

BROAD STROKES

15 WOMEN
WHO MADE ART
and
MADE HISTORY
(IN THAT ORDER)

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CHRONICLE BOOKS
SAN FRANCISCO





Artemisia Gentileschi. *Judith Severing the Head of Holofernes*. c. 1620.

Florence after the birth of her children. She may have felt it suited Medici taste, with its high drama, opulence, and violence. Or maybe given her reputation, there was interest in a scene of implied revenge. *I'd like to kill you with this knife because you have dishonoured me.* Tassi had dark hair, and also a beard.

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If it is difficult to look at Caravaggio's full-lipped young men and not feel a sexual undercurrent (he may have been gay), then the case for reading a biographical urge into Artemisia's work is even more tempting. A young woman experiences rape followed by public torture and humiliation. Shortly afterward, she paints her first version of a scene depicting a woman decapitating a bearded man.

But Artemisia was hardly the first artist to depict the story of Judith. It was long a popular theme. Caravaggio has a famous version, with a more typical Judith as a lovely young thing (complete with erect nipples pushing through her blouse) and Abra as a Disneylike old crone. Less typical is that Caravaggio, like Artemisia, chose to illustrate the moment of decapitation.

The vast majority of artists skirt the gruesome act: Botticelli has a beautiful Judith swaying through a field with Abra carrying Holofernes's head in a basket perched atop her own. They might have been out picking apples for the ruddy wholesomeness of the scene.



Artemisia Gentileschi. *Susanna and the Elders*. 1610.

John Ruskin thought Botticelli's version by far the best of a terrible tradition. If you don't know Ruskin, he was a voluminous Victorian critic whose influence was vast. (I can't resist this take on him from a *New York Times* review of the Mike Leigh film, *Mr. Turner*: "Ruskin [Joshua McGuire] appears as a pretentious carrot-topped nitwit with a voice like a posh Elmer Fudd." But I digress.) Ruskin complained of the "millions of vile pictures" of Judith, specifically in Florence.

But Ruskin was just one of many critics of Artemisia's *Judith*. The last Medici, the Grand Duchess Anna Maria Luisa, loathed it. And according to feminist historian Germaine Greer, when British writer Anna

trump up a charge of promiscuity (punishable by death), then blackmail her to secure sexual favors. The painting is dated from before we know Artemisia experienced her own violation by an older man. But again, the Susanna motif had long been popular with artists, not least because there weren't many opportunities for depicting the female nude outside of Eve, some unfortunate saints (Agatha, Barbara), and Venus.

Though young, Artemisia shows a handling of anatomy that is already sure. And in this, her first professional picture, she already stakes out her vision of the ideal heroine. Susanna is solid, not soft. For the rest of Artemisia's life, her heroines tend to this type of full-bodied but not overtly erotic women. Rather, they are heroic-size. Powerful, but in the sense of real power—physical, artistic—not sexually manipulative.

She also establishes a new perspective for viewers. Susanna turns midwaist, cringing away from the men leering down at her. As spectators, our point of view is allied with the nude woman. We cringe with her, disgusted, rather than voyeuristically eyeing her nudity like another leering elder on the other side of the picture plane.

All viewers of Artemisia's time would have known the full story of Susanna. That she refused sexual demands and risked death as a result. Here the men are clothed and she is naked, but ultimately Susanna is the powerful one. Willing to face death before dishonor, she is pardoned at the last minute when it's discovered the elders have lied. Then they are the ones who pay with their lives.



Artemisia Gentileschi. *Self-Portrait as La Pittura*. 1638–1639.

Portraits of many formidable women followed: Esther, Mary Magdalene, Cleopatra, Lucretia, etc. A virtual pantheon of feminine power, one that included Artemisia herself.

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While briefly reunited with her father in England at the court of Charles I, Artemisia painted a deceptively simple composition that contains multitudes: *Self-Portrait as La Pittura*.

La Pittura is the Allegory of Painting, female embodiment of the art itself.

Crucially, La Pittura is not a muse. She is no female goad to the (almost universally) male artist. No, La Pittura is the art of Painting itself, with all the procreative power and mystery that evokes.

It's a radically simple canvas: the artist at work. And at the same time, Artemisia here is manifold and audacious. She is subject and object, creator and created. A deceptively uncomplicated and persuasive portrait of Painting herself, in the person of a painter and woman. By declaring that



Cesare Ripa. Cropped image of La Pittura from *Iconologia*. 1644.

I AM SHE, Artemisia claims a position that no male artist ever can.

The ideal of La Pittura had been around about a hundred years when Artemisia painted herself as such. La Pittura's attributes were outlined in Italian Cesare Ripa's influential emblem book (a text filled with allegorical figures embodying the arts and sciences, virtues, vices, and more), called the *Iconologia*. First published in the 1590s, Ripa's book was widely consulted by painters, sculptors, and architects. In her own painting, Artemisia cleanly ticks off La Pittura's attributes as codified in the *Iconologia*:

Hair. La Pittura's hair appears undone, indicative of creative passion. Embodied by Artemisia, this, we can imagine, is just how a woman at work looks: hair pulled out of the way, but not fussed over. She's not there to be looked at, but to make something happen. She is the subject of this painting, not its vapid object.

Chain. Around her neck, Artemisia wears La Pittura's attribute of a gold chain with a mask charm. The mask symbolizes imitation, which, as a follower of Caravaggesque naturalism, is Artemisia's forte. Naturalism continues in the casual hanging to one side of the necklace. It's not there to make her more beautiful or more affluent looking, not even to call attention to the bosom across which it hangs. It hangs askew, unnoticed, as she works.

Gown. Artemisia as La Pittura wears a green gown of some iridescent material that shimmers violet in places like a





Judith Leyster. Monogram (detail of *Carousing Couple*). 1630.

Right there, above the foot of the male half of the *Carousing Couple*. No signature at all, but a monogram of a strange sort of *J* with a star shooting out to the right. Unfortunately for the Louvre, this same *J* monogram has been noted before, by one Wilhelm von Bode writing on the history of Dutch painting a decade earlier. He decided the *J* referenced Frans Hals's less esteemed brother, Jans. Bad news.

But von Bode was wrong. It was “worse” than that. In the flurry of accusations and the following trial—you’d need an Excel spreadsheet to keep track of who was suing whom and where—the fabulously named art historian Cornelis Hofstede de Groot unraveled the monogram’s true source: a previously unknown *woman* painter named Judith Leyster.

The Louvre was pissed. Token reparations were paid. And then silence. In the words of feminist writer Germaine Greer in her

pioneering study of women painters, *The Obstacle Race*, “At no time did anyone throw his cap in the air and rejoice that another painter, capable of equaling Hals at his best, had been discovered.”

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Judith Leyster. Born 1609 to a non-artistic Dutch family. Obtained her artist training from no one knows who. But by age twenty she’d painted her *Self-Portrait*, a precocious display of obvious mastery.

Dressed in high style in a corseted wine-colored dress, accented with a most unsuitable projecting collar and matching white lace cuffs, Leyster is glorious in attire, and in attitude. She turns casually toward us, painting arm balanced atop a pokey-looking chair finial. Her mouth is slightly open as if to speak, and the start of a sly smile says she’s up to something.

There is at least one joke in the painting. As *New Yorker* critic Peter Schjeldahl has pointed out, Leyster’s paintbrush, held with assurance in her beautifully rendered right hand, aims directly at the crotch of the merry fiddler on her canvas. Deep meaning? Or a near-adolescent’s bawdy humor? Maybe a little of both. In the phrase of my friend art historian Mark Trowbridge, “This pipe is not just a pipe” (that’s a Magritte pun, for those keeping art history score at home). Whatever it means, the whole painting feels lively and a little naughty. It makes me hope that if I’d been twenty in 1620s Haarlem, Judy Leyster and I would’ve hung out.



Judith Leyster. *Self-Portrait*. c. 1630.

Her pointing paintbrush isn't the only veiled meaning in the painting. Infrared photography shows that the fiddler now depicted was not Leyster's first impulse. The musician covers what was originally the face of a young woman. Schjeldahl speculates that it

may have been a self-portrait—a fascinating meta-portrait within a portrait—and that covering her own face with that of a male figure was a premonitory act of self-effacement. In other words, Leyster predicted her own erasure from the history of art.

The Leyster/Hals comparison is common. She did her share of jolly genre scenes—drinkers, lute players, fiddlers—reminiscent of Hals (her *Self-Portrait* is a type pioneered by Hals: a sitter captured mid-turn as if greeting the viewer), but her work could also be radically unlike his, anticipating the quiet, tense interiors of Vermeer.

Leyster's tiny masterpiece, *The Proposition*, just 1 ft/30 cm high and less than 1 ft/30 cm wide, is one example. Here, a woman in a white smock sews intently by candlelight while a bearded older man in a fur hat leans over her, touching her shoulder with one hand and offering her money with the other. She ignores him. He insists, casting a dark, looming shadow. Candlelight highlights the coins thrust beneath the woman's face. At her feet, a brazier glows beneath her skirt. The room must be cold. She could probably use the money.

It's a creepy, unsettling scene, ripe with Mephistophelean overtones. The man is temptation, no doubt. The fur hat, strange indoors, implies wealth, but also something else. It looks foreign, at least very un-Dutch. From where does this dark stranger hail? At any rate, the older man does not seem to belong next to the much younger woman, who rebuffs his offer by focusing on her work.

Sewing—the old in and out—can easily be construed as a sexual metaphor. In fact (thanks again, Dr. Trowbridge), the medieval Dutch word for sewing was slang for “making carnal union.” In modern Dutch, *sewing* is still used the same way, though



Judith Leyster. *The Proposition*. c. 1631.

probably now better translated as a single word starting with *f*.

Regardless, in seventeenth-century Holland, needlework was something all proper women, highborn or low, should do well. Something a well-brought-up woman took pride in. It's Leyster's innovation to insert this virtuous activity into a scene of seduction that would usually take place in a brothel or bar. There, the come-on is depicted as welcome, a lark, some fun. But in Leyster's scene it is unwanted, unacknowledged, and, as the dark shadow implies, sinister.

In other words: this scene is from the woman's point of view.



Judith Leyster. *Early Brabantian Tulip*. 1643.

It's tempting to read *The Proposition* as a parable of the artist, resisting easy money and sticking with her creative work. Maybe saying, too, that a woman painter is as virtuous as any seamstress.

It's also tempting to see it as a preemptive rebuff to the assaults on Leyster's reputation far in the future.

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Not long after her resurrection from a historical black hole, people began concocting all kinds of liaisons for Leyster. She was

Rembrandt's lover. Or no, she was Hals's lover. There is in fact no more evidence that she was romantically involved with either man than there is of a love affair between Hals and Rembrandt themselves. It is a wholesale fantasy based on the fact that she was a woman, they were men, alive in the same nation in the same century. They must have had sex.

Though there was no romance between Leyster and Rembrandt (or Leyster and Hals or between Rembrandt and Hals or, oh, never mind), there was romance between Leyster and another Haarlem painter (sex, too). It's impossible to know whether this was good or bad for Leyster personally. But for the history of art, the line is pretty clear: all but two of Leyster's known works were painted between 1629 and 1635. On June 1, 1636, Leyster married fellow painter Jan Miense Molenaer. He was more successful than she was in terms of sales, though her inferior as an artist. We don't know why there are no Leysters from the six months before her marriage, though things for Haarlem painters were difficult just then due to an outbreak of plague. The Guild of St. Luke suspended its annual dues that year and the following, as its members found it difficult to generate income in a city more concerned with survival than pretty pictures.

