

Transgressive Women

Jack S. Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin

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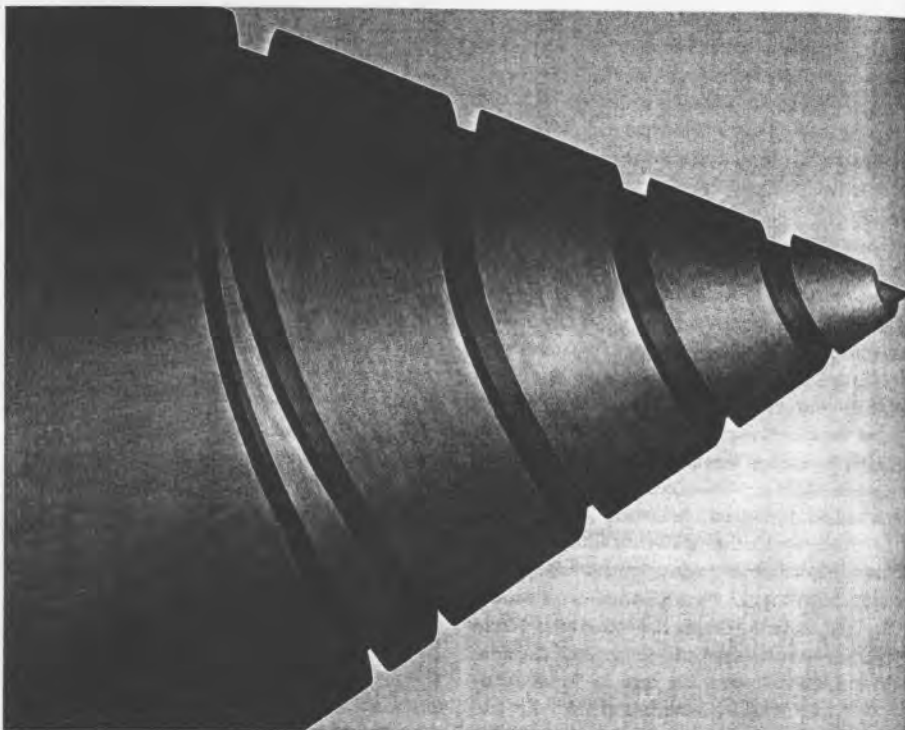
What is a transgressive woman? Annette DiMeo Carlozzi, Blanton's curator of American and Contemporary Art, opens her exhibition stating the definition of transgression as "to go beyond (a limit); rebel." The four women featured in this exhibition—Yayoi Kusama, Lee Lozano, Ana Mendieta, and Joan Semmel—certainly fit this categorization. Each woman adopted, in her own way, a transgressive attitude with her art in order to push herself into an art world dominated by male artists from the 1950s to the 1980s.

Today, the notion of a transgressive artist of the female gender is not nearly as radical as it once was. Statistically, women are still not receiving as many solo exhibitions or the level of recognition that male artists do, but the gap is definitely closing. For Kusama, Lozano, Mendieta, and Semmel, and many others of their time who were entrenched in the beginnings of feminism, going against the creative grain was the only way to confront the difficulties of existing in an era where women were consistently marginalized.

Mendieta, perhaps the best known of these four artists, is represented by a suite of five photo-etchings from her *Rupestrian Sculptures* series (1983). For these works, Mendieta carved mythological figures based on fertility images from prehistoric and pre-Columbian times onto the stone walls of caves. As the elements of nature eroded the marks, these figures, which also reference the artist's body, now exist only in the form of photo documentation. Also on exhibit is a Mendieta drawing on a leaf from 1984, and a video documenting her performance *Bird Run* (Mexico City, 1974). On alternating weeks, the Blanton is showing *Ocean Bird Wash Up* (Mexico City, 1974).

