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At the Intersection of the Feminine, Feminism, and Abstraction:

The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same

Formulating the ideas for this paper took me quite some time and effort. This is partially because it required me to unpack the differences between what it means for something to be “feminine”—from both a cultural and symbolic standpoint<sup>1</sup>—and what it means to be a “feminist,” and whether they are related to one another or not. As well as what it means to me personally to be a feminist and the connection, if any, that it has to my creative practice as an abstract painter. And what all of these moving pieces may have to do with one another.

An element of my difficulty with the issues lies in the fact that I am not entirely sure that being a feminist myself has anything at all to do with my being an abstract painter or the work that I create. Although, I do know that there can be a connection drawn between the two historically and critically.

Another element lies in the fact that I am not only a “late in life” artist (I didn’t seriously start to paint until I was 40 years old), but I’m also a little late to the game as a feminist. This is

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<sup>1</sup> This required me to think about the idea of a “masculine view” and a “feminine view” and whether there can be a specific creative style associated with one or the other, and if so, are they only applied to the works of artists who are the biological gender that these gender specific “styles” or “traits” imply? Shirley Kaneda in her 1991 article *Painting and Its Others: In the Realm of the Feminine*, had some strong ideas about this. And while I don’t necessarily agree with them all, I do agree with her conclusion that if there are “feminine views” and “masculine views” in art, they are not necessarily limited to the biological gender of the artist. She provided a good illustration of this when she wrote, “The Perfect examples of this difference are Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko, both of whom address the sublime, one in a “masculine” way and the other in the “feminine.” While Newman addresses it from a purely intellectual perspective and Rothko from a “romantic” one...” (Kaneda 60) Why the “masculine” view gets to be intellectual and the “feminine” romantic, is a much more complicated story that I won’t go into, at least for now.

embarrassing to admit, but it does not have anything to do with my *not* agreeing with the feminist ideals that were brought to the forefront of the cultural conversation in the 1960s and 70s by prominent and outspoken feminists such as Betty Friedan<sup>2</sup> and Gloria Steinem. It has much more to do with the fact that when I was in college in the late 1980s the message that was being transmitted to me and my female peers was: *You can have it all! You can be a well-educated, high-powered career women, get married, and have a family too. It will be easy for you because, unlike your mother before you, you will not be expected to stifle your intellect and ambition in order to have a family and home life!* And because of the message received, I foolishly, or possibly naively, thought that all the work of the feminist movement had already been done by the brave souls of the generations of women before me. Therefore, I didn't need to wear that label.

It wasn't until many years later, after graduating from college, getting a master's degree in publications design, building a nice career in publishing, getting married and then having a child, that I realized that the reality didn't exactly match the rhetoric of the promises made. It turned out that, at least for me, it wasn't all that easy to work fulltime and be a good mother. But by that point I was too tired and stressed to really consider the reasons behind why it was so hard, and it wasn't until many years after that even, that it finally dawned on me. While on the surface much had changed over the last 20 or 30 years for women, when it came to the work world the main thing that had really changed for women was the *idea* and the cultural *acceptance*

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<sup>2</sup> This is not entirely related, but it is a fun story. When I first moved to Capitol Hill, the neighborhood directly behind the US Capitol, in Washington DC about 20 years ago, there was a rumor that Betty Friedan lived in the area. One day while eating lunch on the patio of our local watering hole, sure enough, there she was sitting at a table nearby! I didn't bother her, but it was thrilling to see her in person. Friedan's book, *The Feminine Mystique*, was sitting on my bookshelf at home (even if I wasn't *quite* able to get through reading the whole thing). She died in 2006 not long after my daughter was born. I like to imagine that Friedan would be happy to know that my daughter, who is now 15 and a sophomore in high school, has joined FemCo (the feminist club) at her school this year. Clearly, she is much more enlightened on the subject than her mother was as the same age.