Possibly to escape the plague and in pursuit of a better art market, the newlyweds moved from Haarlem to Amsterdam within months of their marriage. There, Leyster gave birth to five children between 1637 and 1650: Johannes, Jacobus, Helena, Eva, and





Adélaïde Labille-Guiard. *Self-Portrait with Two Pupils, Mademoiselle Marie Gabrielle Capet (1761-1818) and Mademoiselle Carreaux de Rosemond (died 1788)*. 1785.



Adélaïde Labille-Guiard. *Portrait of Madame Adélaïde*. 1787.

Pupils to the Louvre. It was refused. Not good enough.

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Labille-Guiard's artistic chutzpah wasn't limited to personal causes. She was also, quite happily, a brush for hire. Two years after *Self-Portrait with Two Pupils*, she fired off another political shot: *Portrait of Madame Adélaïde* at the Salon of 1787. Painter Adélaïde Labille-Guiard, meet Princess Adélaïde, daughter of King Louis XV.

One the daughter of a Paris shopkeeper,

one the daughter of the former king of France, but their portraits share so much. Both are full-length images of luxuriously attired women posed before easels. Both are unmarried and childless. Both have scissors and rolled-up cloth beside them. Behind both Adélaïdes, a Vestal Virgin. Above Madame Adélaïde is a carved frieze of her father, much as the bust of painter Adélaïde's father hovers near her. The remarkable thing here isn't so much that Labille-Guiard has presumed royal grandeur, but that Princess Adélaïde assumes the role of artist.

The French nobility was bitterly divided between the current King Louis XVI, with his wife Marie-Antoinette, and the "old guard" of the Mesdames (the king's aunts, of whom Mme. Adélaïde was one). The program for the 1787 Salon identifies Labille-Guiard as the *premier Peintre de Mesdames*. Her ostensible rival, Vigée-Lebrun, was already painter to the queen.

Vigée-Lebrun's *Marie-Antoinette Surrounded by Her Children* also debuted at the 1787 Salon. They were hung essentially as matching pendants, and viewers were encouraged to compare and contrast the female artists and their royal subjects.

Vigée-Lebrun tried to boost Marie-Antoinette's reputation by depicting her as the motherly type, gifting the future of France with her offspring. But Labille-Guiard's childless Madame Adélaïde stakes out her own honorable position. She stands before three profiles (apparently created

Knights of Saint-Lazare (a very old, by then mostly ceremonial order).

But just a year into her grandest project, everything changed. The Storming of the Bastille led to the Reign of Terror: sixteen thousand enemies of the revolution guillotined and twenty-five thousand executed by other means. The king and queen were beheaded, of course, and so were friends of the aristocrats, like Madame du Barry. Artists died, too, and many, like Vigée-Lebrun, fled. The Mesdames also made it out, taking money they owed Labille-Guiard with them.

But Labille-Guiard stayed, together with



Adélaïde Labille-Guiard. *Portrait of François-André Vincent*. 1795.

Vincent, in a home they rented (wisely) outside Paris. Both were in perilous positions as former painters to the court.

Amid such danger, Labille-Guiard did a shrewd, familiar thing. Just as with members of the Royal Academy, she painted the portraits of key deputies of the revolution's National Assembly. Including one Maximilien Robespierre, author of the Terror.

As with her earlier portraits, painting these men made Labille-Guiard subtly allied with them. She needed such alliances. That she survived the Terror is nothing short of incredible.

Amid other unwise acts, she continued to work on the monumental canvas celebrating the king's brother. Even as the Mesdames and the Comte de Provence himself fled for their lives, she clung to her ambition. Her portraits of Robespierre and men like him may have saved Labille-Guiard's life, but no one could save her history painting.

On August 11, 1793, the Directory of the Department of Paris demanded she deliver "the large and small portraits of the former prince and all studies related to these works, to be devoured by flames." She had no choice but to comply. Anything else would have been sure suicide.

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I discovered the fate of Labille-Guiard's painting after a long day of classes, followed by hours puzzling out details (*Grand Master of the Order?*). By the time I left





Marie Denise Villers. *Portrait of Charlotte du Val d'Ognes*. 1801.



Marie Victoire Lemoine. *The Interior of an Atelier of a Woman Painter*. 1789.

James Laver wrote, “Although the painting is extremely attractive as a period piece, there are certain weaknesses of which a painter of David’s caliber would not have been guilty.”

But none other than Bernard Berenson, one of the most renowned art historians of his day and famous for his work in attributions, still considered it one of the greatest masterpieces of all time. And so also continued to insist that it must be by David.

It may be worth saying here that though the Met itself had published in its January 1951 *Bulletin* that the famous painting was

not by the famous painter, it wasn’t until 1977 that David’s name was removed from the bottom of the picture frame.

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After he retired from museum work, Sterling crossed Fifth Ave and became a professor at the Institute of Fine Arts in 1969. I would attend grad school at the Institute twenty years later, when a woman named Margaret Oppenheimer was working on her PhD there. I didn’t know her (though wish I had), but that’s not the point.

The point is that while still a doctoral candidate, Oppenheimer realized that Sterling was wrong (he would not have been surprised). By astounding coincidence—considering that less than 15 percent of the artists showing at the 1801 Salon were women—she discovered that the *Portrait of Charlotte du Val d’Ognes* must be by another female painter, Marie Denise Villers.

About whom, little is known. Her maiden name was Lemoine and she went by “Nisa.” She was married to an architect. She came from a family of artists, and her two older sisters, Marie Elisabeth Gabiou and Marie Victoire Lemoine, were also painters. Perhaps her mother, like my mother, believed girls are best named Mary.

One sister, Marie Victoire Lemoine, has her own work, *The Interior of an Atelier of a Woman Painter*, in the Met’s collection. It’s not found in the same grand gallery as Villers’s painting, which hangs alongside

masterful portraits by David, Labille-Guiard, and Vigée-Lebrun. It is, in fact, rarely on view. But Lemoine's painting also depicts a young artist, bent over a folder of drawing paper balanced on her thighs. And there the similarities end. It's just not very good.

Lemoine's painting is thought to be a tribute to Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, who, dressed all in white (not ideal for painting surely) with a long mahlstick in hand, stands before a canvas depicting the goddess Athena, while her apprentice sketches at her feet. The student is believed to be Lemoine herself, and the painting a not entirely successful homage to her teacher.

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But then, even Villers's own paintings aren't nearly as good as the one in the Met. Oppenheimer based her reattribution on an oil *modello*, a reduced-scale preliminary version, of a lost painting by Villers, *A Young Woman Seated by a Window*. It depicts a woman in white who looks similar to the sitter in the Met's painting, down to a lovely oval-shaped face, updone hairdo, and the very same pin in her hair. What's more, she wears white, her body hooks to the right, and she sits on a window seat.

But even with all that, it's hard to believe it's by the same person. It's bland and a little illustrate-y, more like a Maxfield Parrish print in my grandparents' bedroom than the towering genius of Jacques Louis David.

The only signed work by Villers in a major collection is *Study of a Woman from Nature*, at the Louvre, where Sterling himself must have seen it. It's also a bit like the *Portrait of Charlotte du Val d'Ognes*. A young woman, this time mostly in black, facing right, bent over tying her shoe. Her face is similarly shaped to the Met painting, her hair is also up. She looks out at us.

But there is no magic.

So how can the Met's portrait possibly be by Villers?



Marie Denise Villers. *A Young Woman Seated by a Window*. 1801.



Marie Denise Villers. *Study of a Woman from Nature* (also sometimes called *Madame Soustra*). 1802.

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We need a closer look at the painting's ostensible subject, Charlotte du Val d'Ognes. In a Metropolitan Museum of Art lecture from 2014 (online, and well worth seeing), art historian and consummate gumshoe Ann Higonnet describes traveling to Paris in search of the very room where the young woman sits for her portrait.

And finding it.

It is a gallery of the Louvre itself. An atelier dedicated to female art students, where they could receive instruction (separate and unequal) apart from male colleagues.

Further sleuthing by Higonnet concludes that while the painting's authorship should be transferred to Villers, the identity of the sitter remains Charlotte du Val d'Ognes. Both studied there at the time the portrait was done.

Higonnet's discovery helps us close an important gap in our psychic understanding of the painting: It's the portrait of one young female artist by another.

So it's not about sexual anxiety after all, but about artistic anxiety. Though in the case of early nineteenth-century women artists, the two can hardly be untwined. For the vast majority of female art students then, giving in to romantic love meant giving up painting. And in Marie Denise Villers's portrait, what separates the interior of the Louvre (where art is made and fame secured) from the outside world (of romance and domestic life) is a broken pane of glass.

Charlotte du Val d'Ognes is an object lesson. Like so many women, she gave up the dream of success as a professional artist when she became a wife. Her giving up is not surprising. Not just because social pressure bore down on women to put their husbands and children before all else. But it was also a terrible time to be a woman artist in France. "Although politically advanced," notes feminist art historian Linda Nochlin, "the revolution was in many ways socially conservative."

The gains that women painters like Labille-Guiard hoped to achieve never materialized.





Rosa Bonheur. *Portrait of "Buffalo Bill" Cody*. 1889.

Shortly after their meeting, Cody granted Bonheur total access to his Paris encampment. Bonheur made good use of her time there, completing some seventeen paintings, including a portrait of Buffalo Bill on his favorite horse.

It's a straightforward picture of a man on horseback, but Bonheur tips her hand as an artist primarily interested in animals. While Cody glances to one side, maybe enacting the tracker he once was, his white horse meets our gaze.

Bonheur's equestrian portrait of Buffalo Bill became an American icon. Cody had the painting shipped straight away to his wife. Years later, when he learned that his Nebraska home was in flames, he wired her:

"Save the Rosa Bonheur and let the flames take the rest!"

Buffalo Bill was a metaphor for all that America stood for; it's no surprise Bonheur was drawn to the man. Bonheur thought of herself as a forward-thinking woman in the American vein. "If America marches at the forefront of modern civilization," she said, "it is because of their admirably intelligent manner of bringing up their daughters and the respect they have for their women." For its part, America always liked Bonheur back. America's little girls played with Rosa Bonheur dolls then the way, a hundred years later, they would covet those that looked like Shirley Temple.

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Stepping through the front doors of the Metropolitan Museum of Art into the grandeur of the Great Hall, the first thing I looked for was Bonheur's *The Horse Fair* (see next spread). I was a twenty-something small-town girl in Manhattan, and that painting, hanging high above, reminded me of where I'd started, Montana, where we kept horses in the small corral behind our house. The art I'd grown up with—Russell, Remington, Curtis—was filled with horses, shorthand for a disappearing way of life.

Bonheur's roiling horseflesh was very different from the rangy mustangs and Appaloosas I'd grown up with, on canvas or in fact. Her muscular Percherons, native to France, were as fleshy and erotic as any Rubens or



Rosa Bonheur. *The Horse Fair*. 1852–1855.





Rosa Bonheur. *Ploughing in the Nivernais*. 1849.

Their unconventional marriage came just a year before Bonheur's first great public success, *Ploughing in the Nivernais*, unveiled at the Salon of 1849. On a clear fall day, a dozen Charolais oxen (native to Nivernais) yoked in pairs plow the soil in preparation for winter. Rich, turned-over earth fills the foreground while muscled animals march the middle. They are the heroes of the scene. The farmers and drivers with them are mostly tucked beneath wide-brimmed hats or behind the oxen's majestic bulk.

