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New perspectives and reflections on Women Can't Paint

Gorrill, Helen

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**Dr Helen Gørrill  
University of Dundee**

**New perspectives and reflections on *Women Can't Paint*:  
Gender, the Glass Ceiling and Values in Contemporary Art**

**Presented on 25<sup>th</sup> May 2023 the Percosi Culturali in Pinacoteca, the  
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**Women Can't Paint**

This paper brings new perspectives and reflections upon the research carried out for my book *Women Can't Paint: Gender, the Glass Ceiling and Values in Contemporary Art* (Gørrill, 2020) published by Bloomsbury. My PhD and book's title were inspired by the German painter Georg Baselitz's infamous statement about our female creatives "What's the biggest problem with women artists? None of them can actually paint!" (Clark, 2013). And *Women Can't Paint* was conceived, firstly as a PhD to prove sufficient, robust evidence that Baselitz is wrong, and then as a book encompassing a far wider geography than the original research. It is important to remember that Baselitz based his judgement on the economic value of artworks: "Women don't pass the test, the market test – the value test" (Beyer & Knofel, 2015), because there are significant gender value gaps in contemporary art, of up to ninety per cent between female and male artists.

Baselitz was of course not the first contemporary artist or critic to dismiss the apparently valiant efforts of women who seek to paint. At Jenny Saville's inaugural Saatchi Gallery show in 1994, the critic David Sylvester informed her "Women can't be painters. That's just the way it's always been. That's how it is" (Cooke, 2012). And another critic Brian Sewell regularly informed the general public through his newspaper column that women artists are indeed second rate, "There's never been a great woman artist!" he declared in 2008, stating "Only men are capable of aesthetic greatness!" (Johnson, 2008). And more recently in 2015, Baselitz repeated his statement, insisting that women still can't paint (Miller, 2015). Of course, had these statements been written or spoken a long time ago, we might have some sympathy in terms of contemporaneous political and social contexts. Today

to hear them, we might well be living in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, because it is here from where such statements derive, and of course before.

I have recently stumbled across a book written by two men written 173 years ago, entitled *Art in the House* (Von Falke and Perkins, 1879). The final chapter provides guidelines to women (and to the men who govern them) on why women should not consider making high art/painting, and rather, focus on their own beauty and that of their home's interior. "All great art has sprung from the masculine brain and has been executed by man's hard hand!" they tell us. "The whole of history of art clearly disproves [art made by women], since everything really great and beautiful which we know about, and everything which exists to charm our astonished gaze is the creation of men ['the stronger'] and not of women ['the fairer portions of mankind']". "Women should only carry out embroidery" the men instruct us, nevertheless adding a caveat that even in such a lowly task as embroidery women are generally only capable of producing "a paltry and sometimes even pitiable result" (Von Falke and Perkins, 1879, n.p.). And in case we had not already realised how worthless women's creative efforts were doomed to be, the authors reiterate the statement, by saying of women's crafts, they are "great in their speciality but we must perforce add, her speciality is but small". Embroidery was a real art and almost a rival of painting in the fifteenth century, but only because it was carried out by men, whose methods

enabled the workman to have complete control of his needle as the artist has of his brush. Only when thus treated [by a man] can embroidery be raised to the rank of needle-*painting*. Hitherto woman has been obliged to yield the laurels of high art to the hand of a competitor [the man] stronger than herself and has as yet given no evidence of her capability of winning them. Let her not, however, despair of success in the future, and meanwhile let her look *elsewhere* for consolation" (Von Falke and Perkins, 1879, n.p.).

Reading this then, it is perhaps no surprise that the strong feelings against female creativity were rife at this time, and even later in 1937 when the artist Hans Hoffman remarked, "Lee Krasner's work is so good, you would not know it's been painted by a woman!" (Williams, 2019). But for such misogynistic statements based on an artist's biology, to still be banded around today by Baselitz, Sewell et al. is actually quite shocking. When might this end? Will our granddaughters – and great-granddaughters still be struggling for recognition as artists in many, many years to come? Will the Victorian narrative forevermore prevail? Curiously, many women artists do not wish to be associated with feminism, a movement that might

help to ameliorate the situation. Bridget Riley recently stated: “Women’s lib in art is a naïve concept. Such hysteria is needed like a hole in the head!” (Gørrill, 2020: 147).

In *Women Can’t Paint*, I present the evidence that today, when men sign a work of art, it increases in value, yet when a woman signs her work it goes down. In this (apparently critically acclaimed) study of gender and value, I argue that such inequality remains rife in our contemporary artworld. Using a new statistical method, I constructed databases of over 100,000 datapoints that allow me to contend that there are few aesthetic differences between men’s and women’s painting, but that men’s art is valued up to 90 per cent more than women’s. Museums, I attest, are also complicit in this vicious cycle as they collect tokenist female artwork which detracts from women artists’ market value. My book *Women Can’t Paint* challenges the methodologies that have previously defined women’s role in the artworld and introduces striking evidence that being a woman impacts upon all forms of artistic currency; be it social, symbolic, cultural or economic. I wish to point out that my work very much works with binaries – the polarised male – and female. As I shall explain, I have worked with categorisation and statistics, and I could not have done this research without binarising my data - much as we are all very much aware that binaries are to be challenged as my research and teaching aims to be inclusive to everyone, no matter what their background or where they find themselves on the gender spectrum. I am aware therefore that this presents a gap in knowledge that I am now encouraging others to fill through alternative methods of equalities research.

