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The Feminist Artists Taking Over Frieze

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In the male-dominated commercial art world, feminist art is as radical today as it was in the 1970s.

It's possible to leave Frieze art fair with the impression that feminism never happened in the **art world** (https://broadly.vice.com/en_us/topic/art). The vast majority of the works on show in Frieze's 160 or so galleries are by male artists, with tons of big monochromes, candy-coloured sculptures and expensive one-liners. As a result it's not unfair to say that the main section of the fair feels stale and unbalanced. Women are underrepresented. Feminist work is hard to find.

I sought out artists who were able to address this imbalance. They updates what we think of feminist work, making it relevant for the art world that young female artists find themselves in today, where sexism hides in plain sight. Carolee Schneemann and Ana Mendieta are radical performance artists who use their bodies as vehicles for art-making. Feminism gets a bad rep in the art world, and that's related to the way the work of artists like Schneemann and Mendieta's have been shamefully parodied.

Feminism in art is often taught as a 'moment'—the 1970s—like something that happened rather than an active manner of thought that is undergoing constant revival and reworking. These days art and artists are often thought of as egalitarian and progressive. We lull ourselves into believing that the art market is a meritocracy. At Frieze there are many great young female artists showing work that isn't political or feminist in subject matter, and this can make it seem as though progress has been made and a space for women won. But the presence of high profile female artists doesn't mean that the commercial art-market isn't historically sexist and still biased towards men. There are still many more male artists represented at Frieze than female, and the art of men tends to sell for higher figures.



B. Ingrid Olson, Dry gesture, 2015 Inkjet print and UV printed mat board in aluminum frame, 18 x 12.5 inches, Courtesy of the artist and Simone Subal Gallery.

It was a relief to discover the exhibition by Simone Subal gallery, showing for the first time as part of the Frieze Focus section. The gallery is presenting the work of two artists of very different generations—Kiki Kogelnik's 1970s paintings and the young artist B. Ingrid Olsen's contemporary photographic and sculptural work. The gallery's juxtaposition of these two is clever. Olsen's hazy 35mm photographs are reminiscent of 70s feminist works. Kogelnik's paintings, though made in that era, are vibrantly current—bold images stenciled and painted in blocky forms and bright plasticky layers. Both artists depict and investigate cropped and arranged female bodies. Female bodies that—despite being the site of feminist art of the 1970s—seem largely absent from contemporary work by women.

Kiki Kogelnik was a friend of Claus Oldenburg and Carolee Schneemann, having moved from Austria to New York in the 1970s and fallen in with both a pop art and feminist crowd. She is a fascinating anomaly, making pop-art from a feminist perspective, taking the gloss and gleam of the genre and applying it to slightly macabre imagery of skulls, skeletons and chopped up bodies. The works on show at Frieze present detached limbs and bright splatters which are simultaneously doll-like, death-like and enticing. B. Ingrid Olsen's images are quiet in comparison, devised using lenses, mirrors and her own body to create complex visual spaces inside the photograph's frame. She prints directly onto her large mounts, creating a double layering of a smaller image sitting inside a larger one. The results feel introspective, as though each work is about a process of looking that naturally reveals her working environment and her body at work. Her body is not selling itself or shouting its presence, but investigating itself in its space with a casual honesty.



*B. Ingrid Olson, Shell and covering object, 2015 Inkjet print and UV printed mat board in aluminum frame, 22 x 15 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Simone Subal Gallery.*

Together B. Ingrid Olsen and Kiki Kolgenik represent two different generations of artists, both of whom make artwork that speaks to a specifically female perspective in smart and enjoyable ways. Kolgenik's use of the female body as a lifeless medical specimen subverts the typical image of a woman in pop art—the overwhelmingly sexist-seeming images of models from advertisements of the 1960s, for instance—instead reminding us of our universal mortality. Olsen's use of a 35mm camera and her washed out colour palette recalls the way we view iconic feminist works like Schneemann's videos today, via grainy and faded documentary footage. Olsen's photographs look like 1970s feminist works appear to us now. It is as though she uses this aesthetic to recall a history of women looking at themselves in art, a visual nod to the permission granted by her artistic predecessors to investigate a female gaze in art-making. It's hard to call it feminist in a radical seventies sense, but also hard to say it is divorced from that genre entirely.



