

Torre, Jolene. "Interview with Margaret Harrison."
ArtSlant.com, March 2010,
<http://www.artslant.com/global/artists/rackroom>.

Interview with Margaret Harrison

San Francisco, March 2010 -- Stylistically, Margaret Harrison's work is reminiscent of early 20th century comic and pin-up cartoon art— in color theory and line. Her style adheres to many traditional comic conventions, but she holds up a distorted mirror to contemporary society. Recognized as a pioneer of feminist art, her work explores not only the notions of female equality but also gender ambiguity and the arbitrary nature of absolute identity.

On view thru March 27, 2010, at Intersection for the Arts, Harrison's *The Bodies Are Back* revisits the themes of her early work: the body as an object of sexuality, consumption, and gaze. Pairing new work with older pieces created in the '60s and '70s, this exhibit advances the issues Harrison originally purposed to question.

ArtSlant's Jolene Torr had the opportunity to speak with Margaret Harrison about this show and her roots in the feminist movement.

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Jolene Torr: *In your current show *The Bodies Are Back* at Intersection for the Arts, you're continuing a dialogue you started in 1971. What was the original message you were trying to convey?*

Margaret Harrison: I don't think it was a message but more that I was trying to open up several debates because the work examined several issues. Sometimes, all of them in one drawing, for example. Many of us were engaged with both

world politics and local politics; for instance, we were participating in the major marches and protests against the Vietnam War outside the American Embassy in London. So “Captain America” who was there supposedly to do good in the world, represented the USA and the Vietnam War; the secondary title of the piece was “Compromised Land.”

The other issue was the notion of a fixed gender; society thought of this as “normal” with no gray areas in between and no other options. We thought it was ridiculous, a confirmation of the position, as Ruskin put it, that a woman’s role was to be “the angel in the house” to support her man. So I switched Captain America’s gender around, gave him breasts and dressed him in so-called women’s clothing with high heels, to see what would be the effect and whether it would undermine those fixed notions. I tried to use humor to question all of the above and to raise consciousness around issues of equality by ridiculing fixed identity.

JT: Has your commentary on feminist politics changed for a contemporary, more aware audience?

MH: My recent works in *The Bodies Are Back* still link into popular culture, but take in celebrity culture, consumerism, glamour and high art. The issues around gender and the body have a broader audience appeal now. There is a context for the work to be viewed differently. Certainly it has been noticeable how many young people visit the exhibition and laugh with me not at me. I have always tried different strategies for different contexts in different moments in time. For instance in one section of my previous show at Intersection *Beautiful Ugly Violence* in 2004 I worked with a program called “Man Alive” in the San Francisco prison system which gave the men involved in domestic abuse a voice and the possibility of rehabilitation, moving from the consciousness around victims to action for victims, including male abusers who in many cases are victims of their own background. The form that show took was very different to *The Bodies Are Back* work. Although it relied on my skills in drawing and painting, it was fused with a documentary format. These shows had different focus audiences and the form the work took attracted different groups. My show in ‘71 didn’t focus on any audience in particular, so it didn’t draw in potential supporters.

JT: When you started, and there was this big reaction against your work, did you set out to continue to create work that was controversial?

MH: I never set out to be controversial. To me everything I tackled seemed to make perfect sense that it should be examined and that I should endeavor to find a form to deal with issues that were invisible, and find ways to make them visible with whatever crafts and skills I had. My work did continue to be controversial, but not intentionally. For instance a work from *Rape* created for a one-person show in London, subsequently purchased for the Arts Council by the Artist Derek Boshier, caused the show to be moved from the Serpentine Gallery to the Hayward Gallery on the South Bank in London (a decision taken by some officers at the arts council) because they thought the work was unsuitable for family viewing in a Royal Park, ignoring the fact that it had been used by local schools to talk about rape to their pupils. The ensuing row meant that the work got even more exposure, and by the time it went on view it had quite a crowd around it, a bit like the “Mona Lisa” in the Louvre. The work is now seen as a feminist classic and has recently been on show in Arnhem in the Netherlands, Santiago de Compostela in Northern Spain and will go on to show in Berlin this summer at NGBK.

