

# The Women Who Championed Sexually Explicit Art in the '90s Are Relevant as Ever

ARTSY EDITORIAL  
BY CASEY LESSER  
SEP 20TH, 2016 12:09 AM



Patricia Cronin, *girls*, 1993. Courtesy of David and Monica Zwirner, New York. Image courtesy of Maccarone.

In the summer of 1991, as residents at Skowhegan, the young artists Ellen Cantor and Patricia Cronin shared a strong desire to reclaim female sexuality from the male-dominated art world. “The art world and art history were telling us that sexualized images of women were made by men, for the consumption of men,” Cronin says. “We were young, we were ambitious, we were both making really sexualized work, and we thought, who is our community? Who will be part of a group to redefine female sexuality from a woman’s point of view?”

They returned to New York that fall and scoured the city for fellow female artists working in the same vein. Two years later, their efforts culminated in a 1993 group show at David Zwirner, “Coming to Power: 25 Years of Sexually X-Plicit Art By Women.” This fall, the pioneering feminist show is seeing a revival, with new curators, Pati Hertling and Julie Tolentino, a new gallery, Maccarone in New York, and a fresh performance program of queer and trans artists. Did the show have an impact in its own time? And how has creating sexually explicit art changed for women artists in the 23 years since?

The idea of staging a show was planted in Cantor’s and Cronin’s minds by one of their teachers at Skowhegan that summer, the feminist painter Joan

sexual imagery. “I was making sexual work from the early ’70s,” Semmel, now 83, recalls. “First I had done a whole series of outright sex images, then I went into the nude self-image—and that’s where I live.”



Left: Alice Neel, *Nadya Nude*, 1933. Courtesy of the Estate of Alice Neel; Right: Carolee Schneemann, *Eye Body* (From *36 Transformative Actions for Camera*), 1963/1985. Photo by Erro, courtesy of P.P.O.W. and private collection. Images courtesy of Maccarone.

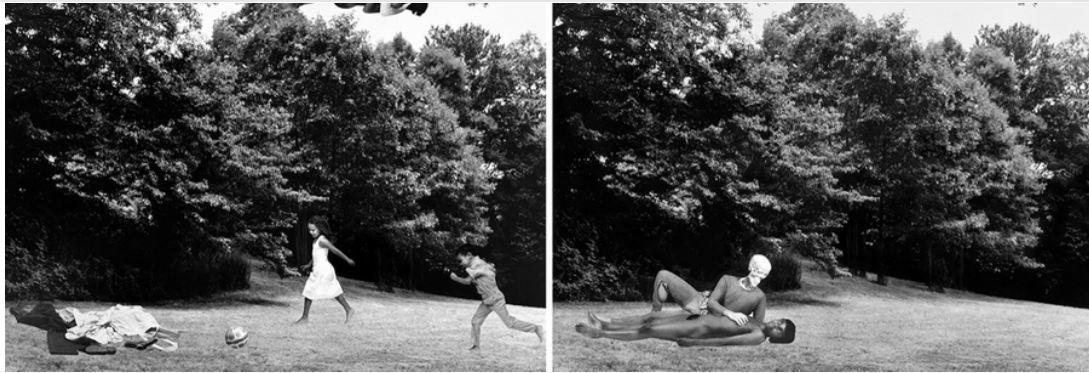
Semmel remembers Cantor and Cronin as young students. “Ellen looked like a punk street kid, and Pattie like a girl just out of a school uniform,” she says. “But they were both hard-nosed and realistic about the difficulties of being taken seriously, and entering the art world.”

Following the ’70s, when women artists gained recognition and feminist art came to prominence, the New York art scene changed for the worse again, she explains. Its focus returned to the “macho work” and male artists who had driven contemporary art before. “The competition was fierce, and the women were sidelined again, not even able to get a foot in the door,” she says. “Women students were extremely frustrated, a lot of them wouldn’t even identify as feminist. They saw what was happening at the time—they would almost be blacklisted.”

Semmel told Cantor and Cronin about a book she had put together in 1973, *A New Eros: Sexual Imagery in Women’s Art* (which was never published), and she suggested they organize a show around a similar theme. “Their work still wasn’t that formed, they were still very young,” Semmel recalls. “Curating something would be a way of establishing some identity, and that’s precisely what happened.”

