

LAGUNA BEACH COASTLINE PILOT

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A women's world of art

Former academic opens Laguna gallery specializing in art by women to explore the concept of gender.



Lisa Aslanian opened the new George Gallery to showcase art by women to explore

gender. (Don Leach, Coastline Pilot / February 2, 2012)

By Cindy Frazier

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Former New Yorker Lisa Aslanian spent 20 years in academia, studying, lecturing on and admiring contemporary art by women until deciding to embark on a new journey by opening The George Gallery in Laguna Beach.

The gallery — the only one in the city devoted solely to the work of female artists — held its grand opening last week.

Aslanian does not think that women are under-represented in galleries; nor is her gallery filled with strident feminist "message" art. The gallery's women-only concept is simple but also subtle: What makes art by women different from that of men?

One of the seven artists in the opening show, "Accomplished," uses a childlike motif of braids in her work. What Talin Megherian is expressing, according to Aslanian, is a distinct feminine identity, particularly in the artist's Armenian culture, where women commonly wear braids.

"I am not a first-generation feminist," Aslanian said, referring to the early women's movement and its emphasis on boldly confronting gender issues. "Women can want equality but not want to be men."

Aslanian named the gallery after the French novelist George Sand, a woman who wrote under a masculine pseudonym. Sand also defied gender restrictions in her personal life, dressing as a man and declining to marry her partner, Frederick Chopin.

Aslanian said that gender issues have fascinated her since she studied for and earned her doctorate in art philosophy at the New School for Social Research in New York. Studies in homoeroticism particularly

fascinated her, she said.

"There's no pedantic polemic behind it [the gallery], but our experience is always gendered," she said. "If a woman is an artist does it betray that in her art?"

On her website, Aslanian declares: "The George Gallery represents women artists who create within a wide range: Some boldly portray aggressive sexuality and parodies of domesticity while others deliver art that is, like Ms. Sand's, uncannily and ironically gender neutral."

In her studies, she noticed that few women joined the ranks of professional artists until the 1950s and '60s, with the explosion of political — and feminist — art.

Aslanian does think that women's art tends to be marginalized as "crafts" when it strays beyond paint and canvas. And there are equity issues.

"Women are well-represented in the arts but does their work fetch as much money as [work by] men?" she asks.

As for taking the risk of opening an art gallery at a time when many longtime gallerists have closed their doors, Aslanian says she is enjoying the process, which is so different from the cloistered academic life she has been pursuing. She got a taste of what a gallerist's life is like by working for a time for Salt Fine Art, also in Laguna Beach.

Entering the competitive world of retail art, Aslanian is keeping her cool — and keeping her eye on the art she loves.

"Teaching is a form of selling, and every one of the artists I've chosen is one I believe in," she said. "We have some affordable artwork and it is all by artists who are collectible. They are all internationally known and acclaimed."

The work ranges in price from \$1,500 to \$12,000, and some more expensive work is coming soon, she said.

For her introductory show, Aslanian selected work that portrays a wide range of themes, some of it obviously gender-based, but not all of it.

"The work in this show has a refined and gentle femininity, but the artists all have more aggressive work," Aslanian said. The more provocative work will be seen in some upcoming shows, she said.

The current show has a delicacy that can be deceptive.

Livia Marin's "Broken Things" are reminiscent of [Salvador Dali's](#) dripping clocks: exquisite ceramics that appear to have melted. She also paints broken teacups, stitching them together on the paper with gold thread.

Susan Jamison's egg tempura paintings are beautifully drawn surrealist works. In one, a bare-breasted, bald, tattooed woman is seemingly being examined by white rats who hold a red thread. One of the rats stares at the viewer through red eyes.

"Bridge of Sighs" by Carla Gannis is a series depicting a woman's body bridging a river or chasm, as people wander over her, seemingly oblivious to the fact that they are standing on her body.

Future shows will consist of two-artist exhibitions, including some of the artists in the current show, and an exhibition by a six-woman New York artist collective.

The George Gallery is at 354 N. Coast Hwy., Laguna Beach. For more information, call (949) 715-4377 or go to thegeorgegallery.com.

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Lisa Aslanian talks about artist Magdalena Atria, above, whose work is featured in the George Gallery in Laguna Beach.