It is fair to say that *Women Can’t Paint* has caused a lot of tension in the artworld. It has attracted much criticism from those who believe that women have already taken over the artworld to the detriment of men (Adams, 2020). In fact, there has been the complete denial that a problem exists, together with repressive feedback (see Flood et al., 2020’s important paper “Resistance and backlash to gender equality”). One of the critiques came from the author of an article (Adams, 2019) who argues black dancers should not be allowed to take part in ballet, hence a sexist and racist white male supremacist viewpoint – which is sadly on the increase. *Women Can’t Paint* was published following on from my column in *The Guardian*, entitled “Are women worth collecting? Tate doesn’t seem to think so” (Gørrill, 2018), which attracted over a million shares, and an amount of predicted hate-mail. The column discussed the dire situation for equality in the British visual arts, where I argue that we have indeed reversed back into the Victorian age, where “women can’t paint” and

“women can’t write” (Woolf, 1927). I also highlighted the fact that our publicly-funded Tate – one of the world’s most-visited art museums - collected as little as 13 per cent female artwork each year in its annual acquisitions, and I called for gender quotas – or caps – to start balancing the collections so that our museums are able to reflect the communities they serve and provide role models for all our aspiring artists and art students, who are largely female in number. My updated analysis, published in *The Sunday Times*, highlights that museum acquisitions fuel the gender pay gap in the artworld (Macaskill, 2022) and shows the Tate still appear to have a circa thirty per cent cap on the collection of women’s artwork. On the other hand, it is promising to hear that the Scottish National Galleries have now implemented a 55 per cent quota for the new acquisition of work by women (Macaskill, 2022).

### **Equality in the Italian artworld**

Firstly however, we shall very briefly look at the current context through contemporary art galleries here in Italy, and go back in time to Victorian Britain where I continue to argue, our current artworld is still solidly based. As Jonathan Jones, *The Guardian’s* art critic notes, “Women are allowed to do art, nowadays, of course. They are just not permitted to be great at it” (Jones, 2014). Let us start the journey in the north of the country. Guggenheim Bilbao’s collection policy acknowledges that “certain limitations [have persisted] in terms of marginalised nationalities, ethnicities, sexualities, and gender identities”. This is certainly apparent in Rome’s contemporary art galleries, whose work represented by galleries is largely masculine. There are a number of galleries who represent only work by male artists, but more usually there is an 80: 20 (male: female) divide in the representation and presentation of artists. Rome’s Gagosian Gallery has just a 24% representation of female artists; the Galeria Lorcan O’Neill Roma has just 21%; and Rome’s Monitor Gallery has only 20% representation of female artists. It is promising to note however that there are galleries with equal gendered representation, including @T293 Gallery. The street art gallery Exclusive Urban Art has a roster of 40 artists, and only one - Hama Woods - operates as a solo female graffiti artist.

### **Art and the exterior**

The masculinity of street art has curiously, recently been impacted upon through the adult website Pornhub, who have launched their own graffiti-art spray paint entitled ‘Pornhub

Orange' (Saint-Claire, 2021) in attempts to mainstream their main activity of adult entertainment. In the promotion for their artist's paint, they feature well-known American graffiti artists – all male of course – with female porn models promoting the paint through writhing and titillating the viewer in front of the exhibited artwork where the male presides with his orange can of paint. Of course, this relates very much to the male-as-master, female-as-muse artworld – together of course with contemporary advertising and pop music videos - and the Guerrilla Girls' campaigns for artworld equality, including their (1989) poster "Do women have to be naked to get into the Met Museum? Less than 5 per cent of the artists in the modern art sections are women, but 85 per cent of the nudes are female".

Graffiti art is well known for its masculine-domination, and even more so for its rejection of the LGBTQ+ community, which several of my current trans students have found themselves struggling with. In her article "Why have there been no great women [street] artists?" (2020), Vanessa Silvera examines the reasons for women's exclusion from wider conversations about street art. She states that in the domain of street art, there are additional obstacles for anybody who is not cis-male who tags – such as a lack of role models, and moreover concerns of personal safety such as the dangers of working in dark streets, alone at night, often in undesirable or dangerous locations. Moreover, it is noted that tagging is largely an exterior artform, which surely harps back to the Victorian ideal of women within, men without – women were very much confined to the interiors both in their domestic lives and in the way they created artwork. And there are key links between ephemeral street artworks and digital limited artworks: Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs) – graffiti artworks are now being painted to be destroyed, created not for the location but for the metaverse and for investment (Shirodkar, 2022). One might think that by using genderless names, that women might stand a chance of success in the dizzying, oft-confusing world of NFTs, where non-works, or images of paintings for example might sell for millions of dollars. Sadly, in a recent evaluation for my new book *War Paint: Gender Inequality in the Virtual Artworld* (Gørrill, 2024) there are hardly any women artists noted in the Top 100 bestselling global NFT or metaverse artworks. As we see that a direct correlation between street art and NFTs exist, this is yet another very contemporary obstacle that women – non-binary artists – anyone who does not identify as male - need to leap over, in order to acquire artworld equality.