Green Machine, Courtesy of Simone Subal Gallery and Kiki Kogelnik Foundation, Vienna/New York. Copyright Kiki Kogelnik Foundation, Vienna/New York. All rights reserved.

Camille Henrot is a rising star of the art world, but her position as a feminist is as tenuous as the culture her art investigates. She creates tributes to the sexualized female body, which has landed significant criticism. Her exhibition "Minor Concerns" being shown by Kamel Mennour gallery at Frieze is a slight departure from her well-known video *Grosse Fatigue*, which catapulted her to fame in 2013 after it won her the prestigious Silver Lion prize at the Venice Biennale.

Henrot's exhibition is mostly comprised of cartoonish, sketched paintings with a few large bronze sculptures of bodies in awkward poses. Her loose ink sketches depict a series of petty humiliations, like people masturbating in front of laptops, examining their genitals, or falling over drunk. They are bodies failing to keep up dignified images of themselves and falling prey to human error. Although both male and female bodies are depicted, Henrot's interest in shame and specifically 'shaming' as a facet of contemporary internet culture means that this show feels like a continuation of her highly criticised paintings inspired by Nicki Minaj's video *Anaconda*.



Interviewed in the *Guardian*

(<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/sep/01/nicki-minaj-anaconda-camille-henrot-feminist-art>) about the drawings, Henrot spoke about Nicki Minaj as a contemporary feminist icon, deliberately working with and subverting western cultural stereotypes of black female bodies through her videos. But Henrot's of presenting bodies at a detached anthropological remove meant that she was accused of taking the very position that she intended to critique, exotizing rather than promoting Nicki Minaj's body image.

This complex space between private experience and public humiliation, and the way in which, particularly women, fall prey to cultural shaming is also explored at Frieze, albeit differently, by the artist Amalia Ulman. Ulman's video and installation *The Annals of Private History* is presented by Arcadia Missa as part of Frieze Live. Ulman's video is about a history of female diaristic writing, from private journals into contemporary internet v-logging. The video can only be watched after you leave your phone and shoes at the entrance and head into a red carpeted, silky curtained space that looks like promotional photographs from North Korea, the place that inspired much of the film's aesthetic. Ulman is drawn to surface gleam as a subversive tactic, and the idea of political tension and control glossed over with satin is a perfect visual metaphor that runs through all her work. Her aesthetic of 'cuteness' and 'prettiness' enables her to get under seemingly banal gender stereotypes and reveal their complexity and difficulty.



Exhibition view « Minor concerns », booth F4 - kamel mennour, Frieze London 2015 © Photo Raphael Fanelli © ADAGP Camille Henrot courtesy the artist and kamel mennour, Paris

Ulman often explores performed and prescribed gender identity and its societal constraints. Her work at Frieze is a subtle departure from her well-known Instagram performance *Excellences and Perfections*, for which she styled herself as a naïve girl-next-door, moving to LA, falling for the wrong guy, working tirelessly on her body and appearance, getting plastic surgery, documenting and hashtagging her progress. She quickly amassed over 100,000 followers, many of whom had no idea that the person they were looking at was a fiction.

Though these artists' feminist predecessors are thin on the ground at Frieze, they are present. **P.P.O.W. gallery** (<http://www.ppowgallery.com/>), based in New York, is showing the work of Martha Wilson, Nicole Eisenman and Carolee Schneemann, among others.

Alison Jaques is showing Ana Mendieta, and on view at Sadie Coles is the more contemporary feminist sculpture of Sarah Lucas.

Thanks to artists like Martha Wilson, Eisenman and Schneeman, when women look at and deal with 'women' as a subject matter for art, it doesn't feel radical anymore, and the feminist perspective has had to shift. Young artists' have to be savvy feminists, very self-aware of their cultural and historical positioning: Olsen of her art historical context, Henrot of the complex cultural histories that we inherit as makers of culture, and Ulman of the cultural pressures that form body images and gender identities, and how these are reciprocal, malleable processes. What became evident walking through the Frieze Art Fair was not just the work of feminist artists past and present in pushing down the gender bias, but also the gallerists making it happen. It's of no surprise that all of the galleries showing these works—both historical and contemporary—were founded by women.

B.
