

Where Are the Great Women Pop Artists?

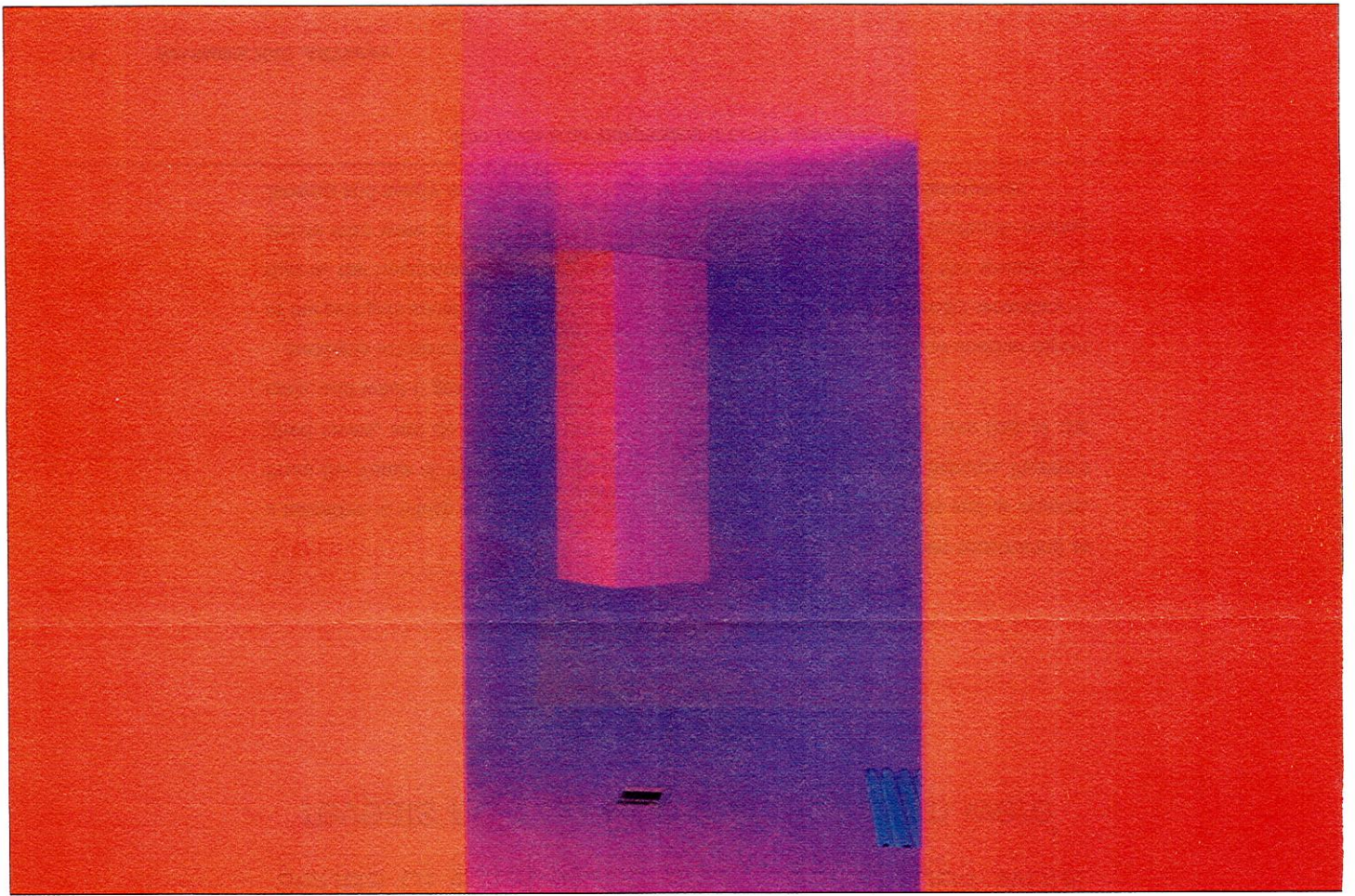
It's clear that female artists of the '60s were pushed to the margins of art history. But a series of exhibitions showcasing their work reveals how un-Pop many of them were

