

HYPERALLERGIC

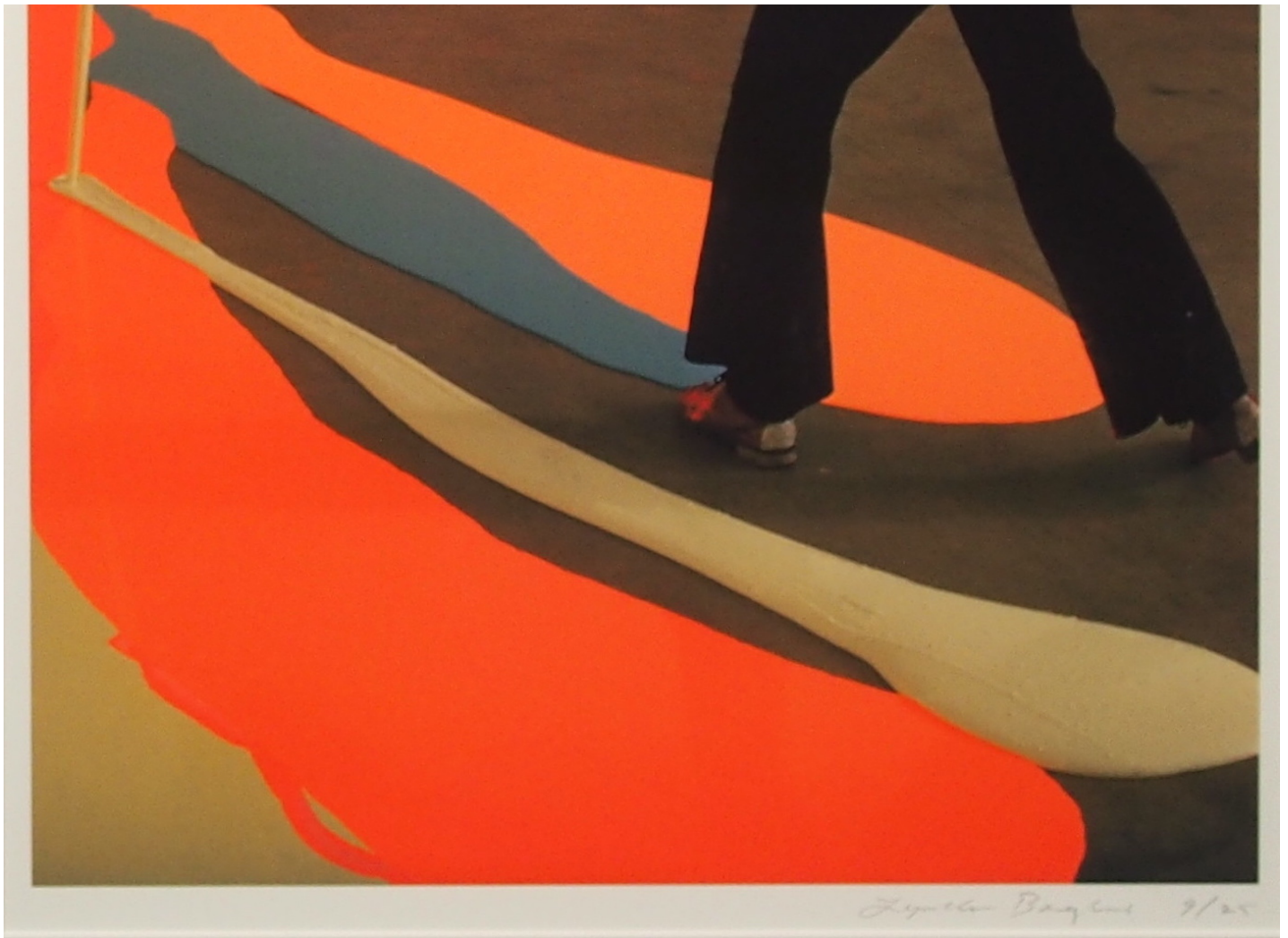
GALLERIES

A Timely but Limited Look at Feminist Art from the 1970s

Far from perfect, this exhibition marks a step toward empowering voices that could do much to liberate our own identity from the cultural codes by which it continues to be confined.

Jessica Freeman-Attwood | January 16, 2017





Lynda Benglis, "SELF" (1970–1976/2012) (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

In an image from her photographic portfolio, *Self* (1970–76), entitled "Fling, Dribble, and Drip" (1970), Lynda Benglis hovers, midway through pouring a bucket of fluorescent-pigmented liquid latex onto the floor. This photo, currently on display at The Photographers' Gallery in the exhibition *Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s*, is an ironic imitation of the presumed masculinity and heterosexuality of the abstract expressionist gesture. Given the male-dominated *Abstract Expressionism* exhibition concurrently on view 10 minutes down the road at the Royal Academy of Arts, Benglis's parody seems particularly timely.



“Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s,” installation view

Feminist Avant-Garde draws entirely on the Viennese Sammlung Verbund Collection, which has been gathering photographic and video works from the 1970s feminist art movement since 2004. Curator Anna Dannemann has arranged more than 200 works into four loose themes — the rejection of the domestic space, the novel use of the female body in art, the collapsing of normative beauty standards, and the use of masquerade in photography — to probe stereotypes of femininity. Each section radically disrupts male-coded spectatorship.

Immediately disturbing are the semantics of imprisonment in the domestic domain as we watch Martha Rosler’s seminal “Semiotics of the Kitchen” (1975). Set alongside it is “High-rise No 1” (1974) by the lesser-known Renate Eisenegger, in which she monotonously crawls around a high-rise building block, her white-painted face erasing her identity as she performs the Sisyphean act of ironing the floor. French artist Orlan’s “Strip-tease occasionnel avec les draps du trousseau” (1974-1975) is a more playful

exploration of the female condition. Initially photographed as a Baroque Madonna with one exposed breast, suckling a swaddled bundle, her garments are gradually removed until, ecstatically stripped bare, Orlan finally appropriates the erotic pose in Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus". She divests the Virgin Mother of her layers of drapery in order to challenge cultural constructions of women as either virgin or whore, and by doing so, liberates her own sexual identity.



C RLAN, "Strip-tease occasionnel avec les draps du trousseau" (1974-1975)



Renate Eisenegger, "High-rise No 1" (1974)

In complete contrast appears an understated photograph of Birgit Jürgenssen hiding part of her face behind a slither of fox fur, and then Alexis Hunter's *Identity Crisis* (1974), a series of six photos taken by different people in her life, each demonstrating an entirely different disposition. These masquerades attempt to obscure the stereotypes imposed by the gendered gaze. The common thread in each of these works is the strategy of self-representation. Using their own bodies, these women become both subject and object, reversing the art-historical norms dictating that a woman cannot simultaneously be a sexed object and a creator of meaning.

