

## Margaret Harrison and The Girls: I am A Fantasy

By [Laura Bushell](#) · April 27, 2011 ·

Feminism was a dirty word, or at least made for some obscene art, when Margaret Harrison put on a one woman show in 1971. Her beautifully rendered drawings of Captain America complete with boobs and stockings and Hugh Hefner dressed as one of the bunnies he so adores were deemed indecent by the police and promptly whipped off the walls. With forty years between then and now, Harrison is showing these works again along with new pieces, joined by The Girls (Andrea Blood and Zoe Sinclair) with a new static performance piece. Bridging the revealingly narrow gap between second wave feminism and contemporary feminist issues, Harrison and The Girls bring the f-word out of the annals of history to the pole-dancing-as-liberation generation. Together they sat down to discuss their work and inspiration...

**Margaret Harrison:** *I'd been invited by a gallery to show some work and actually they gave me a little stipend, which was amazing because the market wasn't great. They didn't see all of my work until the show was put together, but it was fine except that the police apparently went into the gallery the day after it opened and warned the gallery director that it should come down otherwise they would take it down. By the time I arrived it was down, I couldn't believe it. I was packing my bag ready to go out into the night and we found that the Bunny Boy was missing. Then as I got onto the PR person, he said he knew who'd got it because the Playboy people had turned up to the private view and he accused their PR people of using it as a stunt. But we never got to the bottom of it. It was difficult for me.*

### It was closed on grounds of obscenity wasn't it?

**MH:** *I'd done a mixture of works that dealt with sexual politics and sexuality. So I'd added little bits of appendages and dresses and high heels, and what the gallery manager was told was that the police objected to those particular works. Although I'd done a number of drawings which had described women as food, literally put them in food, they didn't seem to mind those at all, it was the male imagery that they really objected to. There are a few pieces in the Tate collection now, so it's kind of come the full circle, there's an acceptance which these girls will be able to tell you about because they're of that age.*

### Now you're showing with The Girls.

**MH:** *Do you mind being called girls?*

**Andrea Blood:** *Not at all.*

**MH:** *See, we wouldn't have liked that.*

**AB:** *Well there's a bit of an irony in the name.*

**Zoe Sinclair:** *We're less girl-like all the time...*





**How has the work of feminists like Margaret from the 70s influenced you?**

**AB:** *I think that we're in a very lucky position as women in 2011 in our thirties, we don't totally appreciate everything that's gone on before. We take it for granted that these pictures can be in an exhibition now and it's not going to get shut down because we're so used to that being the norm. We haven't lived in times when those kind of images could have closed down a show or been banned from TV.*

**ZS:** *When we were children Madonna was writhing around on a bed simulating masturbation in a gold corset and that seemed quite empowering.*

**MH:** *Well it was empowering because she turned sexuality on its head. That's why when I brought this stuff out again it was fine, especially in San Francisco, which has an enormous gay and transsexual community, they absolutely loved the work.*

**It's gone from one extreme to the other then in 40 years.**

**MH:** *Yes, it's just a different moment in time.*

**AB:** *I think in terms of the gay and the transsexual scenes, they're becoming much more accepted and having their place in the mainstream culture, so I can see why they absolutely loved having someone like Margaret put them on the map, as it were. In the seventies, we tried to pretend those things didn't exist.*

**Female identity has become more flexible.**

**MH:** *You can change your identity.*

**ZS:** *Also we grew up as teenagers watching Eurotrash. My family would all sit down together and watch it and there would be pre-op transsexuals, Lolo Ferrari, really sexual content but it was very playful and it was family viewing in our family.*

**MH:** *Yes, I remember watching that with my daughters.*

**AB:** *Programmes like that also showed extreme body modification, which in turn makes it accessible and normal, maybe not normal but something you would know about and you'd grow up with the knowledge of what body modification was at least.*

