FEMINISM and ART:
Four Lectures by Arlene Raven

"I like to relate what's happening in current events to art because they're drawing from the same pool of images and I think their impact is parallel," Art Historian Arlene Raven told her audience as she began a series of four lectures on "Feminism and Art" at the New York Feminist Art Institute. With this deceptively simple opener she proceeded to weave a tapestry of events, images and art work that provided an experience as visceral as it was visual. Although classically-trained in Art History at Johns Hopkins University, Raven prefers to work impressionistically. "I put a lot of information back to back so it will implode, and use contradictory images, talking about Goddess worship and anti-abortion actions at the same time for example, in order to evoke emotions of anger and outrage. I hope this will empower my audience to make social change." She also evokes admiration and gratitude from women artists seeking ways to express the experience of being female that are not male-defined.

Her impact owes perhaps as much to the way she "performs" her lectures – her style and tone of voice – as it does to her complex layering and interweaving of ideas and images to create new connections between art and everyday life. Although one does not agree with every interpretation, they are always thought provoking. The result is a heightened awareness of the way we accept what we are told about art instead of "looking" for ourselves and trusting what we see. None of this translates well to the written page so it is only possible to present here the dominant themes of each lecture.

To illustrate the theme of the first lecture, "The Culture as Male – As Seen in The Feminist Analysis of Art in the '60's and '70's," Raven used Marisol's "Love" (a coke bottle shoved into a woman's mouth); Suzanne Lacey and Leslie Labowitz' performance piece about the Hillside Strangler in Los Angeles, "In Mourning and In Rage"; Betye Saar's "The Liberation of Aunt Jemima", and many others to show how women's growing awareness of sexual and racial oppression is being expressed visually. Other work showed how they were fighting back, no longer fitting in, poking fun at male chauvinism, revising religion, expressing sexual energy, and looking more closely at themselves, "peeling the layers from the onion."

It was relatively easy to make the inequities in our personal lives explicit in the '70's, Raven feels. Current feminist concerns dealing with less solely personal, more global issues, like world survival, are deeply embedded in what she calls the "carnivorous" male culture. She discussed media images and information bombarding us at the moment – starvation in Ethiopia, anorexic fashion models, Jane Fonda's recent confession of 23 years bulemia, with the suggestion that there was a connection. While people in Ethiopia are starving to death, some women are deliberately starving themselves because they hunger for attention, companionship and security. "They strive for perfection and are not able to make it while Third World countries like Ethiopia raise drugs for the 'rich strivers' instead of food for their own people." Raven believes survival in the '80's requires new analysis and tools.

In her second lecture she discussed "Male Culture as Both Sadistic and Pornographic" (quoted from Mary Daly), saying, "It isn't just the specific pictures, it's society itself that is pornographic and sadomasochistic, splitting mind from body." Male art has traditionally reflected that. She showed how women are depicted as separated from the culture in various ways – Man is created by God but Woman is created from Man's rib and is responsible for the fall of humanity as in Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling. Culture is often shown as male (with clothed men) and nature as female (with nude women), as in Manet's "Dejeuner Sur l'Herbe. Raven showed several paintings by men in which the carnality of women is connected to jungle animals and women's sexuality is leeringly viewed. Women are rarely allowed to express their own sexuality in male art, Raven said, except in relation to their sons. She then astounded most of us by pointing out the overt sexuality between mother and son in many painting of "the most important woman in art history, the Virgin Mary."

Art that showed women searching for an identity and to reclaim the "other" included Dorothea Tanning's "The Mirror," Diane Arbus' photograph of "Identical Twins," and Frida Kahlo's "Two Fridas." Raven thinks our eating disorders derive from feelings of not being socially all right. "We feel that our 'otherness,' particularly our needs and appetites, will get out of control."

In her third lecture, a discussion of Expressionism, Raven said that although we see Neo-Expressionism as a new style coming from Europe, it is part of a tradition that dates back to the late 1800's and the paintings of Edvard Munch. "This is a tradition in which men stand for human and women stand for 'other' and are treated very badly." We choose to look at it as a new thing today for marketing purposes.

In contrast to Munch's paintings of women as seductive and wanton, Raven showed Mary Cassatt's work of the 1870's in which "women reside in a world without a fall," and women and children are mythic members of the

matriarchy – an attitude shared with Willa Cather and Virginia Woolf.

According to Raven, the Expressionist tradition continued in the work of Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and other famous Abstract Expressionists of the 1940's and '50's. They showed the artist alone in his studio, "doing the dance of life, creating himself." There is no sense of family, of political struggle or connection to other people. A Shewolf by Pollock shows woman as superhuman (mythical) and subhuman (physical) while de Kooning is concerned with his fear of the large-breasted, devouring mother whom he paints with vaginal teeth. Raven notes that this hostility to women is so deeply embedded in our culture that we aren't even shocked by it.

A number of early women abstract expressionists, Grace Hartigan, Helen Frankenthaler, Joan Mitchell, also dealt with primitivism, myth, and the figure. Others painted such subjects as well, but their images did not gain the currency of Kooning's women.

In her final lecture on "Women's Spirituality," Raven showed the ways in which women artists are searching for their own expression – both within patriarchal forms and outside them. We see their affinity for the Goddess, witches, discovering nature in a new context, or feminizing male religious symbolism (Cheri Gaulke becomes Christ in a crucifixion scene from "This is My Body," Susan Mogul puts on the ritual shawl and yamulke worn only by Jewish men). They also go back in time to Betsy Damon's "Sacred Grove" or Marybeth Edelson's "The Fire Ring".

Other women are looking for new spiritual symbols and myths as seen in "Butterfly for Oakland," a fireworks installation by Judy Chicago; "Welcome to Our Home" by Miriam Schapiro; "Crones" by Adrienne Weiss; "Sun Goddess" by Nancy Azara; Masks by Debbie Jones; "A Work Altar" by Nancy Field and Ritual Sites by Jane Gilmore. Raven also showed a number of "egg" paintings to remind us that the world comes from the Ovum, not the finger of God.

The concern for survival, introduced in the first lecture, continued as an undercurrent throughout. Raven challenged us to make art that will "personalize the political" and to form coalitions with people not like ourselves in order to develop new institutions. However, her style left questions for some: she did not make room for her audience to unify and formulate ideas and possible actions on the important issues raised. She did make a few suggestions: do work that is monumental, as Pat Steir and Judy Chicago have; learn how our images are mediated so we can mediate them ourselves, as Barbara Margolies has in her performance piece, "Therapy and Me"; create performance art to demonstrate our concerns.

Raven also said we must fight for women's survival in the art world, particularly for inclusion in important museum shows – and support places where women can develop their art outside the male establishment.

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