

Women don't get much play in the art world, but here comes 'Women Painting' at Miami Dade College

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Harumi Abe, '134 days and 21 hours,' 2011. Adolfo Facusse

Giant waves take aim at a countryside, with bright yellow paddy fields, a futuristic semi-spherical highway and a lone house surrounded by blue-streaked mountains. The majestic and mournful painting evokes a Japanese landscape, likely enduring a tsunami. Indeed, South Florida's Harumi Abe has painted this exquisite scene titled "134 days and 21 hours," the time it would have taken her to theoretically walk to the devastated territory in her homeland after the massive 2011 earthquake and tsunami.

Abe is one of 40-plus artists whose works make up “Women Painting,” all from the Girls’ Club collection of Francie Bishop Good and David Horvitz. This is a significant exhibit, somewhat hidden at the Miami Dade College Kendall campus’ fine arts center, highlighting the range of creativity in contemporary painting by women. There are figurative pieces with distinct narratives and gestural abstracts from local and national artists — some emerging and others well established, but all of them women.

Curators Michelle Weinberg and Sarah Michelle Rupert were prompted to pull this exhibit together by a seminal 1972 film “Painters Painting,” which documented some of the most important artists from 1940-1970, including Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Frank Stella and Andy Warhol. Not surprisingly, very few women appeared. “Women Painting” aims to bring to the fore the rich output of women since that time, while remaining focused on one practice, one of the oldest and most nuanced — painting. A documentary is also being produced, with interviews of artists in South Florida and New York, and it will debut on Sept. 16.

The inevitable question arises: Is there something specifically feminine about paintings by women? Viewers can come to their own conclusion, but the curators would like to think not. Their goal is to acknowledge the depth of work women have created that has for far too long gone under appreciated.

Although the gender gap in the art world has closed somewhat in the 21st century, women are still vastly underrepresented in museum collections (an Artnews report surmised that only 7 percent of works from the permanent collection on display at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2015 were from women), solo gallery shows, art fairs and biennials; and sell for considerably less than their male counterparts. A flurry of major all-women shows in recent years — including in Miami at the Rubell Collection — have meant to rectify that situation, but there’s much more to be done.

Down in Kendall, the installation of the show suggests something that could be considered a “feminine” side to exhibiting: None of the artworks get their

own wall or dedicated space — no domination allowed. They all have to live with each other, and as curator Rupert says, at times hold an artistic dialogue. “These paintings aren’t islands,” she explains. “They have relationships, they get along with each other.”

For instance, the splendid paintings by two of the most prominent artists in the exhibit, Joan Snyder and Louise Fishman, seem to join in chorus with their abstract neighbors. Snyder first made a name in the early 1970s — a time when men dominated the field — with her “stroke” paintings, and here she is represented by her energetic “Postmardemgarden” from 1995; it’s a swirling field of flowers in a riot of colors that bring out the “landscape” in the abstract works around it.

Fishman’s mark-making involves various techniques like scraping along with brushing; she first grabbed national attention with the 1973 series “Angry Women.” For this exhibit, her “RAZZMATAZZ,” 2000, is a musical masterpiece; you can almost hear what’s emanating from the brush strokes.

Very recent vibrant abstract paintings from the likes of Vanessa Prager, Josette Urso and Elisabeth Condon add to this conversation, where vague landscapes, cityscapes and even visages emerge from the kinetic layers.

But like Abe’s Japan painting, some of the more figurative pieces are just as compelling, occasionally with a darker vision. New York-based Amy Cutler is known for painting women, dressed in garb from an ambiguous past, often performing some type of “women’s” work. “Crying Out Milk,” 1998, unveils a profoundly sad scene. Several women, with heavy coats, heads covered in hats and scarves, stand at the edge of a forest, or maybe the taiga. At the forefront, a woman has dropped her purse, an empty glass milk bottle next to her, as she cries a puddle of milk.

The color scheme and crisp lines give Kathy Osborn’s “Man in Front” (2015) a Hopper-esque feel, a depiction of a 1950s world where the man came first, although he looks unstable on his feet, and the setting is anything but the

glam one from “Mad Men.”

But the works don't have to be bundled; the diversity and scope of the paintings shown here may be what stands out most — there are after all more than 50 works.

Locally based artist Vickie Pierre has plumbed female identity and combined it with ornamental décor to form her assemblages and paintings —for a pink-hued piece in this exhibit, she has written “I’m a Girl.” German-born Julia Oschatz presents her version of Munch’s “The Scream;” and the great Nicole Eisenman, combining allegory and the fantastical, depicts two boys surrounded by naked figures and women in flames, for “The Anxiety of Boys.”

Local artist Odalis Valdivieso’s untitled 2014 piece is a subtle, beautiful study in color and composition, the blues and reds and oranges emitting a soft light. Rising star Shinique Smith painted something resembling a peacock, (or blooming flower?), awash in purples, blues, greens.

In fact, the preponderance of color, of landscape and flowery imagery, does leave the impression of a world blooming with artistic endeavor. Or in this case, to stretch the metaphor, of women’s accomplishment in painting coming out of the shadows.

Like the 1972 movie that inspired the exhibit, the curators were determined that this accomplishment was also documented on film. Eleven of the artists, including Snyder, Fishman, Abe and Pierre, were interviewed in their studios, discussing topics ranging from personal histories, theories on art and feminism. The film will be screened, along with a talk, on at 5 p.m. Sept. 16.

What: “Women Painting”

Where: Miami-Dade College Kendall, Martin and Pat Fine Art Center for the Arts, 11011 SW 104th St., Miami.

When: Summer hours 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Wednesday and Saturday; mid-August

through Sept. 29.

Info: girlsclubcollection.org; 305-237-7700.