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JT: *Can you tell me what happened in 1971 when the London police shut down your show?*

MH: The show opening went well seemingly; I went in the following day to find the gallery manager looking a little frightened and the walls empty. She said she had a visit from the police and was warned that if she didn't remove the show that they would. This created quite a lot of unwanted press attention, which I found rather horrifying and difficult to deal with especially as my daughter was only a few weeks old and never seemed to sleep.

JT: *What do you think they found so offensive?*

MH: I was told that it was the images of the altered men the police found offensive; the images of women they felt were more normal. So I guess they were reacting as males to the notion that there were other manifestations of sexuality than the strictly heterosexual variety, and that was threatening.

JT: *How did this affect your career as an artist?*

MH: I decided that failure was a kind of success, and this 'thing' feminism, that we were embarking on, had many layers of invisible history and politics to be investigated, in order to understand a societal structure, which placed us in a peripheral position. I decided that my little drawings couldn't hold several issues all at once. I needed another strategy for how I would structure my work; I decided I needed to research the concerns I was interested in and not treat the art practice as separate to issues that concerned me. As it happened, my partner was working on an installation for the ICA in London of women on strike in the North of England, so I worked as a researcher. At that point I wanted to switch off from the notion of being the 'Artist'. But when I was given the opportunity I carried on with work, which came out of

that experience: *Women and Work*, a group work very influenced by *Strike*, now in the Tate Gallery Collection, *Rape*, in the Arts Council collection in London, *Homeworkers*, *Anonymous Was a Woman*, and *Craftwork*.

The work looked very different and utilized text, but I kept the link by using painting.



JT: *Was the reaction of the British public more accepting than or just as prudish as that of the government's?*

MH: I don't think the government was aware of the show. There is an arm's length principle separating government from the Arts Council in the UK. Even though it has public funds, it also has the royal seal which means that issues to do with the arts organizations funded by the Arts Council can't be raised in Parliament. I think there was confusion in different sections of the British public, although the sixties heralded in a loosening of attitudes to sexuality, and certainly the bands in that period changed their dress, softening from the smart suit to more feminized forms. For example when the Rolling Stones performed in Kensington Gardens, Mick Jagger was wearing a dress. But like now, there were extremes of opinion and a lot of the women in the movement later on adopted a more prudish approach and the body was kept covered for reasons of avoiding accusations of causing the violence against them. In art, feminist critics like Griselda Pollock proposed that the body could not be used by women artists as it was too loaded with history to be viewed reasonably.

JT: *You co-founded the first London Women's Liberation Art Group. What did this group do for women?*

MH: This group, which had a show at the Woodstock Gallery in London during the first National Women's Demonstration in London, really collected women artists that we knew about who were tackling so-called women's issues or who just wanted to get out of the house and have a motivation and opportunity to show, to work. It was fairly short lived because it became subsumed into the women's workshops of the Artists Union. This came about in our apartment when a couple of women visited me just at the point when several of us who were in the Artists Union were talking about establishing a women's unit of some kind. I suggested that they join us for a meeting in the studio of Su Braden to discuss what form it should take. We decided to nominate each other for positions within the Union rather than wait for the men to do things for us. This meant that we were forced into public speaking and to develop our arguments. We also held sessions for each of us to show our work to each other in a safe environment. Both instances were confidence building.

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JT: Going forward, have you always created work that is politically conscious? Did you intend to make that kind of departure?

MH: Not until the feminist movement and the intellectual ferment of the late '60s. I was floundering really. In many colleges the training focused on techniques and formal structures of images, but art history on the whole didn't discuss the motivation of the artist. Some recent work of mine, a series of landscapes, are the ones viewed as the least message-loaded, and indeed the pleasure of using paint is more to the fore in this work. And another work in the mid-90s of women in the cosmetic departments of stores uses the notion of enjoyment by the viewer of the paintings themselves. It's only later that they may start to question the images (a bit like Manet's painting of the "Bar at the Folies Bergere").

