On the Representation of the Visual Arts at NWSA

Estella Lauter
prepare as part of her work for the six-week program. Theory and practice reinforce one another—a strong remedy for burnout.

After lunch, I spend an hour watching the film "Union Maids" at the New Day Films screening room. At first, it seems like a good way to take a break from the "work" of the Convention. Now, as I sit here in this room with tears in my eyes, "Union Maids" becomes part of the experience of the Convention, every bit as intense as a lecture or a CR group. I think of my own parents, radicals and working people who fought in some of the same struggles I see in the film. And I think of my students—privileged, yet deprived, with so much material wealth and so little sense of their own history. What would they make of this film?

Tuesday afternoon. I am preparing to go home, and I do not want to leave. I make one final circuit of the book exhibit, looking for souvenirs to bring home to my own children. Among the books, stickers, T-shirts, and balloons, I find a large button that says "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent." It seems just right.

Wednesday morning, June 3, 8:00 a.m. While workshops and roundtables are still going on at Storrs, I am back in my home room at school, taking attendance. It is painful to be here today. There are two or three people whom I can tell about the Convention; everyone else wonders where I've been for my two-day "vacation," and stares blankly at my Feminist Press T-shirt. (Teachers aren't supposed to wear T-shirts, anyway.)

Three days at the NWSA Convention have made me more uncomfortable in my high school. I am more conscious than ever that I work in and for a system that is racist, competitive, gynophobic, and destructive. Yet I am also more conscious than ever of why it is important for me to be here. I am here because, next year, as in every other year in the past, there will be a young woman in one of my classes who is discovering that she is a lesbian. Or a frightened sixteen-year-old girl apologetically seeking advice "for a friend" who "thinks she might be pregnant." Or a young woman whose parents want her to wear dresses and be docile when she knows that she is stronger and smarter than her brothers. Or a fifteen-year old boy who writes poetry and has no one to turn to when other students call him a fag. Or a Black student who has no one to defend her when she is harassed by the white football players in the cafeteria.

All of these young people will be looking, half-hoping, for someone to care for them, someone who is as alienated from the institution as they are, but not quite as powerless. That will be the time when I know that my life as a feminist teacher has a purpose, and when the moments of insight and sharing that I found at the NWSA Convention will come back to make me strong.

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Estella Lauter

What commitment is the Association prepared to make to women's studies in the visual arts? Judging from the 1981 Convention the question is not an easy one to answer. On the one hand, the program promised several exhibits and eight sessions involving visual materials; on the other, several of these plans were canceled or rendered ineffective by scheduling problems. The art gallery was closed, I was told, because the exhibit of tree-spirit masks failed to materialize and the space was too large for Brenda Verner's "Americana." Betty La Duke's etchings and drawings were displayed in the busy Women's Center lounge without adequate documentation. I never located the woodcuts by Blythe Follet-Colon. Six of the eight sessions were scheduled in conflict with each other. The only session on Asian women artists was canceled. I assume that all these problems were the result of unfortunate but unavoidable circumstances. But my real concern is this: only two (or at most three) of the 272 sessions actually discussed works of art created by minority women. Surely such works should have been closer to the center of our attention at a Convention devoted to the task of understanding the effects of racism. Surely the works are not so well known that we can afford to pass over them without comment.

The session entitled "The Black Women Artists Film Series: Creating Sistervisions" began with a quiz that demonstrated the degree of our need for education regarding women artists: "Identify the first blakwoman sculptor. Name any blakwoman choreographer. Identify the first play written/produced by a blakwoman. Identify the blakwoman author who served as literary editor of Crisis during the Harlem Renaissance." Most of the audience was stumped by these questions.

Under the auspices of a FIPSE grant, Beverly A. Smith, Fahamisha Shariat Brown, and Denise Hinnant mounted five admission-free programs of films last year on Black women in music, literature, visual art, dance, and drama. The programs, called "Sistervisions," were designed for the general public as well as for Black and women's studies programs in Boston. The one on visual artists, for example, included the NET film on assemblage artist Betty Saar, a documentary by Black filmmaker Monica Freeman on the sculptor Valerie Maynard, and a profile of Varnette Honeywood by Carroll Blue in which the artist's paintings are juxtaposed with scenes from the community life that inspired them. Offered at a branch of the YWCA in Boston, with childcare provided, the program was accompanied by an exhibit and sale of works by Boston-area artists. Information packets prepared for each program include a brief historical essay on the role of Black women in the art form under discussion, a reading list, and a list of other media materials.
These packets are available from the Black Women Artists Film Series, 14 Beacon Street, Rm. 103, Boston, MA 02108. Next year, the group intends to produce a 25-minute slide show on Black women in literature. This highly successful project could easily become a model for education in the arts both on and off campus.

