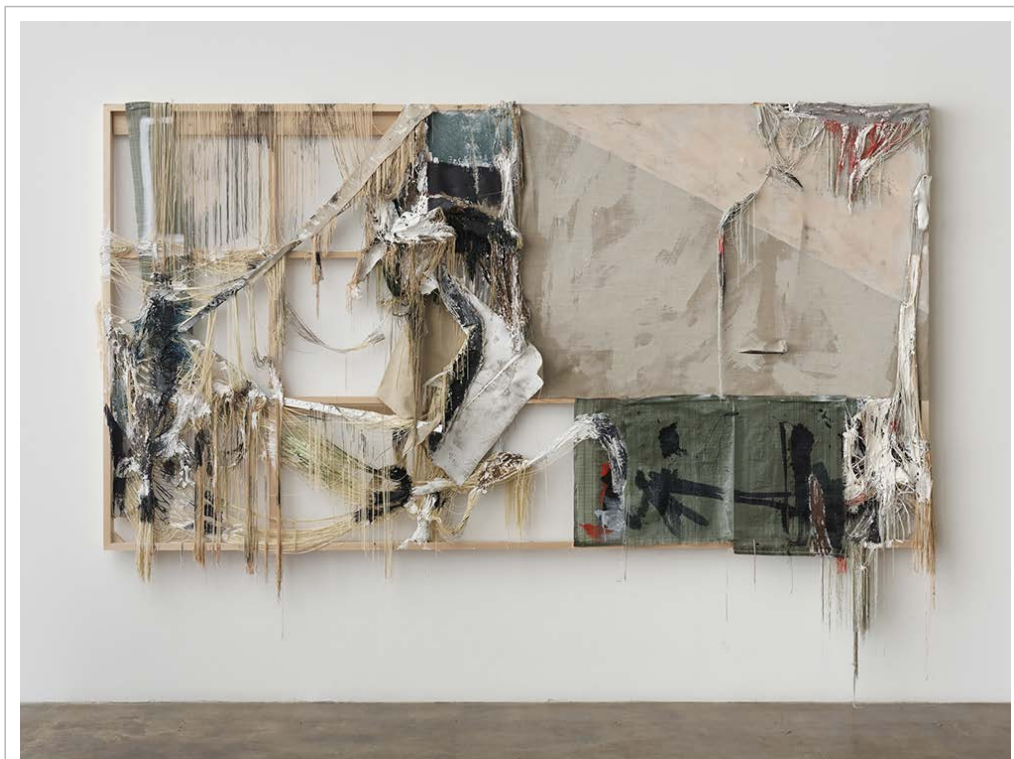


## 'THERE NEEDS TO BE A REVOLUTION EVERY DAY': BROWN, KEYSER, SEMMEL, GINGERAS TALK FEMINISM AND PAINTING AT MACCARONE

BY *Hannab Ghorashi* POSTED 06/12/15 12:35 PM



Keyser's *Recumbent Anvil*, 2015.  
COURTESY MACCARONE GALLERY

Maccarone Gallery was filled to capacity last Wednesday evening for a panel titled “Painting and the Legacy of Feminism,” which featured painters Rosy Keyser, Cecily Brown, and Joan Semmel, who looked queenly. The panel was held in honor of the overlapped timing of Keyser’s and Brown’s shows, “The Hell Bitch” and “The English Garden,” respectively, at Maccarone Gallery and Alexander Gray Associates. Curator and writer Alison M. Gingeras served as moderator.

It was an excellent thing to witness. I think it’s safe to say that everyone—audience and panelists—were surprised at how the discussion unfolded, slowly and sagely, into a scope much greater and far more depressing than market stats (“People are uncomfortable paying \$1 million for a woman’s artwork,” said Brown), or even art itself. By the end, it felt like we had only plucked at the threads of an

enormous, invisible knot.