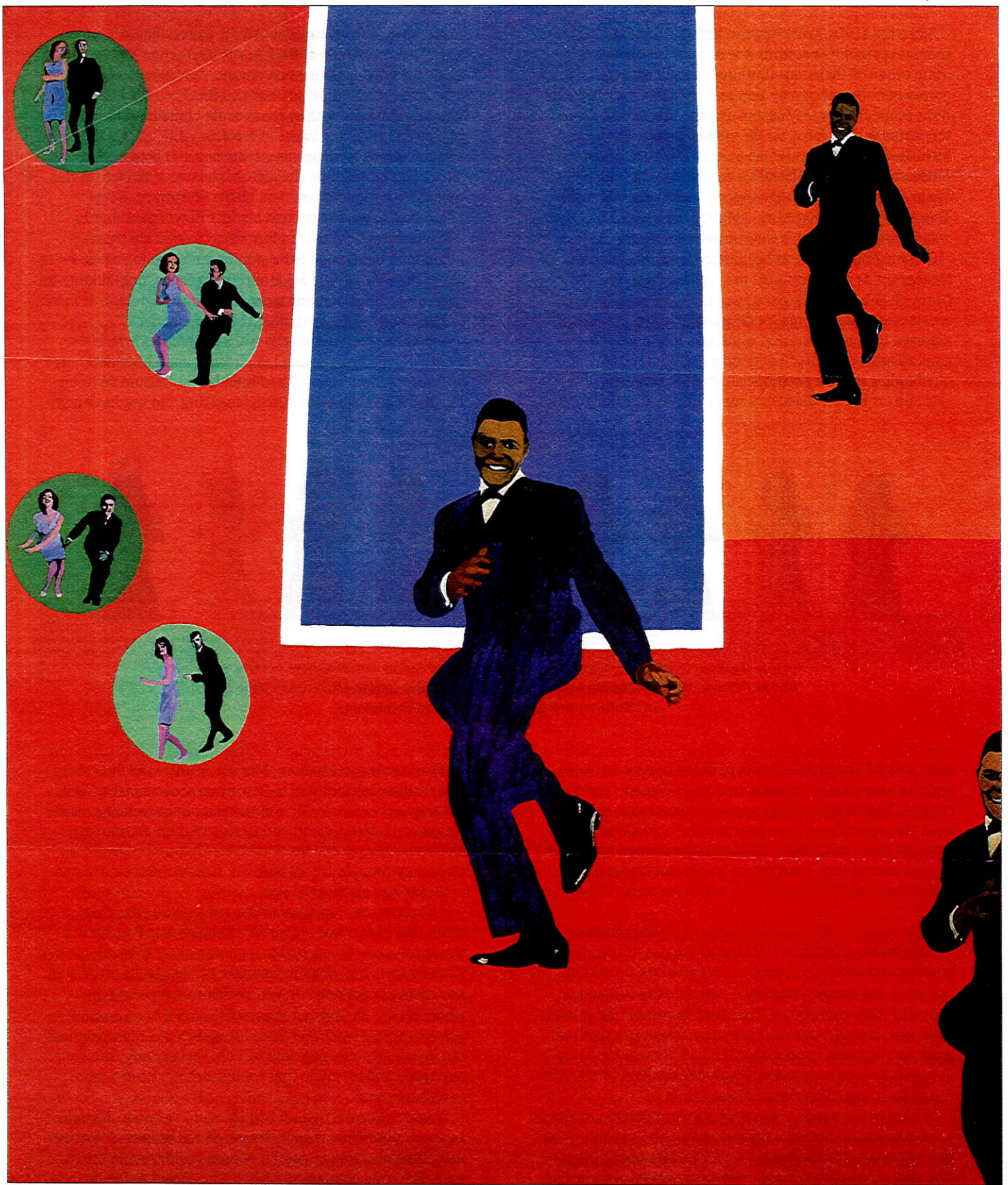
BY KIM LEVIN

Western art history has nearly always been constructed as a narrative in which women are viewed through male eyes—as subjects and as objects. From the Venus of Willendorf to Raphael's Madonnas, Rubens's raped Sabines, Picasso's jilted lovers, and de Kooning's man-eating females, the standard gaze was that of the male, and what it gazed upon was the objectified female body.

Suddenly art history (once again) finds itself being turned on its head as another aspect of the past gets unearthed and revised. This time the subject is the supposedly secondary—that is, the unacknowledged, neglected, subservient, auxiliary—role of the women Pop artists who were at work in the pre-Linda Nochlin days, when the textbook-writing Jansons and nearly everyone else thought that only men could create masterpieces.