**MH:** *Also, things have changed in advertising. I don't know if you remember a billboard called the Britvic Fairy? It went up in the nineties outside Waterloo and it became quite famous. There was a fairy that looked a bit like Elvis Presley and he just had a little tiny sparkly posing pouch and fairy wings. Underneath it said 'We cram ten oranges into our drinks' and the word 'cram' was just below his penis! It was refreshing that you'd have a man in fairy wings. I think advertising was*

*gradually taking this on, rather than the kind of billboards I was confronted with, like one for an orange drink saying 'juicy, fruity, fresh and cheap' with this pneumatic woman. We would object to that, obviously. But I probably would do now, because there isn't an alternative. It's the alternative isn't it?*

**AB/ZS:** Yes.

**Can you tell me about how your collaboration came about?**

**AB:** *We've known the curator, Beverley Knowles, since 2008 when we had a show in her gallery.*

**ZS:** *At the time Beverley had a gallery in Ladbroke Grove and she only showed female artists, and I think she was the only one in the country.*

**MH:** *I think she did my show the year before yours, so the notion was that she was asked to curate a show here and she decided we would go nicely together. I think it's nice that you've got a big difference in ages actually, the intergenerational thing is great.*

**Can you tell me about the performance The Girls are doing?**

**ZS:** *It's partly a response to a fairytale called Diamonds and Toads which has got extreme examples of female stereotypes in it, where one daughter is...*

**AB:** *...fair and blonde and beautiful and kind, and has a good heart. She's blessed by a fairy and gets married and every time she speaks, she speaks diamonds and pearls and flowers. And the other sister is jealous and tries to mimic her, but because the fairy recognizes that this is not a pure act she puts a curse on her so that she speaks only toads and vipers and horrible things.*

**ZS:** *So we're going to be lying top to tail in a claustrophobic wardrobe which is quite coffin like and it's also quite uterus like as well, static for the one hour in there.*

**AB:** *And its slightly ambiguous as to whether we're asleep, dead, under a curse, what are we waiting for? It's this idea that in lots of fairytales you're waiting for this prince to come and rescue you.*

**MH:** *Or assault you.*

**ZS:** *Yes, there are only two endings, you either marry or you don't and you're miserable. It depends how beautiful you are. There's also lots of strands of female rivalry in fairytales and it's looking at that too.*

**AB:** *We're laughing really at the whole notion about this desire to get married and that being the ending of many fairytales, the ultimate aim being to be chosen.*

**ZS:** *We didn't grow up with any of the fairytales that have cool modern endings, we just had the traditional ones. As I child I didn't ever come across an alternative ending, I think that was just a bit later. So my childhood games were all about Sindy getting married.*

**AB:** *When we look at modern women who think they're post-feminists, by in large they're still following the accepted template of getting married, having kids, having a house, and not really considering having anything outside of that, not thinking about themselves. They end up signing up, whether they mean it or not, to a life of drudgery... [Laughs] It's a rosy-tinted view on what's often a very one-sided deal.*

**ZS:** *Also in those stories the woman, well she's almost a child-woman, never gets to know the man at all, they get married immediately. So I think we just both feel incredibly lucky that we've had choices and that we've got support from our families.*

**AB:** *We don't have any pressure from our families.*

**ZS:** *It's such a relief as it would be awful to have that expectation. Otherwise I don't see how you can do it all, I absolutely don't. Most artists have got other jobs, particularly at the beginning and you have to make some stark choices.*

**AB:** Also we're quite horrified by the sexualization of young kids and the kind of clothing that's available, the princess outfits, they're still being pushed into the idea that this 'Barbie lifestyle' is a fabulous thing.

**ZS:** The Disney Princess phenomenon is a relatively new thing as well.

**AB:** This complete conversion to all things pink, when I grew up it was difficult to get pink and it was much more liberating. Whereas now it feels like boys only wear blue and girls only wear pink.

