



## BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD



**A**claimed British artist Margaret Harrison is widely recognized as a pioneer of feminist art. A founder of London Women's Liberation Art Group in 1970, Harrison courted controversy the following year with her first solo show, in which she exhibited drawings dealing with the themes of sexuality, consumption, and gaze. (The London police shut down the show, labeling her work obscene.) Since then, Harrison has produced works that focus on

celebrities, women's labor, rape, domestic abuse, and the impact of war on women. Harrison's most recent show, "The Bodies Are Back," is a reinvestigation of the themes from her early work via powerful drawings of superheroes and pinup girls in gender-bending scenarios, all shot through with a dash of humor.

—*Antonia Richmond*

**How did you get involved in the London Women's Liberation Art Group?**

It came out of a large meeting of women in the media in London. There were about eight of us, [and] we wanted a space to give women artists a chance to talk about what they wanted to, and not in mixed company. Our first show was at the Woodstock Gallery, in 1971. That was the year of the first National Women's Liberation Movement March.

**That was also the year of your infamous solo exhibition at the Motif Exhibitions Gallery. Can you describe what happened?**

It was the first one-person feminist show in London. I hadn't quite realized that I was the first at the time: I was working on my own on these issues and trying to figure them out. I thought, "What would happen if I added breasts to Hugh Hefner, and bunny ears?" What I hadn't realized is that when you come out into the mainstream, [people] only see rather rude drawings.

The main objection was that the police disliked the way I'd treated men. It was okay to talk about women, and it was okay to talk about pleasure, but it's not okay to talk about men. It was a bit of a nightmare. The opening seemed to go fine, but then the Hefner organization sent their people along and the Hefner drawing disappeared. The gallery accused *Playboy* of trying to use the show for publicity. And then the show got shut down.

**The images in "The Bodies Are Back" present the viewer with icons of masculinity and femininity that are recontextualized in terms of dress and situation. What are you asking viewers to see?**

The sandwich ones [in which women are depicted as sandwich fillings] were done because women are always being compared to food; you know, they're supposed to always be juicy and delicious. I'd like for a woman to

look at them and say "I can relate to that." There was an artist in the '60s, Allen Jones, who created these sculptures of women as furniture. I've depicted that in a drawing of a woman as a table. And I thought, let's put it together with Dolly Parton, someone I think is a genius—and who has also quite blatantly altered her body. So she gestures to the table as if to say, "He doesn't get it, does he?"

**Your work is engaging viewers now in a very different way than it did in the 1970s. Why do you think that is?**

The context is so different from the '70s—there was no background for this kind of work. It had all been produced by men, in the Pop movement, so it could only be viewed from a male perspective, while I had been trying to do it from a female perspective. In the '60s, there was a very definite dividing line between genders that was supposed to be fixed. It started to shift in the '70s—like with rock stars, you know: Mick Jagger in a dress. [And later] Madonna—I say now that the song "Material Girl" is a summation of some of the issues I was trying to grapple with.

**Has the art world changed since the '70s in terms of more critical and commercial success for feminist artists, or even women artists in general?**

I haven't investigated that recently. But in Britain, if you look at the Tate Gallery collection, you would notice only a third of [artists included] are women. As far as the commercial galleries, they are still dominated by male artists. The best thing is survival—eventually people begin to reappraise what was happening. It's not going to be an equal situation for a long time. A lot of women's work comes to the foreground after the fact. It might be a good career move if I die.