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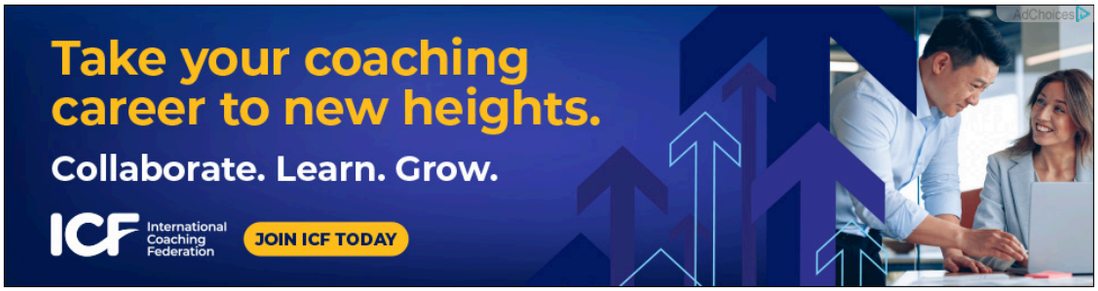

ARTS

Jersey City exhibit showcases 'thoughtful' reaction to feminism

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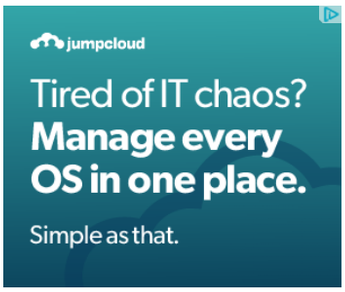

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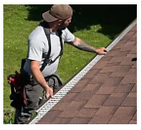
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By Anthony Venutolo | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com

Newark artist Jennifer Mazza's series of five small paintings is part of the "Feminine Mystique" exhibition at the Jersey City Museum.

The Feminine Mystique: Contemporary Artists Respond. *Where: Jersey City Museum, 350 Montgomery St., Jersey City. When: Through Feb. 24, 2008. 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesdays and Fridays; 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Thursdays; noon to 5 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays. How much: $4; $2 seniors and students; children under 12 admitted free; free Thursdays 5 to 8 p.m. Call (201) 413-0303 or visit www.jerseycitymuseum.org.*

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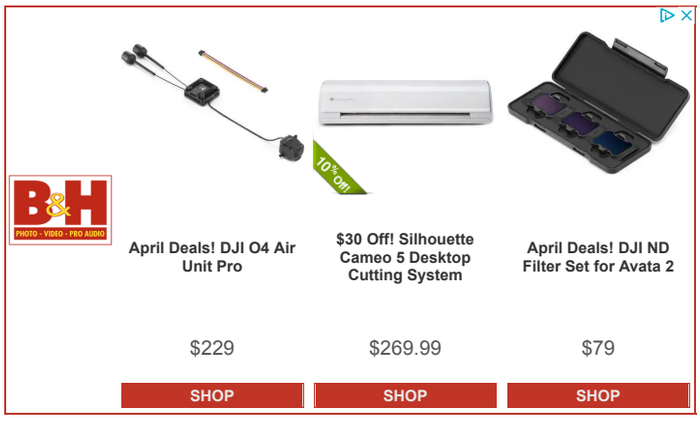

Jewelry, needlework, lace, dolls, corsets, glamour photography and human hair -- that's just a partial materials list for the art in the Jersey City Museum's season-opening "The Feminine Mystique," an exhibition of mostly contemporary reactions to Betty Friedan's groundbreaking 1963 book.

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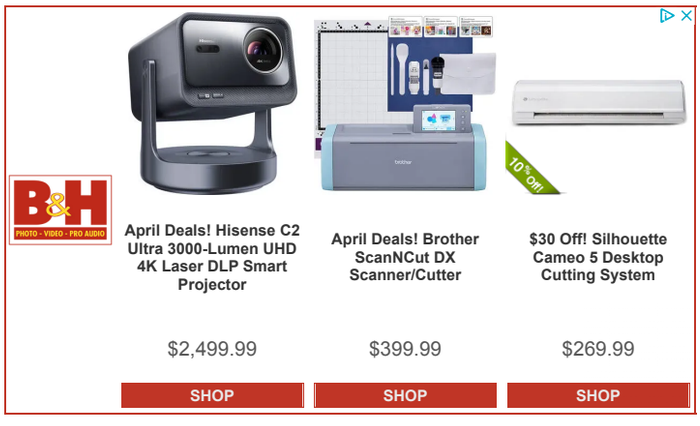

It's also a better recipe than sugar and spice. And like the trends in feminist art itself, the list comes back to the simple fact of a woman's body: Just who you think possesses that body, either as a major subject for art or as a physical fact, has proved to be, over the past 45 years, the best definition of whether you are a feminist.