that we could have both our careers and a family. Unfortunately, the underlying cultural structures to support this shift in acceptance hadn't changed all that drastically. The work world still revolved around the social construct that one person would be available to raise the children and one person would financially support the familial structure. At the time there was no such thing as a work/life balance. It was only then that I realized that I was wrong about the efforts for equality being accomplished, and I started calling myself a feminist. Clearly not enough had changed culturally in the work world (and most likely in many other areas) for women.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, over the last decade with the insurgence of the Millennials into the workforce and their different ideas about gender norms when it comes to raising a family, as well as their insistence on having more of a work/life balance, we have seen many positive changes in this area. Still, when it comes to gender equality, I think that there is much room for improvement in both the work world and the art world.

Indeed, women and their art (especially painters)<sup>4</sup> seem to be having a moment and it feels like we are at *the tipping point*<sup>5</sup> of something, but as we are still firmly in the midst of it, I feel that the proper language has not quite been coined that would allow me to adequately describe what is happening or how it may all turn out. And yet, strangely, at the same time I feel a sense of déjà vu. Somehow, we have also been here before.

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<sup>3</sup> For the record. I do understand now, that as a middleclass, white woman, my status under the label of "woman" and "feminist" is still a relatively privileged one. I also recognize that the difficulties around issues that I faced such as childcare, maternity leave, and work/life balance were most likely relatively small compared to the pressures that less educated women from lower socio-economic backgrounds must have and still do face.

<sup>4</sup> Just this month there was an article on *Artnews.com* about the record setting sale for a living female artist of a 1992 Jenny Saville painting for \$12.4 million, as well as a 1973 Joan Mitchell abstraction for \$4.09 million. Although, the title for the most paid ever for a living artist's work still goes to a man; a Jeff Koons "Balloon Dog" sculpture for \$58.4 million. I am not sure what the exact math is there, but it seems to me that women artists are getting even less than the standard 80 cents on the dollar that the rest of the female work force is left with. [www.artnews.com/2018/10/05/jenny-saville-painting-sells-12-4-m-sothebys-london-record-living-female-artist](http://www.artnews.com/2018/10/05/jenny-saville-painting-sells-12-4-m-sothebys-london-record-living-female-artist)

<sup>5</sup> In 2000 Malcolm Gladwell published his book *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* where he argued his theory about "that magic moment when an idea, trend, or social behavior crosses a threshold, tips, and spreads like wildfire." (from the cover copy of the book).

It was almost 50 years ago when Linda Nochlin in her seminal article *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* asked us, when talking about the field of art history, to “pierce through the cultural-ideological limitations of the time and its specific “professionalism” to reveal biases and inadequacies not merely in dealing with the question of women, but in the very way of formulating the crucial questions of the discipline as a whole” (Nochlin 146). She goes on to answer the important question—memorialized in the title of her piece—by stating:

[T]hings as they are and as they have been, in the arts as in a hundred other areas, are stultifying, oppressive, and discouraging to all those, women among them, who did not have the good fortune to be born white, preferably middleclass and, above all, male. The fault lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles, or our empty internal spaces, but in our institutions and our education—education understood to include everything that happens to us from the moment we enter this world of meaningful symbols, signs, and signals. The miracle is, in fact, that given the overwhelming odds against women, or blacks, that so many of both have managed to achieve so much sheer excellence, in those bailiwicks of white masculine prerogative like science, politics, or the arts (Nochlin 150).

Nochlin then goes on to write, and I will quote her again directly because it is so important how she expresses it and it is the linchpin to my thesis for this paper:

It is when one really starts thinking about the implications of “Why have there been no great women artists?” that one begins to realize to what extent our consciousness of how things are in the world has been conditioned—and often falsified—by the way the important questions are posed (Nochlin 150).