Bonheur more than ennoble the beautiful creatures doing God's work under a clear autumn sky. She loves them. Adores their fleshy ox bodies and big bovine heads. She makes us love them, too.

Though raised on a dairy farm, I never saw the worthiness of cows until standing before Bonheur's painting at the Musée

d'Orsay one rainy November in Paris. I sensed the steam rising from those sweaty flanks, smelled their earthy, pungent scent. These were noble creatures of admirable will and intelligence. PETA could only hope for a propagandist today as convincing as Bonheur.

It's often noted that humans mostly take second place to animals in Bonheur's work. Ruskin (remember him?), who dined with Bonheur once, later disparaged this tendency in her: "No painter of animals ever yet was entirely great who shrank from painting the human face, and Mlle. Bonheur clearly *does* shrink from it."

For her part, Bonheur was unimpressed with the eminent critic. "He is a gentleman," she conceded after their dinner, "an educated gentleman, but he is a theorist. He sees nature with a small eye, just like a

bird.” Bonheur knew animals. And she knew art from the position of the painter, not the theorist. She was no birdbrain.

Bonheur was fond of characterizing people as animals, including herself. In letters and other writing she variously refers to herself as a dog, a calf, an owl, a donkey, a boar, a tortoise, a bear, and no doubt more. But the animal she felt most kinship with was the ox or bull.

So is it any surprise that the heroic center of *Ploughing in the Nivernais* is no farm boy, but a great white ox who seems to have caught sight of us from the other side of the picture plane? There’s beautiful intelligence, and personality, in those bovine eyes.

What is a painter, or any artist, if not one who *sees*?

It seems to me that *Ploughing in the Nivernais* is, again at least in part, a self-portrait.

When Édouard Louis Dubufe painted Bonheur in 1857, she didn’t like his depicting her leaning on a “boring table.” With Dubufe’s permission, Bonheur herself painted in a lovely brown bull cuddled at her side instead, her painting hand draped over its broad, hairy neck. And while Dubufe’s Bonheur stares a little vacuously into the distance (shades of fashion models to come), Bonheur’s bull engages us with frank intelligence.

An odd couple at first glance, Bonheur with her bull would be familiar to anyone raised in Catholic France from depictions of the four Evangelists. Matthew, Mark, Luke,



Édouard Louis Dubufe. *Portrait of Rosa Bonheur*. 1857.

and John each have a corresponding symbol: man, lion, ox, and eagle, respectively. As authors of the Gospels, the Evangelists are usually depicted with a book, a writing instrument, and their symbol nearby. Note that Saint Luke is represented by the ox. Saint Luke is also the patron saint of artists.

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Perhaps such saintly connotations offered a counter-narrative to Bonheur’s many public “unorthodox” habits. The smoking, the cropped hair, the wearing of pants—all taboos for women, some illegal.





Edmonia Lewis. *The Death of Cleopatra*. 1876.

tunic, kneels with clasped hands, gazing upward. Her long hair, parted in the center, falls softly to either side of her classically idealized face. The man standing beside her is nearly nude, wearing only loose-fitting shorts. His large right hand rests protectively on the woman's shoulder. A chain hangs from his still manacled left wrist, but he raises that fist in triumph.

His left foot rests atop the ball of his broken chain, where in a classical statue the head of a vanquished enemy might be (see Donatello's *David* for a Renaissance take). Positioning one leg higher than the other causes Lewis's contemporary figure to naturally stand in that most classical pose: *contrapposto*, a trick of the Greeks whereby having one active leg enlivens a standing figure (check out the *Doryphoros* by Polykleitos).

Though Lewis celebrates a recent (for her) historical event in *Forever Free*, it is thoroughly grounded in tradition. This marriage of new and old is her genius. A clothed woman with an unclothed (or barely clothed) man can be seen as far back as ancient Egypt (*Prince Rahotep and His Wife Nofret*, for example). Or in the Kore and Kouros figures of Greece, where male Kouros are nude and female Kore wear belted *peplos*, tunics similar to the one worn by the kneeling woman in *Forever Free* (see the *Peplos Kore* from the Acropolis). *Forever Free* was as timely as America itself and as timeless as the classical world.

Lewis found her own freedom in Rome, the eternal city, alongside a small group of fellow women expats. They included the



Edmonia Lewis. *Forever Free (The Morning of Liberty)*. 1867.

sculptors Harriet Hosmer, Margaret Foley, and Emma Stebbins. (The internationally successful Hosmer helped Lewis secure the former studio of Italian Neoclassical master Antonio Canova.)



Edmonia Lewis. *The Wooing of Hiawatha (Old Arrow-Maker and His Daughter)*. 1872.

Hiawatha is nowhere in Lewis's piece, but there is the deer lying before Minnehaha, and it's us she looks up at. We are Hiawatha. Lewis has done away with the privileged white viewer, even while depicting the work of an august white poet. We are all Chipewewa now.

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I'm white, but two of my siblings are Native American. My sister Diane, an enrolled member of the Blackfeet Nation, is eleven years older than me. A great boon to my childhood, since she could drive and, crucially, still liked going to fun places, such as Taco John's and the YMCA. And every summer of my childhood she took me for long days at the Montana State Fair.

One summer when I was about eight, our brother Tom won a blue ribbon for one of his paintings. His canvas of a man in a hospital bed was one of very few in the Fine Art Hall not on a "Western" theme (what art I saw growing up mostly concerned horses, cowboys, Indians, bison, and the like). I held Diane's hand as we walked along looking for Tom's painting, silently bestowing titles on those we passed: *Indian Girl with Doll*. *Cowboys Shooting Up Saloon*. *Braves Painted for War*. *Singing Cowboy on Horseback*. They all looked a little bit the same, like illustrations in books of fairy tales. Nothing like Western life as I knew it.

Diane stopped walking. She was staring at a painting of a young Plains Indian woman, about her age. The woman was pretty, like



Henry Rocher: *Carte-de-Visite of Edmonia Lewis*. c. 1870.

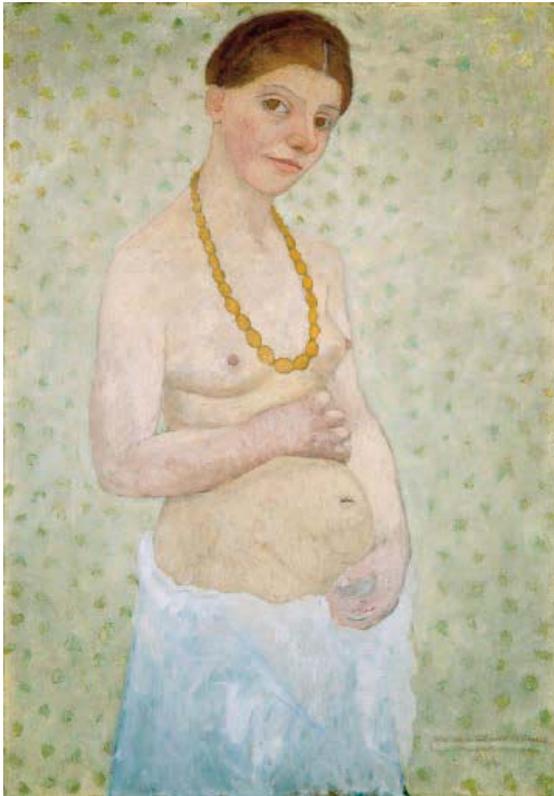
my sister, with high cheekbones and dark braids falling over buckskin-covered breasts. Her brown eyes stared back at Diane's, but they were vacant, like an Indian doll. Nothing like my lively sister, whose favorite fair ride was the terrifying Zipper.

The first time I saw Edmonia Lewis's work, when I was an undergrad, I thought of that long-ago day with Diane. I happened to open a slim book on Neoclassical sculpture



contest for the supremacy of the avant-garde was being fought in the arena of the female nude, painted large in scale,” writes Cubism scholar Natasha Staller. *Contest* is certainly *le mot juste* in this case.

Yet that contest was underway before 1907. The previous year, a nude as groundbreaking as those by Matisse and Picasso had already been painted, by a woman. In Paula Modersohn-Becker’s *Self-Portrait, Age 30, 6th Wedding Day*, the unclothed subject is the artist herself. Standing life-size, she



Paula Modersohn-Becker. *Self-Portrait, Age 30, 6th Wedding Day*. 1906.

stares out at us, comfortable and impassive. From the waist up she wears only an amber necklace that rests between her small breasts. Her left hand holds a kind of skirt or drapery around her waist, while her right rests—protectively? meaningfully?—above her protruding belly.

It’s painting as manifesto, not one brush-stroke less so than Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger*. In a *New Yorker* interview, art historian Diane Radycki describes Modersohn-Becker as “the missing piece in the history of twentieth-century Modernism.”

“Cézanne is the father of us all,” is a line attributed both to Picasso and to Matisse. Certainly it’s true he fathered them both.

It’s equally true that Modersohn-Becker is mother to an alternative strand of Modernism: psychologically probing, personally brave, flagrantly and unrepentantly female. Think Frida Kahlo and Alice Neel, Ana Mendieta, Kiki Smith, Nancy Spero, Cindy Sherman, Catherine Opie, and countless more. The list is eminent and long.

* * * * *

I like to picture Modersohn-Becker in a cold Parisian flat, in the spring of 1906. She’s waited until the light is good, but sun in May is weak at best. She’s stripped to the waist, chilled, and alone but for her camera. She’s left her husband, her parents, and her



Paula Modersohn-Becker. *Portrait of Clara Rilke-Westhoff*. 1905.



Paula Modersohn-Becker. *Reclining Mother and Child II*. 1906.

studio outside their home in Worpswede (as did he), painting from nine in the morning until seven at night, with a two-hour break midday for family lunch, prepared by a cook. She had more support than most women artists, of any era. But even with that and with yearly visits to Paris, she struggled. A rural art colony, Worpswede looked backward while Modersohn-Becker saw the future. “She is understood by no one,” wrote her husband, who tried to understand.

While working on her *Portrait of Clara Rilke-Westhoff*, Modersohn-Becker wrote her mother, “That one is so terribly stuck when one is married is rather hard.”

Rilke-Westhoff herself later wrote, “Paula threw one piece of peat on the other through a little squeaking door in the kiln, as one tear after another rolled down her cheek while she explained to me how very important it was for her to be out ‘in the world’ again, to go back to Paris again.

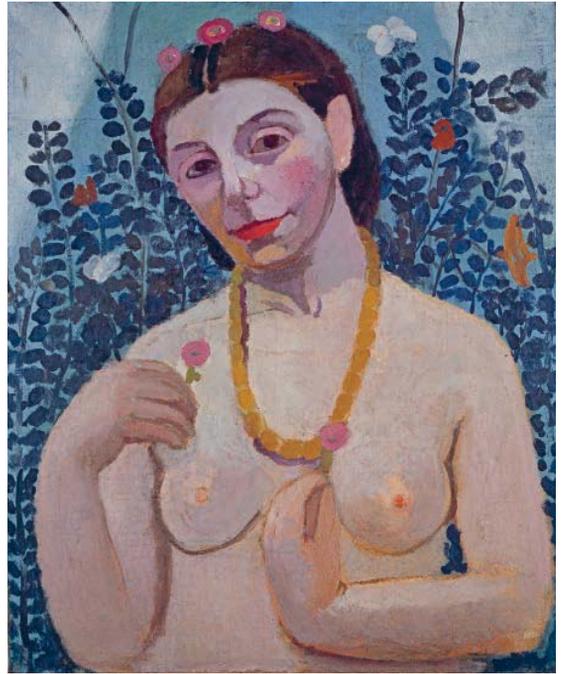
“When I think of it, the world’—she said.”