In all of her works, the artist identifies with primordial art and cultures, intertwining earth and nature with her person to create new self-images. In doing this, she aligns her identity with a powerful spirit (nature), a conceptual union that allows her to transcend her place in the world. The sampling of her work within this exhibition is just a cursory illustration of how Mendieta—until her untimely death in 1984 at the peak of her career—combined earth art, body art, multiculturalism, and performance in such a way as to exclaim her feminism.

Also comprising a major part of the exhibition is a grouping of work by Kusama, an artist who in recent years has received renewed attention for her hallucinatory dot installations. Unlike the politically charged and sexually explicit performances for which she is widely known, the exhibition features a quieter performance documented on film by Jud Yalkut, *Self-Obliteration* (1967), wherein Kusama covers herself, other people, a dog, and her environment in dots.



Lee Lozano, *Ream*, 1964
Oil on canvas
78 x 96"
Gift of Mari and James A. Michener, 1968

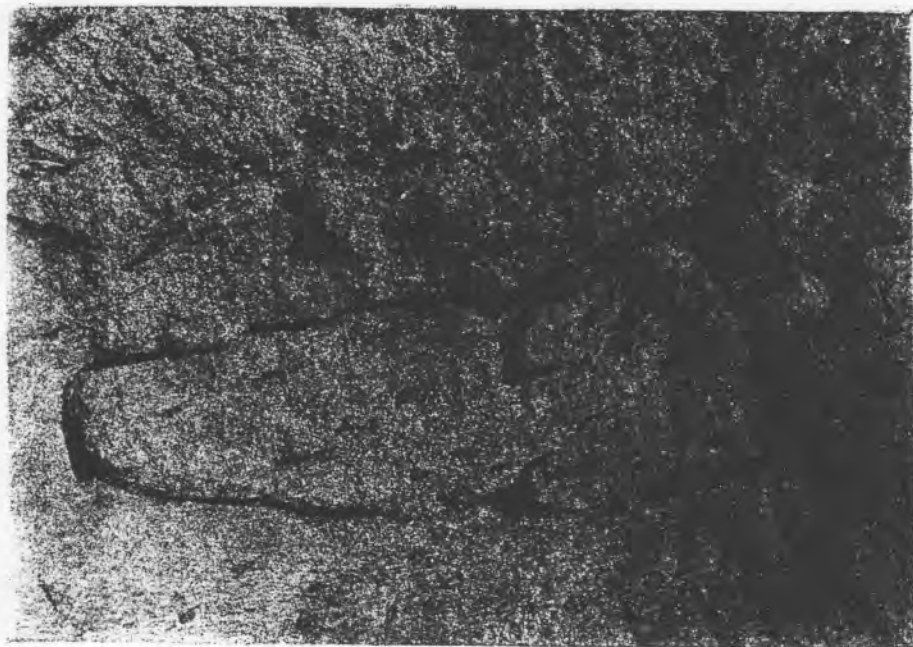


Joan Semmel, *Mythologies and Me*, 1976
Oil and collage on canvas
60 x 148"
Gift of Boffie Johnson, 1978

Emphasizing her interest in pattern, a large green and white canvas entitled *Sprouting (the transmigration of the soul)* (1987) hangs along with selections from earlier paper pieces completed in 1953.

These acrylic, aqueous tempera, pastels, spray enamel, and ink images portray amoebae-like shapes that are precursors of Kusama's later obsession with

dots. Kusama's work, which does not fit within the context of any specific art historical movement from the 1950s to the 1980s (the time explored in the exhibition), still appears very contemporary. Perhaps by creating works that focus on her emotional state and her psychological scars, the artist, who since 1977 has been a voluntary patient at a psychiatric hospital