Now, I will pose a few “important questions” of my own. Why is it that in art (and in many other realms it seems) when an element of a work is deemed as having a “feminine” quality (i.e., colorful, crafty, decorative, emotional, happy, handmade, intuitive, pink, romantic, sensuous, soft, weak, whimsical, etcetera, etcetera) that it carries the whiff of a negative taint to it? And why, as women, *have we allowed this to go on for so long?* Indeed, as is the case with women working in many professions, women artists have tried to distance themselves from the very notion that their work is feminine or even claiming the label of “women” artist at all. And really, who is to blame them?

From the time that women started to steadily enter the workforce in the 1970s and 80s, in order to compete in a man’s world, to be taken seriously and to succeed, we needed to act, dress, and think like a man would if he were a woman, effectively denying any distinctly feminine quality we may bring to the table, even if it is one that may make us better at what we do. This is what Nochlin is referring to when she talks about the “extent our consciousness of how things are in the world has been conditioned.”

In a 2016 interview by Jennifer Samet with the contemporary abstract painter Carrie Moyer published in *Hyperallergic*, Moyer is quoted saying:

I was thinking about how issues of taste operate in modernist art. Younger artists might look at Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party* (1974-79)<sup>6</sup> and think “That is so cool.” But people from my generation get a stomachache when they go into the Brooklyn Museum. For feminist artists of my generation, it’s even more

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<sup>6</sup> Feminist artist Judy Chicago created her conceptual sculpture installation *The Dinner Party* as a way “to celebrate women’s achievements and to call into question the marginalization of these achievements throughout history in a symbolically powerful way.” By collaborating with a collective of women artists, Chicago produced painted china and embroidered cloth (among other elements), both of which are art forms traditionally associated with women. Chicago’s arrangement was a sophisticated conceptual installation that drew attention to women’s contributions to all forms of art (Fabozze 319). Part of the original installation currently resides in the Brooklyn Museum.

complicated and challenging. The project was way ahead of its time in many ways—it pulls craft into the mix and counters every idea about taste attached to High Modernism (Samet).

Chicago's work is stomachache inducing to women artists of Moyer's generation because of the very close association it has to all things *female*. For when it came to their own work, these women artists drank the "Kool-Aid" that was handed to them by the very same patriarchal and cultural structures that I talked about earlier when writing about my formation as a feminist, even while at the same time considering themselves to be feminist artists. And while there is only eight years age difference between Moyer and myself, I am one of those "younger artists" who thinks that Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* is cool, for the very reason that it *does* celebrate all things that are considered to be traditionally feminine.<sup>7</sup>

In 2017 Shirley Kaneda revisited the ideas she had written about 25 years earlier<sup>8</sup> in another article entitled *The Feminine in Abstract Painting Reconsidered*, and in it she asserts:

If we accept the view that culture and high art in particular is the site of the ideological, or the struggle of societies' standards and values, and that there is presently a crisis in our society, a fundamental re-examination of identity for example, then we must be conscious not only of what we say, but how we say it (Kaneda 2017).

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<sup>7</sup> In February 2018 *The New York Times Style Magazine* did a feature article about Judy Chicago. In it, Chicago tells a story about an incident in the 1960s when she shared a studio with her husband and a few other male artists. When the gallery owner Walter Hopps came to visit one day, while there he literally turned his back on Chicago, ignoring her and her work and only speaking to the male artists in the room. Years later, she ran into Hopps and he told her that the reason he behaved that way was because he was paralyzed by the fact that her work was so much better than the other male artists, and that he didn't even know how to respond to her (Weiss 202). This is a powerful illustration of the type of discrimination that women artists of Chicago's generation were dealing with.

<sup>8</sup> Shirley Kaneda's first article in which she considered this topic, *Painting and Its Others: In the Realm of the Feminine*, was published in *Arts Magazine's* summer 1991 edition.