## **Obstacles to success**

Of course when we think of obstacles to painting and its validation, we immediately think about Germaine Greer's famous book *The Obstacle Race* (2001), where she explores the psychological, economic and political reasons for the "virtually unchallenged patriarchalism of all Western artistic establishments" (Greer, 2001). Again Linda Nochlin (1971) investigates historic art in her eponymous essay "Why have there been no great women artists?" – and there are multiple articles regularly appearing in the press lamenting that there are none, or hardly any, women appearing in Top 100s of all-time best-selling art (see for example, Youngs, 2018). However, it is of course quite obvious that when we look at data relating to best-selling art from time immemorial, that women are going to be scarce in visibility, given their historic restrictions from creating artwork and elimination from art-schools, etc. – notwithstanding the new information that has recently come to light – and that the pre-historic cave paintings we have long been taught were made by men, were in fact largely created by women (Hughes, 2013). However, we should not allow contemporary restrictions led by museums, to continue to hold our female creatives back, thus allowing history to repeat itself.

I needed to find out if Baselitz (Clarke, 2013) was right in what he was saying. I needed to discover if there were such a thing as a masculine or feminine aesthetics in contemporary, rather than historic painting. If there were, then Baselitz may have a case, because he may be able to segregate the paintings by gender – by style, medium, subject etc – and declare that women cannot indeed paint, because their work is so very different to our genius male artists. However, if my research were able to prove that there is virtually *no* difference between men's and women's painting, then this would infer that Baselitz's views on women painters are based solely on misogyny - on the biology of the creator - rather than the painting qualities themselves.

## **Quantitative methodology**

An absolute novice to statistics, I enrolled in classes and took on a mentor who was a statistics professor. Numbers, I declared are beautiful; they open up new possibilities and, as stated by *ArtNews* editor Sarah Douglas (2015), "irrefutable, that is, it's impossible to deny them". The database contained over 100,000 individual datapoints and over 3,000 individual paintings as case studies. Each artwork's overall size, shape, media, painting

support, average lightness/darkness and subject matter were analysed; it was noted whether the artist had painted with an abstract or figurative approach, and if the painting contained a signature or artist annotation. Each of these categories were given a numeric value or coding, which was input into the new database, and compared alongside artist's biographical details – including artist's age at creation of painting, artist's age at sale point or museum acquisition, place of birth, where the artist lives and works, which art school was attended, prices attained at auction, and symbolic recognition such as award of an arts prize and of course, the gender of each artist. This huge spreadsheet was then analysed at the click of a command, whereupon hundreds of graphs and charts appeared, and further tests were needed to test the significance of each finding. As a newbie to statistics, I was fascinated by the patterns formed and detected by the software, which are not often evident to the naked eye. And here is what I found:

### **Masculinities and femininities in painting: the new androgynous aesthetics in contemporary art**

Many of our key theorists in the realm of gender and the arts are highly critical of gender-based readings, including Griselda Pollock (2003: xxxi, xxvi) who states:

Gender based readings mean limiting the artist to what is projected onto her as her female gender on which derive circumscribed meanings to the artwork. The work of feminist interventions becomes that of differencing the canon, not reifying the difference of women as the other gender, but allowing a desire for difference...we must offer differencing stories, more stories that aim to resist all ghettoization, separation and categorisation.

Additionally, Judith Butler argues that when gender is independent of sex, “gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one” (Butler, 1990: 6). However, within this research it was necessary to revert to the basis of biology and binary of the genders in order to carry out a data mine.

Although perceived as an ambitious task, I wished to challenge Pollock and Butler's denial of gender as I perceived the refusal to sex or genderise was potentially holding back gender and arts research which could lead to the generation of new methods and theories. Whilst the basis of biology is a key consideration of the book's research, through the use of initially categorising female artists into a unified group separate from that of men, an accurate picture of the state of equality does start to emerge. This is a contentious issue



within the arena of gender studies because Butler argues that if men and women are seen as fundamentally different and separate, then equality becomes impossible. This means that to accept a quantifiable feminist methodology, a feminist framework has to embrace an essentialist or binary rather than anti-essentialist standpoint, which is based on biological difference. The contentious issue here is that it is arguable an essentialist standpoint aligns itself with a supposed masculinist approach to gender, in other words, that one is born either male or female, and gender may not have the fluidity claimed by such theorists as Judith Butler (1990, etc.).

### **Oppositions to the quantitative**

Here the paradoxical battle between Pollock's feminism and the quantitative emerges clearly, because in order to carry out a feminist intervention into the gendered differences in paintings made by female/male artists, and to establish if there are any significant exclusive 'feminine'/'masculine' qualities in contemporary painting, it has been necessary to adopt a quasi-quantitative methodology which depends upon categorisation. With due respect, I sought to argue that in polarising the quantitative and qualitative as binary gendered positions, anti-essentialist feminists may fall into their own trap of binarification, which other feminists oppose and fight against in their research propaganda. Therefore whilst Pollock and other feminists remain advocates of sexual difference being socially constructed rather than biologically formed, *Women Can't Paint* took a combination of both approaches: categorised biological difference or gender binaries were analysed to investigate discrimination through the quantitative, alongside an additional analysis of socially constructed sexual differences and stereotyping through the qualitative.

Despite potential feminist oppositions, the use of quantitative methods enabled the precise pinpointing of inequalities such as artworld gender pay gaps within this research. We could also align with Judith Butler (1990), who argues that we must adopt our own gender performance (in this case through a new hybrid methodology), and by choosing to think differently about it we might work to change gender norms and the binary understandings of femininity and masculinity.

