

# IN CELEBRATION OF GRASSROOTS AND GRASS WIDOWS: WOMEN'S ART COLLABORATIONS IN GLASGOW

An essay by Sarah Smith



Women In Profile, Issue 2, 1990

*Strohwitwe*, a German term that translates as 'grass widow,' is the tongue-in-cheek title for a cross-generational exhibition by a group of four women artists, which took place in Glasgow earlier this year. The term's various meanings, such as a woman who is divorced, or widowed, a woman 'out to pasture,' all point to the pitiful condition of a woman who is without a man, emphasising her status as the abandoned party.

Carole Gibbons, Lucy Stein, Manuela Gernedel and Rachal Bradley have all resided, or currently reside, at 24 St Vincent Crescent. This formative connection provided the exhibition's location; an elegant first-floor Victorian tenement flat owned by Gernedel that has also been sometime home to Stein and Bradley. Gibbons, at least two generations older than the others, has lived at this address the longest, in the flat above, on the second floor. Her influence on these younger women—as both artist and neighbour—provides the stimulus for the show, which pointedly asserts the contemporary relevance of her work.

The exhibition was one of the lesser-known projects that ran during 2012's Glasgow International Festival (GI), its low-key status attributable to it being organised outside the official programme (a decision made partly to avoid the bureaucracy of professional exhibiting). The group's objective, to resituate and reassess the work of an under-represented woman artist, is clearly feminist and their choice of site resonates with an established history of feminist exhibition making. Beyond the convenience of using one's home as a makeshift gallery—common practice in Glasgow's DIY contemporary art scene—the domestic space provides a politically germane environment for showing work by women artists, the roots of which can be traced back to the groundbreaking *Womanhouse* exhibition of 1972, one of the earliest public exhibitions of feminist art. Led by teachers Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro, *Womanhouse* was the first exhibition by staff and students of the Feminist Art Program at California Institute of the Arts and involved the transformation of a disused 17 room mansion in Hollywood into an exhibition space [1]. The private setting of the house, traditionally perceived as a woman's place, was the antithesis of the public space for gallery or museum and provided an incisive context for a series of works that focused on domestic themes and their impact on women's lives eg housework as a form of unpaid labour and under-valued creativity [2].

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While *Strohwitwe* builds on the impetus of this international feminist art heritage, it is simultaneously rooted in a rich local history of similar projects, each of which can, in turn, be linked back in different ways to the generative moment represented by *Womanhouse*. An important starting point, in attempting to map briefly this local history, is provided by *Castlemilk Womanhouse*, a project directly motivated by the CalArts exhibition, evident from its partially borrowed title. Initiated by Adele Patrick—feminist artist, activist and a founding member of Glasgow Women's Library—and subsequently led by artists Cathy Wilkes, Rachael Harris and Julie Roberts, *Castlemilk Womanhouse* took place in the summer of 1990 in four flats in an empty tenement block in Castlemilk on Glasgow's south side, as part of the European City of Culture events programmed by *Women in Profile*, a women's arts organisation co-founded by Patrick in 1987 [3]. What sets this project apart from many other women's art collaborations was its remit to work closely with a particular community; a series of artists' residencies facilitated workshops for local women and children that focused on skills associated with home-making or traditional feminine art forms such as tapestry, batik and wood-cut printing, but the project also provided an informal meeting place for those who participated and was open to the public for a two-week period. Like *Womanhouse*, this project inhabited abandoned domestic spaces to explore various forms of creativity associated with women's domestic work.

*Womanhouse Castlemilk* influenced other Glasgow-based women artists' projects that followed and, in particular, prompted an exploration of the contributions women artists could make in other roles, for instance as curators. Notable curatorial collaborations between women in Glasgow include *Switchspace* (1999-2004) run by Marianne Greated and Sorcha Dallas, and the *Mary Mary* project space (2004-2005) run by Hannah Robertson, Harriet Tritton and Sara Barker. Following a similar trajectory, these began as exemplars of the DIY approach, routinely using a room in one member's flat as the main exhibition space, and led to the formation of successful commercial galleries for one member; Dallas opened a gallery under her own name *Sorcha Dallas* (2004-2011) and Robertson continued to use the project space name for her gallery *Mary Mary* (2006-ongoing). While these collaborations did not exclusively promote feminist curatorial practices, they consistently championed the feminist ideal of collective over individual endeavour.