Well, there are other definitions, of course. Sculptor Sandra

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Bermudez fills the first vitrine with wedding and engagement rings she's redeemed from pawn shops and soldered together (four in a row) to make matrimonial "brass knuckles." And Heather Hart crochets wool coverlets for guns (as in "Uzi Coozy," 2006), literally domesticating male violence to make it look ridiculous.But by and large, like the book that gives it its theme, the dominant feeling of "The Feminine Mystique" is not aggressive or jaundiced but thoughtful, ironic, even elegiac. One wall, as you enter, is given over to a row of five oils-on-linen, each no bigger than a Wonder bread sandwich, by Newark painter Jennifer Mazza. Mazza paints in a dazzling imitation of 17th-century Dutch realism, and all five pictures feature a detail of a young woman lying on a bed of crisp white linen -- a clasped fist here, an open hand there, a face seen from chin to nose, pressed against a starchy pillow -- their intense rendering strangely evoking those household virtues Dutch realism so often promoted. But the glistening mouths, usually coquettish in a Ter Borch or a Vermeer, here spill bright red berries or glittering red jewels all over the sheets.

Tell me about it. Curated by Rocio Aranda-Alvarado, the exhibition features the work of 25 contemporary female artists plus a handful of older objects from the permanent collection, like an etching by Louise Bourgeois, "Untitled (For 'The Paris Review,' 1994)," thrown in for ballast. Some, like Ayakoh Furukawa's pencil drawings of vampish women with $?'80s-style teased hair, refer quite directly to Friedan's text: When you look closely at Furukawa's women, you realize they are composed entirely from famous phrases in the text, like "Her Problem That Has No Name" (2007), scribbled with different intensity to produce different tones.

"When we first started asking artists to participate in a show centered on 'The Feminine Mystique,' a number of them took issue with that particular text, because one of the common criticisms of Friedan was that she was writing just for the slice of women she knew, mostly upper middle-class college graduates in the suburbs," Aranda-Alvarado says. "True as that was, it still launched the movement, and made it possible to view contemporary events through a prism of gender."

That Newark sculptor Noelle Lorraine Williams is very aware Friedan skipped over the markedly different struggles of African-American women is obvious from her installation, "The King is Dead: Condoleeza's Coup d'Etat" (2007), a figural group. Williams focuses on the odd coincidence of Friedan's publication date and the Birmingham church bombings of the same year, which took the life of a little girl, Denise McNair, whom Rice knew (Rice was nearly nine at the time, and her father was a church minister). The installation consists of two little girls in pristine white vinyl raincoats, Mary Janes and white gloves, one posed standing and the other flying overhead; both figures wear white wigs and have white plaster faces derived from Yoruba headdresses.

All white and dressed like Caroline Kennedy at her daddy's funeral (Williams stitched the costumes, too), you could say Rice embodies the unreconstructed Friedan woman, obsessed with presentation and appearance. That she wound up the ultimate career girl, without a husband but with time to shop for Ferragamos during Hurricane Katrina, is an irony almost too deep to be plumbed--a coup d'etat, no doubt, of the self.

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True to the nature of Jersey City as a venue, many of the women artists here do expand Friedan's themes to other cultures, like Swati Khurana's Bollywoodized photos of glorified women or Shelly Bahl's ink drawings on floral wallpapers. Bahl shows groups of clearly South Asian women going through thoroughly American rites of passage -- like lying provocatively on the hood of a convertible, while hourglass-shaped houris dance among the French botanical print.

But, like we said, underlying all of it is the female body. Carson Fox, who was born in Mississippi and received her master's degree in fine arts from Rutgers University, fills one whole wall with her "Hair Filligree #9," woven from synthetic hair to look rather like a Victorian curtain, and Babs Reingold shows her own baby photos with an overlay of her own hair, each lock plucked from bath drain or comb over many months. Since Rapunzel, hair has symbolized femininity, but these exhibits bring it down to manageable meaning: to hair is human.

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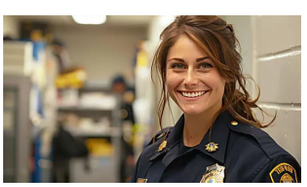

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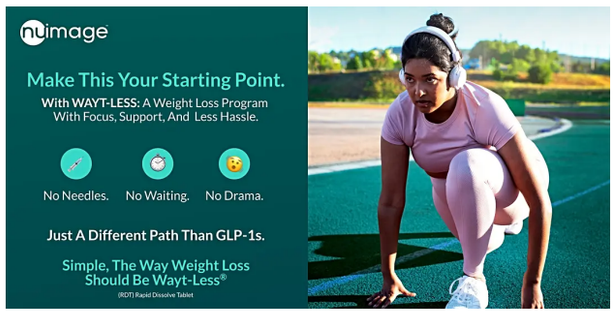

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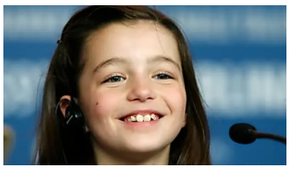

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