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ABOVE Rosalyn Drexler's *Chubby Checker*, 1964. **OPPOSITE** Vija Celmins's *Pencil*, 1966. Both images are in "Seductive Subversion: Women Pop Artists" at the Brooklyn Museum.

Since the 1960s, when women artists started defining themselves and re-narrating the history, we have slowly become aware of their contributions. Lately museums have gotten into the act. It may be sheer coincidence, but exhibitions at the Brooklyn Museum and the Kunsthalle Vienna this autumn both focus on the women artists who were identified with Pop art, while an exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York tackles a related subject: painting and feminism (with a bit of Jewishness thrown into the mix). These shows complicate the categories of what's Pop and what's not, opening up a slew of new questions.

Curator Angela Stief, in her catalogue introduction to "Power Up: Female Pop Art," at the Kunsthalle Vienna (through February 20), points out that while female Pop artists resemble their male colleagues, oscillating between Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism, commodity cult and capitalist critique, they remain "militant, critical, and outstanding in their positions as feminist pioneers."

If Pop art by women artists was hardly ever simply Pop,

about all-American banality. And it was an almost exclusively male movement. Back in the days when Mel Ramos could paint Chiquita Banana pinups, Tom Wesselmann could sex up his still lifes by putting sunburned nudes with pubic hair into them, and Allen Jones could obnoxiously use a life-like playmate on her knees as a coffee table, Marjorie Strider was making shaped canvases featuring 3-D breasts that were smartly violating the picture plane as if to one-up the men, who never noticed. And Elaine Sturtevant, a few months after Warhol created his first flower paintings in 1964, borrowed Warhol's silkscreens to replicate those paintings and inserted her renditions into group shows—along with her George Segal and Frank Stella look-alikes—to make Pop into something more conceptual, a decade or more before the word "appropriation" would emerge.

Unlike the previous macho AbEx generation, which also counted female artists like Lee Krasner, Joan Mitchell, Louise Nevelson, Helen Frankenthaler, and Elaine de Kooning, the Pop movement, strictly speaking, did not have high-



Venus Pareve, 1982–84, by Hannah Wilke, appears at the Jewish Museum in New York, in "Shifting the Gaze: Painting and Feminism."

what was it? The female artists of those years were, willingly or unwittingly, involved in a major change in content, context, and medium. They were concerned with shifting both the objectifying male gaze and the objectified female gaze. As these exhibitions point out, the women whose art skirted around Pop—and can be somewhat misleadingly called Pop—complicate matters, which isn't a bad thing.

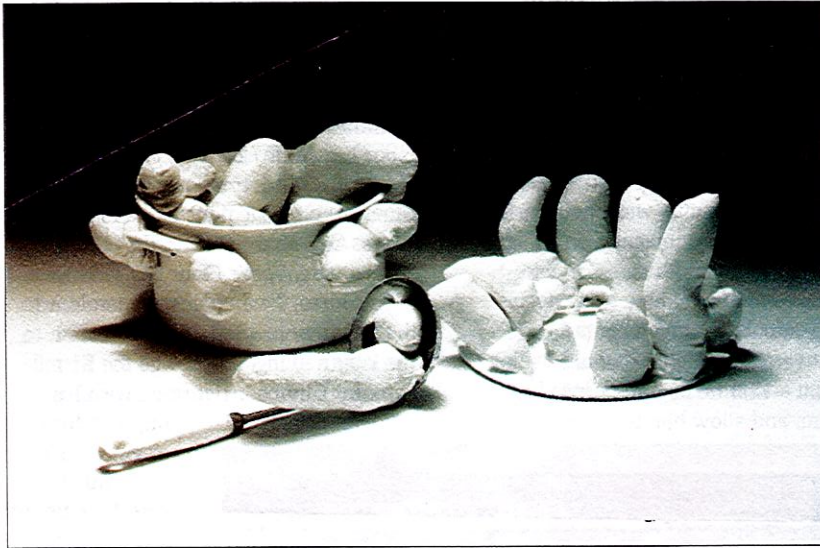
Pop art in the hands and minds of women artists is intricately linked to the rise of feminist art, political and sociological art, art that involves decoration and craft and female sexuality—and thus the subsequent future of 20th-century art. These artists weren't tangential; they were crucial. And what is most interesting about their work can be found in its disparities and divergences from Pop. What women were doing was another kind of art, and to call their work Pop does a disservice to it.

