The Future is Female

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The fluidity of gender and sexual identity is today more widely accepted, and yet as the art featured in *The Future is Female* illuminates, the struggle for equality and inclusion persists: far more progress is needed before Woolfalk's vision of the *Empathics* reflects lived reality. What role might art play in shaping the next notation inscribed on Tiffany Shlain's feminist history tree ring?

Cover: **Azita Moradkhani**
Iran, 2024
Colored pencil on archival paper pulp body cast with branch

Gleaming acrylic fingernails glued into patterned, reptilian forms that emerge from the wall; female anatomy rendered in neon light and boxing gloves; haunting words about the present overlaid on imagery of the past: surface tension abounds in this exploration of contemporary feminist art. The broad range of media and subject matter presented reflects the ongoing influence of the art of the second-wave women's liberation movement, which engendered unprecedented cultural change, shifting art-making out of the isolated studio and hallowed institutions into both more intimate domestic and broader public spheres. The ensuing transformation ushered in generations of artists addressing identity, the body, and the affirmation of personal experience. As critic Laura Cottingham writes, "[contemporary] art engaged with sexuality, conscious politics, gender roles,...first person video, autobiography, and performance is directly indebted to the space opened up for new media and new content by the feminist art movement in the seventies."

Tiffany Shlain
DENDROFEMONOLOGY: A FEMINIST HISTORY TREE RING, 2022
Reclaimed deodar cedar wood sculpture
Courtesy of the artist

The use of the self as subject and the prevalence of craft-based practices such as sewing, weaving, embroidery, and appliqué in 21st-century art are central to this legacy. During the 1970s, artists like Judy Chicago, Mira Schor, Martha Rosler, Adrian Piper, Howardena Pindell, Faith Wilding, and others, merged art and activism, elevating everyday materials, methods, and experiences to challenge conventional notions about how and why and where art is created and consumed. Today, artists like Lesley Dill and Stephanie Hirsch employ and expand decorative or domestic art to reveal intersections between the personal and the political. Dill and Hirsch express a sense of power and purpose that belies the delicate fabrics and feminine forms of their craft-based work: Dill's hand-sewn image of a veiled woman asserts *I See Visions*, and Hirsch's bright, beaded floral canvas declares her *Indestructible*.

The inventive use of language, whether printed, projected, illuminated, or recorded animates works by Jenny Holzer, Betty Tompkins, Kiki Seror, Nina Katchadourian, and Michele Pred, introducing unexpected voices into both art and history that resonate as private and public at once. Tompkins, Seror, and Holzer use text to interrogate power through self-expression, creating new narratives for cultural and political resistance. Projected as video onto institutional buildings in Berlin, Holzer's poems about her fears as a parent become the collective concern of all who "fear those in power." For her series, *Women Words*, Tompkins crowdsourced "words about women" and overlaid them on top of images of women from art history by male artists. The text obscures the image, subverting male-centric narratives and revealing the misogynistic and degrading terms often used to describe women. Seror's lightbox, *Not of Her Body*, *Her Thoughts Can Kill*, *Dulcinea*, is a digitally rendered, hard-to-decipher text derived from the artist's exchanges with men in online sex chat rooms. This illuminated script of seduction challenges the stereotype that women do not seek or control their own sexual pleasure. By manipulating the physical and psychological properties of language, Seror transforms the viewer into a complicit voyeur of her power and seduction. Using a scarf, a sweater, and toilet seat covers to create outrageous costumes in homage to David Bowie and Freddie Mercury, Katchadourian and her double sing along to the rock stars' hit song "Under Pressure" in an airplane bathroom, simultaneously voicing the frustrations of everyday life while inserting her artistic identity into the male-dominated traditions of both portraiture and pop culture. Pred's hot pink hand mirrors combine the symbol for the female gender with captions that render the viewer "Feminist," "Equal," or "Powerful," offering a passive yet potent transformation of the audience-subject's self-image.

A confrontation with past experience inspired Zanele Muholi's series of self-portraits: "When I was young, I was told that I was ugly, and I had to grow up with that sense of ugliness and shame," Muholi explains. Self-portraiture allows Muholi to explore multiple elements of their personality as a Black queer person, while undoing the psychological damage of growing up in a society that devalued their appearance and identity. Muholi describes themselves as a visual activist rather than an artist, and their photography as a personal expression of resistance, because, they declare, "we cannot be denied existence. This is about our lives, and if queer history, trans history, if politics of blackness and self-representation are so key in our lives, we just cannot sit down and not document and bring it forth."