### **On masculinities and femininities in paint: 'IT'S NOT FOR GIRLS!'**

Looking through the transcripts of my artist's interviews, it became clear that art students may be taught that painting is a masculine activity: most of the art history books, and even

books on contemporary art contain mainly male artists. As our Victorian friends Von Falke and Perkins dictated to us in 1879, “*Don’t attempt to paint pictures, and don’t try to replicate paint in your embroidery. You are a woman, and therefore you belong inside, prettying your domain for your master’s return.*” Painting, it is made quite clear, is NOT for girls. Indeed a number of high-profile female artists told me that in art school they were shunted towards the textiles department, and the weaker ones complied. Angela McRobbie (1988: 34), also argues that the 1960s/1970s art school was institutionally sexist and highlighted “the exclusion or marginalisation of girls from the fine art culture which still prevailed”. And Judy Chicago (2014: 19) discusses the notion of women being steered away from fine art into feminine areas such as textiles. The masculinity of paint still prevails in our museums, galleries and through critics (the majority of whom are male) who seek to praise art which reflects themselves and their own masculine values. As *The Guardian*’s art critic Jonathan Jones wrote in 2014:

The reason there are no great female artists is, in short, because of men like me. Art criticism defines the lofty peaks of the canon and it is, let’s say, a macho trade. I’d go further. I think to feel a passion for an artist – a real passion like the enthusiasm that made John Ruskin write five volumes of sprawling prose to prove the greatness of JMW Turner – involves a kind of deep identification, a sense of meeting your double, the artist who speaks for you.

And as the much-celebrated feminist curator Maura Reilly (2018: 220) points out, this means that “it is the ‘macho trade’ of the arts that makes it impossible for a woman artist to be ranked among the great. Put simply, men cannot identify with [women’s] artwork”.

In terms of my data analysis, there were found to be very little aesthetic difference in paintings by men and women. In fact, a curious pattern of feminine and masculine encroachment emerged during the analysis of the paintings across the globe (with the exception of the paintings analysed in Finland). So whilst Griselda Pollock’s (2003) ‘differential’ seeks to claim there is a different kind of greatness for women artists, this research contested the theory through my discovery of androgynous aesthetics in contemporary painting (Gørrill, 2020: 24-49).

### **Fe<>male**

In *Creativity, Theory, History, Practice*, Rob Pope (2005: 78) uses the term ‘Fe<>male’ to

Attempt to register the complexly dynamic nature of the relationship. Seen as two arrows or two forks, it points to the reciprocally defining *movement* of the

relationship; how far it is motion from or towards, an opening or closing, depends on which 'arrow' or 'fork' you take to be attached to which of the two components.

The key word here is 'movement'. In *Women Can't Paint*, I present evidence that both female and male artists have 'moved' towards or converged in their painting aesthetics, or painterly qualities (Gørrill, 2020: 24-49). Pope's (2005) figure may thus read as Fe±male. The plus-minus sign generally indicates the option of two possible values, one of which is the negation of the other, or if we look at chess the sign indicates "a clear advantage for the white player; the complementary sign minus-plus, indicates the same advantage for the black player". In his text, Pope refers to a key text *The Art of Loving* by psychoanalyst Erich Fromm. Fromm (1957: 33-4) argues that a 'bisexuality' of behaviour is essential for creativity: "Creativity is realised through the coming together of the 'male' and 'female' polarities". Indeed, whilst femininity was seen as being vital to creativity by theorists such as Carl Jung et al., Jung cites women as being only muses of inspiration: "The woman brings forth creative seeds which have the power to fertilise the feminine side of the man" (Fromm 1957: 80). There is no notion, ironically of man's seed fertilising the masculine side of the woman artist. In *Creativity: Theory, History, Practice* (2005: 78), Pope describes such theories as the idea of "men abrogating the procreative power of women for their own purportedly superior 'creative' ends". So whilst the work by female artists in my sample arguably became more 'male', Fromm and Pope's creativity theory suggests this polarised convergence (or 'wholeness') of masculinity and femininity is essential for what has been accounted for as 'genius' in the past. The merging of the feminine and masculine could also be defined as androgynous. As noted earlier, Judith Butler's (1990: 6) suggestion is to encompass a fluidity of gender, where "man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine might just as easily signify a male body as a female one", pertinent here, where such a concept aligns with the new emerging theory of androgynous aesthetics. In *Gender and Genius*, Christine Battersby (1989: 10) summarises the Jungian theory of the androgyny of creative genius, stating "The great artist is a feminine male". While Carl Jung (1957) believed that the mind of a male benefits from the emotion, the moodiness and love associated with his inner femininity, by contrast the masculine woman merely 'parodies' the male. Thus according to Jung (1957), while a polarised aesthetics may benefit the male artist, it may only ever be used to devalue a female artist's work. Indeed, an experiment carried out on male fine art students in 1964 by the psychologist Emanuel

Hammer at New York University, found that the most successful (male) artists required a fusion of both feminine and masculine qualities in order to produce what the psychologists judged to be an outstanding painting. No parallel study was carried out on female fine art students and no feminine qualities were noted, but the masculine qualities of 'good' artists were a "high degree of strength, confidence, determination, ambition and power" (Hammer 1964). Interestingly, when I interviewed a selection of contemporary global-stage artists recently, they used very similar words to describe how they perceived male artists today (Gørrill, 2020: 46).