In early 1906, just days after Otto’s birthday, Modersohn-Becker fled Worpswede, intending never to return.

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I remember the very moment I saw Modersohn-Becker's work for the first time, sitting near the front of the Institute's lecture space, in the mansion's former ballroom. Professor Schiff was a few feet away, peering into his notes at the lectern. He'd fought on the German side in World War II, was captured by the French, and then came to New York, where he lived among the bohemians at the Hotel Chelsea. A few years ago I read this by Patti Smith in her memoir *Just Kids*, from when she lived there: "Occasionally I would bump into Gert Schiff, the German scholar, armed with volumes on Picasso." I smiled, picturing Schiff just as he was at the lectern twenty years later, hunched over a text on art, rumpled, wry, impassioned.

A slide of Modersohn-Becker's *Self-Portrait with Amber Necklace* popped up, many feet high beside him, the crystal chandeliers and mirrored gilt walls of the room disappearing behind a woman's pale torso. Schiff glanced up, looked startled, then gave a sigh—of what? Recognition? Admiration? I followed his gaze. An ample nude seen from the waist up, body turned toward us, her eyes cast somewhere to our right. She stands before a sky-blue background filled with vines and flowers. She wears an amber necklace—warm gold against peach skin—and in her pulled-back hair are three small pink flowers. She holds two similar flowers against her chest, the one in her left hand turned upward between her breasts.



Paula Modersohn-Becker. *Self-Portrait with Amber Necklace II*. 1906.

"They are," Schiff said beside her, "nearly the same color and shape as her areolas." His German accent slipped softly on the s's.

It looks so clinical written down, but sounded beautiful to me then. Unlike every other nude we'd seen in the course, she was sensual but not sexual, brimming with health and strength. So unlike her Nordic and Germanic peers, slashing, sultry nudes as she-wolves and sex objects, devourers and meat.

I was stunned by the painting, trying to take notes, but not wanting to look away. When Schiff said it was a self-portrait, I almost dropped my pen. When he said that





Vanessa Bell. *Virginia Woolf*. 1912.

Bell's portrait of Woolf reveals the explosive impact on her art of Britain's first Post-Impressionist exhibition, organized two years before by her lover, Roger Fry, with the help of her husband, Clive Bell (hold on to your hat, that brain-twister and more to come). Experiencing Cézanne, Gauguin, van Gogh, pierced the young painter: "Here was a possible path," Bell wrote of seeing their work, "a sudden liberation and encouragement to feel for oneself."

The heavy black outline of forms in her portrait of Woolf, the loose, visible brushstrokes and the bright contrasts of orange armchair and teal background all reveal the influence of Post-Impressionism. But one thing in particular is Bell's own. She depicts her sister, a person as close to her as anyone in the world, without a face. Instead, Bell

captures something essential in her, a pose or way of being in the world as distinctive as her facial features. Virginia Woolf was noted among friends and family for the rapid mobility of her facial expressions—impossible to capture in paint or by camera—and also her violent dislike of posing for portraits of any kind. Bell understood her, body and soul. She ignored mere features, capturing her sister's essence instead. "It's more like Virginia in its way than anything else of her," Leonard Woolf told a critic decades after his wife's death (speaking of another faceless portrait of his wife by his sister-in-law, done that same year).

The sisters traded muse roles regularly.

At the time of her portrait, here, Woolf was at work on her first novel, then called *Melymbrosia*, later published as *The Voyage Out*. Bell served as model for one of the novel's main characters, Helen Ambrose. Bell would later loom large in Woolf's masterpiece, *To the Lighthouse* (#2 in a BBC top 25 greatest British novels ever poll), where a painter, Lily Briscoe, is the soul of the story. Later still, Bell was Susan in Woolf's most experimental work, *The Waves* (#16 in the BBC top 25).

But were they alike? In ambition, yes, but not much else.

Bell was stolid, self-contained, an almost totemic figure of self-possession, who, while socially unconventional, was, according to biographer Frances Spalding, "voraciously maternal." Virginia, on the other hand, was brilliant but brittle, childless, and

relations who regularly dropped by for teas, dinners, and long evening visits, and a brilliant younger sister of fragile emotional health (Woolf had by now experienced at least two serious breakdowns). Through all of it, Bell painted.

“I don’t think I’m nearly as enterprising as you (or Duncan),” she once wrote Fry, “about painting anything I don’t find at my door.” Reading about Bell in her sister’s diaries, this is the talent I recognized I would most need as a mother: Bell simply got to work, with whatever was at hand. Such as her sister in a nearby armchair. Or houseguests.

To wit, Frederick and Jessie Etchells, a brother and sister duo of painters who were Bell’s first guests at her new country home in late summer 1912. That Bell both hosted them (along with Frederick’s annoying dog) and painted alongside them is testament to her work ethic.

On a formal level, Bell is assured here. Dark sinewy outlines—what Fry (a biased art historian, perhaps, but a sharp one) called her “slithery handwriting”—demarcate figures and shapes while the rest of the canvas pops with bold rectangles of color. As with Picasso, who was never wholly non-representational, these abstract passages refer to something concrete in the world. In this case, the canvases the siblings work on and those stacked against the wall behind Jessie. Equally rectilinear are horizontal slices of clear color denoting the garden view between open French doors: stone steps, red tile courtyard, green lawn, gray wall.



Vanessa Bell. *Frederick and Jessie Etchells Painting*. 1912.

Bell’s painting offers more than a mere formal exercise. It’s moving to see sibling artists working together (not so different from Bell painting her writer sister), but she includes a whiff of the injustice she must have sometimes known even in bohemian Bloomsbury. While Frederick (who Vanessa didn’t much like) works standing at an easel (Was it Bell’s easel? Did she have an extra? Did he bring one with him on the train?), his sister crouches on the floor. Her brother was unrepentant even decades later, when he told the Tate, “It is startling to come across so authentic a representation of oneself at a so much younger period, and Jessie is equally true to one’s recollection.” He must have seen his sister working on the floor a lot.

* * * * *

Bell’s masterwork of this early period is the spare and haunting *Studland Beach*, called



Vanessa Bell. *Studland Beach*. 1911.

“one of the most radical works of the time in England” by art historian Richard Shone. The painting’s power lies as much in Bell’s own past as in the Modernist future she helped create.

A diagonal shoreline divides the scene between water and sand, with figures above and below. In the upper right, a woman seen from behind stands before a white cabana as if entering a portal to another world. Maybe the very one revealed here: simplified, timeless, eternal, filled with children, anchored by women. The woman in a hat sitting in the lower left may be a nanny, but might also be Virginia Woolf. She rests on

the beach with a young child, watching the figures above: the standing woman with a single thick braid down her back, who has children at her feet hunched over hunting or building in the sand while she stares out at a horizonless sea. The figure calls to mind predecessors as wide-ranging as Piero della Francesca’s quattrocento altarpiece of the *Madonna della Misericordia*, to modern visions of Munch and Matisse.

Bell’s women and children by the sea predicts, maybe even partly inspired, Virginia Woolf’s literary masterpiece *To the Lighthouse*. The novel grapples with the sisters’ real childhood experience seaside with

multiple siblings, an overbearing father, and a warm, capable mother who dies too soon.

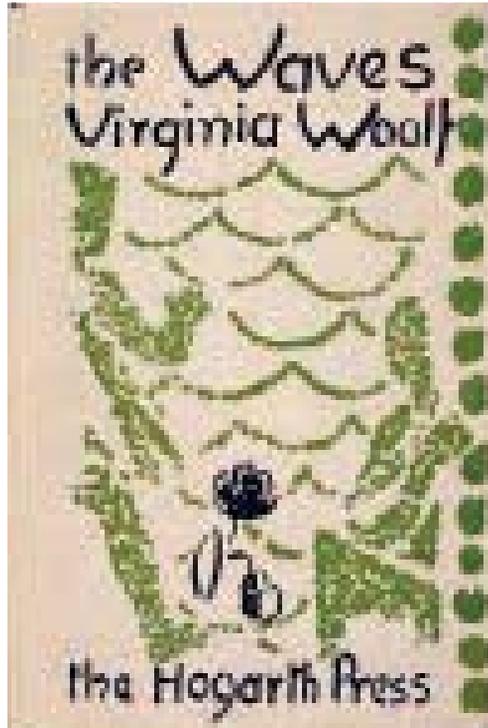
The Stephen family spent summers in St. Ives looking onto Godrevy Lighthouse, a singular verticality on the horizontal plane of the sea. One of the novel's main characters, Lily Briscoe, is a painter who suffers outward criticism and inward uncertainty, but who in the end prevails. Hers are the novel's final words: "With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush, I have had my vision."

The magic of both *Studland Beach* and *To the Lighthouse* is the prosaic transformed into the highest art, so high as to be almost a spiritual experience. *Studland Beach* could be an altarpiece for a modern era—Mother and Child meet women and children. Everyday life becomes eternal.

* * * * *

Bell did the covers for her sister's books. Her abstracted, almost ecstatic lines denoting lighthouse, waves, or whatever was within (the covers are also charmingly literal) became the hallmark style of the Hogarth Press (a hand press and a publishing imprint that Virginia and her husband started in 1917).

And Bell continued to inspire her sister's art. As noted, Susan in *The Waves* is based on Bell, while the work as a whole seems influenced by her paintings. Woolf wrote in her diaries that *The Waves* was "an abstract



Vanessa Bell. Cover of First Edition of 'The Waves' by Virginia Woolf. 1931.

play-poem . . . a mystical eyeless book." It was, like her sister's paintings, faceless, abstracted, but always drawing on the vital stuff of life itself.

A decade after writing *The Waves*, Woolf deliberately drowned. Bell suffered at her loss, but went on. Into old age, painting until the very end. A survivor, she might have been her sister's hero. Near the end of Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out*, an old man declares, "It's not cowardly to wish to live. It's the very reverse of cowardly. Personally, I'd like to go on for a hundred years . . . Think of all the things that are bound to happen!"



If this painting waves any flag it's that of portraiture still alive and kicking even after the artists and critics and art historians who "mattered" all believed it stone cold and long buried.

Neel's high-flown brows are familiar to anyone who's ever peered into a mirror putting on mascara, an indication of careful attention. Neel must have done this painting by looking in a mirror. For one thing, she disliked working from photographs, desiring the pulse of personhood and emotion beneath real flesh. But also, here she holds her paintbrush in the right hand and Neel was left-handed.

