

Margaret Harrison's new show I Am A Fantasy starts at the Payne Shurvell Gallery from 15 April.

Born in 1940, Margaret Harrison was one of the most prominent Feminist artists who came to the fore in the early 70's and was the founder of the London Women's Liberation Art Group in 1970. Her work has often been controversial and subverts conventional and received ideas of sexuality and gender. On one occasion the police caused one of her exhibitions to be closed on the grounds that the images were indecent - it is hard now to imagine that the police were quite so easily shocked in those days. Her work has met with considerable critical success; seven pieces are in the Tate Collection and her work has been shown in major galleries internationally.



I was lucky enough to speak to Margaret Harrison just before the opening. I had not met Margaret before and if I had been expecting the tabloid stereotype of a radical feminist those expectations would certainly have been confounded. Margaret is obviously an extremely thoughtful and very articulate artist, something of a contrast to some of the artists who are most prominent in the public consciousness nowadays.

I asked Margaret whether she thought that nearly all female artists are essentially feminist artists now. "Yes, but they don't want to be seen as feminist artists - to use the "f-word" - in case it affects their careers and selling prospects. But if you ask them whether they believe in the principles we were putting forward, they would say that they do. There has been a kind of backlash against the work we were doing, a kind of weariness has set in and you can't keep reviving the same issues. One of the sad things that began to happen in the 1980's when the YBA's started to get a lot of attention and the art market began to peak was that the work we had done when the art market was virtually non-existent was overlooked. For example, the work of Kate Walker prefigured Tracey Emin's use of her domestic and personal possessions in her work but her influence was not acknowledged. There are a lot of women now who are addressing the same issues as we did but in a different way. Lady Gaga and Madonna address the female form and sexuality in their work and I admire what they do. The trick is not to be exploited."

I asked Margaret whether there was still a place for overtly political art in a world of cobbled-together coalitions and voter apathy.

"There are many younger artists in the UK whose work is very political, many coming out of Goldsmiths at the moment. And if you look at women artists in Turkey and places like Iran and South Africa dealing with issues of race, and the persecution and violence perpetrated on grounds of sexual orientation, their work is very political. Our work gave these artists permission to produce this political work - we have served as role models for them as there were none in their own societies.

I asked Margaret why she came to choose her particular artistic style and subject matter: "When I started producing my work, I was told that I shouldn't use painting as it carried too much weight from the past compared to the new media. But I had just spent 7 years at two art schools acquiring those skills and I took the conscious decision that I was not going to

de-skill myself. And while that was happening in my work, the Thatcher government was presiding over the deskilling of people in the workplace. I did work with installation and photography and documentation. I also produced abstract paintings - terrible abstract paintings! - but I was interested in a particular kind of subject matter and I chose the medium that suited the subject matter. And political engagement at that time was like breathing - you had the feeling that the world would collapse if you didn't go to some political meeting or another. It would have been mad not to put that into the work."

About the art world today: "There is a kind of negative gloom in the art world at the moment. The art market is surviving to a degree but it is far too top-heavy."

And while artists need to earn a living, the most important thing for Margaret is the work. "I recently heard two young artists agreeing that if they hadn't made it by the age of 25, they were going to give up art. And I thought - but that's not what it's about! It's not just about fame which is a two-edged sword anyway, it's not just about commercial success."

John Kavanagh