Of the artists I interviewed, one felt that it was "genuinely interesting how aesthetics are appearing now – there is a feminine-male and a male-feminine" (Gørrill, 2020: 47) which she felt was generating more scope for cultural expression. This is an issue also broached in relation to Linda Nochlin in "Why have there been no great women artists: thirty years after" (Reilly, 2006): "Although I can only hint at it, I would like to indicate the impact, conscious or unconscious, of the new women's production on the work of male artists". My new theory of androgynous aesthetics (Gørrill, 2020: 21-50) therefore develops upon this suggestion of the influence of feminine upon the masculine, and vice versa.

### **Essentialist aesthetics**

I discussed earlier the notion of androgynous aesthetics in contemporary painting, which is emerging across many parts of the world. There was one anomaly to my research, and that was in my examination of contemporary Finnish paintings (Gørrill, 2020: 73-98). Finland is one of the most equal nations in the world, and the only collection I analysed where male/female collections were approximately equal – without the museum having to use quotas or caps in their policies. As a result, I found a curious anomaly to the rest of the world in terms of the ways men, and women, were painting. Here in Finland, the aesthetics in art by men and women was vastly different – an essentialist aesthetics, if you like – which suggests that greater equality gives greater freedom to create (and the opposite effect to that of androgynous aesthetics). Perhaps - I question - in Finland, women are not so obliged to follow the suit of male practitioners in order to have their works validated by museums, the market, or gatekeepers?

## **Women Can Paint!**

It appears, quite simply that Georg Baselitz has aligned and confused the economic value of art with the artwork's aesthetic worth. However, Baselitz does not explain what he means by his gender-specific term 'aesthetic greatness' nor does he deliver a list of female aesthetics which he finds to be inferior to those of men. As no great nor weak gendered aesthetic qualities have been detected, and indeed a new androgynous aesthetics has emerged, then one can only assume that Baselitz refers to the biological characteristics of the painting's creator in his judgement of a painting's worth. At the University of Luxembourg, Roman Kraussl declared "the results of [a 2018] study delivered proof for the disadvantages women face in the artworld solely based on their gender" (Adams et al., 2018). The brand of masculine is thus judged to be more valuable than the brand of feminine in the work of art. Shockingly, in our apparently gender-equal 21<sup>st</sup> century societies and the emergence of a new androgynous aesthetics in contemporary art, whether one is born man – or woman – could very well dictate our creative values circumscribed thereafter. The market is important, whether we like it or not. And coincidentally, *Kunstkompass* 2021 has addressed the gender divide in their annual measurement of fame and rank of contemporary artists worldwide, which they have carried out for more than 50 years. They have now removed the 'market test', as Baselitz terms it, because it remains perpetually gender-biased. As a result of removing the financial values from their assessment, more women have been able to enter *Kunstkompass*'s renowned lists of achievement (Luckwaldt, 2021). This may eventually have an impact upon the 90 per cent gender pay/value gaps in contemporary art, when the 'vicious feminine cycle of value' (for women artists) and the 'virtuous masculine cycle of value' (for male artists) is disrupted.

### **The museum exposed: gendered visibilities and essentialist aesthetics through equality**

One may think at first glance, that our museums are doing a great deal to balance the gender ratios of the visibility of work by female and male artists. One could also be deceived into thinking that perhaps work by female artists is even more visible and exposed than that created by their male contemporaries. Are our museums hiding behind headlines? In 2016, the Tate hosted a week-long residency by the Guerrilla Girls – so one might reasonably assume that the Tate actively support and practice art equality in their collections. Similarly, the Guerrilla Girls' work is collected by high profile museums worldwide including the Tate,

MoMA, the Pompidou and many others, while the museums' respective collections remain largely masculine.

Courtesy of art museums' public relations teams issuing hard-hitting press releases to newspapers and publications across the globe, we hear about the exposure and visibility of our women artists. The headlines for women artists far exceed those for males (Gørrill, 2020: 73-74). While the exposure and support of the Guerrilla Girls is indeed a clever tactic by our museums – “if we collect the Guerrilla Girls we at least *look* as though we care about equality”, one curator told me – then it could be argued that our museums' press releases are actually doing our female creatives more harm than good. Museums inadvertently raise the question as to whether women artists are worth collecting at all, by reminding us that they are not ARTISTS, but just Women Artists. No similar press releases are sent round about men artists because museums do not need to tell us how generous they are for putting on a solo show by a male artist, nor do they need to remind the public how much museums are doing to raise their collections of male artists. The repetitive headlines displaying such tokenism could therefore send a negative message to collectors, aligned with the views of those who argue against gendered quotas. This is possibly one reason why symbolic/museum values in female artists is so much lower than it is in work by men. If collectors perceive there has been a politically correct movement in museum collection policies, it is possible this could have influenced the opposite effect on the market. The Tate's media coverage highlights an additional area of concern, that the artworld is perceived and promoted as being implicitly male. By drawing attention to their female shows, the Tate emphasise the artist's gender or biology over their creativity, highlighting a small amount of artists in the hope of avoiding the bigger picture, and thus our respected museums may be guilty of tokenism.

The impact of museum inclusion on the economic value of painting is also something to consider which our museums are well aware of – particularly the Tate. In his book *The Conditions of Success: how the modern artist rises to fame*, the Tate director Alan Bowness (1989) observed “it is only the museum artists whose work begins to rise to exceptional prices!”. Therefore, by collecting mainly male artists, the Tate are indeed aware that they are creating a gendered inequality of wealth. We then have the problematic issue of artwork/gender segregation through museum annexes for ‘women's art’. And by having women included in such alleged inferior spaces, means that museum curators do not need to

include them in the mainstream museum itself. Very often the majority of visitors do not bother to visit the women's sections – although many will make special trips to do just that.

