By Andrea Bowers

WHEN I WAS first asked to write a Muse column, in which an artist discusses a source of inspiration, frankly, I was annoyed by the topic. It serves up the old cliché. Media critic and blogger Anita Sarkeesian nails it in her essay “Try Not to Hate Women: #1 The Meme Piedo Dream Girl” (2013), the first of a six-part video series created for Rock magazine’s website:

“We should talk about this whole idea of a muse, which is the foundation for this trope. For centuries male filmmakers, writers, painters, artists of all kinds have often cited women as the inspiration for their brilliant masterpieces. I mean if I hear one more story like this, I’m going to scream. Or puke. Or both. Women are here for men’s inspiration or celebration or whatever. Not only does Touré change the lives of women in her immediate community, but she also strives for constitutional change to protect women’s rights.”

NANCY BUCHANAN, a California feminist artist of the second wave, is my political lighthouse. Her practice is a brilliant synthesis of art and activism. She combines political acumen with uncompromising ethics like no other artist I know, maintaining a belief in the power of protest and the necessity of organizing to facilitate change. Her early performance works are iconic and at times wickedly funny. In Please Sing Along, performed at the Woman’s Building in L.A. in 1974, Buchanan and Barbara T. Smith investigated power and beauty through the reversal of male and female roles. The performance begins with naked men dancing whimsically to soothing music. Next, the two women, wearing what appear to be martial arts uniforms, beat the tar out of each other, while male voices read a collage of critical essays discussing essentialism. My other favorite, Tropes vs. Women: #1

Polygamy is culturally accepted in her country, and she has seen on young women by other women for the equivalent of $4. Genital mutilation is a tradition in Mali. It’s a brutal procedure performed at the Woman’s Building in L.A. in 1974, Buchanan and Barbara T. Smith investigated power and beauty through the reversal of male and female roles. The performance begins with naked men dancing whimsically to soothing music. Next, the two women, wearing what appear to be martial arts uniforms, beat the tar out of each other, while male voices read a collage of critical essays discussing essentialism. My other favorite, Tropes vs. Women: #1

Have you ever seen a group of naked people—men and women—standing together and aiming a weapon at each other? That is exactly what is happening in the video installation Two Views of Nancy Buchanan’s Performance: Please Sing Along, March 13-17, 2013 (detail), 2014, graphite on paper, 12½ by 2½ inches overall, Courtesy Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects.

ANDREA BOWERS, a feminist tornado: performing, curating, writing, teaching, speaking and maintaining social and studio practices. She confounds me with her intelligence, her energetic multitasking and her commitment to engaging large groups of people in collaborations. Uniting feminist ideas from the materialists and essentialists, she might find a way for us all to get along in this very fractured feminist movement. As her work grows, she becomes increasingly adamant about rejecting object-making—which I admire but can’t do. In 2004, she founded L.A. Art Girls, a critique and support group that encompassed over 30 women artists at its height and continues to this day. Currently Hebron is working on the “Gallery Tally” project, a compilation of data on the ratios of female and male artists in contemporary art galleries overall. Courtesy Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects.

MUSIC

Red vs. Blue (1974), began with Buchanan selling raffle tickets. The night of the raffle, wearing a blond wig and fake eyelashes, Buchanan performed a song whose lyrics came from the Union Oil Company of California’s annual report to shareholders, with the band Blue Cheer accompanying her. She then had blood drawn from her arm, stepped to the microphone and announced that two raffle winners had each received four shares of Union Oil stock that she inherited from her family. She signed over the stock certificates using her own blood. In February 2013, REDCAT in L.A. presented a survey of Buchanan’s videos dating from the 1970s to 2009. This screening powerfully influenced my work. Her videos have poetry, humor, quirky aesthetics and a consistency of political voice, all of which undermine the art world’s celebration of big budgets and high production values. It’s ridiculous that Buchanan isn’t having solo museum shows. After fighting oppression for years she’s still optimistic about possibilities and supportive of young artists.”