She wears glasses in a nod to old age and honest scrutiny and even waning sexual allure. To quote her contemporary, Dorothy Parker: "Men seldom make passes / At girls who wear glasses." Or to quote feminist art historian (and Neel subject) Linda Nochlin, eyeglasses "are hardly part of the traditional apparatus of the nude." Neel is being both scrupulous and poking a little fun: *Here ya go, male gaze, enjoy.*

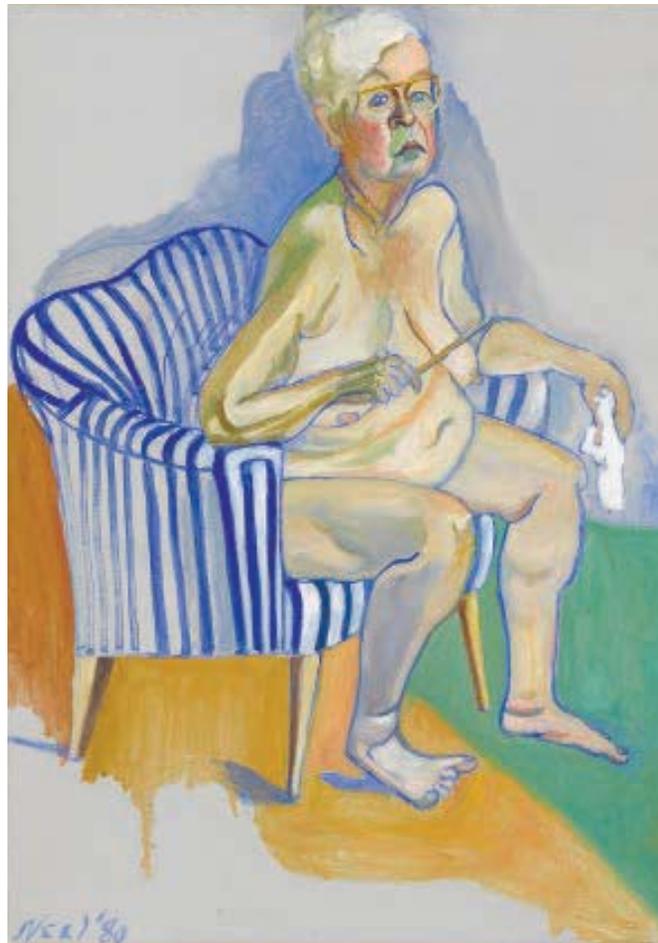
Unlike Rembrandt's weary personal testaments to the ravages of time, there's no sense that Neel feels sorry for herself. What many might consider a ruin of a body is just realism at work, a fact like any other. Though painted in an age when finding something that might still *épater le bourgeois* was almost impossible, a naked old woman was pretty damned shocking.

"Frightful, isn't it?" Neel cackled to critic Ted Castle. "I love it. At least it shows a

certain revolt against everything decent." No one ever revolted more consistently than Alice Neel.

* * * * *

While there's often some charming mystery to writing about artists of the past, holes in knowledge we can (however unconsciously)



Alice Neel. *Self-Portrait*. 1980.

to the Upper East Side. But then, how did I? Later, I sent both my children to the same kind of school in San Francisco and taught art history to high school students there for years. Art in Steiner schools is the linchpin of the curriculum, whether the class is English, history, math, or physics. In a sense, Neel sent her kids to her own version of parochial school, one that held art as the holy of holies.

Neel was adept at getting what she wanted, but it took a couple of decades of painting friends and neighbors in Spanish Harlem before she realized a little networking wouldn't kill her. With a nudge from her therapist, Neel starting asking art world folks in power to take a seat. Shades of shrewd Adélaïde Labille-Guiard.

Neel started in 1960 with poet and newly appointed Museum of Modern Art curator Frank O'Hara. As an art-maker himself and a gay man, maybe he seemed nearer Neel's regular milieu of outcasts. But Neel depicts O'Hara in perfect profile, a rare formal position for her (though he wears a rumpled gray crewneck) that calls to mind Roman emperors on coins or Renaissance profile portraits. Quite specifically, O'Hara here recalls Piero della Francesca's *Duke of Urbino*, who could be looking right back at the MOMA curator across five centuries. Painting O'Hara in profile emphasizes his "strong" nose and jutting chin, as does della Francesca's Urbino portrait. Both are men of power, though where the Duke of Urbino's structured red cap is almost crownlike,



Alice Neel. *Frank O'Hara*. 1960.

O'Hara leans back into a spray of purple lilacs. O'Hara's open, staring eyes are as startlingly blue as a movie star's (Paul Newman's spring to mind; O'Hara liked a good movie-star reference), while behind him hangs a formless shadow, a kind of dark double portrait. That shadow looms large



Alice Neel. *Jackie Curtis and Ritta Redd*. 1970.



Alice Neel. *Kate Millett*. 1970.

Psychiatric Association's list of mental disorders until 1973).

Not that Neel gave a shit about any of it, not morality or social opprobrium or even legality. Her sons remember FBI agents descending on the apartment at the height of the Red Scare with a thick dossier on Neel's communist sympathies. Rather than quake or cajole, Neel admired "these two Irish boys" and immediately invited them to sit for her "in their trench coats." The FBI men declined and quickly exited. Posterity weeps at the loss.

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The rise of feminism was at last the perfect storm to raise Neel's battered boat. Here after all was a woman artist, in the thick of the New York art world for decades, who had been callously overlooked. She'd always been egalitarian in her approach to her subjects: working-class men and women of all races, mothers of all kinds, fine artists of every sex and race, pregnant women, curators and art historians, nudes of all ages, gay men and transvestites, the glory of humanity at every point on the way station of the century, and through it all she'd stuck to her own style, never swayed by theory or fashion. Feminists in the 1970s took up Neel's cause with vigor, though Neel refused to spout a party line. "I much preferred men to women," she shrugged. Her contemporaries rightly scoffed at Neel's feminist branding. Painter May Stevens has said, "She wasn't a feminist; she was an Alice Neelist."

Regardless, the movement served Neel well. In 1970, *TIME* magazine asked her to create their cover on Kate Millett, the Columbia grad student whose dissertation, published as *Sexual Politics*, was an unlikely bestseller. Last of a dying breed, Neel of course wanted to paint from the living model, but Millett refused. Like a lead singer worried about pissing off her bandmates, she didn't want to break ranks with the sisterhood by taking the limelight. Never one to pass up an opportunity, Neel settled for a photograph.

By painting the cover for *TIME*, Neel reached a bigger audience than any





Lee Krasner. *Self-Portrait*. 1930.

She refused.

Ruth, just eighteen years old and perhaps more pliant, or with less grasp of her own destiny, stepped or was pushed into the breach. According to Krasner biographer Gail Levin, Ruth “never forgave her sister.”

But crucially, and quickly, Krasner forgave herself.

The September after Rose’s death, Krasner applied to the National Academy of Design, on Manhattan’s Upper West Side, and was accepted. Like most serious art schools, students there began by sketching from casts of Classical and Renaissance sculptures before they could enter “life drawing” classes, to which they had to apply.

Krasner’s application to life drawing was this assured self-portrait, done outside her parents’ home in rural Long Island, where they had moved (and she with them) in 1926. “I nailed a mirror to a tree, and spent the summer painting myself with trees showing in the background,” Krasner said. “It was difficult—the light in the mirror, the heat and the bugs.” It was both technically challenging and a bold choice for a school steeped in nineteenth-century Academic (read: highly traditional) painting.

Krasner depicts herself as a no-nonsense young woman in a dirty painter’s apron and short-sleeved work shirt with short hair to match. Her cool-eyed stare is familiar from the beach photo, but here she casts a cold eye on herself. Piercing and a little merciless, she doesn’t flatter herself physically: her lips, nose, and ears are big, her eyes small. But in one way she does flatter: she wholly and self-consciously presents herself as a painter. *This* is me.

The painting got her into life drawing class (enticingly called “Life in Full”) at the Academy, where she would be allowed to draw from the nude model, but not without a scolding from her teachers, who said, “When you paint a picture inside, don’t pretend it’s done outside.” They thought she’d made up the trees for some reason, while keeping strictly to nature when it came to the awkward planes of her own face.

* * * * *

no less than the boxing ring or wrestling mat. It tended to attract men. Or actually, no. It tended to *recognize* men, those brawling, “heroic” action figures.

But this is not about Jackson Pollock. This is about Lee Krasner, married to him for eleven years, but a painter for three decades after he died and painting for nearly twenty years before they met. If one of the great aims of Modernism was to “make it new” (to quote Ezra Pound, who was, somewhat confoundingly, quoting an eighteenth-century Chinese king), then it



Lee Krasner. *Seated Nude*. 1940.

was Krasner who got there first. She beat Pollock in the first round.

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But I’m getting ahead of myself.

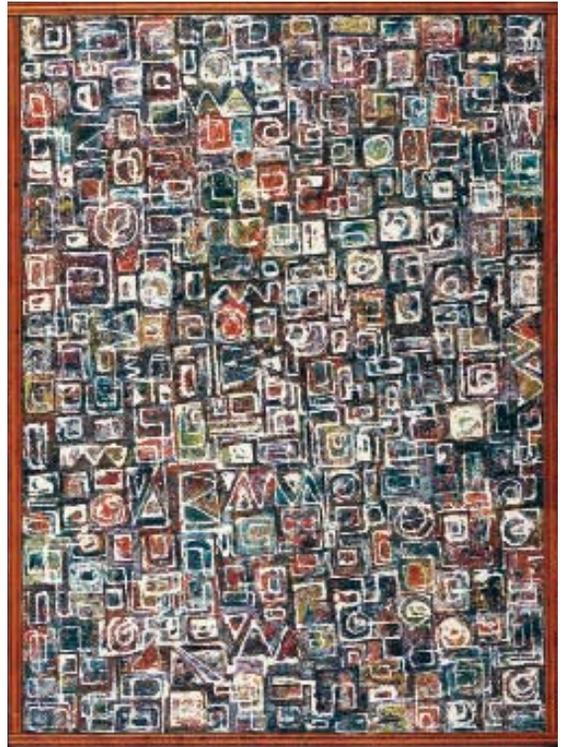
Krasner left the Academy in 1932 with a handsome White Russian émigré boyfriend named Igor Pantuhoff and a desire to pursue the new. One Academy instructor, Leon Kroll, had once told her to “go home and take a mental bath.” Instead, she took off and immersed herself in the avant-garde.

She and Pantuhoff moved in together (they never married, possibly because Pantuhoff’s anti-Semitic Russian family were the very sort whose pogroms caused Krasner’s family to flee the Old Country in the first place). Together they frequented an eatery called the Jumble Shop, a gathering place for serious artists from Arshile Gorky to Willem de Kooning, where “you didn’t get a seat at the table unless you thought Picasso was a god,” according to Krasner.

Like de Kooning and Gorky—and like Picasso himself—Krasner had not yet taken up total abstraction. But as her *Seated Nude* demonstrates, she was working through the complex lessons of Cubism under the tutelage of German painter Hans Hofmann, a legendary teacher who taught a “push pull” aesthetic of puncturing the two-dimensional picture plane and reordering it using the tension of relationships between simplified

as she loathed Krasner, even though he was the one peeing in her fireplace at parties—they purchased a home in the Springs on Long Island. There, in a big barn that Pollock used as his studio, he developed his revolutionary drip paintings, the brilliant epitome of gesture, action, and abstraction in one mind-blowing explosion of beautifully ordered paint and canvas.

