

# ARTNEWS

## She Said Boom: The London Art World Has a Feminist Moment

On Milly Thompson, Emma Hart and Jonathan Baldock, Tala Madani, Helen Marten, Caragh Thuring, Leah Capaldi, Simon Fujiwara, 'Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s,' and the Guerrilla Girls

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Milly Thompson, *Nor playing the flute*, 2015, oil and acrylic on board, 20" x 24". Westminster Waste. DAMIAN GRIFFITHS, 2016/COURTESY THE ARTIST

A topless woman suns herself on a beach, eyes closed. She has an A-list body, slim and toned. Yet her sagging jowls, the deep brackets around her mouth, and the gray in her bobbed hair give her away as middle-aged. Elsewhere, a pretty, bikini-clad woman plays a flute on what may be the same beach; like the first woman, she is shapely, but her limbs and belly are swirled with cellulite and wrinkles. Her opened-legged pose is seductive, but who is she trying to seduce? "Cougar," the title of **Milly Thompson's** solo painting exhibition at **Westminster Waste**, is slang for a sexually aggressive older woman. If this term is usually used derogatively, Thompson reclaimed it with these canvases. The artist has long been interested in women's desire as represented in fashion and advertising.

Here she reminded us how rare it is for women of a certain age to be shown as sexual beings, unembarrassed by, even flaunting, no-longer-youthful bodies.

Thompson, a member of the puckish 1990s London artist collective BANK, is never entirely po-faced. The exhibition was accompanied by a manifesto, "I Choose Painting," in which Thompson recuses herself from the dialectics of feminism: "In an era of the female artist and her powerful texts, articles, lectures, performance, memes, installation, videos, and internet stuff I choose painting." While she admires well-reasoned arguments, she herself can't stop "thinking about bananas and melons." Her mind wanders to romantic literary heroines, their longing, their repression. Thompson "guiltily seeks pleasure," even if that means accepting the "hegemony of male materials." In its day, BANK struck out repeatedly at the art world's hypocrisy and kowtowing to money and power. Here, Thompson cautions us to look beyond rhetoric to what is still at stake: a woman artist's right to decide the manner and means of her own representation.

Thompson's provocations were well-timed: The London art world was having a feminist moment last fall. Exhibit A was Emma Hart, winner of the 2016 Max Mara Art Prize for Women. There is a love of awkwardness peculiar to the British, none more so than

Hart, whose ceramics and videos explore feelings of inadequacy and social humiliation. For their exhibition at the nonprofit PEER gallery, she collaborated with fellow artist Jonathan Baldock to create “Love Life: Act 1,” inspired by Punch and Judy—a traditional puppet show featuring a quarrelsome couple.

“Love Life” expanded on Punch and Judy’s tense domestic relationship, imagining them as new parents. The floor of the first gallery was lined with Hart’s installation *Here We Go Again* (all works 2016): pairs of black ceramic feet stuffed inside black socks, contorted to look like a chorus of nagging mouths. A giant baby (Baldock’s *A Guiding Hand*) in a baby walker loomed at the center of the room; a video monitor installed in its head showed a single human eye, red with conjunctivitis. Unwisely left to its own devices, the baby was smoking a cigarette. Hart’s *Boohoo Boob Tube*—an oversize pair of squeezed-out toothpaste or paint tubes ending in raw, red nipples—emphasized the physical and emotional stresses of motherhood. Elsewhere, Baldock’s anthropomorphic cooking pots and pile of washing ruined by a rogue red sock continued the theme of domestic drudgery. A hi-fi played a spoken-word duet by Hart and Baldock: a back-and-forth repetition of each other’s first names. The effect was tragicomic rather than romantic or sexy—Serge Gainsbourg and Jane Birkin’s “Je t’aime,” it was not.

A darker humor pervaded “Shitty Disco,” **Tala Madani**’s solo exhibition at **Pilar Corrias**. Like her works of the last few years, Madani’s latest paintings depict a nocturnal world in which nude, or nearly nude, bald men play out sexual and scatological rituals. In many of these canvases, arseholes and penises become sources of illumination and cinematic projections: *Chandelier* (all works 2016) depicts a man hanging from the ceiling, projecting light from his bum, while in the Freudian-sounding *Ding Dong Dream*, an

erect penis beams out the image of a smiling baby into a dark void. Men blind each other with flashlights; vomit rainbow-colored liquids; and create fantastic fireworks shows out of their own semen. Their stereotypically male aggression and childishness is alternately horrifying and bathetic—but is also, perhaps, a metaphor for the artist’s own creative process.