In *Women Can't Paint*, I suggested that it looked as though the Tate were potentially over-inflating the values of their art by women in their new acquisitions' lists (Gørrill, 2020: 80-81), perhaps to bolster the appearance that they were not spending 90 per cent of their funding on the usual white, male artists. For the purposes of this paper, I have updated this research and carried out a new analysis of the museum's most recently available accounts at the time of writing this report from 2019/20 (Tate 2020). Perhaps unsurprisingly, as per my previous comments on Tate's cap of artwork by women being held at 30 per cent, the Tate's acquisition of work by women artists (calculated by number of artworks) falls at just under one third, at 32.57 per cent. During my PhD I carried out a number of interviews with high profile international artists, and subsequently, gatekeepers. It was suggested by one of the artists in 2015 that the Tate had informed them they were aiming for a 30 per cent target on work by female artists. I have not been able to clarify whether this is, or is not the case with the Tate directly, but the figures certainly suggest that 30 per cent or thereabouts appears to be an unwritten cap – and is very much a 2:1 ratio in favour of male artists. This is particularly extraordinary in today's age where the majority of our art students are female, and thus one might think the majority (and not the minority) of contemporary art collected by the institution might by consequence be made by those who identify as women.

In terms of economic valuation, women appear to be doing extremely well according to the Tate calculations, in fact better than men – or so their figures appear to tell us. Whilst only occupying a third of the Tate's space in terms of new acquisitions, the most recent spree of artwork totals £10,624,154. This averages out at £49,250 for each woman's artwork, and £33,228 for each man, and very much contradicts what the market data tells us because here it looks as though women are economically more successful than male artists which we know is far from the case. With an eighty per cent (and upwards) gender value gap in contemporary art, it is sincerely hoped that our museums would not over-inflate the values of women's artwork to boost the appearance of economically gender-equal collections. Surprisingly, in analysing the high value artwork individually a number of women's artworks appeared to be over-valued to the tune of almost £1.5 million when compared to artists' latest auction values (these being the main means by which Tate place values on artwork entering their collection).

## **Sexism and ageism in visual arts values**

According to *The Guardian* (Finel Honigman, 2006), “older artists are dismissed when they are no longer hot and hip”. In the 2014 novel *The Blazing World*, author and cultural critic Siri Hustvedt tackles the long-debated issue of artworld ageism/misogyny. The book – a work of fiction (or not!) – concerns a repressed older female artist in New York. Artist Harriet Burden has become so frustrated with her lack of artworld recognition that she persuades three young male friends to show her work under their own names. Until that point, Burden is invisible – wife and middle-aged mother foremost, her occupation as artist viewed as trivial and inconsequential. She is in fact, an aging woman attempting to encroach the peripheries of a man’s world, and it is apparent she will never make it past the boundaries of acceptance and validation. Burden has long passed the feminine fruitful promises of childbearing age and decorative youth that her artworld’s men allow to encroach upon them. She is fading away and disintegrating into her husband’s shadow and a world of obscurity. In our Victorian men’s book *Art in the House* (Von Falke & Perkins, 1879), they stated “there are female painters who work out their conceptions boldly and powerfully, with a broad touch, and to use artistic language, with the hand of a virtuoso. While this expression which is applicable only to man’s work, implies in women the overstepping of the bounds of nature” – women such as our protagonist Harriet, have long been accused of encroaching on masculine protected space.

Why do some female artists feel – as Hustvedt’s Harriet Burden does – that as far as the artworld is concerned, they are invisible? Very often living in the shadows of better-known spouses as Rose Hilton did, whose artist husband Roger Hilton perceived there was not enough room for two artists in a relationship (Salter, 2012). But what I am interested in is, why do women artists appear to become invisible as they age? Why do some younger female artists explicitly assert their brand of youth and sexuality above the art they produce?

In the 1980s, the Young British Artists’ (YBA) generation promoted art as being young and part of popular culture. British prime minister Tony Blair promoted such a culture as ‘Cool Britannia’ – a national renaissance for the UK in arts and culture pioneered by Britpop bands, young British artists, young filmmakers and fashion designers. It is arguable that such a focus on youth, coolness, sexuality and fame may have cast a shadow on older practitioners, which particularly affected women in the 1990s and beyond. Prior to the Cool Britannia era, women with shoulder pads and high ambitions were doing exceedingly well



in other industries, evidenced by a narrowing of the gender pay gap (O'Neill & Polachek, 1993).

Political art historian Julian Stallabrass (Foster 2008) argues that the artworld has become contaminated by corporate mass media culture: There is “an emphasis on the image of youth, the prevalence of work that reproduces well on magazine pages, and the rise of the celebrity artist, work that cosies up to commodity culture and the fashion industry, and serves as accessible honeypots to sponsors”. Indeed, work presented at the London Art Fair in 2018 at the time of writing my book very much aligned with Stallabrass’s thoughts. Here, there was an emphasis on youth and work that might be reproduced very easily on the pages of glossy magazines via Instagram. The rising power of the social media influencer artist, such as Claire Luxton, whose supersized glossy and beautified selfies may not have the same appeal to followers and prospective sponsors if she were photographing herself semi-clad or non-beautified in her sixties; images of the work, with a nod to Stallabrass, subsequently published in the glossy magazine *Harpers Bazaar* (Luxton, 2020). Karina Jakubowicz (2017: 66) argues that “instead of a paintbrush, the artist now uses make-up, lighting and digital enhancement in order to achieve a certain level of perfection that is far removed from the reality”. This is the art of seduction. Are these artists *catfishing* collectors, we might ask, tongue in cheek? Catfishing of course, being the term for luring someone into a relationship by means of a fictional persona. One does not find many (if any) male artists performing in such a fashion to appeal to the masses, unless we consider the work of British artist Paul Kindersley (b.1985), whose Youtube makeup lessons parody young women’s beautification routines as his fine art practice.