**MH:** It comes the full circle, depending on what's marketable. My daughter has two boys and friends who've had kids at the same time, boys as well, they all come to the house and she says it's a nightmare. I asked why and she said 'well these boys are rampaging all over the place and if I say anything to my friends, say 'well that's what boys do isn't it?' She has a little boy of six and he hates it, it's like he's also got to have this expectation that he's got to go and fight.

**AB:** That's what I object to, the expectation that people put onto kids about what boys do and what girls do. Actually very young kids behave in similar ways it's just we help guide them and what we do helps them evolve into society's preconceived ideas about how they should behave.

**MH:** It's very complicated isn't it because there's all sorts of stuff on television all the time which fixes them in this kind of way.

**In one of your new works for the show Margaret you draw David Walliams from Little Britain.**

**MH:** Actually it touches a bit on the things we've just been talking about. So this image is a found image of David Walliams in a Vivienne Westwood dress, all corseted. It's against a Velazquez painting of a woman who's been prepared for the marriage market so she's got all her finery on, she must have been weighed down with all this stuff. I thought that's interesting because there you have David Walliams who's not gay, or says he's not gay but he's in a dress, it doesn't bother him. He quite enjoys it, so it's okay. Actually you can turn that whole thing on its head, so the division between the sexes is not that wide. It's a little horrifying to hear all these things about pink toys because there's no room then, again you're down into that fixed identity. I felt that because it's in the public domain, it's interesting to have this as a contrast to the other works.

**AB:** David Walliams is an interesting character – do we accept it because he's famous and funny? Funny is a great way to cut through a lot of things, get a message across and suddenly it's acceptable. If he was someone who just lived down the road and went to the pub in a dress how would he get treated by the general public?

**MH:** It's all at certain points like a gay festival where it's allowed. In San Francisco where I live most of the time it's kind of normal! That's why they asked me to do this show because they said they hadn't found a way at this particular gallery to relate to the gay community. There was a group of young transsexual, gay and lesbian kids who had art classes at the gallery and they wanted to create some work that would go on the underground. Anyway, the curator showed them my drawings and they were delighted. They said 'we can do this' and they made these drawings in which they mixed up the body parts and indeed it did go in the underground. I thought it was so nice to have this young group who related to this stuff.

**I like the Marc Quinn drawing you have here, that made me laugh, it relates to what Andrea said about humour.**

**MH:** I couldn't resist it actually. You see he's got a head on his penis as well. I was also interested in the notion of class, that Kate Moss came out of a working class background and has developed her talents as she's gone along. And I looked at Marc Quinn and I was disappointed that the class thing was still going on, that he could move very easily from not being trained as an artist to being an artist, whereas someone like me had to do seven years in the expectation that you might make it. He had the confidence that comes with that kind of background to think that he could switch, so that's why I added the two biographies. But I thought that piece was more about him than it was Kate Moss, it's a kind of introverted piece really.



Sculpture  
 JANE WOOD  
 Born London 1938  
 Married Richard Wood 1968  
 Married and divorced 1971  
 Married to artist and is  
 an artist  
 JANE WOOD 'SELF' 1991  
 100 x 100 cm  
 Painted by Jane Wood (Self)  
 (Signed) 1991 on the back  
 Edition 1/100  
 Original price was £1,000 and  
 selling price £10,000 approx.



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*J.F. Harris 2010*

**I think that's a parallel in your work – to tackle serious issues with humour.**

**AB:** *For us it's a really good way to reach a wider audience because most people can get it at least on a humorous level, then if it does bring a bigger issue to the table as well..great! Zoe and I have got a very similar darkness in our humour and that's one of the reasons we started working together and it always comes through in our work.*

**ZS:** *It's hard to imagine that we wouldn't use humour, it's just absolutely integral. Because were spending a lot of time on our work and for us, that's who we are, I don't think we could not use it.*

**MH:** *Well its good that you don't separate yourselves out in that way, that 'I'm an artist and I'm serious'.*

**There's also a misconception that feminists are angry rather than humorous.**

**ZS:** *At the Feminism in London 2010 conference, Finn McKay was saying that feminism needs reclaiming, not re-branding, which is really true. I don't think enough young women are thinking enough about feminism.*