In a small upstairs bedroom of the main house that Krasner used as her studio, she too worked from within. Just, you know, a lot *smaller*. Like Pollock, she took to standing over her canvas rather than working on an easel, and dripping paint. But where he lunged and danced like a fencer parrying with an opponent, she worked with “controlled chaos.” *Composition* is one of thirty-one paintings that make up her *Little Image* series (1946–1950), done in the bedroom at Springs. Here Krasner layers in thick surfaces of paint, divvying up the canvas with an all-over grid of white skeins that create dozens (hundreds?) of smaller images, like hieroglyphics in an Egyptian tomb. Like Egyptian hieroglyphics, there’s a tantalizing sense that if we only had the right key, we might unlock this mysterious language. At the same time, there’s something universal in their form, something we intuitively recognize as meaningful and human and timeless. Many commentators have connected Krasner’s *Little Image* paintings to the Kabbalah of Jewish mysticism, and more prosaically, simply to the Hebrew



Lee Krasner. *Composition*. 1949.

language she studied as a child. Certainly, in the painful years following World War II, Judaism must have often been in her mind, and heart.

Ah, Krasner’s heart.

* * * * *

She knew life with Pollock would be tumultuous. Early in their courtship, she’d gone with his brother to get him out of Bellevue, where he’d been drying out for days after a bender brought on by his mother coming to town. Pollock was an alcoholic, no doubt, and an angry, violent drunk at that. It was a



Lee Krasner. *Milkweed*. 1955.

lot, but Krasner was willing to take on all of it for the sake of art, and love.

Critic Amei Wallach has said of Pollock and Krasner that “his energy was lyric, hers was thundering. He was Mozart to her Wagner.” I smiled when first reading this because I’ve often thought of Krasner as Salieri to Pollock’s Mozart (in the pop-culture sense, i.e., the movie). Not that Krasner was dangerously envious or conniving, but because like Salieri she was an excellent artist, close enough to genius to know it immediately when she saw it. Much has been made of Krasner’s tireless promotion of Pollock, both

before and after his death, but she never stopped making art. Never. As artists they stood shoulder to shoulder, doing the work. Unlike the movie version of Salieri, Krasner did not want this Mozart dead. She very much wanted him to paint, and to live, on.

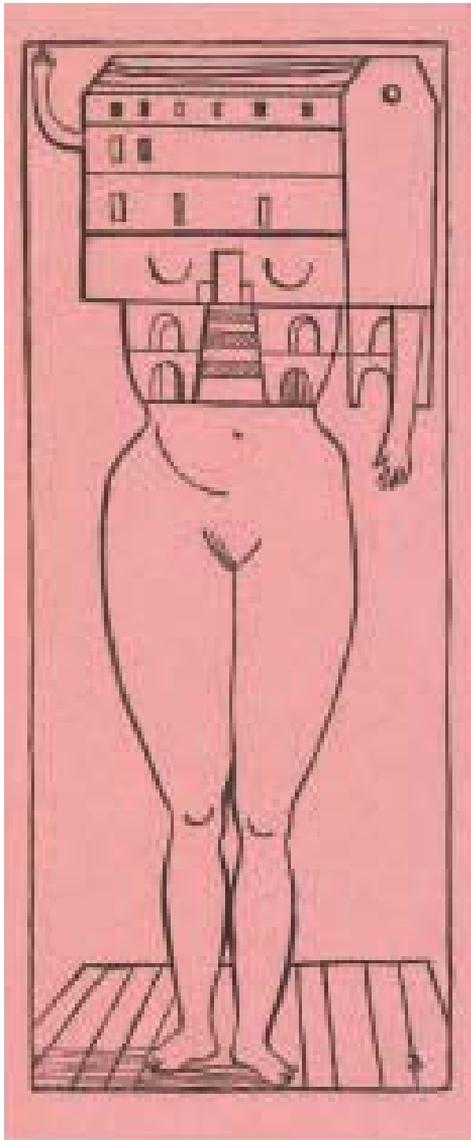
Famously, Pollock did neither.

The final year of his life, Pollock painted not at all, though Krasner tried to keep him working and sober. She got a reputation for bitchiness, which may have been deserved. But then, she had some things to feel bitchy about.

Her own work was not one of them. By the time Pollock died in an alcohol-fueled car crash (one young woman died with him; his mistress lived) in the summer of 1956, Krasner had completed a series of impressive collages made by tearing up old paintings she found insufficient and reassembling the shards on canvas. As in *Milkweed* here, the results revealed a beautiful balancing point somewhere between Matisse and Motherwell, embracing the past and present, hers and the whole history of Modern art. Krasner had found her own way, working from without and within. Her work had never been better.

Krasner named the collage paintings after they were made, coming up with titles by association. So *Milkweed* isn’t a “picture” of the plant per se, but a feeling or spirit or color or shape linked with it, at least in her mind. As to what *Milkweed* or any other





Louise Bourgeois. *Femme Maison*. 1984.
Version 2 of 2, only state, variant. 1984. Photogravure
with Chine-collé, plate: 10¹/₁₆ x 4⁷/₁₆ inches; sheet:
19⁵/₁₆ x 14¹⁵/₁₆ inches. The Museum of Modern Art.
© The Easton Foundation / Licensed by VAGA, NY.

frickin’ château, with a big central staircase and two stories of Roman arches like a mini coliseum. The figure’s left hand hangs loose at her side, while the other—or so I first thought—cheerfully waves. She seemed to be waving at me. Flagging me down? Later I thought the gesture might read differently, something like, *Hey you! Can you get this house off me?* The wall above her limp left hand is suspiciously coffin-shaped.

This was how I discovered Louise Bourgeois, a mother and an artist then around eighty years old, living just blocks west of where I’d first found her, and still furiously producing great work.

Femme Maison is literally “woman house,” but it really means “housewife.” Bourgeois was a housewife when she made them, and a pretty good one. Might we imagine that they are self-portraits of a kind? Bourgeois said that a *Femme Maison* “does not know that she is half naked, and she does not know that she is trying to hide. That is to say, she is totally self-defeating because she shows herself at the very moment that she thinks she is hiding.”

I hadn’t known anything about the artist then, but her *Femme Maison* contained everything I—a young woman starting out in life—feared (or secretly hoped for?) about womanhood. That a home would consume me, destroy a vital part of my personality and intelligence, i.e., my head. But also, *Hey man, that is one big-ass house. Maybe I could have a house like that?*

with elaborate borders and backgrounds. Repairing them was as much art as trade.

When Bourgeois's father came home from the war, he scouted the countryside for tapestries (often repurposed to divide up barns or keep horses warm on cold nights) while her mother ran a workshop out of their home, overseeing a staff of twenty-five

women. Her mother was both practical and artistic, capable of running a large workshop and of recreating beautiful artworks of the past. Though strong in many ways, her mother was not physically vital. She'd barely survived the Spanish flu during World War I (an epidemic that killed some forty-three thousand soldiers), and Bourgeois spent much of her childhood attending to her mother's health.

She said she wanted to be indispensable, and she was in other ways as well. By age ten, Bourgeois was drawing in the missing parts of tapestries. Since they were huge and heavy, they'd often been dragged along, wearing away the bottoms. "I became an expert at drawing legs and feet," Bourgeois said. "It taught me that art can be interesting, as well as useful. That is how my art started." It was in the workshop's sewing room, sitting with gossiping women intent on work but free to talk, that Bourgeois discovered her young English nanny was also her father's mistress. The rage it inspired fueled her art for decades.

Her father considered contemporary artists "parasites," but when Bourgeois's mother died in 1932 (ah, these dead mothers!), she abruptly switched from studying math at the Sorbonne to studying art. For her, the two pursuits were not so far apart. "The sculpture is a problem to be solved," Bourgeois said. "And it is a pleasure to find a solution." She studied in excellent studios by exchanging translating skills for art instruction (it was Americans who could pay, so she at least had her hated English



Louise Bourgeois. *Fillette*. 1968.
Latex over plaster, 23½ x 11 x 7½ inches. The Museum of Modern Art. © The Easton Foundation / Licensed by VAGA, NY.

We looked in the “Oak Room,” where wine and tea were served after Friday afternoon lectures, then wandered into the “Marble Room,” with its wall-to-wall golden-hued stone, where we ate and bitched and gossiped. How many hours did I sit in that room? More than in any lecture or seminar, that’s certain.

“Look,” Martha said. Pushed against one wall was a model of the building we were in, on a stand in an open cage, with movable oval mirrors above and to each side.

“I forgot about this,” I said, moving closer. I’d seen the press release when it was donated, but never thought of it again. Bourgeois had created and then given to the school a work called *The Institute*. It was as literal as could be imagined: a replica. Far from Bourgeois’s typically astonishing vision, it seemed out of place in her oeuvre.

Later I read a piece by feminist art historian and Institute grad Linda Nochlin, quoting Bourgeois: “The Institute played an important part in my life. For many years my husband Robert Goldwater taught there. The four o’clock Friday lectures and tea were events I enjoyed.” Oh, me too.

There was something Alice-in-Wonderland-like about being inside the Institute looking at an artwork called *The Institute* that was just that: the Institute. It was like I’d taken some of those Wonderland pills and things were swerving bigger, then smaller, then bigger. Time was zooming in and out, too.



Louise Bourgeois. *The Institute*. 2002. Silver, 12 x 27¼ x 18¼ inches. Steel, glass, mirrors, and wood vitrine: 70 x 40 x 24 inches. Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. © The Easton Foundation / Licensed by VAGA, NY.

There I was again with Martha in the Marble Room, as we’d been hundreds of times many years ago.

We touched the mirrors, turning them up and down, getting the bird’s-eye view of the roof and angles on the side walls, but never able to see inside. Cast in silver, *The Institute*’s windows coolly reflected back at us. There is always something unerringly true about Bourgeois’s choice of material. Silver is a chilly medium. And though *The Institute* can apparently be taken apart—each floor dismantled and peered into, like a 3-D jigsaw puzzle of rooms and levels—if



Louise Bourgeois. *Maman*. 1999.
Bronze, stainless steel, marble. 30.5 x 33 feet. © The Easton Foundation / Licensed by VAGA, NY.

you are just looking (the case for most any viewer), you cannot see in. The entire thing feels exclusive, hermetic to the point of being off-limits.

That's a little how it felt when I was a student there, too. As if, again, by some looking-glass magic I had made it inside a place where I did not belong.

Or maybe I did.

Linda Nochlin said of her time as a young woman at the Institute, "It was difficult,

but not always so—at times, the struggle itself was exhilarating and energizing. Bourgeois's late work, among other things, reminds me of the contradictory aspects of a vanished past."

I was overcome with a sense of the past colliding with the present. "I miss this," I said.

Martha laughed her throaty, '40s-movie-star laugh. "You could still have it," she said, as if that were obvious, then gesturing it was time to go. I followed her out, hoping she was right.

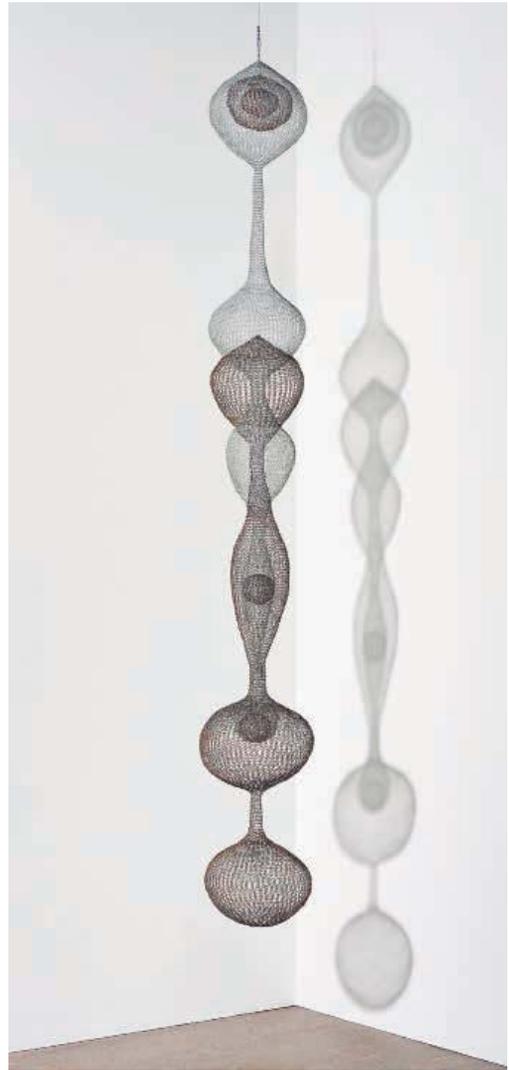


Mountain College meant everything to what Asawa would become.

