

ART REVIEW

A feminist breakout

MOCA surveys the powerful influence of gender politics on art over the last half-century.

March 05, 2007 | Christopher Knight | Times Staff Writer

MOST any weeknight it's possible to turn on television's political chat show "Hardball With Chris Matthews" and watch the host launch jaw-dropping slurs in the direction of Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.). He's described her as "witchy," "uppity" and a "girl" prone to "giggling," with nary a burble of protest from program guests. He characterized her unveiling of a presidential candidacy as being "like a stripper."

One measure of the 1970s feminist revolt is that today, in our shiny new millennium, a woman can be the front-runner in polls for the 2008 presidential race, while a man can direct gender-based insults at her with virtual impunity. Sexism, like the poor, will always be with us. But it also mutates like some intransigent virus, determined to survive.

Celebrity status even awaits the woman who chooses femininity as a disparaging bludgeon, internalizing society's deep-seated prejudice. The widely read New York Times pundit Maureen Dowd famously dissed former presidential candidate Al Gore for being "so feminized ... he's practically lactating." And in recent weeks she's pictured Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) as "legally blond," and compared him to flirtatious Scarlett O'Hara at the Twelve Oaks barbecue. Pity the man who isn't a crude cliché of manliness.

At the Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, "WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution" traces the invigorating collision between gender politics and art that characterized so much art production in the 1970s. This historical overview's timely, topical relevance is inescapable. MOCA, virtually alone among American art museums, has a long record of doing the heavy lifting required to organize essential surveys that chronicle powerful developments in art of the last half-century. "WACK!" now adds feminist art to an unparalleled roster that includes, among others, histories of Minimal, Conceptual and performance art.

The culture-altering clash of feminism with art can partly be encapsulated by "Soft Gallery," a snazzy reinterpretation of a 1973 installation by Argentine artist Marta Minujin, collaborating with Richard Squires. Some 200 mattresses have been lashed together with rope on a steel superstructure to create the floor, walls and ceiling of an enormous walk-in cube. A mattress is a site for sleeping, perchance to dream, as well as for sexual liaison. A gallery is a site for art encounters.

Put them together and a mattress gallery resonates as a site for pleasure, play, invention and -- quite possibly -- for highly charged psychological and social conflict.

If you're unfamiliar with Minujin's work, you're probably not alone. Former MOCA curator Connie Butler has assembled an exhaustive review of work by 119 artists from 21 countries, and one of her show's virtues is the abundance of unfamiliar work.

Fittingly for today's internationalism, "WACK!" seeks to move feminist art out from beneath a familiar American (and, somewhat less so, British) umbrella, to chart its global emergence instead. The show's two largest bodies of work represent well-known California rabble-raising pioneers, Martha Rosler and Lynn Hershman, but the next largest are from international artists with far lower profiles: Croatia's Sanja Ivekovic, India's Nasreen Mohamedi (who died in 1990 at 53) and Australia's Ann Newmarch.

Rather disconcertingly, "Soft Gallery" also looks like it could have been made last week. True, the free-standing cube is a contemporary reinterpretation of a temporal event: In 1973, the artists lined the interior of an actual Washington, D.C., gallery with mattresses salvaged from a nearby hotel. But would anyone be surprised to see either version as a brand-new work by a young artist showing in a Chinatown or Chelsea gallery now?

One premise of "WACK!" is that feminism has been the most influential movement for art in the last 40 years -- more effectual than Pop, Post-Minimalism or Conceptualism, which usually take that honor. Butler might be right, but there's a downside to that pervasive influence.

Form is what conveys visual experience. Feminist artists therefore faced a nettlesome formal conundrum: Painting and sculpture were the traditional province of masculine prerogatives. "WACK!" reconfirms that the most common solution was to set aside painting and sculpture in favor of camerawork -- still photography, media-based collage, documented performances, films and video art. Works in those mediums constitute most of the show.

In the 1960s and '70s camera images occupied an art ghetto of lesser stature -- not unlike women artists themselves. Given art's clotted, exclusionary history, why not turn toward a thoroughly modern medium that did not come trailing so much baggage? One that, in the case of video, was even brand spanking new? If the art world's social restrictions are simply a microcosm of the larger world, why stay locked inside?

That sense of status-quo refusal and open-ended adventure also helps explain another inescapable feature of the show: A good deal of the

art is finally wanting. The work can be loosely divided into two groups. One engages form as art's indispensable drivetrain. Like jujitsu, it leverages its opponent's power to its own productive ends. The other, less deeply resonant type regards form as incidental -- perhaps because form is mistakenly considered as just another facet of fusty, oppressive tradition. There is more of the latter than the former in "WACK!"