I agree with this whole heartedly, but I would add that we need to also be conscious of what we *don't* say, and I think one place where we as women artists can start is to truly embrace the feminine and “what we say” about it and “how we say it.” It is crucially important for us to advance the idea that we are not just artists, but *women* artists, and that we are proud to embrace “feminine” qualities in our work if we so choose (of course not all women artists’ work has any so called “feminine qualities” to it and that is just fine too). Kaneda seems to echo this sentiment when she writes, “What needs to be emphasized is that if we as women want our experiences and our culture to be recognized [as] specifically female, then we must claim a position, not as *other*, but independent of the masculine world and this is to be in favor of a concept of the feminine which would take as many forms as there are women” (Kaneda 2017). In other words, be yourself, in whatever form that takes. Don’t reject something about yourself or your work, most especially if it is distinctly feminine, just because we are conditioned to think that it is not “high art.”

I believe that this may be a way for women to start to change the underlying cultural narrative that emits the subliminal message that the “feminine” in art is a “negative” in art. If we as women artists do not stop believing what we have been “conditioned to think” about ourselves, then how do we ever expect the other half of the gender divide to stop believing it as well?

Where does this leave us, and more specifically, where does this leave me and my creative practice as an abstract painter? Obviously, I am already onboard with my proud status as a women artist, but I’m not one hundred percent sure yet about whether I even want to start to insert symbolic feminist imagery or messages into my work. I do know that if I start though, one way in which I would consider it is through humor. Most likely not “stand-up comedy” type

humor, but something subtler and not too obvious. In order to see it and understand it in my work, you would have to work for it yourself.

In a 2016 interview with Fabian Schöneich the artist Amy Sillman responds to the question “What do you think abstraction offers today?” by saying:

I think abstraction is very much like humor in a way, because it’s a form that resists or refuses—refuses what? I guess the preconceived. It’s a kind of negation, but it’s also a generous condition, “not this, maybe that, or maybe somewhere between,” a way to compress what is there with what is remembered, or to admit what is wrong, or confusion, or just coming into being, or not there yet, or emotional, or imaginary—in other words, everything *other*. And it’s where the formal language of color, shape, line, layer, scale, size, is used, respected, on its own terms, not as illustration (Sillman 51).

When it comes to how I feel about my own abstract painting practice, I am not sure I could state it better than Sillman does above. But I also appreciate the inherently simple, yet highly effective, use of humor by the “anonymous feminist art collective” the Guerrilla Girls. The group’s subtle poster-style designs tend to mask the in-your-face messages that they contain, but once you *get it*, you really get the message. Recently, upon noticing that the official presidential portrait of Bill Clinton, currently hanging in Washington DC’s National Portrait Gallery, was painted by Chuck Close;<sup>9</sup> “One accused sexual predator painting another!” the Guerrilla Girls released a few ideas for some newly designed wall labels for the painting that

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<sup>9</sup> The artist Chuck Close, who is disabled and, in a wheelchair, has been accused of sexually harassing some of his female models and studio assistants. [www.nytimes.com/2017/12/20/arts/design/chuck-close-sexual-harassment.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/20/arts/design/chuck-close-sexual-harassment.html) (Pes 2018).

suggest more appropriate wording in light of recent #MeToo concerns.<sup>10</sup> This past January the National Gallery of Art cancelled a planned Chuck Close show due to the allegations of his predatory sexual behavior (Pes 2018), yet it's not clear if Bill Clinton will ever be held accountable for his behavior.

I suppose this brings us full circle and back to where I started with the title of this paper and all of the intersections crossing without any definitive ending point in sight. In the art world and, I would say in our current culture in general, there is definitely change brewing. It is too soon though to know if these tiny revolutions towards equality in the art world have been won and, if so, whether they will stick this time around. It could be that everything will just eventually revert back to the status quo as it has, unfortunately, in the past. I suppose time will tell that story.

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<sup>10</sup>"The Guerrilla Girls Are Helping Museums Contend With #MeToo: Read Their Proposed Chuck Close Wall Labels Here." *Artnet*, 26 September 2018, [news.artnet.com/art-world/the-guerrilla-girls-help-museums-contend-with-metoo-chuck-close-1356403](https://news.artnet.com/art-world/the-guerrilla-girls-help-museums-contend-with-metoo-chuck-close-1356403)

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