As was the case last year, three of the four **2016 Turner Prize** nominees were women: Anthea Hamilton, Helen Marten, and Josephine Pryde. With an installation dominated by a giant pair of buttocks, Hamilton was the bookies’ favorite at 2 to 1. Perhaps this country needed some bawdy humor after the Brexit shock. However, with the longest odds of 4 to 1, **Helen Marten** won the day. Her installations are admittedly not easy to grasp on first viewing, with little obvious logic holding their disparate elements together. But give them time, and the inventiveness with which Marten has turned an encyclopedic range of found materials—from the man-made (cotton balls, ball bearings) to the natural (coffee beans, leaves)—into compelling ecosystems emerges.

Marten’s work is a clear antidote to Instagram culture. It is hard to do justice to her installations in photographs; zooming in to capture details means leaving the rest of the work out of the picture, cutting short a continuous chain of associations. (Marten was also the subject of a solo exhibition at **Serpentine’s Sackler Gallery**, for which she created a long ribbon of white aluminum that roller-coasted through the Sackler’s corridors and bare-brick rooms. As it led the viewer from one work to another, it also made the Serpentine’s “problematic space”—in Marten’s words—her own.)

**Caragh Thuring**—based, like Marten, in London—commissions artisans from Suffolk and Belgium to produce woven canvases onto which she then adds paint or other pigments. The woven patterns are in

fact recycled images from past works, and include patterns resembling tartan checks or brickwork, as well as brushstrokes and handwriting. At **Thomas Dane Gallery**, Thuring's new series of paintings had a naval theme, with submarines being a favorite subject. In one, a tiny group of black-silhouetted sailors stand precariously on the top of a whale-like submarine. Under cover of darkness, they are up to no good—a child is being dragged by the hair, a man is being hoisted up against his will by two others. The titles of some of the works are taken from naval vernacular for submariners, *The Silent Service*, *Sundodger*, and *Bubblehead*, for example. Others, like *Mothership*, *Jolly Rodger*, and *Enlisted Wives Club*, hint at gender divisions. When female figures appear in the paintings, they do so in the woven background; a recurring image is that of two women standing hipshot next to one another. In one such image, one of the women holds a scaled-down submarine under her arm like a surfboard, perhaps a reference to the recently lifted ban on women serving on submarines in the Royal and U.S. Navies.

**Leah Capaldi** has also turned her attention to all-male cultures, in her case one she encountered in the American West. At **Matt's Gallery's** smart temporary space in Bermondsey (the gallery will move to a new development in Battersea next year), was her film installation called *Lay Down*, in which for 21 minutes we watch a real-life cowboy coax his horse into lying down. A dual screen offers two perspectives from which to view this strange and tense ritual. As a viewer, there is an ambiguity about whether to admire the skill of this horse-whisperer (the great grandson of a sheriff of the old Wild West); or rather to feel pity for the horse, who, clearly nervous, is being mastered against her will, despite the lay down's supposed restorative and relaxing effect. Throughout this operation, the horse's tension is increased by the presence of the camera, and the viewer's unease by the presence of a live male performer in the

space, whose arm, and then legs protrude, motionless, through holes in the screen. Capaldi went to America's deserts to explore the effects of those hostile landscapes on their residents. She came back to London with a film about different kinds of frontiers, those between different species and different genders.

Not all the feminist art on view in the city was by women. **The Photographers' Gallery** presented *Joanne*, a newly commissioned film by **Simon Fujiwara**. A portrait of Fujiwara's secondary school art teacher, Joanne Salley, who was fired after students found and circulated photographs of her topless, the film showcases Salley's diverse roles and identities, albeit through clichéd shots of her modeling and working out, as well as through teary scenes in which she discusses her difficult childhood and the loss of her teaching job. But any certainty about who she might really be is destabilized by sequences in which she discusses the storyboarding of the film, as well as by the appearance of a brand consultant, who advises on the remaking of Joanne's public image. Fujiwara's film was paired with the exhibition "**Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s: Works from the Verbund Collection**," featuring artists like Marcella Campagnano, Alexis Hunter, Suzy Lake, Cindy Sherman, and Martha Wilson—all of whom started making art about identity 40 years ago.

In 1986 the **Guerrilla Girls**, the American feminist art group that publicizes women artists' lack of representation in galleries and museums, produced a poster that grimly stated, "It's even worse in Europe." This past October, 30 years later, they opened an exhibition at **Whitechapel Art Gallery** that asked: Is it even worse in Europe? and had on view the results of their recent research. These days, it's probably a toss-up between how badly civil rights are faring in Europe (or post-Brexit England) and the U.S. In a post-truth era, myth takes precedence over fact. We can select our news sources to tell

us what we want to hear, and exclude those that don't share our beliefs. Online anonymity gives cover to intolerance, reversing decades of antidiscrimination lobbying. These developments give added political resonance to those women artists who occupy spaces, cultures, and even states of mind from which they have historically been, and continue to be, excluded. The wonky, rickety art in these London exhibitions asks women to resist what is soothing—the “lay down”—and instead be

in an active relationship with their surroundings, pay close attention to systems and structures, and remain alert to how others may seek to define them.