A fleeting but distinctive moment for women's collaborations in Glasgow's art scene was provided by artist Lucy McKenzie's 2003 'women only' soirée, part of a series of music, art and poetry events called *Flourish Nights* that ran from 2001 to 2003 at McKenzie's Robertson Street studio. The evening's programme included video works by Cosey Fanni Tutti and a collaborative piece by McKenzie and Polish artist Paulina Olowska as well as a live set by band *No Bra* and DJ set by Lucille Desamory. McKenzie describes her curatorial rationale for this event thus: "I thought it would be an interesting proposition for the invited artists to think about what effect a women only audience might have on the reading of their work on that night." [4] McKenzie also made an audio recording of the ambiance of the all women environment on the night "without the base of male voices" [5] for an audio-play she was working on at the time. Here, the relationship between art and viewer was carefully considered as a form of exchange, providing a challenging context for the artists as well as the audience, whilst also issuing a rebuff to the long history of men only clubs in cities around the UK (some of which still exist).

Glasgow's art scene has also given rise to a number of all women music and performance groups, including the now disbanded *Elizabeth Go* (1997-2001), which included artists Cathy Wilkes, Victoria Morton, Sarah Tripp and Sue and Hayley Tompkins, and the current group *Muscles of Joy* (2004 to date) – the variable line-up includes Victoria Morton, Anne Marie Copestake and Katy Dove. Most of the group members also have an established visual art practice, but this musical aspect of their work focuses on commanding a stage through self-directed performance, a dominant strategy in feminist art since the 1970s.

Each of these women artists' collaborations has had direct and indirect influences on the *Strohwitwe* group, but another recent local project that particularly chimes with their approach is the cross-generational international collaborative partnership between Glasgow-based artist Kate Davis and American artist Faith Wilding. Wilding was a member of the Californian *Womanhouse* group. Her performance piece *Waiting, 1972*, shown at

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*Womanhouse*, has achieved iconic status and proposes a feminine temporality, which echoes various feminist theoretical concepts of a distinctive 'women's time,' one of repetition and waiting in contrast with the active, linear time of man [6]. Their collaboration began after Davis made 'Waiting in 1972: What about 2007?', part of a series of works which appropriated and reactivated a number of seminal feminist artworks from the 1970s and 1980s in order to assert their contemporary potency. In other words, Davis' engagement with Wilding's work and their subsequent collaboration, wrests it from its apparently fixed place in the history of feminist art to demonstrate its enduring relevance to contemporary culture [7].

For *Strohvitwe*, no attempt was made to conceal the primary function of the exhibition space as a home, engendering a strong sense of living with art, rather than merely viewing it within the walls of pristine galleries. Two of the rooms given over to the exhibition were emptied of furniture, one was not, and none of the walls or floors was painted in preparation. Even the ashes had not been removed from the fireplace. The installation of the works was influenced by Gibbons' flat where, as Gernedel notes, the domestic objects meld with the canvasses and free-form wall paintings to take on a different role, as part of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* [8]. Home and art are fused for Gibbons; the objects, people and pets that have filled her domestic space have become, over time, subject matter for her paintings, producing an environment where representation and reality rub together in perfect accord.

Each room included a combination of work by all four artists. Gibbons' variously sized paintings and drawings—a mixture of landscapes, still lifes and self-portraits— were interspersed by Stein's small ink drawings and single painting, Gernedel's intriguing mixture of ceramic and batik works, oil pastel drawings and ink wall painting and Bradley's potted cacti, each inscribed with the word 'dry.'

In the living room a group of five oil pastel drawings by Gernedel was propped up against the wall on the mantelpiece, their colours echoing the vibrant earthiness of Gibbons' palette. Situated at the symbolic heart of the home—the fireplace—these laboriously worked drawings depict vaginal shapes, the repetition of which points to an obsessive attempt to get at some sort of catharsis. They sat where family photos or small ceramic ornaments of sentimental value might, drawing attention to this space as a focal point for displaying a kind of edited family history. Taken at face value this series could be said to endorse essentialist views of 'woman,' reduced to her biological core and fixed to her place at the centre of the home. Yet they are easily recognised as citations of 1970s feminist 'cunt art,' most notably made by American artists Judy Chicago, Faith Wilding and Hannah Wilke; like Davis, Gernedel is clearly invoking a notable moment in feminist art history here, holding it up for scrutiny at one generational remove.