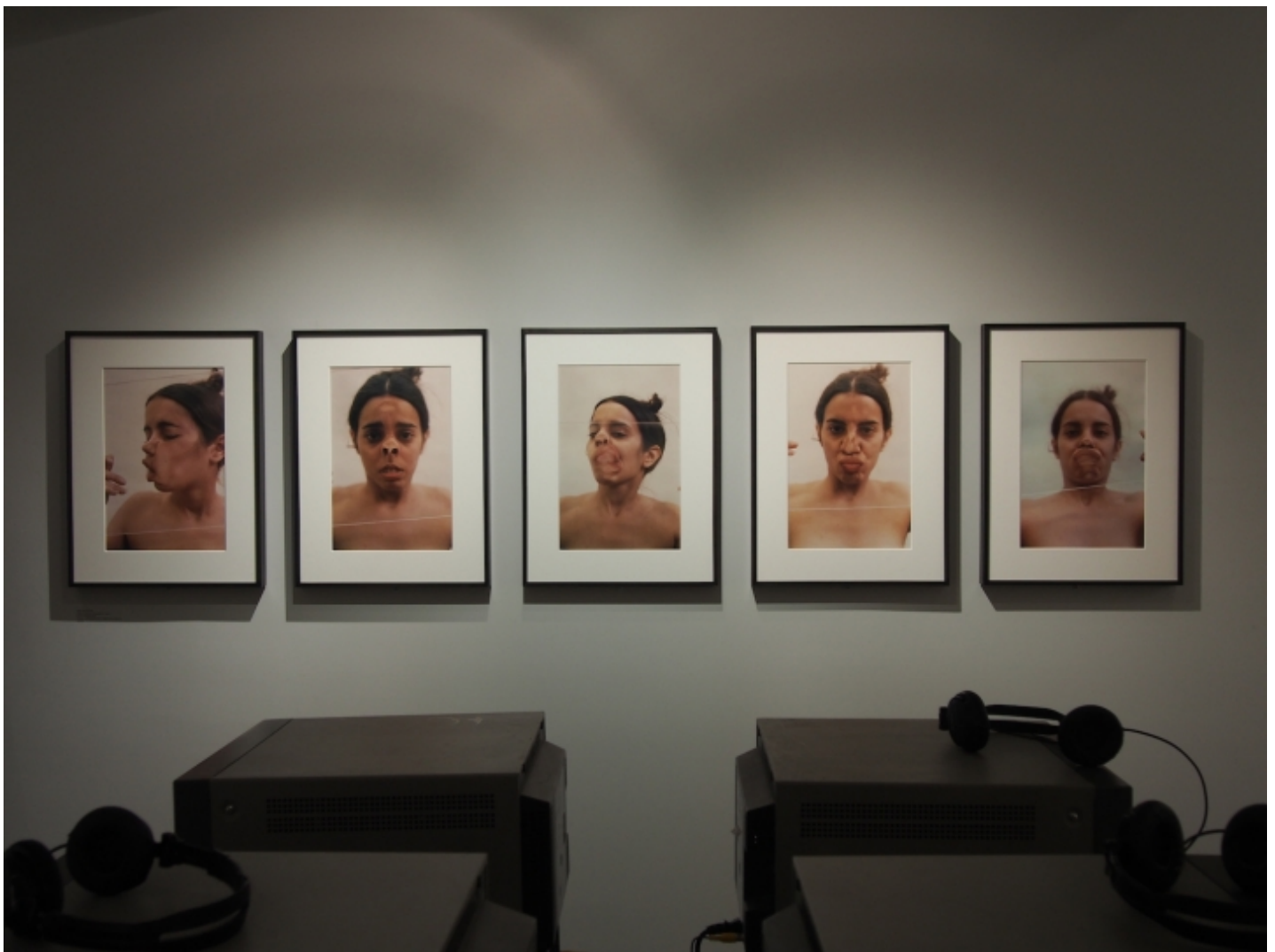


Alexis Hunter, "Identity Crisis (maquette)" (1974)



Lorraine O'Grady, Detail from "Mlle Bourgeoise Noire (Miss Black Middle-Class)" (1980–1983/2009)

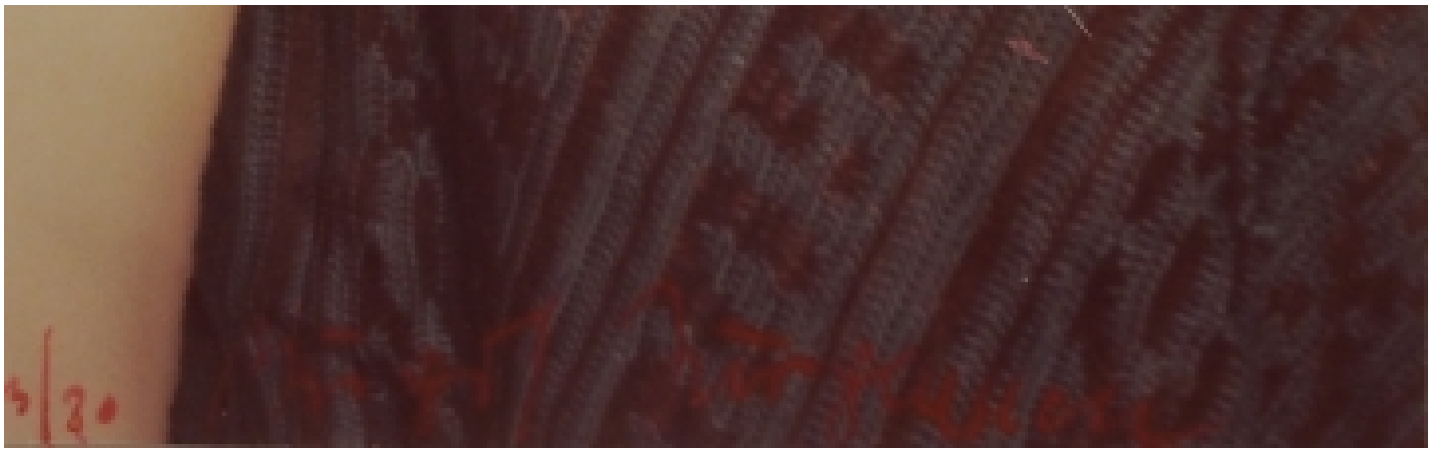
The scarcity of reference to non-Western and non-white artists presents the most problematic element of this show. Lorraine O'Grady's "Mlle Bourgeoise Noire" (1980–83) is one of the few works where gender and racial politics coincide. Placed in the section exploring the ideal of female beauty, O'Grady documents a performance by her alter ego, an imaginary Caribbean beauty queen. In a robe made of 360 white gloves, Mlle Bourgeoise Noire is escorted to Just Above Midtown, the first black avant-garde gallery in Manhattan, where she begins to hand out white chrysanthemums to attendees. She subsequently removes her cape and begins to lash her own back with a whip while shouting out a protest poem, culminating in the lines "BLACK ART MUST TAKE MORE RISKS" and "NOW IS THE TIME FOR AN INVASION."



Ana Mendieta, "Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints)" (1972/1997)

The effect of these photographs and the story they tell are ultimately overwhelmed by the disproportionate number of white artists who also protest against the normative standards of beauty. For the same reason, it's all too easy to overlook Ana Mendieta's serial expression of the grotesque in relation to the perception of a woman of colour in her "Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints)" (1972). This imbalance is unsurprising since the exhibition has been restrained to a single collection, the contents of which only represent a fragment of the multifaceted feminist avant-garde of the 1970s.





Birgit Jürgenssen, "Untitled (Self with Fur)" (1974/1977)

The onus is on the viewer to detect these flaws and yet to also recognize the timeliness of the principle themes of this show. A few months ago, a Muslim woman was forced to remove her clothing on a beach in France as two male policemen towered over her with guns. A man who has been accused of multiple acts of sexual assault is about to become the 45th President of the United States of America. Far from perfect, this exhibition marks a step toward empowering voices that could do much to liberate our own identity from the cultural codes by which it continues to be confined.

Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s continues at The Photographers' Gallery (16-18 Ramillies St, London W1F 7LW) through January 29.