



Gladys Nilson  
*Another Drying Xperience, 1974*

## Wit Works

Julia Couzens

*Feminist art is not a style or a movement, it is a value system and a revolutionary strategy ... a way of life.*

Lucy Lippard, Writer, Activist, Curator

*She Laughs Back* presents art made by women with the audacity to have believed in themselves as artists at a time when the aspirations of women were derided or ignored. It's a spirited reunion, a head-on collision, a commedia dell'arte: antic, smart, erotic, ribald, misunderstood, dauntless ... and droll.

The survey threads 1970s Bay Area art through a feminist needle, stitching second-generation feminist concerns of the 1960s-70s to the ones facing us today. Like the restless, break-out movement years in which these works were made, the exhibition is one high-octane mix.

Diverse aesthetic tones, fabrication modes, and artistic missions sew a crazy-quilt amalgam of mis-matched parts, both formal and discursive. The works come large and small. Many are authoritative expressions of recognized artists. Others are experimental fledglings of mature work to come. Some are studio outliers—the anomalies artists make to please only themselves. These sly asides jostle for position next to paintings that debuted at the Whitney. Xeroxed pamphlets,

political protest posters, and documentary photos of decades old ZFG (zero fucks given) performances of sexual liberation are shown detached from their original context. These works weren't intended for the conventions of the white cube gallery in which they're now seen. They were made for the street, for picket lines, and for rooms where consciousness was raised, and activism born. These narratives all talking at once and in different frequencies, rallied first as a cacophony—an experiential white noise obscuring its gestalt.

Suzanne Adan's works on paper resemble battered project proposals or mechanical drawings for such things as paddle balls, panty hose, a matchstick, and a party dress. Splots and leaking rivulets of watercolor accentuate the works' ad hoc immediacy as if made with the urgency of an engineer's brainstorm. Visual puns + building plans for better underpants = Adan's cheeky, deadpan declarations of independence from patriarchy's humorless oracles.



Judith Linhares  
*Love Flies, Hope Dies, 1977*

At first sight, Kathy Goodell's *Stretching the Truth* could be thought a role play device for kink-dens, not a work of art. Its two bungee cords tightly wrapped with waxy paper, suspended then stretched between the ceiling and floor with black rubbery hooks and bulbous hand weights, conjure dungeon-y visions. But it's a torn-to-pieces letter from Goodell's ex-lover, cartoonist Robert Crumb, that sheathes the bungee cords, giving meaning to the piece beyond its status as a salacious object. It's a cunningly inspired gesture of personal liberation — twisting erotic ideas of bondage into an unworkable relationship's mocking finale.

Gladys Nilsson's utterly gooney figurative paintings, such as *Another Drying Experience*, depict the busiest cast of characters ever to crowd into a picture plane. Seriously, you'd think a casting call had gone out for Toon Town's lunatic fringe, what with the back bending, arm twisting, pirouetting, scratching, and strutting. Yet for all the slap-stick pictorial frenzy of forms stretching, shrinking, and packing her compositions, delicacy and control exemplify Nilsson's touch. Nilsson, wielding her brush like a scalpel, defines their outlines and the intricate delineations of space with surgical precision.

So what to make of this brash, optical laugh?

Exhale starched judgments, for starters.

Pursed appraisals from the patriarchal canon's corroded motherboard are the real noise. Its now derelict canonical hierarchies of taste wouldn't have recognized the imperfect human ground on which *She Laughs Back* stands. The generosity of the survey's formal and conceptual diaspora isn't a flaw in need of censorious grooming. It's the point. The curatorial structure is itself an artful collage, a femmage.<sup>1</sup> Its nonconforming open-hearted pluralism precisely manifests the artists' philosophical views and what was then, and still is, at stake. It speaks both to the rancorous socio-political currents of the 1970s and to the charged reception and disavowal still greeting the feminist spectrum today. Feminist critique isn't consensus driven. But if feminism, in its ever-expanding intersectional forms, has a point, isn't it, at the very least, the acknowledgment of our spectacularly unruly humanity?

