

## **Burning Down the House: Building a Feminist Art Collection**

**Date :** March 19, 2009

This is the first in a series of exhibition reviews written by students enrolled in Erin Hasinoff's Exhibiting Cultures: Politics and Practices of Museum Exhibitions at Columbia University. Exhibiting Cultures is one of the two core courses offered in the Museum Anthropology MA Program. In addition to learning the craft of writing reviews, students are curating an exhibition, *Out of the Box: Anthropology Collections Unpacked*, which will be on display in Columbia's Low Library from May 11 to June 3, 2009. Check back for more information about the show.

October 31 2008–April 5 2009

Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn Museum, New York

Reviewed by Constance Smith, MA Candidate, Department of Anthropology, Columbia University  
[crs2150@columbia.edu](mailto:crs2150@columbia.edu)

In 1979 Judy Chicago's monumental installation *The Dinner Party* was exhibited for the first time. Thirty years on, the work has been seen by more than one million viewers and remains controversial for its striking symbolic history of women in the Western world. Chicago set out to "end the ongoing cycle of omission in which women were written out of the historical record", and although now considered by some critics as overly reductive and simplistic, the work has been seminal in inspiring discussion and research on feminism, in the art world and beyond. Since 2007 *The Dinner Party* has been installed at the Brooklyn Museum, New York City, where it forms the focal point of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art.

The Sackler Center's latest exhibition directly engages with the discourses stimulated by *The Dinner Party*. Curated by Maura Reilly and Nicole J. Caruth, *Burning Down the House: Building a Feminist Art Collection* presents almost fifty artists – male and female – and includes recent acquisitions and major loans of works by Kiki Smith, Tracey Emin, Tracey Moffatt, and Lorna Simpson. Reflecting the museum's commitment to developing an archive of feminist art, the exhibition encompasses photography, painting, installation, sculpture, video and performance art from the 1970s to today. This span of artists from different generations working in a variety media enables the show to chart historical and contemporary feminisms, and traces the changing concerns of contemporary artists working within the historic framework of feminist art.

The title of the exhibition plays on the notion of 'the master's house'. Museums have historically been a male domain, dominated by grand masters of art history, in which women have featured mostly as the subject of works and not as creative agents in their own right. 'The master's house' also refers to the idea of the home as a traditionally feminine sphere, where a woman's role as carer and nurturer ensured the well-being of the 'master'. By burning down that house, this exhibition seeks to proclaim not just the creativity and independence of women, but the leading role feminist art has played in shaping the wider art world over the last forty years.

Among the featured works are Carrie Mae Weems's *Untitled (Man Smoking/Malcolm X)*, a

photograph from the artist's 1990 Kitchen Table series in which Weems depicted herself seated at the same table with various companions and an array of props and backgrounds. In this work she plays cards with an African-American man beneath an image of Malcolm X, weaving African-American politics with allusions to black feminist campaigns such as those of Rosa Parks. Kara Walker also draws on gender and racial issues in *Keys to the Coop*, 1997, a dramatic black and white linocut of a young African-American girl running with the head of a chicken in her hand. The keys in her hand suggest salvation, but the girl is clearly an anti-heroine.

Sex and sexuality are unsurprisingly prominent in the exhibition, sometimes in very provocative forms. Caroline Schneeman's 1975 performance piece *Interior Scroll* is remembered through a dramatic larger-than-lifesize black and white still, capturing the artist in the process of removing the scroll from her vagina and reading it aloud to her audience. An i-pod audio-video hub next to the work features an interview with Schneeman, in which she describes waking with the image of the work in her mind, and using it to explore ideas of inner knowledge. The use of i-pod hubs with artist interviews is one of the most successful features of the exhibition, enabling artists to explain their often very theoretical work. In Schneeman's case it is particularly useful, overcoming some of the problems of ephemerality inherent in displaying performance art.

A newly acquired work by Cuban performance artist Ana Mendieta references debates in feminist archaeology over the depiction and reverence of women in ancient societies. *Guanaroca (First Woman)*, 1981, is a photograph of a site-specific carving by Mendieta in the caves of Aguila near Havana, Cuba. The work takes up the much-explored feminist iconography of the fertile goddess (the second place setting in Chicago's Dinner Party, and the theme of a related temporary exhibition nearby) and exaggerates elements of the female body still further. Although in part marking an ancient appreciation of the female form, Mendieta's focus on female genitalia is also unnerving, perhaps suggesting the timeless categorization of women as sexual objects.

The curators of the exhibition emphasize the multiple and historical discourses of feminism, stressing that there is no single look or narrative to feminist art. Part of this agenda is the inclusion of male artists such as Nayland Blake, whose "bunny" sculpture challenges constructions of masculinity, highlighting the impact feminism has had in the reconsideration of male as well as female histories. Feminist activism is often assumed to be limited to Europe and America; the inclusion here of artists from the rest of the world suggests the wider nature of feminist discourses. Particularly powerful are three images from South African artist Berni Searle's *Colour Me* series. Exploring the intersections of race, colonialism and gender, she transforms her prone body into a display fetish in images resonant of colonial classifications of racial 'types'. Covering her naked body for each image with a different spice – paprika for red, turmeric for yellow and cloves for brown – Searle's work recalls apartheid divisions of the South African population into black, white and colored, whilst the foregrounding of her body implies a fourth multi-racial but still marginalized category: women.

The works featured in *Burning Down the House* are thought provoking, often dramatic, and occasionally shocking. The juxtaposition of different media, themes, nationalities and generations of artists reflects the impossibility of making reductive statements about feminism, and recognizes the diverse influences historical feminism still has in informing contemporary considerations of women and gender-related issues. Yet in some ways this diversity is also the exhibition's downfall;

neither the works nor the curation do much to expand on the introductory panel's dual interpretations of 'the master's house'. Beyond the simple fact of their inclusion in a show on feminism, there is little curatorial attempt to understand how the featured art or artists are breaking down barriers of domestic confinement or macho museum culture. One wonders also whether isolating feminist art in its own wing of a museum really affects the status quo all that much. Wouldn't demonstrating how such art can not only hold its own against the rest of the canon, but has also powerfully informed it, be a more powerful feminist statement?