Picturing transcendence, visibility, and social engagement is also a hallmark of Yvette Molina's work. Molina titled her portraits of female skateboarders *Freedom Beings*, after a quote from German Conceptual artist Joseph Beuys: "Every human being is an artist, a freedom being, called to participate in transforming and reshaping the conditions, thinking, and structuring that shape and define our lives." Explains Molina, "These paintings are of a group of indigenous Bolivian women skaters that generously gave me permission to make their portraits. I think a lot about the act of play as care. Amidst the structural violence of capitalism and patriarchy I am moved by those that stay connected to their creative source and remain self-expressed while sharing and caring for one another. The women of the Imilla skate collective in Bolivia are powerful examples of finding their inherent creativity as a source of joy, connection, and community. "

Yvette Molina
Freedom Beings 4 & 6, 2023
Egg tempera on found cardboard

"Sitting in front of a mirror for two years trying to capture my features felt like an ongoing hymn, repeated again and again," says Hannah McBroom. From 2017 to 2019, the artist painted one self-portrait each month for twenty-four months, cataloguing her physical and emotional states as she used hormone replacement therapy (HRT) to transition from male to female. McBroom gave herself two rules for the project: each painting had to be completed in one month and each must be a forward-facing profile as she saw herself. The resulting portraits that comprise *Two Year Hymn* range from photorealist to nearly abstract. "Some feel scarred and ghostly, some appear distorted, while others appear to be an exact copy of what I looked like at that moment," she observes. McBroom's devotion to her ritual is a personal Hymn, a sacred expression of identity and transformation.

Today the most iconic art-historical precedent for envisioning and honoring the power of the female body remains Judy Chicago's monumental ceramic sculpture *The Dinner Party* (1974-1979). With place settings emblazoned with floral designs that reference the female body, *The Dinner Party* gave Georgia O'Keeffe and 998 other notable women throughout history recognition for their accomplishments. Thirty years later, E.V. Day's *Waterlily* enlarges one of O'Keeffe's signature subjects—the flower—into a lush, far larger-than-life-size vision that evokes the body—a portrait of the floral and the female, showcasing its beauty and its power. Indeed, "the body is a receptacle for knowledge, belief, storytelling," says Kiki Smith, who has spent the last three decades creating a pantheon of female icons, such as *Ballerina (Stretching Left)*. Archetypes from mythology and fairy tales populate Natalie Frank's paper pulp paintings of siren-like women who embody and express jealousy or desire, power and knowledge. *Woman II* with her cascading red locks, confronts the viewer with a looking glass in hand, claiming the gaze and asserting her power.

Female identity and experience is often the subject of Frances Goodman's multi-media investigations, including *Medusa*, a many-tentacled wall sculpture titled after the mythological Greek monster with a woman's form and face, but a head full of writhing snakes in place of hair. Medusa's weapon was her stare: she turned her victims to stone with one look into their eyes. Goodman's appropriation of the myth subverts the convention of the "male gaze," the theory first posited by writer Laura Mulvey in a 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," that women are represented as objects to be seen in art, while men are assumed to be the viewers or consumers of imagery. Makeup, jewelry, and other forms of self-adornment have long served as women's weapons to make themselves seen (in competition with others) and as armature under which to hide (masking or protecting the real, vulnerable self). For this three-dimensional investigation into female representation and consumerism, Goodman utilized thousands of the acrylic nails designed for use as bodily decoration after she heard a dropped fake nail described as the ultimate female calling card—a weapon of seduction.

Frances Goodman
Medusa, 2013-2014
Acrylic nails, foam, metal

Goodman's labor-intensive technique and use of inexpensive, commercially produced objects designed for self-adornment, connects her work to that of 1970s feminist artists. As curator Tami Katz-Freiman writes, "Goodman thus joins a respectable lineage of women artists who brought elements previously relegated to the inferior margins of kitsch and decoration center stage....the use of acrylic fingernails—a popular consumer product, a cosmetic prosthetic that blurs the boundaries of the body and presents an illusory substitute for 'the natural,' the seemingly innocent ornamental pattern appears as a parable for the web of affinities between flesh, body, nature, culture, ornamentation, beautification, seduction, and consumerism."

