Nasher exhibit puts gender roles in context

BY MICHAELA DWYER

At Duke, and at colleges and universities nationwide, there seem to be more and more student-led discussions surrounding gender and its relation to power dynamics. Does the media objectify men as much as women? Is feminism necessary politically? Does feminism even still exist in the 21st century?


“This was the voice, this was the time when women’s voices were just being heard in the art world,” said Sarah Schroth, Nancy Hanks Senior Curator at the Nasher Museum and an adjunct associate professor in the department of Art, Art History and Visual Studies. “Art is a very male-dominated field, and especially was [in the 1970s and 1980s].”

In a break with previous artistic models, contemporary art in the latter half of the 20th century shifted toward postmodern visual representation. Artists both female and male utilized new mediums and non-traditional exhibition spaces to experiment with form and style. Much of their material responded directly to the growing presence of the media.

“This was the beginning of the time when there was this explosion of imagery,” Schroth said. “The marketing and advertising agencies were using visual material in order to convince the consumer to buy; the politician was convincing the voter to vote for him using imagery.”

These artists used this philosophy to “deconstruct” symbols of power, creating the academic and philosophical discourse of postmodernism. These artistic efforts are often viewed without the lens of gender, representing works from this period as non-feminist and apolitical in the gender sphere.

The Deconstructive Impulse, however, turns this idea on its head. The exhibition’s primary contention is that women artists, underrepresented and undervalued in the 1970s and 1980s art scene, used postmodern techniques to generate an original critique of power mechanisms and gender bias in popular culture.

“I think the artwork in the exhibition really shows how complicated the relationships among gender, feminism, and visual culture are,” Kimberly Lamm, assistant professor in the Women’s Studies program, wrote in an email. “It seems like for the most part [these women artists] are interested in finding mediums and materials that suit the arguments they want to make, rather than the other way around.”

The exhibition reflects the various strategies women artists used to make such arguments. No matter the form, their overall philosophy upheld deconstructivism as a means to create anew.

“Essentially, [deconstructivism] is the reassembling and recontextualizing of something,” Schroth said. “[These artists] would take the mass media as their jumping off point.”

In the exhibition, the manifestation of these ideas runs the gamut from the abstract to the literal. Deborah Kass’s 1991 painting “Before and Happily Ever After” deals with issues of physical beauty, female ambition and the exploitative effects of the “male gaze.”

Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger, famous for their artworks incorporating textual literalism, each have pieces in the show. Excerpts from Holzer’s 1977-79 “Truisms” contain statements such as “Abuse of power should come as no surprise” and “Romantic love was invented to manipulate women.” A 1982 photographic work from Kruger features a woman obscured by a wildly brimmed hat, accompanied by the statement “I am your reservoir of poses.”

The works in the exhibition—organized by themes like media, masquerade and appropriation—aim to subvert both the male artistic and socio-cultural paradigms through caustic wit and, at times, shock value.

“The Deconstructive Impulse is funny, smart and weird in the best sense, and therefore asks its viewers to encounter ideas and have experiences that are unsettling,” Lamm said. “These strange encounters are really important for feminism because the assumption that feminism is something that is familiar and happened in the past is quite pervasive.”

The Nasher’s decision to mount The Deconstructive Impulse emphasizes its commitment to representing diverse exhibitions and crafting educational engagements to demonstrate their relevance to modern audiences. We’re a teaching museum,” Manager of Marketing and Communications Wendy Hower Livingston said. “The Nasher is intent on showing works of art that a wide variety of audiences can relate to. We want to see ourselves in the art. That’s why we showcase artists of color, women artists and young or overlooked artists.”

Schroth noted that the typical viewer didn’t need to grow up during the 1970s or 1980s to appreciate the importance of the exhibition.

“I was doing graduate work in art history in the 1970s, so all these women are like heroes to me. They were the first ones to break through the male-dominated art world in a big way,” Schroth said. “But I don’t think you have to have grown up then to be moved by them and what they’re saying.”

As part of the exhibit, the Nasher will screen artist Lynn Hershman Leeson’s 2010 film Women Art Revolution. The museum will also host the Guerrilla Girls artist collaborative, who will discuss their trademark posters and billboards exposing gender imbalance in the art community.

The philosophy espoused by the Guerrilla Girls hits home the fact that the art world—and society in general—has a long way to go in terms of gender equality. As definitions of feminism become increasingly nuanced, The Deconstructive Impulse urges a reconsideration of the work that got us to this point.

“Now we’re in a period where [I think],

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The Deconstructive Impulse revisits and recontextualizes the works of female artists from the ’70s and ’80s.
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what happened to feminism? Schroth said. "[This exhibition] is really good for the Duke students because we just take for granted that women will go into careers. It wasn't taken for granted back then. Everything that we do rests on the shoulders of this generation of feminists. I think you can't talk about any art—male or female—today that doesn't stand on their shoulders in some way."

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