Pop art in the hands of male artists was cartoony, exaggerated, sometimes cynical. Involved with male sexuality, it had to violate something, blowing a cliché so far out of proportion that it could be reconstituted as an aspect of formalism. Pop art was about fast foods, fast babes, fast mechanically reproductive processes such as the silkscreen and the Benday dot, and blatant commercial images and ads. It was

profile female participation. Marisol, Strider, and Sturtevant were sometimes included in Pop group shows in New York, but they never wholly fit. Pop art was about banality, disaffection, and detachment, and the ideas of the women artists diametrically opposed these themes. Philosophically liberated, they thought for themselves, radicalized their art, and imploded the meaning of Pop.

If Chryssa was Pop because she used neon, does that mean Dan Flavin was too? If Vija Celmins was Pop, wasn't she at the same time a budding photorealist? If Yayoi Kusama was Pop, what do we make of her phallic obsessions and cosmic polka dots? If Niki de Saint Phalle was Pop, where do her big folk-art mamas fit? And if Lee Lozano's pre-conceptual work and Faith Ringgold's pre-quilt paintings can be dragged into the orbit of Pop, we can only throw up our hands and conclude that we desperately need a more descriptive term.

Women's Pop-related art had its own intentions. It could be about obsession, cosmic design, or, in the case of Marisol, folk arts and crafts. Usually it opposed or dissected the male gaze. The male artists may have been content to flirt with post-industrial Minimalism, but back in the days when femininity equaled domesticity, Martha Rosler mailed out a series of narrative recipes. They involved, for example, the



Yayoi Kusama's witty, parodic *Untitled*, 1963, takes Pop into the realm of craft and phalluses.

dislocations of a Mexican maid who didn't have a clue as to what a peanut butter and jelly sandwich was, and pieced together images of suburban kitchens invaded by the horrors of the Vietnam war. On the other hand, Warhol, whose latent political content went unremarked for years, didn't do decorative camouflage painting until the 1980s.

Now "Power Up: Female Pop Art" makes it quite clear that an idea can be about politics as well as about female sexuality. It narrows its scope to nine artists, some of whom—such as the Belgian Evelyne Axell—have remained seriously unknown in New York. The star of this exhibition is Sister Corita Kent, the nun who used signs, slogans, and packaging as a form of political protest.

Twenty-five female artists, including Axell and some other unfamiliar Europeans, are in the Brooklyn Museum's "Seductive Subversion: Women Pop Artists, 1958-1968" (on view through January 9), and it's hard to resist an impertinent question: Would anyone ever dream of titling a show of male Pop artists "Subversive Seducers"? And in an exhibition that includes a number of arguably un-Pop artists, where is Yoko Ono, Lee Bontecou, Carolee Schneemann—or even Colette, who knowingly transformed herself into the objectified object of the male gaze?

The impact of feminist thought permeates works by 27 artists in the Jewish Museum's "Shifting the Gaze: Painting and Feminism" (through January 30). Contributors range from Louise Nevelson, Rosalyn Drexler, and Eva Hesse to Nancy Spero, Hannah Wilke, and Nicole Eisenman. Rosler is oddly absent, but then, conceptual photomontage proba-

bly doesn't count as painting per se. But kudos to this exhibition for anointing three token males as honorary feminists: Leon Golub, who was always attuned to power, persecution, and victimhood; Robert Kushner, who made the most of feminized pattern and decoration; and Cary Leibowitz, with his self-deprecating gay Jewish humor.

Unacknowledged or under-acknowledged at the time, relegated to the margins or forgotten by history, the profound female artists of their time inverted the male gaze and anticipated the future while male Pop artists were getting stuck in their own styles. The tenuous thread that ties them all together is linked to feminism and the contemporary art that was still to come. And now, in these exhibitions in which nearly everyone spills out of the arbitrary category of

Pop, what at first may seem curatorial weakness becomes great strength. History is again being distorted, manipulated, and revised, for better and worse, but such are its innate fictions. And we have to conclude that the work by these woman artists doesn't seem nearly as dated as that of their male counterparts. Shifting the gaze, indeed. ■



Martha Rosler's photomontage *Vacuuming Pop Art*, 1967-72, addresses politics and the male gaze.