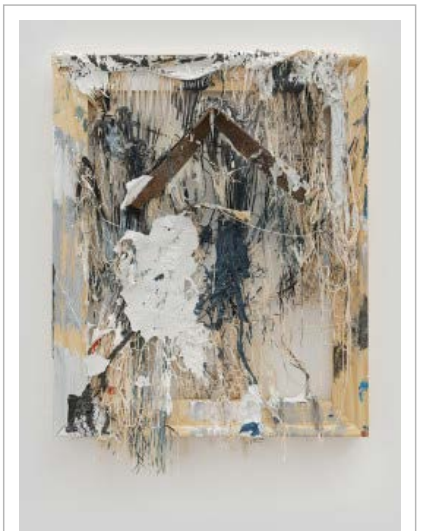
“Feminism is not a monolith,” Gingeras began. “All of us probably don’t even operate under the same definition of feminism; like painting, it’s all a relative term. We also wanted to say collectively that we’re really not interested in turning this into a complaint session, which can descend very quickly into discussions of figures and quotas.”

She continued, “I also wanted to start simply with a homage to something that feels timely right now, which is Linda Nochlin’s famous essay ‘Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?’ [*ARTnews*, September 1971], which is really the mother of feminist art history. In light of that essay, one of the parts of her taxonomy of the reasons why has to do with education and has to do with access. Can you talk a little about your own education and access as a painter?”

And they were off. Below are some key quotes from the ensuing conversation, which touched on everything from Oedipal complexes to edible feminism.

## ON WHY FEMINISM IS NOT OVER, AND PAINTING IS NOT DEAD

Semmel: “First, I’d like to say that it’s very gratifying to see such a wonderful turnout for the two topics. I was told that feminism was over a long time ago, and painting was dead. But here we are. I’m very thrilled to speak on behalf of my generation, who worked so hard to make feminism something that we still talk about. For all these reasons, I think we can make a conversation. I started out as an artist, and it never occurred to me that being a woman, in any way, changed being an artist. Women who come out into the field today only realize when they hit menopause that they’re not just a doctor, lawyer, or writer but rather a woman doctor, lawyer, a woman artist because that’s the way the world has always defined them. And how has that changed the way they have been able to practice their profession, the way we are able to practice as artists? I think that’s where the conversation has been for women of my generation. It’s also there for the younger generation: How does it change what you are able to do? And why is it still necessary to talk about that? What will the future be? Will we always be talking about [feminism]? When will feminism really be over? It’ll be over when it’s no longer needed. When will painting really be dead? Never, I hope.”



Keyser's *How Wide an Eye Can Open*, 2014.  
COURTESY MACCARONE GALLERY

## ON THE MULTITASKING MYTH

Keyser: “I think that being privileged enough to have a child...creates this really kind of this mysterious, visceral thing [in the studio] where you’re maybe more able to empathize with separate moments, separate objects, the potential of things and how those things interact.”

Brown: “I don’t drive. I don’t cook. I can’t do lots of things, and I’m really quite proud of that. Painting is what I can do, and I think I made this decision to only really try and excel at one thing. Women are taught, even now, to try to be good at lots of things —‘multitasking’ is the classic trope.”

## ON THE CANON

Semmel: “The canon has been a masculine canon for centuries. The [reason why] the canon has seemed so masculine has to do with scale, with a certain kind of performative motion, bravado, gigantism, all of these elements. At the beginnings of feminism, the women who were coming into being artists at that time were knocking down that canon and setting out the kinds of things that would be feminist reactions to that masculine canon. And that was the beginning of ‘feminist art.’ It wasn’t intended, I don’t think at the time, to be exclusionary or to limit the possibilities, it was just a way of attacking that



Semmel's *Me Without Mirrors*, 1974.  
COURTESY ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES

canon. Personally, I love a lot of the canon. I was in love with those men. The work thrilled me, and I couldn't give it up. I needed to paint, and I needed to paint as large as I could. I must have been a terrible feminist."

## ON MASCULINE VS. FEMININE APPROACHES TO SEXUALITY

Gingeras: "When you read interviews with well-known male painters, there's this desire when they speak of those artists [in the male canon] with whom they're having a dialogue. Whether the artist is Caravaggio or a peer, there is this kind of Oedipal impulse, like they want to kill the fathers."

Brown: "Years ago I tried to paint the male nude—full frontal, with erections—and people said, 'They're so gay!'"

Semmel (in response to Brown's quote above): "That's because it's always been assumed that man related to sexuality much more visually than women did. Women turned the lights out, men turned the lights on."