Intimate, personal, and worn next to the skin, underwear tells both highly personal stories and reflects prevailing standards of beauty. To create her *Every Curve* series, Zoë Buckman hand-embroidered rap lyrics about women from songs by Notorious B.I.G. and Tupac Shakur into vintage lingerie ranging from turn of the century corsets, to flowing 1930s nightgowns, to pointy, wired, 1950s-era bras. Buckman, who grew up in a feminist household and has long been a fan of rap, embraces the visual and conceptual tension of combining soft, feminine clothing with the song lyrics that are alternatively violent and misogynistic, yet sometimes loving and empowering. Buckman explains, "You shouldn't have to shun something that's complicated and difficult. The fact is, the beats are amazing and the lyrics are really skilled. We shouldn't have to never listen to Biggie because we're feminists." Buckman's recent series of embroidered vintage materials, Tended, includes domestic fabrics, like the tea towel she transformed into a portrait of intimacy and gender fluidity in *grow clumsier still...*, in which hair and clothing of the embracing couple spool and stretch into the bright floral blooms below. "I think the eclectics of the materials speak to the shades and diverse modes of our experiences—the mess and vibrancy as well as the depth," says the artist. "One of the aspects I've been reflecting on in recent years is that of our wilderness and intuition, and so having these embellishments of embroidered flowers, plants, and birds at times bursting from the figures is, in part, an exploration of this."

Utilizing collage, Deborah Roberts and Frida Orupabo resist the reductive representation of Black female figures in popular culture. Roberts's series of portraits of young Black girls responds to the historical—and persistent—absence of Black women and girls featured in advertisements and on television shows. "To me, Black beauty has always been put on the back burner," the artist explains. Roberts's polymorphic figures suggest a multiplicity of identities: young girls and women who appear simultaneously defiant and innocent, vibrant and thoughtful, meditative and incendiary. Orupabo sources much of the imagery from which she constructs her enigmatic, at once regal and vulnerable female subjects, from Instagram, collaging disparate features, body parts, and objects. "When choosing images," the artist explains, "I am looking for resistance, or some type of tension, especially in the way the subject sees or stares..." Orupabo effectively harnesses the power of Mulvey's "gaze," redirecting and redefining who is in control of what is being both seen and depicted: "It was important for me to create visuals where the subject looked back, which was a direct response to my own life experiences—to the feeling of being determined, given an identity that I didn't understand or agree with."

Alison Saar
Hades D.W.P., 2016
Etched glass jars, water, dye, wood, cloth and ink transfer, electronics, found ladles and cups

Invoking mythology, history, and grim reality, cultural critique is embedded in works by Amy Hussein, Alison Saar, and Vibha Galhotra. Combining references to her Lebanese and Dominican heritage, Hussein's digitally woven Jacquard tapestry is titled *L'Hallili (after Hondius)* identifying the subject matter---a huntsmen's cry to excite his dogs—and the 17th-century Dutch painter Abraham Hondius, renowned for depictions of hunting parties. Here, Hussein has replaced the traditional animal prey with a mythical hybrid, a "deer woman," according to the artist, at the moment of her capture, the teeth of her pursuers just piercing her flesh. While the image suggests a mythological or fantastical origin, Hussein is critiquing violence against women, in particular the exploitation that women in the Dominican Republic were subject to under the 30-year dictatorship of General Rafael Trujillo (1930-1961). A related critique of exploitative colonialism is embedded in the choice of the French antique poles on which the tapestry hangs: Hussein's family left their homeland, Lebanon, during the French occupation (1918-1946), migrating to the Dominican Republic.

Saar's *Hades D.W.P.* presents five glass jars, each filled with water to varying levels, lit and tagged with lines of poetry, their surfaces etched with figures that float between life and death. Labels identify the water sources as the five rivers of the underworld, which according to Greek mythology, guide the dead to the afterlife. Saar first presented this assemblage in "Silt, Soot and Smut," an exhibit inspired by the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, which displaced more than 200,000 Black Americans. The aged cups, ladles, and spoons that hang from the shelf indicate the water is meant for drinking, though its colors suggest toxicity, alluding to the recent poisoning of drinking water in Flint, Michigan; D.W.P. is a reference to the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, where the artist lives and works. Saar combines familiar, domestic, and personal objects, imagery, and writing to connect past and present adversities resulting from the intersection of environmental destruction and social inequality.