JT: How do you respond to contemporary society in your work? A lot of artists are turning to the '70s for inspiration. How do you feel your work fits in with that trend?

MH: There is a reappraisal of the work of the '70s and certainly there has been a demand from a lot of international shows for that particular period of my work including the 11th Istanbul Biennial, (I was the only British artist selected) which is regarded as the most cutting edge of the Biennials. The Croatian Curators, only included 17 out of a total of 70 artists from the West. It was noticeable that those of us in that group were there to validate younger artists' work, from countries such as Turkey, Croatia, Egypt, Africa, etc., who were attempting to deal with difficult subjects.

Now I am not just responding to issues on my doorstep; I am also taking in issues of violence towards women, which until fairly recently were invisible in the West. We weren't too aware of what was happening in say Afghanistan, Iran, and African countries. They weren't in our vision, so I included reportage on this in *Beautiful Ugly Violence*. The '70s Fest, as some have termed it, has meant some of us are able to talk to younger artists from other countries. *Rape* was

included in *Rebelle Art* and the feminist movement through 1969-2009 in Arnhem in the Netherlands. I met a young artist from South Africa who was using photographs of gay people who had been raped and abused; she introduced herself to me, thanking me for creating *Rape* and saying that she felt it was very important and that she hadn't been aware that other artists had tackled these subjects.

"You can put your toe in the water without drowning yourself."



JT: The proportion of women in the art world has increased since the '70s, but feminism has lost some ground on the basis that the contemporary art world is generally not politically-oriented right now but commercially-focused; it's economic. Do you feel there's still a resistance against feminist art? That the art world is sexist? And that there is still a place for this kind of dialogue?

MH: There is a place for these dialogues to happen. I think younger artists have been afraid to call themselves feminists because of possible damage to their careers and the sale of their work. What they don't understand is that you can wait around forever to be recognized, but [also] you can put your toe in the water without drowning yourself. Also the hype around the art market disguises the fact that very few artists are making a good living.

There was definitely a backlash against the kind of work I was doing, but curiously artists following [the movement] were able to take advantage of the path we had pioneered. They produced work which was very much akin to ours, and they were able to sell for high prices; but [they] wouldn't acknowledge where it had come from because the myth of the unique artist abounds. And they would worry about affecting their prices and reputation. Others were just totally unaware where the work originated; they took their role models from those artists who seemed very prominent in the hype of the booming art market and because university art departments discouraged students from looking at role models from previous generations, the history was hidden for a while.

A few years ago I heard a couple of young artists discussing what they were going to do if they hadn't made it in the art world by the time they were 25. My generation just wanted to be where it was at. Perhaps we were too starry-eyed and impractical but it has been an interesting journey, and the '70s Fest means that the history is in the museums and publications.

ArtSlant would like to thank Margaret Harrison for making this interview possible.

~ Jolene Torr, a writer living in San Francisco

[Images: Margaret Harrison, Captain America, 1971/1997, Watercolor and graphite on paper ,30" x 22.75" (image) / 32.25" x 22.75" (frame); The Healthier Choice, 2007 Watercolor, colored pencil, and graphite on paper, 18.25" x 12.5" (image)/ 27.75" x 21" (frame); Courtesy of the artist & Intersection for the Arts; Good Enough To Eat (2), 1971, Watercolor, gouache, and graphite on board ,20.75" x 25" (image)/25.25" x 31.25" (frame); Courtesy Beverley Knowles (London, U.K.); Little Woman At Home, 1971/2010 ,Claria print (original watercolor and graphite on paper in permanent collection Tate Gallery, London, U.K.) 18.75" x 12.75" (image) / 20.25" x 14.25" (frame); Allen Jones & The P.T.A. (Dolly Parton/Allen Jones "Table" sculpture), 2010, Watercolor and graphite on paper, 11" x 15" (image) / 15.25" x 19.25" (frame); Courtesy of the artist & Intersection for the Arts]