Keyser: "One area that I think is particularly problematic, is that there's this very open model of how women can portray themselves online and in magazines. We hope that it's changed from being about looking desirous for a male gaze, but there has to be something more fundamental that needs to change within that... We have to ask 'What is this doing? How do I feel just standing here?' It relates to appetite and eating. I think we have to give more nourishment back."

Brown: "I think I'm a good feminist because of the choices I've made and the way I've decided to live. When I was younger I used to be accused of being more like a guy, which always really annoyed me, because I always felt like a woman. I never felt like a guy; I was always very proud of being a woman. I reveled in my womanhood, and it really pissed me off to hear people tell me I was like a guy, especially in relationships and just my attitudes in life."

## ON FEMINISM

Keyser: "There needs to be a revolution every day."

Gingeras: "Feminism can be a hashtag, or it can be a backdrop of a Beyoncé music video, and we should be celebrating that. But in the absence of [accompanying] discourse, I think there [is a need to] fill in the fluff. We need to look back—history is an important tool for us."

Semmel: "We have to realize that we're talking about more than 4,000 years of culture. And we're not going to change 4,000 years of culture in 40 years. It can't change that fast—when things change that fast, you get backlash."

## ON GREAT ARTISTS WHO HAPPEN TO BE WOMEN

Semmel: "I would like to get away from the basic declaration of why there are no great women artists. There are great women artists. There are many great women artists. And we shouldn't still be talking about why there are no great women artists. If there aren't great celebrated women artists, that's because we have not been celebrating them, but not because they are not there."

I don't think about feminism when I'm in the studio. There I'm thinking about making that painting, and what that painting means to me, and how it resonates. While I'm doing it, I'm only involved in my relationship to the work and vice versa, not to anything else.



Semmel's *Green Heart*, 1971.  
COURTESY ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES

Then I want to take it out into the world, but the world has to be ready to receive it, and that's when I need my feminism. If I don't get out there and do something about it, things are going to stay the way they are. For younger women, they have exactly the same problem. No one goes into the studio saying, 'I'm a feminist, how do I make a feminist painting?' You make a painting that relates to who you are and how you function and what you're doing. If you have children, if you don't have children, if you're getting sex, if you're not...all of these things enter into it. It's about you, the work is about you. And you live in the world. If you want the world to receive you, you better damn well get out there and change it."



Brown's *Oh I do like to be beside the seaside*, 2014.  
COURTESY MACCARONE GALLERY

## ADDITIONAL NOTES

– Someone in the audience asked if all-women shows are something that should still happen. Short answer: Yes, unfortunately.

– A young woman in the audience asked a very good, Ph.D.-level question about the integration of feminism and practice that gave the panel pause. In response to the ensuing discussion, the asker responded with another query, prefaced with an apologetic "Sorry, I don't want to take up all your time..." Later on, Keyser addressed the apology to exemplify the way women are encouraged to take up as little space as possible, asking, "Why shouldn't you take up that time?"

– While Semmel was speaking at one point, the woman next to me leaned over to her friend and whispered fiercely, "She is *brilliant*." It felt like the whole row nodded.

– An elegant-looking woman in the audience was using a long screw to hold her bun in place.

– A man behind me was wearing some kind of hat featuring what appeared to be a *Pan's Labyrinth*-esque eyeball protruding on a stalk. I can't stress how bizarre it was.

– A different, equally bizarre man wearing earphones and a fedora wandered in towards the beginning and parked himself in front of everyone sitting on the floor to the side, oblivious to the growing cloud of annoyance behind him. He anxiously rocked back and forth on one knee in a pose like a runner waiting for the gunshot, gaping impatiently whenever conversation lulled. Finally, he shouted what sounded to me like, "In this world, as it is, being a woman, let's say you're a transsexual, how would you...there's a lot fewer transsexuals than there are women...What I'm saying is, why does it always have to have a message? Why does it always have to hit you over the head? Why can't the art be about something else?"



Brown's *Land of the Free*, 2008.  
COURTESY MACCARONE GALLERY

Keyser responded politely, "Well, there's no monolithic art, first of all. I was just going to say, the great thing about art is that difference is celebrated. So, to your point, whatever your orientation..."

"No, we want to hear you!" the crowd shouted.

I looked back at him five minutes later; he appeared to be meditating. PRs were whispering together urgently. A few minutes after that, he wasn't there anymore.