

[NSFW] Erotic Feminist Art Gets a Second Look

By Gabrielle Bruney — Jan 10 2016



Cosey

Fanni Tutti, The Kiss, 2003, large format diptych photograph 2 parts, each 85 x 120 cm, edition of 3. Images courtesy of Dallas Contemporary

Feminism, like any other political movement, has weathered a lot of shifting tides. Sex-positivity is pretty much a given in contemporary mainstream feminist discourse, but this wasn't always the case. For earlier generations of feminists, feelings about heterosexual eroticism were a bit thornier. For them, erotic art and pornography had always been the tools of the patriarchy, and couldn't be pried apart from it. Celebration of straight sex, of porn, or of phallic images could be taken as blasphemy. In this highly political atmosphere, the work of feminist artists who disagreed with the party line could sometimes be neglected. Such works were doubly rejected, first by a mainstream society scandalized by overt sexuality, and secondly by the feminist movement itself.



Betty

Tompkins, Fuck Painting #4 1972 84x60," acrylic on canvas

Black Sheep Feminism, a new exhibit at Dallas Contemporary (<http://www.dallascontemporary.org/>), seeks to spotlight feminists artists who were sidelined by the mainstream because of the erotic content of their work. It features the work of four artists active since the '70s: painters Joan Semmel (http://www.joansemmel.com/ftp.joansemmel.com/JOAN_SEMMEL.htm) and Betty Tompkins (<http://bettytompkins.com/>), performance artist Cosey Fanni Tutti (<http://www.coseyfannitutti.com/>), and the late painter and photo montage artist Anita Steckel (http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/27/arts/design/anita-steckel-artist-who-created-erotic-works-dies-at-82.html?_r=0).

"There's real jet lag between "real life" political progress and the cultural sphere—the art world can be a curious, surprisingly conservative realm," says Alison M. Gingeras, adjunct curator at Dallas Contemporary.

Black Sheep Feminism is her first exhibit for the museum. "Despite the prevailing assumption that the art community is very progressive in socio-political terms, there is a lot of self-policing and self-censorship in terms of what content is supported by museums, supported by curators, etc."



Joan

Semmel, Hold, 1972, oil on canvas, 72 x 108 inches, Alexander Gray Associates

There's also an entrenched double standard in the art world when it comes to male and female nudity, as any museum-goer knows. "In a commercial gallery context, the male nude, or phallogocentric tropes are a hard sell—while on the flip side, the art market has always embraced the female nude (with centuries of popularity, this is

considered a classical paradigm and no one bats an eye),” Gingeras tells The Creators Project.

The overtly erotic oeuvre of the four featured artists has faced an uphill battle in the struggle for recognition, but hopefully, with the help of this show at Dallas Contemporary, the tide will begin to turn. “In the case of these four artists, it is my hope that by giving them visibility, and arguing for their legitimate place within the canon of postwar art—not just the subset of feminist art history—we’re now finally in a position to truly acknowledge these artists’ value,” says Gingeras. “In their case, it is only a first wave of recognition and it is long overdue.”



Anita

Steckel, New York Landscape (Woman pressing fingerdown), c.1970-1980S, silkscreen print, oil paint and collage on canvas, 64 x 100inches, Anita Steckel Estate/Suzanne Geiss, NY



Cosey

Fanni Tutti, Szabo Sessions, 2010, Volume I, 4 Poses, 28 Giclée Prints Edition of 10, closed dimensions: 53 x 37 x 5 cm

Black Sheep Feminism runs at Dallas Contemporary from January 17th through March 20th. For more information, click here (<http://www.dallascontemporary.org/>).