There is no suggestion that ageing women artists can contribute to the culture described above in this way. Indeed, during an interview with *Artnet News*, Margaret Harrison (b.1940) complained that when she was awarded a major arts prize, that in her words, nearly all the press responded with the phrase ‘Pensioner wins big prize!!’ (Gørrill 2020: 138). Margaret claimed that when older male artists had won the prize, their age had not even been mentioned. She perceived that the press thought it was not about the quality of the artwork, but the age and appearance of the woman concerned winning the prize. During a discussion with Margaret on age, art and beauty, it was clear she had very strong feelings on the subject – “but men are allowed to be old and ugly!” she rightly exclaimed, pointing out a number of high profile aging male artists who were revered for the quality of

their work rather than their age or appearance (Gørrill 2020: 138). There are of course, parallels with this in film and TV – particularly in newsrooms where women are dismissed when their hair becomes grey – whilst the male anchors are seen as wise, dependable and reliable a ‘silver fox’, rather than a ‘battle axe’ (Wolfe & Mitre, 2012).

### **Artworld parallels with the pop music industry**

It may be useful to compare the music industry’s branding of young women in the context of women painters and their physical visibility. With the merging of the boundaries between popular culture and contemporary art, it is arguable that the boundaries have also blurred between the public’s perception of, and galleries’ marketability of our visual artists. In *Gender, Branding and the Modern Music Industry*, Kristin Lieb (2013: iv) notes how the birth of the music channel MTV allowed audiences to “see [singers] as they heard their music, forever linking the artist’s image with her sound”. According to Lieb (2013), artists rely increasingly on sex appeal, however it is not just singing artists who use sex appeal in their branding and promotion. It could be argued that female visual artists have adopted a similar approach in personal branding. The (then) 30 year-old painter Scarlett Raven recently posed semi-naked for a painting advertisement in *Modern Painters*, *Tatler*, and German *Vogue*. Raven was stripped to the waist, baring her breasts and covered in Winsor and Newton paint. The sexualised image blurred the lines between the attraction of a page 3 girl, the contemporary woman artist today and the cultural object. In applying Griselda Pollock’s 2003 research to contemporary female artists’ decisions to expose their bodies as sexualised, Karina Jakubowicz (2017: 35) argues “the predominant idea that Pollock proposed in *Vision and Difference* is that artistic representations of women are products of the artist’s social and political environment”:

In sexist societies, women are typically depicted in ways that indicates their oppression. Even if an artist is not particularly sexist, they will portray the ideologies around them by virtue of representing the world around them. By looking closely at the images that these artists create, it is possible to see complex and fascinating ideological concepts at work. The way the female body is presented, how it is dressed, the characters that the models depict, and the way the figure is presented in relation to the space around them, are all indications of a wider context (Jakubowicz, 2017:35).

During Kristin Lieb’s investigation into the differences between female and male branding in the pop business, there were several key findings:

Women... must meet some universal but sometimes ineffable quality of transcendent attractiveness to have a fighting chance of success, they must be willing to show all and tell all to their demanding audiences, they must play a vastly different game to their male counterparts...they must leverage their bodies and perceived sexual availability into as many [arenas] eg. fashion, publishing (Lieb, 2013: 88-9).

Although this statement refers to the music industry, it is possible to argue that there are parallels with the way female visual artists have exploited the media's socially constructed reality and expectations of a woman's appearance. Such a constructed reality encourages those in the music industry to guise themselves as sexually available, a term defined by Kristin Lieb as "fauxmosexuality" (Banks, 2015). It is arguable the notions of such performative statements have been adopted by some female artists, perhaps seen as a requirement for media attention and subsequent success and artworld desirability as Luxton et al.'s success might suggest.

### **Age is (not) but a number**

The research in *Women Can't Paint* shows that shows that the average age of symbolic achievement for women is 12 years younger than that of men (Gørrill, 2020: 140), which suggests that women are dropping out of practice or becoming invisible at an older age – nevertheless, men do win a significantly larger number of arts prizes than their female counterparts. There are of course examples of successful high profile women creating and exhibiting symbolically-recognised work at a more mature age. Lubaina Himid won the Turner Prize in 2017 at the age of 63, Phyllida Barlow represented Britain at the 2017 Venice Biennale at 71, Marina Abramovich had a major retrospective at MoMA in 2010 at the age of 64, Mona Hatoum held a major monographic exhibition at the Pompidou when she was 63 (Gørrill, 2020: 141). And as I write this paper, 60 year-old Sonya Boyce wins the coveted Golden Lion award for best pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2022 (Harris, 2022). These are all great stories. The question is, do such examples indicate that there has been a shift in attitude towards our (older) female artists? It is important to keep on gathering statistics in order to ensure that gatekeepers do not simply say (according to one high profile American artist I spoke to) "oh we've done the women now so we can forget about them for a bit, let's go back to the big guys!" (Gørrill, 2020: 141). The statistics however speak for themselves. On average, women artists are simply not achieving the same validation as men, certainly not at an older age.