Cantor and Cronin set up studio visits to begin selecting the artists who would feature in their forthcoming show. “This was before the internet, before cell phones, so we would meet in this café in SoHo and we would make up lists,” Cronin says. With each artist they met, they asked for recommendations of others. “We were two young, crazy girls running all over Manhattan, trying to fit in every woman artist that was making really explicit sexual work—from different generations, different sexual orientations, different races,” she remembers. “We wanted to kind of redefine the representation of sexuality.”

They sought out pioneers in the field who broke out in the 1960s and ’70s, as well as their peers. The wide-ranging group of artists was producing art that spanned popular culture, pornography, and BDSM, delving into pleasure and pain alike, and working across media, from painting to video. They were eager to participate, often relieved rather than hesitant. “The most common response was ‘oh thank goodness someone’s finally doing this!’” Cronin says.



Lorraine O'Grady, *Body/Ground (The Clearing: or Cortez and La Malinche. Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, N. and Me)*, 1991. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York © 2016 Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Before they found a gallery for the show, the pair had a falling out. Cronin found herself busy with other work and walked away from the project. Cantor (who died of cancer in 2013) was introduced to the young gallerist David Zwirner, who had just opened his first gallery on Greene Street earlier that year. "Coming to Power" would be his third show there, with Cantor as curator.

In addition to Cantor, Cronin, and Semmel, the show included pioneers like Louise Bourgeois, Alice Neel, Hannah Wilke, and Yoko Ono, and younger artists like Marilyn Minter, Nancy Grossman, Nicole Eisenman, and Lorraine O'Grady. It featured over two dozen artists, plus a performance program that included former porn stars Cicciolina and Candida Royalle. The art historian Linda Nochlin was among the artists and scholars who contributed critical essays to the show's catalogue.

The artists involved remember the show as a success. "It was a difficult time, but the show seemed to have some traction," Semmel says. "There were names of some fairly prominent women at that time, a good gallery gave it a certain validation, and then thematically it caught the attention of a lot of journalists. Sex coupled with feminism was a potent brew, and evidently still is."

Minter agrees the show meant progress. "I think it was a step in the right direction, for women to own sexuality, but we were all fairly young," she says. She recalls that the female generation before her had struggled to gain acceptance. "People like Carolee Schneemann, Hannah Wilke, and Lynda Benglis had been criticized so badly," she says. "They were basically slut-shamed." At the time, Minter herself had received criticism for the work she'd made that was inspired by hardcore pornography.

Cantor and Cronin formed a reading group that included Minter, Pat Hearn, Linda Yablonsky, Peggy Ahwesh, and others who were, in Minter's words, "making transgressive imagery." In addition to raising consciousness through readings like Carole Vance's *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (1984), the group functioned as a supportive community. "Women owning sexuality, especially when they're young and beautiful, there's just such prejudice against that, even today," Minter explains, and adds, "but old ladies can do anything."



Left: Marilyn Minter, *Flurry*, 1994. Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94, New York; Right: Zoe Leonard, *Frontal View Geoffrey Benne Fashion Show*, 1990. Courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Images courtesy of Maccarone.

This point rings true in the present moment, when many of the artists included in the original show are now revered. Other women, like Betty Tompkins, known for her large-scale “Fuck Paintings,” have developed a following among the millennial set. In addition to Maccarone’s revival of “Coming to Power,” a slew of upcoming solo shows, at museums and galleries, are dedicated to these trailblazing women.

Minter will have solo shows at the Brooklyn Museum and Salon 94 later this fall; Schneemann has concurrent gallery shows at Galerie Lelong and P.P.O.W opening in October; Semmel, Benglis, and Zoe Leonard each have new solo shows in New York galleries this September, at Alexander Gray Associates, Cheim & Read, and Hauser & Wirth, respectively; and Cantor’s work is being shown at Foxy Production, NYU’s 80WSE Gallery, and Participant Inc. this fall alone—not to mention recent renewed interest in Nicole Eisenman, Judith Bernstein, and Yoko Ono, among others. MoMA will also screen the world premiere of Cantor’s film *Pinochet Porn* (2008–2016) on October 31st.

“I have been working with sexual content for over 50 years and in the beginning it was an immense struggle for my peers and myself to gain access to the system,” Judith Bernstein says. “Fortunately, the times are changing. Now my work has been shown in museums and galleries all over the world.” She notes that her works are especially well-received in Europe, “where sex is not viewed as puritanically as in the U.S.” Her show at Mary Boone in January, aptly titled “Dicks of Death,” was entirely devoted to phallic paintings and drawings—subject matter that she began to engage with in the ’60s and has continued into the present, this time to comment on the military industrial complex.