The summer after she started at Black Mountain, Asawa returned to Mexico, where she taught drawing to children in Toluca. From villagers she learned how to weave baskets out of wire, a strategy of utilizing what was effective and at hand. The technique—no more complicated than crochet—beautifully met many criteria that Asawa had soaked up under Albers's tutelage.

Before the war, Albers had studied and taught at the Bauhaus, an influential German school that fed European Modernism, from painting, sculpture, and architecture to craftwork and industrial design. Through Albers (among many others, including his wife, renowned textile designer, Anni), the rational ideals of the Bauhaus were transmitted to American artists: refined simplicity, elegance, truth to material.

When she returned to Black Mountain that fall, Asawa began creating her own works in wire. "You make the line, a two-dimensional line, then you go into space, and you have a three-dimensional piece. It's like drawing in space," she said. She'd discovered a humble method that utilized industrial materials to create forms as elegant as nature itself. Asawa's hanging chain-mail baskets feel almost like they might have been birthed in a kind of mechanized petri dish. They are both insistently man-made and feel elemental, living parts of the natural world.



Ruth Asawa. *Untitled*. c. 1955.

Bourgeoning, breathing, they sway as they hang and cast complicated, ever-changing shadows.

* * * * *



Ruth Asawa. *Andrea Fountain*. 1968.

I knew about Ruth Asawa from the history of Black Mountain. Her fellow students included such influential artists as Ray Johnson and Robert Rauschenberg, while instructors spanned the gamut, from painter Jacob Lawrence to composer John Cage, from choreographer Merce Cunningham to architect Buckminster Fuller, her mentor and lifelong friend.

So I respected Asawa but knew little about her until moving to San Francisco, where she was famous as “the fountain lady.” Said fountains—mermaids, one on a sea turtle nursing a merbaby; a cylinder jam-packed *horror vacui* style with notable

city landmarks molded by local children; and others—filled me, I confess, with some dismay. *These* were products of Black Mountain?

They’re not my thing, but so what? Many people adore them, including the throngs who rallied to defend the landmark-filled fountain when Apple started its demolition for its new building in a shared plaza on Union Square.

So I didn’t “get” Ruth Asawa. That is, until one Sunday when I visited the de Young Museum with my teenaged son. He needed to find a work of art he liked for a class



Imogen Cunningham. *Ruth Asawa at work with children*. 1957.

pink haze. At the water's edge, a deer family shyly drank, innocent but alert. Basically, it looked a lot like Montana.

Why had I so much preferred the first painting, the one I hadn't fully understood? To paraphrase Lee Krasner when speaking

of her teacher, émigré Hans Hofmann: "His was the lesson of abstraction, and I got it." I just got abstraction; I liked it straight off.

But for my son it was the reverse, sublime landscape trumping any abstract art, whether painting or sculpture. He held the elevator



Ruth Asawa. *Untitled*. c. 1962.

artists whose work was utterly defined by economy and radical simplicity (see Brancusi's *Bird in Space* or Albers's *Homage to the Square*).

* * * * *

Asawa explored the possibility of wire for decades, following line into space wherever it led, neither burdened by past success nor afraid to explore new styles.

In the 1960s, friends brought her a desert plant from Death Valley, thinking she'd

enjoy its unusual, outer-space shape, and she did. But when she tried drawing the plant, its unusual structure proved difficult to capture in two dimensions, so she began sculpting. A new style of "tied" wire sculpture was born, anchored at the center while simultaneously reaching up and down into space.

These could almost be portraits of the artist.

Her career was, more or less from the start, one of national and even international scope. By the end of the 1950s, Asawa had already





Ana Mendieta. *Silueta Muerta*. 1976.

But there is more than eerie symbolism lurking in this story. On the 911 tapes, after her fall, Andre informed the emergency operator that he and his wife were both artists and had been arguing about his being more “exposed to the public than she was” and that in the heated course of things “she went out the window.” A bizarrely passive construction, as if she were a little bird who’d suddenly taken flight. Mendieta was indeed little, under 5 ft/152 cm tall, weighing just 93 lb/42 kg. Their high bedroom window was barely within her reach.

When the police arrived, they found the room in wild disarray, fresh scratches

marking Andre’s face and arms. He showed the officers a book about himself, saying, “I am a very successful artist and she wasn’t. Maybe that got to her, and in that case, maybe I did kill her.”

Two things are worth pointing out here. One, Mendieta, recently returned from working at the American Academy in Rome after winning the prestigious Rome Prize, was plenty successful. Two, both artists were big drinkers and had been drinking heavily that night.

Even Andre doesn’t seem to know exactly what happened; over the years, he’s given three very different accounts. First to the 911 operator, then to the police, then to the *New Yorker*. In the magazine’s 2011 interview, Andre told Calvin Tomkins that the warm night had turned suddenly cool and Mendieta had gotten up from their bed to close the window and “just lost her balance.”

Andre was arrested and briefly held. Bitter art-world factions sprang up immediately, for and against him. No question, Andre had power and wealth on his side. Artist friends paid his bail, and in 1988, he was acquitted. A celebrated pioneer of Minimalist sculpture, Andre and his brilliant career were affected not at all.

* * * * *

I only discovered Mendieta in 1992, the year the Guggenheim opened its new SoHo location (now defunct) not far from the gallery where my husband worked.



Ana Mendieta. *Volcano Series no. 2.* 1979.



Ana Mendieta. *Volcano Series no. 2.* 1979.



Ana Mendieta. *Untitled*. 1985.

any bullshit with her intensity. She was fierce.

Like an artist-shaman, in *Volcano Series no. 2* from 1979, shown here, she molded the earth to her purposes, filled the goddess-shaped hole with gunpowder, and set it on fire. The transformation of gunpowder—light-filled, spewing, active, and alive—to dead ash was a kind of transubstantiation of matter. One she, as the artist, had performed in and on the earth.

Magic.

* * * * *

In 1983, Mendieta took up residence at the American Academy in Rome. The city was a revelation. It offered a new context for her Latin heritage. According to author Robert Katz, Rome was “a midplace in the geography of her soul between Cuba and America, neither motherland nor fatherland, a kind of sisterland where she felt strong and free.”

With use of a dedicated studio, Mendieta began working indoors for the first time. Her final pieces were also her first meant to be exhibited in a gallery just as she’d made them, objects in themselves, with a palpable sense of permanence. Totemic and upright, they’re made from large, often curving slabs of the trunks of fallen trees. A contemporary letter from her dealer mentions a “shield project,” of which these are likely part.

Which, it turns out, is heartbreaking.





Kara Walker. *At the behest of Creative Time Kara E. Walker has confectioned: A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby, an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant.* 2014. A project of Creative Time. Domino Sugar Refinery, Brooklyn, NY, May 10–July 6, 2014. © Kara Walker, courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.

*our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the
Kitchens of the New World
on the Occasion of the demolition of the
Domino Sugar Refining Plant.*

There is so much to unpack in this piece, it could easily furnish an entire chapter of its own, with lots left over for its very own doorstopper of a book. If you listen closely, you can almost hear the clickety-click of dissertations well underway.

So, *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby.*

A brief and very much not-exhaustive tour:

Commissioned by Creative Time, an organization dedicated to ambitious public art projects, *A Subtlety* was anything but. Except, actually, it was. It turns out “subtleties” were once elaborate edible sugar sculptures made to adorn the tables of the über-rich. Who knew?

Well, Walker, for one. And in addition to using the very material that same factory processed to create a monument to its



Kara Walker. *Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart*. 1994.
Cut paper on wall. 156 x 600 inches. © Kara Walker, courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.

Artist Glenn Ligon was there (it occurs to me that it may have been his show my husband was hanging while I hung out). He saw or (please God, no) heard me and came over. We admired Kim's paintings together and then he said something like, *If you like these, you should check out this artist named Kara Walker down the street*. When I asked for details, he said to just go, that I needed to see for myself.

So I strolled blithely into the Drawing Center, expecting more abstract paintings. I was charmed to see nothing of the kind. And not conceptual art or Neo-expressionist paintings or graffiti art or any of the things you might have expected to see in SoHo in 1994. This was totally unexpected, something almost like a history painting, big and bold

and self-assured and . . . pretty. 50 ft/15 m of gracefully cut silhouettes superimposed across the wall's white surface.

Then I looked closer. My next thought: Holy. Shit.

Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart was, frankly, terrifying.

Walker's silhouettes are nearly life-size. I felt subsumed in the scene, pulled in, implicated. I wasn't totally sure what was going on, but whatever it was, it was deeply disturbing.

Reading it, approximately, from left to right: A hoop-skirted white woman leans in

was dedication! And not cheap, either) addressed especially to black artists and intellectuals: “I am writing you, seeking your help to spread awareness about the negative images produced by the young African American artist, Kara Walker.” Actually, she wasn’t just asking for awareness, but calling for censorship of Walker’s work (which was effective in at least one instance). Saar said it wasn’t personal, though it’s hard to take her at her word: “I have nothing against Kara except that I think she is young and foolish,” she said. Saar did concede that she found Walker’s work “revolting” and questioned her intentions as an artist. “The goal is to be rich and famous. There is no personal integrity,” Saar said. “Kara is selling us down the river.”

Saar’s own, celebrated, work also often utilizes racial stereotypes—Uncle Tom, Aunt Jemima, Little Black Sambo—but with a crystal-clear party line. Her most famous piece, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* from 1972, is a vitrine lined with a backdrop of smiling Aunt Jemima faces, presumably from pancake boxes. Standing before them is a plump and grinning mammy figurine. Propped against her belly is a picture of a mammy holding a white baby. In one hand the figure herself holds a broom and in the other, a shotgun. Aunt Jemima may still be smiling, but she’s not gonna take it anymore. Totally worth saying, and got it.

Walker’s art isn’t like that. It’s far more complicated, implicating, scary, and confusing. And it’s brave as hell. When the attacks on her work began, Walker was pregnant and, soon after, the mother of a newborn



Kara Walker. *Rebel Leader* (from *Testimony*). 2004. Cut paper with pencil, pressure-sensitive tape, and metal fasteners on board. 18 x 14.5 inches. © Kara Walker, courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.

daughter. It was undoubtedly a psychic and spiritual one-two punch, but nothing has stopped Walker from continuing to make hella difficult art.

That’s true even when she’s using an image similar to Saar’s—in this case, black female stereotype holding broom and gun (from her 2004 video work *Testimony: Narrative of a Negress Burdened by Good Fortune*). Violence is not implied, but carried out in the lynching of a white slave master (by jittery silhouette puppets). There is a steady willingness to hold a cold eye on the horror. Walker doesn’t just threaten the tough stuff: she makes us undergo it with her.