There are of course gendered issues that affect women of all ages. An American artist I spoke to, was depressed that her sales appeared to dry up after she had given birth to her second child. She related this to an online dig at her role as mother, where someone had posted an image of her pushing a buggy, laden down with groceries and apparently looking tired. The caption rather cruelly described her as a 'has-been' (Gørrill, 2020: 142). Previous social media posts had shown the glamorous side to the artist's lifestyle – photographs in glossy magazines at previous and ceremonies.

Overnight I just seemed to become boring and invisible and it was other women artists the columns were looking at, not me. It occurred to me that my dealer was avoiding me in photo opportunities, though I thought I was being paranoid at first. He made jokes about botox and fillers. My work stopped selling so much and I began painting different types of paintings, ones that might appeal to a different generation perhaps (Gørrill, 2020: 142).

The British artist Annie Kevans (b.1972) spoke about her experience of discrimination by a New York gallerist, who believed it would not be possible for Annie to continue to be a good artist when she was also a mother. "The male gallerist never spoke to me again after finding out I was pregnant, never emailed me again, nothing, that was it!" (Gørrill, 2020: 142): Annie felt that society's perception of motherhood led to negativity, perhaps these attitudes being reinforced by such prominent artist role models as Judy Chicago (2014: 13) and Tracey Emin (Simpson, 2014) – neither of whom are mothers, and who openly declare you cannot be both a mother and a good artist.

### **The new contemporary artworld hysteria**

A worrying form of suppression and discrimination is that of female artists being described and consequently labelled as 'mad' if they do not conform to their galleries' exact (and often unreasonable and unlawful) demands. Hysteria is a long-forgotten malady with a historical basis: back in Victorian times, 'madness' was also feminised in the form of 'hysteria' (see for example, Kromm, 1994). The word 'hyster' is also Latin for womb, and so the malady of the womb/hysteria is a gender-specific disease that can only affect women. And many of the artists I spoke to claimed they were being labelled with a contemporary version of hysteria:

If you fall out with your dealers you're screwed. And the gossip as well that the galleries spread about you. Oh the best is - if you're a woman - you're crazy, you're mad! You hear that about women artists all the time, but never about men, the dealers tell each other this so that no one else takes you on. It's a small world. First of all you're difficult, you're a difficult artist to work

with, and then when they really don't care they say you're mad. I've heard lots of female artists being referred to as mad, and I know them – they're not mad at all – the dealers are just making the women look bad so they can take back control of them (Gørrill 2020: 148).

### **Gender is not a neutral category**

The fact remains, that people do not want to deal with the issue of gender. It is a dirty word in the artworld. Originally asked to submit a proposal on 'Gender' for the *Whitechapel Gallery's Documents of Contemporary Art* series, they then decided that a book on gender was unnecessary, as “gender is neutral and was threaded throughout all of their books”. However, gender is NOT a neutral category, as people like to argue. Gender is like the last taboo, and will probably be the last thing to be dealt with, in a world that is very slowly – too slowly – trying to remove the white hetero-masculinist canon from its backbone. But unless we deal with the issue of gender, nothing will change. Women artists have such a dazzling future ahead, but only if we do something about the invisible barriers to success. We need to remove Germaine Greer's (2001) hurdles, we need to rewrite art history books, but more importantly we need to fight for our future art histories where women artists will be the norm rather than the exception.

For me, I dedicate the rest of my academic career to counting, exposing and fighting artworld discrimination. At the University of Dundee, we academics are encouraged to embrace change and commit to making a real difference through our work, inspiring others with our passion and enthusiasm. I hope that I have done something to contribute to, and demonstrate this through the present paper, and the books and academic journal papers I am currently working on including my forthcoming monograph *War Paint: Gender Inequality in the Virtual Artworld* (Gørrill 2024), and edited compilation *Wife, Witch, Whore: Essential Conversations on Gender, Art and Culture* (Gørrill et al., 2025).

To conclude this paper, I offer below the areas where my doctoral/postdoctoral research highlighted that change could be made – noting of course, that we need more research from non-binary voices. I have termed these manifestos in *Women Can't Paint* (Gørrill 2020: 155-170), in response to the descending glass ceiling we currently see enforced on our female creatives. As noted in the Indian national press, “everyone from Gørrill to the Guerrilla Girls has warned against the dangers of tokenism” (Ghose, 2019). These suggestions will help to avoid such tokenism in helping to create a fairer world, a

fairer *artworld*. Nevertheless, it is important to remember, and not be surprised that there is an inevitable resistance and backlash to efforts of progressive social change – in this case, gender equality, as I broached upon in the introduction. According to Flood et al. (2020), pushback against gender equality comes more often from members of the privileged group, i.e., in this case from men. However, many women are also, perhaps surprisingly against gender equality in the arts, as an examination of the contents of my inbox would reveal.

### **Manifestos for a gender-equal artworld**

1. An education for all through more female role models.
2. Museum diversity policies to be fully inclusive and take account of gender.
3. The introduction of gender quotas or caps to exhibitions.
4. Media and museum PR responsibility to gender equality.
5. Call for artworld regulation.
6. Feminist (and visual art) methodologies to embrace a quantitative research.
7. More funding to investigate and find solutions for art gender inequalities.

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