Not surprisingly, painting is a weak link. Sylvia Sleigh approached the problem through simplistic substitution: Men replace women in the traditional category of nude figure painting. Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago replaced phallic compositions with centered abstractions, switching the vagina for the penis. Joan Semmel went after equivalence, juxtaposing male and female erotic subjects. (The show, incidentally, is filled with nudity, painted and photographed, which isn't unusual for an art that seeks to strip back tangled gender issues.) But these and other paintings are shallow, their painterly qualities inept or routine.

By stark contrast Alice Neel's dazzling portraits, marked by the nervous energy of her brushwork and the electric-blue line that sends a subtle jolt of electricity coursing through the canvas, are shining exceptions. So are Sylvia Plimack Mangold's exquisite amalgamations of Minimal, Conceptual and realist art.

Mangold's breathtaking 1972 "Absent Image" shows an austere, wood-framed mirror leaning against a white studio or gallery wall. Reflected in the mirror are an empty room, a doorway into another realm and a window beyond.

Western painting's history as a window or mirror is cannily represented. So is its claim to transport viewers to hidden worlds. Suddenly it strikes you that Mangold, standing before her easel to paint this picture, would have been reflected in the mirror at the center of the image. Her absence becomes forceful. The work is a disarming critique of the myth of an expressive self, believed to reside at painting's core. Simultaneously, "Absent Image" represents the dearth of women artists from Western painting's established history.

Sculpture, traditionally conceived, is almost nowhere to be found. Yet among the most compelling works are hybrids of painting and sculpture, beginning with Eva Hesse's bandaged square of stretcher bars, which send a long wire loop out into the room to ensnare unsuspecting passersby. Harmony Hammond later amplified the motif, swaddling ladder forms that straddle the space of wall and floor with latex-soaked fabric. Some are ruffled, others gauzy. Dressing as delectable fashion oscillates with dressing as treatment for a grievous wound.

Lynda Benglis' poured puddle of brightly pigmented latex, "Odalisque," spreads out luxuriously on the floor, crossing Abstract Expressionist painting metaphors with unavoidable allusions to things like a toxic spill, a bloody crime scene and a doormat. Her chest-high mound of gray polyurethane foam, piled into a nearby corner, is either sculpture trying to climb the wall or painting oozing off it. The charcoal lump feels conflicted, both carnal and morbid.

Indeed, one startling feature of "WACK!" is the pervasiveness of violent themes -- depicted, threatened, suggested or directly encountered. Adjacent to the crimson labial folds of Magdalena Abakanowicz's monumental woven sculpture, Nancy Spero's extraordinary printed collage, "Torture of Women," unfurls across a wall. Its 14 scrolls recall ancient sacred documents, typically hidden from common view. The collages articulate episodes of unspeakable brutality in Chile, Uruguay, Iran and elsewhere, reverberating against horror stories that course through today's news. The agonized, poetic frankness of Spero's blunt-force art embarrasses the crudely romanticized torture in pop culture products, such as the television series "24."

In a wholly different way, Rosler's landmark 1975 video "Semiotics of the Kitchen" is an outlandish cross between a Julia Child cooking show and a Weather Underground training manual. The artist brandishes a rolling pin, colander and kitchen knives like a fierce soldier of feminist fortune.

Even artists who don't identify themselves as feminists, like Marina Abramovic, sometimes invoke violence in gender-specific ways. Abramovic's powerful 14-minute video "Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful" conflates ordinary grooming rituals -- especially hair brushing -- with an aggressive suggestion of hair-pulling torment. The concept of suffering for art is gently lampooned, while life's routine suffering is quietly divulged.

A word about the show's wonderfully revealing title: "WACK!" is not an acronym for anything. But Butler's exclamatory invention does immediately evoke an older period's politically committed movement affiliations, like the Art Workers Coalition or Women Artists in Revolution. It exudes opposing forces of savageness and resistance. And finally it injects a playful element of pop: Biff! Bam! Wack!

Feminist art was never monolithic. This important show embodies and illuminates its variegated spirit.

`WACK!'

Where: Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, 152 N. Central Ave., Los Angeles

When: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays and Fridays; 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Thursdays; 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays; closed Tuesdays and Wednesdays

Ends: July 16

Price: \$5 to \$8

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