

Margaret Harrison: a brush with the law

Her art was branded indecent and the police shut down her exhibition. Now the artist talks about the changes that have taken place in the 40 years since then



Margaret Harrison's depiction of Captain America, with false breasts and a basque. Photograph: Courtesy Payne Shurvell London

Forty years ago, in April 1971, the police closed down London's first overtly one-woman feminist art show after just one day, on the grounds of indecency. At first glance, British artist Margaret Harrison's drawings fitted into the imagery that fine art and popular culture were infatuated with at that time: comic-book superheroes and pneumatic Vargas-inspired pin-ups – think pop artist Tom Wesselmann's nudes and the 50s-style glamour girl sprawled, supine, on Roxy Music's debut album.

Yet, unaware of their double standards, the police objected to the portrayal of men in Harrison's work as demeaning. There was Hugh Hefner squeezed into a bunny girl costume, a beefy but emasculated Captain America wearing false breasts and a stars 'n' stripes-patterned basque, and Valerie Solanas, the radical feminist who tried to murder Andy Warhol, stamping on his Brillo box artwork.

These images, says Harrison, "questioned the idea of having a fixed sexuality". She has previously said the police "were reacting as males to the notion that there were other manifestations of sexuality than the strictly heterosexual variety, and that was threatening".

What was her reaction to the suppression of her work? "Shock. I'd been in a cocoon of discussions with other women," says Harrison, who founded the London Women's Liberation Art Group in 1970. "Until then, my work hadn't been in the public domain." Did it politicise her? "The events of 1968 had already done so, but the reaction to the show politicised me more."

A new exhibition of her work, *I Am A Fantasy*, which combines late 60s/ early 70s pieces with later additions, opens in London next week. It will include a reproduction of the Hefner piece, which went missing during the original exhibition. By coincidence, Hefner is back in the news: a Playboy Club is to open soon in Mayfair (the last one closed in 1981). Does this make Harrison feel her efforts to raise awareness of sexism were in vain? "No, this revival seems quaint, just good retro business. But it's out of step with today. My original bunny girl image highlighted the ridiculous idea that the only career for women was wearing this clothing. You might want to wear this stuff now and then, but it shouldn't be your only option. Lady Gaga and Madonna have used such imagery to great effect."

Harrison is less well known than feminist artists such as Mary Kelly and Nancy Spero, but is highly respected in the art world: the Tate owns seven of her pieces. Living in London in the 70s, the anti-Vietnam war protests and the American artists and writers who had escaped the draft inspired her, as did changes in fashion and rock music and the rise of pop art. "My Captain America piece was also a comment on the Vietnam war," she says. "Other drawings examined the media's equation of women with food. My work also referenced the underground cartoons of Robert Crumb, Eric Stanton and Oz magazine. I was attracted to Vargas's style, too, but wanted to unpick it."

Her 70s drawings crossed pop art with a nascent feminist sensibility, and were spiked with mordant humour: "I was critiquing American pop culture but using irony rather than being militant," she says.

Her late 70s art was more political still. She says *Rape*, a 1978 piece that spotlights the injustices against women in rape cases via newspaper cuttings and reproductions of classic paintings, did challenge attitudes. "The Arts Council, which bought it, planned to show it at the Serpentine but decided it couldn't because it was a 'family gallery' with free entry, so it moved it to the Hayward gallery. But it ignored the fact that it had been shown at the Battersea Arts Centre, where schoolteachers used it to introduce pupils to this issue."

Some of Harrison's contemporary versions of her 70s drawings, such as an image of actor David Walliams in drag, suggest things have changed for the better, with the notion of ambiguous sexuality becoming more mainstream: "I found an image of Walliams in a magazine wearing a stiffly corseted Vivienne Westwood dress. It struck me that, in the west, images of corseted women previously represented oppression. But this picture shows acceptance of a range of sexuality we couldn't have imagined in the early 70s."