Another fine session featured a carousel of slides of works by Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American women, proving the point that there is no shortage of excellent art to be studied. For Vicki Patraka (English, University of Wyoming), the acquisition of materials on Third World women artists has been a labor of love involving considerable persistence and enterprise. She took many of the slides herself, and she acquired others directly from artists and their galleries. Her intent in this presentation was to demonstrate the diversity and range of art created by minority women. In addition to showing works by such well-known artists as Catlett, Savage, Ringgold, Saar, and Kahlo, she included the “filigree drawings” of Consuelo González Amézcoa, ceramic sculpture by Deena Bur­styn, earth works by Ana Mendieta, and autobiographical drawings by Pishiok. The images might have sparked many useful discussions on the program (a late addi­tion). Verner's inclusion of some handsome pictures of African women taken in the 1880s at a Cambridge girls' school culminated in an image of a child breaking out of a watermelon/egg. Verner’s inclusion of some handsome pictures of African American women taken in the 1880s at a Cambridge girls’ school was a welcome antidote to the popular images. The lecture was effective and convincing; it would be a useful consciousness-raising tool in many educational environments. Verner would like to be invited to present this lecture and/or another called “Public Property: Media’s Historic Image of Black and White Women.” She can be contacted through Lordly and Dame, Inc., 51 Church Street, Boston.

There was no dearth of visual stimulation at the Convention. Two sessions featured multimedia presentations using slides as part of an “essay” on women. “In the Beginning . . . Of the End: A Voyage of Women Becoming,” by Renate Stendahl, a French critic, and Maj Skategaard, a Danish artist, concerned women’s struggle to revise the meaning of patriarchal definitions of our lives. “Gene­sis/Genocide: Women for Peace—A Multi-Racial Slide/Music/Word Collage,” by Carol Christ, Marcia Lynn Keller, and Karen Voss, concerned our collective struggle to survive extermination by war and nuclear radiation. (The latter is available for purchase or rental as of September 1, 1981; contact Carol Christ at San Jose State University, San Jose, CA 95192.) Films were shown continu­ously, though only one, screened separately by women from New Day Films, concerned the work of a minority woman—a Black woman, one of several quilters in their wonderful film on contemporary artists of that medium.

Probably the most effective presentation of visual images was the exhibition of photographs in the spacious gallery of the auditorium building where registration took place and many Convention events were held. Called “Generations of Women II: Visions and Voices,” it included sixty-two photographs of our female forebears, some of them blown up to larger-than-life size. The exhibit is designed to foster respect for the various (traditional and nontraditional) choic­es women have made in living their lives. Its coordinators are currently working on a multimedia project called “In Search of Our Female Forebears.”

Women’s studies in the visual arts may legitimately take many forms. We still need to develop literacy regarding images of women. The visual “essay” has unlimited possibilities in our hands. But members of NWSA have an opportunity to affect the lives of women artists materially by creating a public that is familiar with their work and with its history. The problems of minority women artists are often more severe than those of their Anglo sisters, and they will require more energy on our part as educators. Only when their images are part of our long-term visual memory can we afford to rest undisturbed by the fear of their disappearance. I hope that artists, art historians and critics, and other aficionados of art by women will conspire next year to bring it closer to the center of attention at the NWSA Convention.

*Verner objects to the objectification involved in the use of the term “Black” as a noun; even used as an adjective, it is insufficient because it fails to imply the people’s place of origin. She would prefer to wrest the term “Afrikaner” from the Dutch Africans, but will also settle for “African American” as a suitably dignified descriptor.

*Ed. note: For more on the project that resulted in this exhibit, see Women’s Studies Quarterly 9:2 (Spring 1981): 4-13.

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