For an artist, survey exhibitions such as *She Laughs Back* are grazing opportunities. I look at the work in the visceral moment, guided by rifts in time, context, and disposition. Memory and cognizance toggle back and forth in alternative chronologies. Judith Linhares's effortless gouache hinting at pathos, *Love Flies, Hope Dies*, for example, triggered my wincing cringe. I was chagrined to realize that when Linhares was painting those fluidly supple chalk-white lines with deft immediacy, I was equally deft outlining my eyes with "Velvet Brown" Maybelline Ultra Liner to entice men. This Linhares-

tripped insight was yet another tiny, but intense particle of consciousness on the feminist continuum. Larger assessments of historical context and artistic scope are best served by art historians. I have no opinion as to orders of worth. Nothing and no one is wrong. I offer the juicy morsels that pulled me away from the laden banquet table in flavorful reveries. Such savories are only core samples, the singular work, or groups of work that in a slice of time engrossed me, but a means for tasting the delectable whole.

Artist/activist Yolanda López fought fire with fire. Mass media tropes that either typecast or ghost ethnic groups and objectify women were the raw material for her narrative campaign to counter and disable these tropes. The suite of photographs, *Tableaux Vivant*, offers mise en scenes of the artist as the Virgin of Guadalupe, not amidst the glories of heaven on high, but amidst the down-market real estate here on earth. Positioning herself within an artlessly painted paper mandorla together with roughly assembled cultural artifacts common to altars, López sanctifies herself, not as a saint but as a runner and working artist—defiant, pensive, and joyously triumphant. With sly aplomb she used the Virgin of Guadalupe as a cultural icon, or “influencer” in today’s jargon, to persuasively confront patriarchal marketing of the Chicano/a/x culture.

Both feminist couture and soft sculpture, Louise Stanley’s *Two Muffs* is a delicious example of a private lark—one of those

works artists are compelled to make just for themselves—and until now, it held court on a kitchen table in her studio. Constructed of worn velvet and vintage silks, the child-sized muffs recall women’s handwork from a bygone era. *Two Muffs* possesses the aura of having had a purpose, like a relic, or a cherished heirloom bearing the patina of use. Yet unsettling cloth extensions dangle off the ends. With tips blood-stained like tiny tampons, the extensions resemble tails or snake-y penises. Zooming in on these dangly bits together with the muff’s soft orifices piques disquieting images of fetishy handheld perversions. And let’s face it, vaporizes any genteel images of a Victorian lady’s parlor.

Joan Moment’s somber *Condom Relief Series No. 1* is something else. Using condoms as components in fabricating the work is an audacious hack, no argument there. But to consider it a strictly humorous take on minimalism, as it often is, strikes me as simplistic. In my view, the conceptual apparatus of *Condom Relief, No. 1* delivers an elegant, resoundingly elegiac work. Its genesis comes from the blunt and formless feelings within the body. Layers of rubber latex and gauze transmute these ineffable feelings into form being form. The pliable sheets meld and fuse, becoming a single viscous stratum or the elemental matrix of the body. The embedded condoms, within and of the rubbery ground, evoke upwardly writhing aspirational life forms. Organisms fossilized within the embracing ecosystem of our ancestral membrane.



Joan Moment  
*Condom Relief Series No. 1*  
1971 (refabricated in 1993)

It's the clotty rubber rumble, the deeper, higher blind desire to wake up, liberated from the spell of received ideas—arguably the premier feminist aspiration any conscious individual, and certainly artist, would want to own.

Wit works. The nineteen artists of *She Laughs Back* knew it and used it. Progressive curatorial practices that advance womxn artists and rehangs of major museum permanent collections are beginning to move the conversation to the center due in part to their efforts and those of their sympathetic colleagues. Patriarchy isn't going quietly. Its buff levers continue to torque the art world and the way it works—its systems of looking and naming have been long entrenched. But social evolution is a long game. And if art changes



the way we understand what we think we know, then these nineteen artists have created a space of potential, they have left a mold to be refilled or remade for another future. Having a voice demands constant self-surveillance, assessing the gap between one's truth and what's being asked or expected. Yet isn't this the nature of the creative process?

As for humor, nothing skewers self-importance like wit's shiv. Humor is notoriously charismatic. Its seductive pull is peerless, it warms up a crowd or draws us close to catch a droll story. So, if the desired aim of feminism in all its forms is the generous embrace of inclusivity and equitability across all races, classes, sexualities, gender identities, and abilities who doesn't want to sit next to the funny one?

<sup>1</sup> "Femmage" coined in the 1970s by feminist artist Miriam Shapiro, has come to mean the elevation of all marginalized creative work, not just artworks composed of materials gathered from the sewing room.



M. Louise Stanley  
*Two Muffs*, 1969