“They may own it in a bodily fashion, but men don’t exclusively own the phallus,” Bernstein asserts. “Women who work with sexual imagery are often lumped together, but our aesthetics and messages can be very different. I am now observing women through my ‘Birth of the Universe’ series, which deals with the Big Bang, with women at the center, and the birthing process. Sexuality is on a rotating continuum.” She describes a new painting called *The Voyeurs* (2015), which pictures a large vagina, as a self-portrait. “Now all eyes are on me!” she exclaims.

All eyes are also on Semmel, in her show of large-scale, nude self-portraits that opened last week. Semmel moved to New York in 1970, and amid the unrest and activism around the Vietnam War, Civil Rights, and the Women’s Liberation Movement, she sought to reach women through her art, to offer them a release from sexual repression. She quit her abstract painting practice and began to create intrepid paintings—close-ups of interlocked couples in vibrant color (one of which is in the show at



Left: Joan Semmel, *Purple Passion*, 1973. © 2016 Joan Semmel/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Right: Monica Majoli, *Untitled (Bathtub Orgy)*, 1990. Courtesy of the artist and Air de Paris, Paris. Images courtesy of Maccarone.

“Things have changed, but not that much,” Semmel says. “Things are better, but they’re not where they need to be. [Sex] is an area of life that’s primary for everybody, and it needs a lot more work.” Despite the accomplishments of artists like Bernstein, Semmel, and Minter, younger women are still having difficulty addressing sex in art.

Given this, the revival of “Coming to Power” feels necessary. “All of the artists in the show are defying this male perspective that has, and does, describe female sexuality—whether it’s writ large in culture, entertainment, advertising, literature, art, and then how that trickles down to in between the sheets,” Cronin says. “It’s nothing short of brave and urgent. This is still radical—which is good news and bad news, actually.”

It’s bad news because it’s an issue that women are still facing, and it can construe these artists as “ahead of their time”—a qualifier that ultimately, in this case, is diminishing. “I try to reject that language because it tries to put a positive spin on this fact: *Her time couldn’t see her*,” Cronin explains. “What decisions, life decisions, would these artists have made if they were supported at the height of their time? It’s great that women in their seventies and eighties are getting recognized, but don’t you want to enjoy your life now, when you’re at your peak?”

Minter believes the prevalence for slut-shaming young women, coupled with the rise of social media, continues to stop young women from engaging in sexual subject matter. “Culture is so vicious on the internet,” she says, “there’s this kind of trolling. It’s a way of policing bodies, and I think women owning the agency of sexuality makes people crazy. Other women too, but definitely men.”

Today, it still takes courage for younger generations of artists who don’t identify as heteronormative males to represent sexuality through art. “I felt very strongly that sexuality and all the things connected to it determine so much of what comes afterward in one’s life,” Semmel muses. “If you start out in a way that is oppressive, you’re going to end up with that kind of oppression in other parts of life. Harassment has always been there, but nobody ever talked about it.” She gives the example of Anita Hill. Her comments also bring to mind Columbia undergrad Emma Sulkowicz and her senior thesis performance *Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight)* (2014–15), through which she drew attention to her own rape, and the massive issue of campus harassment across the U.S.

I ask Cronin, who is now a professor at Brooklyn College, if she sees her students exploring sexuality. She tells me that due to the difficulties of finding success as a young artist, her students are drawn to market trends,

---

“Focus on making art history. Don’t focus on making art market history.” Cronin, whose most recent work, *Shrine For Girls*—a site-specific installation that addresses the exploitation of women and girls around the world—debuted during the Venice Biennale last summer and traveled to the FLAG Art Foundation this summer, clearly speaks from experience.

Minter has also found recent critical success, but in contrast to Cronin, her work is often pigeonholed as being sexual in nature, regardless of her intention. “When I first made my work, nobody wanted anything to do with it, and now everybody wants to talk about how my work is very sexual,” she says, “and more than half of it has nothing to do with sexuality, but god forbid I paint a glass of water and it comes out ‘by sexual artist Marilyn Minter.’” She emphasizes that although sexuality is an innate part of being human, one that is vital to express, it’s not something that can easily be put in a box. “Anytime you try to categorize sexuality,” she says, “it will spit in your face.”

—Casey Lesser

*“Coming to Power: 25 Years of Sexually X-Plicit Art By Women” is on view at Maccarone, New York, Sep. 9–Oct. 16, 2016.*