**AB:** *Most women would all agree to lots of feminist principles but deny being feminists. It is just a dirty word for a lot of people and it's about reclaiming it, it's still very relevant.*

**MH:** *If you talk amongst yourselves then everybody understands that there are these issues that you're all familiar with.*

**AB:** *But waving the flag is a bit too far.*

**MH:** *If you want to sell your work immediately, don't take chances, but the best work is made by people who take chances, take a leap. It may not be right immediately but then you work from it, you can have successful failures.*

**ZS:** *And you've got to make art work for yourself first of all, that's why you do it, and then you share it. I think it's too easy with the British culture of hen parties going to pole dancing lessons, there's just not enough thought behind that and not enough hens ready to stand up and say they don't want to do it.*

**MH:** *In 1980 I helped to put on a exhibition at the ICA called Issues and I did a piece which was about craftwork, people using craft and skill, but in the course of it I found that historically women had gone into prostitution from the middle classes because they couldn't get married, there was not enough men to go round because of the war. So this thing about craft started to turn into a piece about prostitution and we held a meeting in the ICA and it was absolutely packed to the gunnels with everybody you could think of. One women in the audience, quite sweet, said 'oh I really like sex! Do you think it would be a good thing if I went into prostitution?' And this prostitute said 'If you like sex, for God's sake, don't make a job of it!' So it's kind of that same thing, women are drawn into it maybe because they're economically needy but also through the notion that it's okay, it's empowering.*

**In the press for The Girls on your website, you're described as 'post feminist'.**

**ZS:** *In this country we are liberated, we're lucky. But in most other countries in the world women mostly have a terrible time.*

**Does post-feminism imply that feminism has stopped?**

**AB:** *That's what most people think. We were involved in an exhibition for Feminism in London and when we were advertising it people were saying 'What's the point? Feminism's done, all the work's done, right?'*

**So what stage is feminism at now?**

**MH:** *Well it's difficult to tell, but I showed in the Istanbul Biennale in 2009 and interestingly it was curated by four women from Croatia. I was the only British artist actually and most of the other artists apart from about eight of us were all young but they came from places like Turkey, Iran, Africa, it was dominated by what is referred to as the periphery, but it was the main part of the exhibition. They were taking on issues and doing stunning work. There was one woman from Iran who'd made a burkha out of hair and everyone who walked in was stunned, it just made an amazing impact. It was finding*

*another way, artists are very inventive at finding ways of making things work visually. There's something going on here, quite a few left their home country, where they were able to rework things they'd wanted to do for years.*

**Another thing I wanted to ask about adapting and surviving as a female artist was how to exist financially, as Margaret you mentioned the collapsed art market of the 70s, and it's the same now.**

**MH:** *I think most artists are having to earn a living in other ways and you'll probably find there's about thirty artists making a reasonable living.*

**AB:** *I think the idea of being an artists and nothing else, having no other form of income seems quite outdated, especially in London, one of the most expensive cities in Europe, it's almost impossible.*

**ZS:** *It's a long-term goal and having an entrepreneurial spirit is very important.*

**MH:** *We need to be out in the world to understand it. People are raising expectations of students to think they're going to be an art star.*

**ZS:** *It's really about a lifetime's work.*

**AB:** *It's about the practice, putting in the hours, developing what you want to say and how you're saying it. I don't even think you can do that straight off.*

**ZS:** *When you're in your early twenties, do you even know who you are necessarily? It easier as you get older because you know what you're about and then you're not taking every knock back so terribly personally, you just get up again. It's a long, slower burn, that's why you're willing to give up so much free time, it's a sacrifice now for the future.*

**MH:** *I think you have to be obsessive anyway if you're an artist if you want to continue on working. People ask why I didn't give up when I wasn't making any money and I think well what else would I do? That's what I was trained for, that's what I do all my life, what would I do?!*