



Taking the Bad with the Good

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in New York City*

Bad Girls: From Louise Bourgeois to Anna Gaskell

The problem with good girls is that they are waiting to fall. The problem with bad girls is that they are waiting to be redeemed.

Artists have been playing with those stereotypes for a long time now. Marcia Tucker made waves with a group show on the theme back in 1994, in fact. Feminism and Postmodernism

just made them a lot scarier and a lot more fun. The only trick lies in telling the roles apart.



For the late spring and summer of 2007, quite a few women artists have done a particular fine job of scrambling the roles. They also force the viewer to piece together the entire story from scratch. Louise Bourgeois had been doing so for sixty years when **she and Lynda Benglis** started to bring dark sexual fantasies out of Surrealism and into the post-industrial age, and now they share a space. **Margaret Murphy** likes to pretend she is painting only bad girls, but you and I know better. And **Anna Gaskell** presents psychological turning points as true confessions, but with the artist, the viewer, and the narrator all asking questions.

Making a splash

Louise Bourgeois was working with **Fernand Léger** when **Lynda Benglis** was five years old. Yet each gained attention in New York, **Bourgeois in painting**, at almost exactly the same time—and both will have pride of place in a 2008 survey of feminist art from the 1970s, "**WACK!**" For each, but especially **Louise Bourgeois**, it took some creepy sculpture and a formidable personality, and the same exclusive gallery now handles them both. That sounds like a self-serving excuse for a summer show, and so it is. Fortunately, it also promises a good story and some very good art. Now guess which one played the bad girl first?

In 1970 Benglis had not turned thirty, while Bourgeois had had work in the Museum of Modern Art for longer than **Jackson Pollock**. The first might have seemed more infamous than famous, thanks to sculpture resembling congealed lava and an appearance in *Artforum* brandishing a dildo, short hair, dark glasses, bright lipstick, a nasty smile, and little else. The other had languished on the periphery of fame. In retrospect, both had already come into their own, thanks to the same three things—feminism, talent, and the troubled aftermath of Minimalism. Benglis offered a counterpart to **Richard Serra's *Splash Pieces***, in materials layered on the floor or tied like ribbons on the walls. Bourgeois's caged *Spider* at **Dia:Beacon** suggests Surrealism sprung to life as a black widow, but with renewed resonance from Minimalism's factory scale, industrial parts, and invasion of the viewer's space.

Several recent shows have looked at the same years of adjustment, including "**High Times, Hard Times**" and "**Summer of Love**." Benglis in fact appeared in both with much the same poured latex, first as abstract sculpture without fine art materials, then as psychedelic floor covering.

Now a gallery presents the artists instead as Minimalism's feminist unconscious. It sees them both as tactile and fluid, and it sees those qualities as the recovery of a woman's bodily experience in living and making art. Rough streams of metal ooze to the floor, gather in heaps, or hang from the ceiling by a wire thread. They give the lie to the thought that a lead pile can grow only as fast as teaspoons of sperm.



Benglis also has what look like

narrow abstract paintings, but the spattered color has congealed. Bourgeois contributes a sculpted amoeba or two. Benglis shapes a two-headed penis into a smile, while Bourgeois sculpts a whole row of penises, each seemingly sliced through by a metal foreskin. It should come as no surprise to one who has seen her 1982 portrait by **Robert Mapplethorpe**, cradling a roughly sculpted phallus under her arm like a shotgun. Correspondences like these will make anyone, at least any male critic of contemporary art, feel even more sheepish. This kind of feminism also makes for some pretty classy sculpture.

Like most huge piles of goo, however, this story covers up a few salient points. For one thing, the two artists come at Minimalism from different directions in time. Bourgeois is finding a hard ground for her imaginings, an industrial reality for biomorphic sculpture, while Benglis is telling serial form and industrial material to let go. The repeated boxes of **Louise Nevelson** and **Eva Hesse** offer very much the same contrast. Besides, neither artist fits so easily into the exhibition's gynecological certainties—even if **Nevelson drawings** included women. Bourgeois is threatening them, often with sexually ambiguous reference points, and Benglis, I like to think, is having fun with them.

