

## With 'Secret Garden,' female artists use erotica to break barriers, reclaim sexuality

Untitled Space's "Secret Garden" exhibit emphasizes women's decades-long uphill battle for equality and freedom of expression.

By **Nikki M. Mascali** Published : June 27, 2017 | Updated : June 27, 2017



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Since the election, female-identifying artists have joined forces at the Untitled Space gallery in Tribeca to use their medium of choice to [rise up and resist](#), focus on positivity and now, address the double standards and restrictions they face when it comes to their own sexuality.

It's important to "emphasize how the female gaze on erotic differs than that of the 'male gaze,' which tends to objectify women," gallery founder Indira Cesarine said of "[Secret Garden: The Female Gaze on Erotica](#)," which opens Tuesday.

Nearly 50 artists are featured, from feminist icons like Betty Tompkins and Joan Semmel to emerging names fighting the same fight those women did against censorship and taboos decades ago.

"The goal is that all sexualities are allowed to perform and be themselves freely," said Leah Schragger, who will display digital paintings manipulated using Photoshop and printed on aluminum. "It's a beautiful thing to see women performing, owning, claiming, sharing their sexuality. It is about freedom, expression and love."

Though pieces range from paintings and photography to poetry and sculpture to video and mixed media, Cesarine was looking for artists who “fearlessly explore sexual themes.” “It was important for the artwork to convey a dialogue of sexual exploration or touch on the female experience of sexuality in some way,” she added.

While some may hear “erotica” and think it synonymous with “pornography,” the two are “vastly different,” Cesarine said. Whereas pornography leaves “little to the imagination, erotica can be very subtle . . . very interpretative. I think the only crossover really is that they both can relate to sex — but erotica does not necessarily have to be sexually explicit,” she added.

“My paintings in the show are intimate glimpses of women during private moments. Getting undressed, exploring their sexual fantasies, touching themselves . . . they each use so many colors, slightly unfocused and watery, like a glimpse into a dream,” Fahren Feingold said.

The exhibit title was inspired by Nancy Friday’s 1973 book, “My Secret Garden: Women’s Sexual Fantasies,” which impacted Cesarine when she read it as a teenager. “This type of art has gained even more significance as women today fight an upwards battle towards equality, fight to keep personal choices as personal versus that of the government and fight for freedom of expression as essential for progress,” she said.

For Feingold, the show means “breaking barriers and stereotypes placed on women by others who have no concept of what makes us who we are.”

“Secret Garden: The Female Gaze on Erotica” will be open June 27-July 30 at Untitled Space (45 Lispenard St., Unit 1W).