that question, it helps to untangle historical concerns and contemporary ones. Art was a man's affair for most of Western art history, and the paucity of women artists in earlier eras ingrained a conception that the artistic disposition is naturally male, while women will always be the exception. Yet in her landmark 1971 essay Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?, the art historian Linda Nochlin demolished the misconception that women lack the artist gene. She showed that from the Renaissance until the turn of the last century, it was "institutionally impossible" for women to become artists of the first rank. Women were not admitted to art academies and denied apprenticeships. They were excluded from social circles that led to advancement or patronage. They were also unable to participate in life drawing classes until the 19th Century; even after that the models had to be draped. All of that has ended – but the image of the artist as a solitary male genius that arose from those circumstances is still with us.

MoMA, to its credit, knows it has a problem, and it has been trying harder. It recently published a major catalogue, Modern Women, accompanied by a feminist symposium at which the Guerrilla Girls appeared. Its photography

department mounted an excellent exhibition, Pictures by Women, which charted the history of the medium through over 200 images. In the last year the museum has put on small shows of Alina Szapocznikow, Carol Bove, and Dorothea Rockburne, and next year will see a delayed, extremely exciting retrospective of Lygia Clark, the Brazilian sculptor. Even the donors want to see change: the Modern Women's Fund, established in 2005, was endowed by a museum trustee to encourage new research and exhibitions.

All of this is welcome. But a much larger shift is required before MoMA, and all of our institutions, can start building a culture that reflects the whole of society. More exhibitions and more books are a start, but they aren't enough. More fundamentally, we have to break out of the chokehold that maintains art as naturally a man's domain. The best way to do that, I would say, is to spend as much time as possible with the art of someone like Isa Genzken, whose mishmashes of high and low, elegance and trash, come closer to capturing our contemporary moment than any other artist I can name. Such affecting, disturbing, disorienting sculpture cannot stand on the margins of art history.