Kara Walker. *Alabama Loyalists Greeting the Federal Gun-Boats from Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)*. 2005. Offset lithography and silkscreen. Sheet: 39 x 53 inches. © Kara Walker, courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.

* * * * *

One of the slams against Walker early on was that the white establishment just loved her so much. There may be something there, I don't know, but it's hard not to sense the lip-purse of sour grapes. Unquestionably, from the MacArthur to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Walker has traveled in the highest of high circles.

In 2006, she was the first living artist in the history of the Met invited to curate an exhibition using the museum's permanent

collection. Gary Tinterow, curator of nineteenth-century, modern, and contemporary art (that vast position embodied in one person says a lot about the Met's relationship to "newer" art), gave Walker carte blanche to do what she wanted: show her own work, the work of some other artist, a selection, whatever.

Walker responded with a timely exhibition titled "After the Deluge." It featured wide-ranging samples of water and terror—from an obscure seventeenth-century Dutch etching, *The Bursting of St.*





Susan O'Malley. *I Love You Baby*. 2012.

except that when you look closely, they coalesce into readable, declarative statements: *I Love You Baby. Trick Your Brain & Smile. If it takes more energy to frown than be happy.*

They are upbeat, heartbreaking, and deeply human.

“I am so grateful for her,” O'Malley wrote about her mother, “not only for agreeing to make art with me, but for her endless inspiration on how to live: with love, grace and a sense of humor.”

The same might be said of O'Malley herself. Actually, the same is said of her.

I'm struck by all the lost mothers in this brief sampling of women artists. The mothers of Artemisia Gentileschi, Adélaïde Labille-Guiard, Edmonia Lewis, Vanessa Bell, and Louise Bourgeois all died when their daughters were still children or teenagers. O'Malley was in her late thirties. And there's Paula Modersohn-Becker, just thirty when she died shortly after becoming a mother herself, leaving behind her infant daughter.



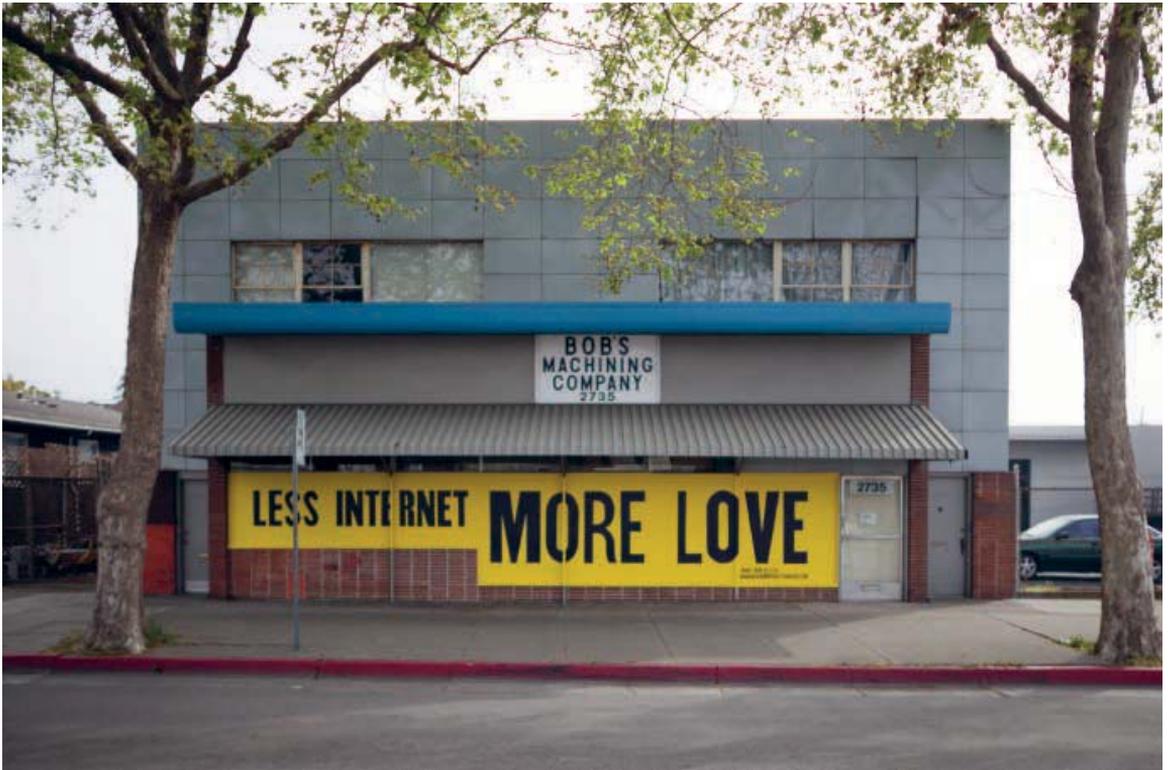
Susan O'Malley. *Lawn*. 2008.

elevating all kinds of environments—urban, suburban, woods, countryside—and maybe most importantly, elevating the people in those environments, whose lives and living spaces are deemed worthy of art.

In her short films, *How to Be an Artist in Residence* and *A Few Yards in San Jose*, it's striking how much a part of her environment O'Malley is. She's no punk rock anarchist or paint-splattered artiste, but a young woman with plain midlength brown hair in (not especially cool) blue jeans, T-shirt, and sneakers.

She takes up her work like an Andy Goldsworthy of the mundane, arranging rocks and leaves and rolling up hoses. Also, hugging fire hydrants or washing her hands in a birdbath. Watching her reminds me of Joseph Beuys, another earnest explorer of his own origins. But imagine if instead of Beuys crashing his Luftwaffe plane and getting wrapped in felt and animal fat by nomadic Tatars, he was raised with five siblings in a San Jose subdivision.

Beuys's story is a little like a fairy tale (of the dark, Germanic variety) and there's something of the same in O'Malley's origins



Susan O'Malley. *Less Internet More Love*. 2015.

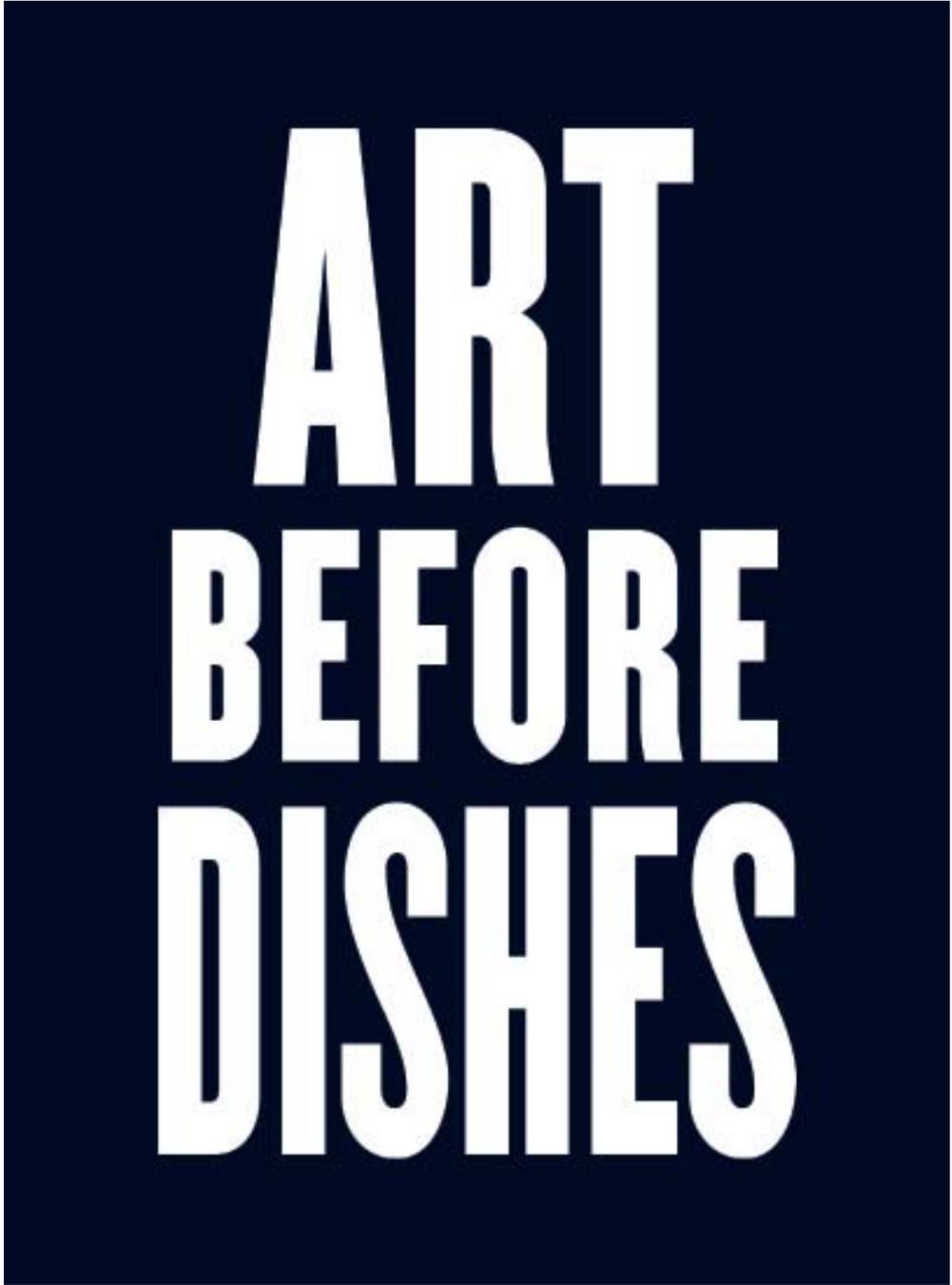
visited Chaylee and her children every few weeks or so. She'd been there for me when my own kids were little, and I wanted to do the same. Seeing the mural confirmed my best intentions—that human contact, however erratic, beats out e-mail any day.

It wasn't until I was home and Googled *Less Internet, More Love* that I discovered the terrible coincidence of seeing O'Malley's work again (it was her of course; I should have known).

The week before her bright yellow mural went up, O'Malley was at home in Berkeley getting things shipshape before the

scheduled delivery of her twin daughters in three days. She wrote e-mails and posted a note on Facebook asking if anyone could help transport an artwork. An artist friend came by to borrow a book, young daughter in tow. It's easy to imagine O'Malley thinking how amazing it was that soon she would have daughters herself.

Her husband was working in an adjoining room that day when, not long after the friend and his daughter left, he heard a noise. Going in to investigate, he found O'Malley on the floor, unconscious. He started CPR. EMTs were there within minutes, but O'Malley could not be revived.



Susan O'Malley. *Art Before Dishes*. 2014.

Our story began with my finding sixteen women artists in the third edition of H. W. Janson's seminal *History of Art*. I've presented fifteen here. Why one short?

I've left room for myself. For you. For anyone who wants it.

Insert yourself *here*.

In her groundbreaking work *The Obstacle Race*, Germaine Greer wrote, "Books are finite; the story of women painters has no end—indeed it may be said to be just beginning—but a book must stop somewhere."

Insert "artist" for painter and the story is the same. Hell, insert anything you like—poet, architect, filmmaker, actor, brain surgeon, astronaut—and run with it. Great lives and great works are endless: we just have to look for them. And, of course, create them.

* * * * *

Let's get started.