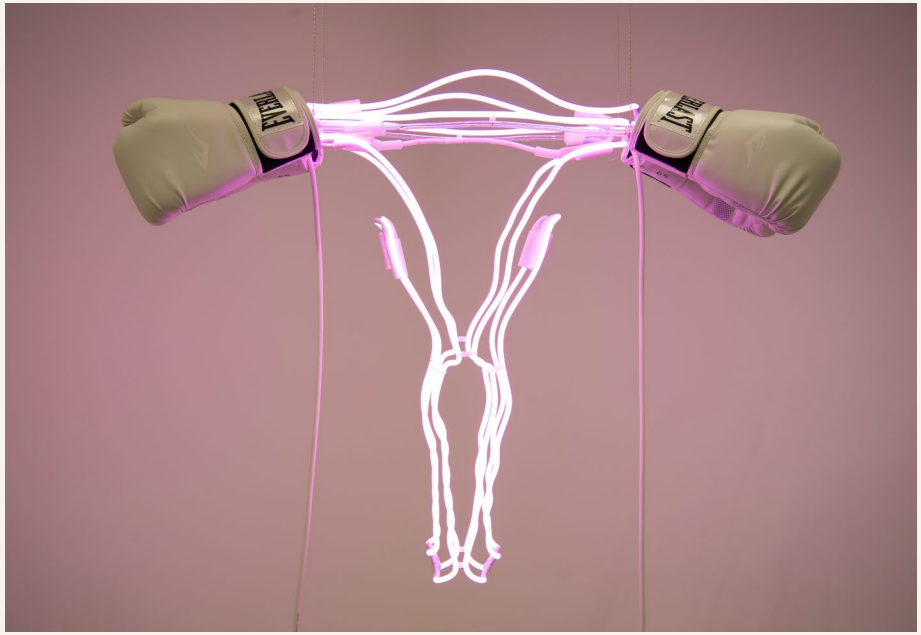
Ecological disaster is addressed through mythic ritual in Galhotra's multi-media series, *ABSUR-CITY-PITY-DITY*, which exposes the rapid environmental changes underway in India's Yamuna River, one of the world's most contaminated waterways. A hypnotic film, *Manthan*, invokes a Hindu legend in which the gods churn the ocean to obtain the nectar of immortality. As the camera moves along the banks of the sewage-filled river, performers attempt to cleanse the water. The sprawling city and polluted landscape are reflected in the water's surface, offering a reminder that the future of humanity is tied to the health of the environment. The fragility of the Yamuna and its communities is evoked in Galhotra's hanging *Map*, an overhead view of the riverscape hand-woven in glass and bugle beads and reflected on the wall, creating ephemeral echoes of the topographical patterns receding from view.

The intersecting relationship between ecological evolution and equal rights in evoked in Melanie Bonajo's *Matrix Botanica-Biosphere above Nations*, a film both poignant and humerous about the the treatment of "Mother Earth," and in Tiffany Shlain's *DENDROFEMONOLOGY: A FEMINIST TREE RING*. Using pyrography, Shlain burned text into the lines of an ancient tree ring to tell a 50,000-year global history of humanity through a feminist lens, from the time of goddess worship through witch trials, the expansion of the right to vote, access to abortion and birth control, the election of women leaders in 86 countries, to the recent loss of women's rights, including the repeal of Roe v Wade in 2022, and finally, the campaign of Kamala Harris and the election of the first trans Senator, Sarah McBride. "I have always been fascinated by the tree ring timelines at the entrance of Muir Woods or any National Park," explains the artist." However, I also felt like those timelines tell a colonialist and patriarchal story. *DENDROFEMONOLOGY: A FEMINIST HISTORY TREE RING* imagines what alternate histories could be told."

Long subject to patriarchal control, the female body knows pain and power. Zoë Buckman invokes this visceral knowledge in *Champ*, a glowing neon sculpture of the female reproductive organs with boxing gloves in the place of ovaries. The work is a direct response to attempts to curtail women's reproductive rights, which recently culminated in the June 2022 Supreme Court ruling overturning Roe v Wade. Embellished with materials from bridal gowns and veils, Buckman uses boxing gloves as the central element in her series, *Let Her Rave*.

This group of hanging sculptures responds to 19th-century poet John Keats's expression of male dominance in his "Ode on Melancholy" from 1819: "Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows, / Imprison her soft hand, and let her rave." Buckman's sculptures challenge the treatment of women and the representation of the feminine as a series of binary paradoxes: that women are gentle and nurturing, but also weak and hysterical, simultaneously chaste yet seductive. Buckman notes, "The work is about the ways in our society that patriarchal constructs keep us controlled." Buckman's combination of traditionally feminine materials with boxing gloves is both an assertion of feminist power and an invitation to join the fight.