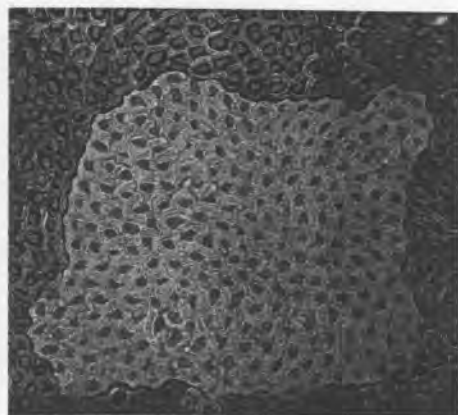


Ana Mendieta, *Guabancex [Goddess of the Wind]* from *The Rupestrian Series*, 1983

Photo-etching on chine collé

3⁷/₈ x 5¹/₄

Purchased through the generosity of Mari and James A. Michener and the Judith Rothschild Foundation, 1999



Yayoi Kusama, *An Island (6)*, 1955

Aqueous tempera on paper

11³/₄ x 12⁵/₈

Gift of the Center for International Contemporary Arts; Emanuel and Charlotte Levine Collection, 1992

in Tokyo, makes timeless works that are consistently unexpected explorations in materiality and the disjunction between art and life.

Surprisingly, there is only one painting by Semmel in the exhibition, *Mythologies, and Me* (1976). This monumental triptych presents differing stylistic visions of the female body. On the left panel, Semmel painted a female form reminiscent of soft porn; on the right she painted a monstrous woman in the style of Willem de Kooning. Residing in the center panel is a fleshy, reclining figure depicted in Semmel's iconic manner, portraying the body realistically from an unusual vantage point based upon photographic self-portraiture. The artist represents the feminine form by offering a female perspective, rendering and exposing all of the body's parts equally—wrinkles and all—and reclaiming power by effectively subverting the male gaze. On this triptych, Semmel also included collage elements. Feathers and a sculptural nipple inhabit the left and right panels respectively. Only the center panel is free from additional elements, casting a sense of purity and strength onto its representation of the female body.

Lozano, perhaps the most obscure of these four artists and the most overtly transgressive, is also the most interesting. As one of the first female conceptual artists, her work also resonates with contemporary

conceptual works. Her notebooks, filled with instructions on how to complete theoretical and abstract pieces, are forerunners to projects found within the web-based *Do it* exhibitions. Lozano's expressionistic tool paintings from the 1960s such as *Ream* (1964) took masculine objects and infused them with sexual connotations as a reaction to characteristic male imagery inundating the New York art scene.

Later, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Lozano further rebelled by systematically removing herself from the art world. Four intriguing notebook pages in the Blanton exhibition provide an overview to this process by detailing the artist's sustained happenings. On the first page, Lozano sketches out ideas for her work *Stroke* (1967–70), a diptych with perforated slashes also seen in the exhibition. On the second page, she sets up instructions for completing an artwork. On the third and fourth displayed pages, Lozano's disillusionment and frustration with the commodification of the art world and her strategy for dealing with it becomes clear.

For *General Strike Piece*, on the third notebook page, Lozano creates a directive for her life, to "avoid being present at official or public 'uptown' functions or gatherings related to the 'art world' in order to pursue investigation of total, personal, and public revolution and then only exhibiting those pieces."

The fourth page details the methodical removal of her work from all exhibitions. In conjunction with her radical and extreme boycotting of the art world, Lozano stopped speaking to other women altogether. Initially planned to last only a month, this art action—taken on as a way to improve communication with women—lasted for almost thirty years up until then end of Lozano's life.

In using themselves—their bodies, gender, and culture—as subjects for their artwork and performances, Kusama, Lozano, Mendieta, and Semmel were pioneering feminist figures. Each created works that strained against the stylistic dictates of the New York art scene by, as Carlottozi posits, "refusing to conform to the social and artistic expectation of their time." *Transgressive Women* narrows down each artist's extensive career to focus on a few examples pulled from the Blanton's collection. While a well-conceived and strong installation, the exhibition only served to whet the appetite. Had more space been devoted to the presentation, this fascinating sampling of the work of these seminal artists would have been even more stunning.