Bourgeois's primitive, surging, bisexual masses still look so frightening. Benglis's bisexual self-portrait and funky carpeting, meanwhile, still look funny. Which, then, does that make the bad girl? You can take your pick, but the show contributes something regardless, especially once one gets past its thesis. At some point, one *can* tell the artists apart again, and one has gained again in perception. More often than not, Bourgeois's forms threaten to rise up, while Benglis's threaten to keep tumbling down. Art can still defy gravity, but the 1970s changed how.

Some girls

The good girls have had quite a run for it recently. True, **Nathalie Djurberg** keeps inviting **art's bad boys** and girls into the sweetest of fairy tales, **Clarity Haynes** bares a bad girl's sagging flesh, and a group show boasts of "**The Brand New Heavies**," meaning black. Yet **Tracey Moffatt** plays dress-up with nothing *but* role models—the more, the merrier. And the trouble with "**Global Feminisms**" at the Brooklyn Museum was that it seemed to find *only* good girls. Its artists merely nurture together, suffer together, and cheer each other on.

Of course, the real problem with both good and bad girls is that they amount to male fantasies. Each plot has an unspoken hero, perhaps even me. In its earliest versions, the girls even offer him a choice. **Raphael** painted a dream of two woman, one only slightly more angelic than the other, although legend prefers to dwell on **Raphael's mistress**. **Veronese** painted a man fleeing from vice to virtue, and I feel sorriest for the woman he left behind. But if the story goes back a long time, it came into its own with the novel, with Hollywood—and, to trust Margaret Murphy, with a souvenir store in your very neighborhood.

Murphy does not exactly celebrate good girls and bad girls, but she sure loves seeking them out. "Third-wave" feminism made it okay to look for one's inner bad girl, just when post-feminism made it (marginally) acceptable again to talk of women as girls, period. **Carla Gannis** recently based her film noir creations on Jezebel, and **Anne Collier** has invoked the **gaze of Laura Mars**, but Murphy goes back to the real kitsch role models, in Victorian drawing rooms. She surrounds her solo figures in the ovals then common in painting, given a touch of the third dimension and set amid the rectangular frame. Some backgrounds draw on heavily patterned wallpaper, while others settle for unfashionable wall colors, but all may have you looking for a sponce to either side. The women themselves run the gamut, but Murphy reserves the greatest temptations for her good girls—the Madonna or the proper schoolgirl, give or take her flowing hair and short skirt.

Murphy paints quickly, and the loose shadows help sex things up, too. No doubt a truly eminent Victorian would have labored over fine detail, hard anatomy, cold surfaces, and the *trompe l'oeil* of one medium within another. She is not painting from life anyway or even from storybooks. She has hunted down every one of the girls, good and bad alike, as cheap figurines. Many, she says, she found in Amsterdam, which I recall has a notorious red-light district. If the hunt signals an obsession, the Victorian oval could also serve for a mirror, just as girls like

these have served women as role models.



The series in fact describes a whole sequence of mirroring. Painting copies molded plastic, which copies fine art, which copies life, which copies cliché—which in turn is ripe for a woman's appropriation. As in Plato's theory of art or, for that matter, Jean Baudrillard's "*simulacra*," reality becomes more degraded with each successive copy. The poses, with their faces just barely turned away and with their variations on a theme, may suggest **Cindy Sherman** and her *Untitled Film Stills*, but never imaginary. The combination of bare legs, faceless women, and consumer goods may suggest the **collage photographs** of **Laurie Simmons**, but without the Pop irony or stern admonition. The recycling of cheap artifice as art may suggest **Jeff Koons**, but the pleasure lies in the irony and the kitsch rather than in its *being kitsch*.

Murphy never lets good and bad girls get too fanciful, too admonitory, too accepting, or too knowing. Perhaps this has its costs, too. An engagement with Victorian art does not have the familiarity *or* the shock of Sherman or Simmons. On the other hand, it is intelligent, and it has its real temptations—for both the artist and the viewer. (Ironically, her gallery's summer show, of Karen Marston's paintings after *The Wizard of Oz*, the bad girl has already melted, and the good girl appears only as her red slippers.) As for me, I am holding out for the schoolgirl.