Zoë Buckman
Champ, 2016
Neon, glass, leather



Andrea Bowers
March on Washington, March 3rd, 1913 (Leaflet for the National American Women's Suffrage Association, illustrated by Alice Paul), 2017
Archival marker on cardboard

Historical and present-day activism collide in Andrea Bowers's homage to the women who fought for the right to vote, *March on Washington, March 3rd, 1913 (Leaflet for the National American Women's Suffrage Association, illustrated by Alice Paul)*. Using found cardboard protest signs to create a patchwork background, Bowers recreates the historical drawing from the cover of the program for the women's suffrage procession on March 3, 1913. The Art Deco-style scene shows a group of women—on foot and on horseback—marching towards the Capitol; the woman on horseback blows a horn with a banner demanding votes for women. Bowers reminds viewers that over one hundred years after this march, the fight for equal rights continues. Felix Cid captures the ongoing struggle in his photograph of the 2017 Women's March in Washington D.C., which followed the inauguration of the 45th president of the United States. From top to bottom, side to side, the frame is filled with people holding signs, wearing pink hats, and manifesting the right to peaceful protest. The figures and heroines of this century-long struggle remain in the collective consciousness and shape conversations about feminism today. Painted in shades of gray, Gavin Nolan's image of writer, activist, and life-long feminist, Gloria Steinem, speaking at a podium, highlights both her legacy and her relevance today: the words she spoke in the 1970s still resonate in the fight against patriarchy. The artist depicts Steinem wearing pink and yellow-lensed glasses, and titles the portrait *Triscopic*, a scientific term used to describe an X-ray imaging system that produces beams from multiple directions. Steinem has been lauded as a feminist icon for decades; Nolan presents her as a visionary who has grasped—and grappled with—the complexity of gender politics and human rights throughout her lifetime.

The female population of Saya Woolfalk's utopian vision transcends binary divisions. Inspired equally by science and science fiction, nature and technology, Woolfalk's *Empathics* are hybrid creatures whose DNA combines genetic materials from humans and plants, a cross-species who are highly culturally adaptive and who feel and understand deeply the experiences of others. *ChimaCloud Crystal Body B and Chimabot (Iguana)* are figurative sculptures covered in a decorative skin of lace appliqué, pearls, felt, sequins, silk butterflies, and symbolic patterns with bejeweled and cloth-wrapped resin bones, a carved iguana, and more. Both the subject matter and materials of these embellished female forms reference feminist art history, though they have clearly emerged from a supernatural realm. Woolfalk explains the origins of these figures, saying "the Empathics have patented a multi-step process with home-use technologies that make interspecies and intersubjective hybridization available to all." In the utopia Woolfalk describes as evolving from "a post-racial and/or post-gender reality," the future is female, and female may then apply to all who embrace and embody extreme hybridity—a condition shaped and nurtured by empathy.

Published more than thirty years ago, theorist Judith Butler's influential book, *Gender Trouble*, posits that gender is performative, challenging binaries long established by patriarchal convention: "Precisely because 'female' no longer appears to be a stable notion; its meaning is as troubled and unfixed as 'woman.'" The fluidity of gender and sexual identity is today more widely accepted, and yet as the art featured in *The Future is Female* illuminates, the struggle for equality and inclusion persists: far more progress is needed before Woolfalk's vision of the *Empathics* reflects lived reality. What role might art play in shaping the next notation inscribed on Tiffany Shlain's feminist tree ring?

Alice Gray Stites
Chief Curator, Museum Director

SOURCES:

"The Future is Female" first appeared during the 1970s on a t-shirt designed for the first women's bookstore in New York City. Over the last two years, the phrase has re-emerged on clothing, social media, and various other platforms.

Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London and New York: Routledge, 1990.

Laura Cottingham, *Seeing Through the Seventies: Essays on Feminism and Art*. London and New York: Routledge, 2000.

Tami Katz-Freiman, "Frances Goodman Nails Her Colors to the Mast," in *Rapaciously Yours*, exhibition catalog, Richard Taittinger Gallery, New York, NY, 2015.

Claire Gemima, Interview with Zoë Buckman, Widewalls, October 2023.

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21c Museum Hotels, an award-winning hospitality company based in Louisville, Kentucky, is pushing the boundaries of both the museum and hotel worlds to create a new kind of travel experience.

The company was founded as a single property by contemporary art collectors and preservationists Laura Lee Brown and Steve Wilson, whose mission was to share innovative contemporary art with the public and participate in the revitalization of downtown Louisville. The couple opened the first 21c in 2006 along downtown's West Main Street, rehabilitating a series of 19th century warehouses to create a union of genuine hospitality, thoughtful design, and culinary creativity—all anchored by a contemporary art museum.

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