

How Women Invented Postmodernism

An exhibition at Mason Gross Galleries in New Brunswick, featuring works by Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, Faith Ringgold and others, traces the roots.

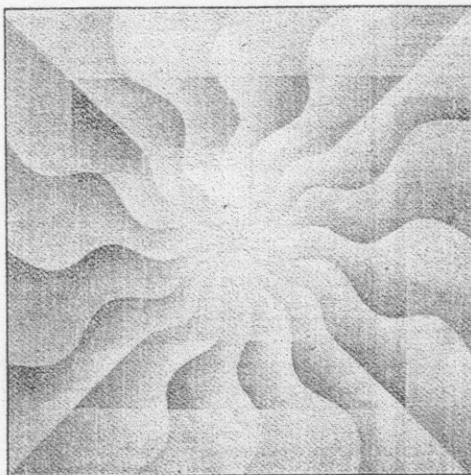
It's not a cooking show Martha Stewart would ever do.

Standing in the kitchen, a woman names a variety of cooking implements in alphabetical order — chopper, dish, eggbeater — and demonstrates their use in a violent way. Martha Rosler's 1975 performance piece on video, *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, makes fun of women's stereotypical role as homemaker. It's a vivid reminder of a time when women were expected to make pies instead of art.

The piece is part of *How American Women Artists Invented Postmodernism: 1970-1975*, on view at Mason Gross Galleries at Rutgers University in New Brunswick through Jan. 27. Ferris Olin, head of the Margery Somers Foster Center, Rutgers University Libraries, and Judith Brodsky, founding director of the Rutgers Center for Innovative Print and Paper, are the exhibition's curators.

"One of points we're trying to make is that feminism is a very important intellectual movement in terms of shaping contemporary culture," says Ms. Brodsky, "and that its accomplishments have not been recognized in the way that they should be. Look at the position of women today, and how different it is than the '50s, when ads were all about women having nice stoves in the kitchen and new shiny refrigerators."

The exhibition includes pieces by Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, Faith Ringgold, Lynda Benglis, Carolee Schneemann and other pioneering feminist artists. It is the first event in the Feminist Art Project, a national celebration that commemorates several anniversaries for women in art. 2006 marks the 35th anniversary of the Mary H. Dana Women Artists Series at Rutgers, the oldest venue for showing the work of emerging and established contemporary women artists; the 20th anniversary of the founding of the National Museum of Women in the Arts, and the 30th anniversary of the exhibition *Women Artists: 1550-1950*. Several related events will continue through 2007.



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Above, a 1973 painting by Judy Chicago's "Great Ladies" series; below left, Betye Saar's "Rainbow Shrine" (1975); right, May Stevens' "Striped Man" (1975), from the "Big Daddy" series.

How American Women Artists... aims to celebrate the founders of the feminist art movement, and show how they influenced the next generations of artists and, in effect, invented postmodernism.

"We felt that these artists were the starting point," says Ms. Brodsky. "They set the ideas that other people developed. We wanted to make sure that these artists were recognized for the important things they did, so that's why we came up with the show, and the name. So many of the things in this show have now become standard process."

The video performance art pieces in the exhibition were the first ones to really develop the form, says Ms. Brodsky, especially since they allowed for a narrative in art, which had been absent because of the popularity of abstraction.

Other artists, such as Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago, used the abstract, minimalist styles they had been taught and gave them a feminist perspective. Miriam Schapiro's "Big Ox" uses an image that refers to women, but in an abstract way. Judy Chicago's "Christine of Sweden" and "Elizabeth A. Sackler" (originally titled "Queen Elizabeth"), from the "Great Ladies" series, are abstract paintings that use feminist iconography, which later was the basis for Chicago's "Dinner Party." Betye Saar's "Rainbow Shrine," a mixed media collage, brought the use of toy-like objects and fabric into the realm of high art.

Another groundbreaking style is demonstrated in Joan Semmel's nudes, "Antonio and I" and "Woman Under Sheet," in which she paints her own body from her perspective, rejecting the objectification of men painting female nudes. Silvia Sleight also turns the tables in her male nude, "Paul Rosano Reclining," which pokes fun at the standard female reclining nude.

The art in the exhibition is a product of the three movements that were taking place in the 1960s, says Ms. Brodsky: the feminist movement, the Civil Rights movement and the anti-war movement because of the American presence in Vietnam. Two paintings from May Stevens' 1975 "Big Daddy" series, "Top Man" and "Striped

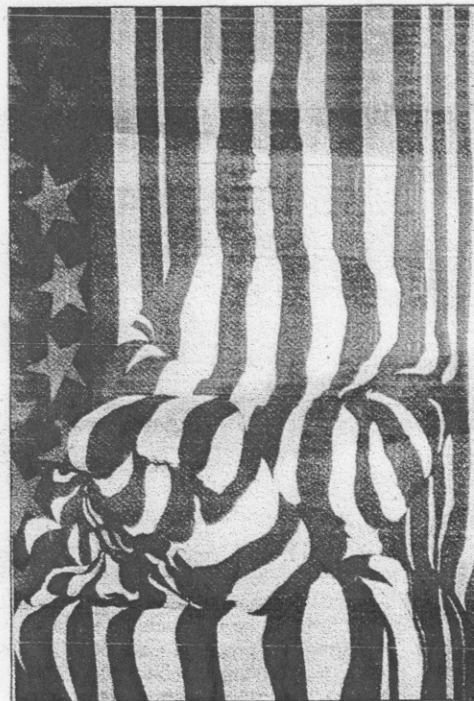
Man," satirize American male authority figures. As curators, Ms. Brodsky and Ms. Olin aimed to show both the East Coast and West Coast feminist movements, as well as represent diversity in artists.

Other events planned in 2006-2007 at Rutgers as part of the Feminist Art Project include a symposium on the Women Artists Archive National Directory, a May Stevens retrospective, an exhibition of documentary photos of the American women's movement and an exhibit of Women's Art Organizations at the Zimmerli.

How American Women Artists... serves as a kick-off to a three-year national celebration, but also as a landmark exhibition that highlights the very beginnings of feminist postmodern art. Ms. Brodsky and Ms. Olin hope to expand the exhibition and show it elsewhere in the future. Ms. Brodsky recently had an experience that made her realize just how far women artists have come since the 1970s.

"I went to the National Portrait Gallery in London — this staid, traditional institution," she says. "There was a show of self-portraits, and half of artists in that show were women. They were the important paintings of women artists that are now in the art history books. It really showed that we achieved something, that the cannon has changed to include these women artists and there are now landmark paintings by women artists, like how there are landmark paintings by men artists."

How American Women Artists Invented Postmodernism: 1970-1975 is on view at Mason Gross Galleries at Civic Square, 33 Livingston Ave., New Brunswick, through Jan. 27. Gallery hours: Mon.-Fri. 10 a.m.-4 p.m. and by appointment. A gala dinner in honor of the artists will be held Jan. 14, 7 p.m. Tickets cost \$125, \$200 for two. For information, call (732) 932-2222, ext. 838. On the Web: www.masongross.rutgers.edu



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