

Margaret Harrison @ Intersection for the Arts

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"Good Enough to Eat (2)", 1971, watercolor, gouache, and graphite on board, 20.75 x 25 inches

Art that engages with the politics of gendered subjectivity frequently references the body. As Margaret Harrison understands fully, there are reasons for the prevalence of this thematic emphasis. First, the body, we are conditioned to believe, is the place where sexual and gendered subjectivity reside. In the late 1960s, the representation of female bodies in a range of media and genres achieved prominence in art produced by feminist activists. Women launching careers in the arts at this time adopted a range of positions vis-à-vis the representation of gendered subjectivity. Harmony Hammond, Howardena Pindell, Lynda Benglis, and Louise Fishman, among others, embraced

abstraction in part because of its resistance to body-centered essentialism. At the same time, performance artists such as Hannah Wilke, Carolee Schneemann, Yoko Ono, Eleanor Antin, and VALIE EXPORT variously dramatized the status of the female body as a site of subjugation. Judy Chicago, with her collectively produced monument *The Dinner Party* (1974-79), and Tee A. Corinne, with *The Cunt Coloring Book* (1975), also deployed essentialism strategically, mobilizing in-your-face vaginal forms to both provoke and counteract phobic patterns of response to the female body and its parts. Path-breaking feminist artists from Barbara Kruger to Nicole Eisenman focused on the ways that visual culture mediates gendered power relations. Harrison's early work played similarly with the gender codes of popular culture and the sexual politics of consumerism.

In 1970 she participated in the formation of the London Women's Liberation Art Group. The next year, the London police shut down Harrison's first solo show the day after it opened at Motif Editions Gallery due to the controversial character of works with titles such as *Ejaculator*. This swift act of suppression turned Harrison's gallery debut into an inadvertent performance piece, demonstrating the brutality of the value system critiqued by these censored works: pin-ups pushed to the extremes of their objectifying logic and gender-bending perversions of comic-book heroism. The works were stored away and not exhibited again for decades. Key works—*Captain America*, for one—were lost.

Harrison subsequently switched her representational tactics. Still thinking through how the gender system polices its interests and imposes its constraints visually, she began to explore subtler ways to engage viewers—by using mixed-media collage and the representation of emblematic objects, for instance. Her 2004 show at Intersection for the Arts, *Beautiful Ugly Violence*, featured a series of exemplary still life paintings focused on small household objects and appliances: a pair of scissors, an electric tea pot, a telephone, a set of kitchen knives. These fixtures of domestic life, pictured from awkward angles at uncomfortably close removes, take on disturbing qualities generally cloaked in typical portrayals of domestic bliss. The outsized scale of the paintings contributes to an effect of disorientation. The only still life that appears overtly violent, a handgun resting on the folds of a satin bed sheet, is rendered oddly banal within the context of this series, just as the violence of innocuous household objects is proportionately heightened by the presence of this weapon.



"Heroes (1): What's That Long Red Limp Wrinkly Thing You're Putting On", 2009, water color, colored pencil, and graphite on board, 24 x 19 inches



"Captain America (2)", 1997, watercolor and graphite on paper, 26 x 18.25 inches

Never abandoning her feminist commitments, Harrison has, since the 1970s, continuously explored the politics of domesticity, addressing issues that range from domestic labor to sex trafficking to genital mutilation and domestic abuse. Her work tracks the relationship of gender oppression in the domestic arena to global economic and political systems. *Bodies Are Back*, at San Francisco's Intersection for the Arts, features some of the paintings and drawings for which Harrison achieved notoriety in 1971. These include a re-creation of her lost piece *Captain America*. This portrays the American comic book icon in dominatrix drag, with projectile breasts, black stockings, and stiletto heels. The show juxtaposes vintage pieces (and reproductions of vintage pieces) along with new works created expressly for this occasion. As the title of the show discloses, the artist again adopts the human figure as the site of sexual subjection and consumption. Many of these works are rendered in watercolor, a medium long associated with women and amateurs. The new works, in dialog with the originals, open additional registers of visual culture to feminist critique, using high-art icons. Harrison confronts pop heroes from

Dolly Parton to Batman with canonical works of art—Diego Velázquez's *Infanta*, Edouard Manet's *Olympia*, Willem de Kooning's *Woman*, and *Allen Jones' Table*—in which the objectified/commodified female body plays a starring role.

Has Harrison's early work retained its power to disturb? Pieces from the 1970s such as *Good Enough to Eat*, and *Mrs. Softie*, where bustier-clad seductresses serve as sandwich meat or ice-cream toppings, seem almost quaint in today's media-jaded and putatively "post-feminist" era.

Incursions into the high-art arena by artists from the Guerilla Girls, with their billboard critiques of Met acquisition policies, to Yasumasa Morimura, with his queer re-performances of masterworks, such as Velázquez *Infanta* and Manet's *Olympia* (both also cited by Harrison), locate Harrison's most recent works within a long history of critical interventions into visual art canons.

While the show might leave some habitués of feminist art with a sense of *déjà-trop-vu*, the work has important lessons to impart to a new generation of viewers. *Intersection for the Arts* should be applauded not only for supporting a historically important feminist artist, but also for seizing this opportunity to create an innovative forum of intergenerational dialog. In anticipation of Harrison's show, *Intersection* partnered with LYRIC (Lavender Youth Recreation & Information Center) to host a series of workshops focused on gender-based oppression and modes of print-culture activism. Framed in this way, *The Bodies Are Back*, in addition to its visual pleasures and piquant wit, transmits historical wisdom about gender oppression and its mechanisms while demonstrating the stamina of the feminist art resistance.



"Mrs. Softie No. 2", 1970, watercolor and graphite on paper, 30 x 22.5 inches

—TIRZA TRUE LATIMER

Margaret Harrison: *The Bodies are Back* @ Intersection for the Arts, through March 27, 2010.

Tirza True Latimer is Chair of Visual and Critical Studies at California College of the Arts.