Elsewhere, in the hallway, Gernedel's ambiguous wall drawing, a cluster of orangey-red circular shapes, bleeds down onto the wooden frames of the doors beneath. The title of this work *Einen Tag Rosen, Einen Tag Zwiebeln (One Day You Get Roses, the Next Day You Get Onions)* gives form to the visually ambiguous, expressive shapes. It's a saying that simply means that some days are good, others not so good, but the context of this show infuses it with pathos. In a literal sense, the title suggests that these shapes can be read as either roses or onions and, symbolically, that woman's domestic narrative teeters between romance and drudgery.

Operating on a different register to Gernedel's, the small scale of Stein's ink drawings invites an intimate relationship; one becomes absorbed in the detail as though reading the pages of an engrossing book. In *Everytime I Closed My Eyes* (2011), Stein cites François Boucher's erotic painting *Leda and the Swan* (1740), where a reclining female nude is about to be penetrated by a swan, its neck an obvious phallic symbol. In both Boucher's and Stein's paintings, the woman's benign facial expression suggests a willing participant—Boucher's Leda even lifts her nightdress in compliance—however, the rather concerned looking trio of angels who survey the scene in Stein's rendition suggest that this erotic art historical image and the myth it perpetuates might not be quite as pleasure-focused for its protagonist as it appears. In Greek mythology, Leda and the Swan is a story where the God Zeus takes the form of a swan to either seduce or rape Leda. The coexistence of antithetical readings provided in the telling of this ancient story underscores the ambivalence of woman as a cultural symbol.

Stein's reanimation of the Greek myth foregrounds the latent violence in cultural representations of heterosexual sex, while her signature cartoonish aesthetic playfully mocks the authority of her appropriated texts.

This kind of critical intertextuality is another common feminist strategy and is also found in Gibbons' paintings. In *Self Portrait as Minotaur* (1972) Gibbons depicts herself as the fearsome half-bull, half-human figure of Greek mythology. The Minotaur is male and her adoption of this figure therefore draws attention to the usual equation of intimidating power with masculinity while also consciously asserting her own prowess (as a woman and a painter) as she stares directly out at us with piercing blue eyes and pursed lips. Another of Gibbons' works, a large still life painting titled *Mrs Fletcher's Table* (1974) depicts a console table upon which rest a vase of flowers and an open book. It is an art history book, the right page showing a well-known self-portrait of the painter Vincent Van Gogh. The diminution of the great master's image set within Gibbons' grand canvas and her deftness as a painter combine to simultaneously pay tribute to and critique the dominant male lineage in historical art narratives.

Although Gibbons has rejected the categories of 'feminist artist' and even 'woman artist,' her work undoubtedly contains a feminist sensibility, which is drawn out by the curatorial context of this show. Set against something like Gernedel's flowing batik work Gibbons' self-portraits and still lifes make bold statements about the gendering of different creative practices; the relegation of feminine craft to interior decoration while masculine art is publicly celebrated and mythologised. Categories limit and artists often resist their use; the mantles 'feminist artist' and 'woman artist' had, over the course of second wave feminism, often been seen as ones to avoid, with women artists arguing instead that their work be considered within the same frames as art by men. More recently, postfeminism's stronghold kept many women in a state of closeted feminism, but there has been a resurgence of feminist activism, discourse and politics since the early 21st century and an enduring commitment to feminist curating has resulted in a spate of major feminist art exhibitions giving this work a global platform [9]. This international reconsideration of feminist art coincides with greater fluidity in art categories, largely resulting from the dynamism of current curatorial practices, so that artists no longer need to feel constrained by categories; a work can be both feminist and relational for instance.



Lucy Stein, 'Every time I close my eyes', 2012, ink and watercolour on paper

As well as providing a kind of visual punctuation, Bradley's cacti provide a thematic link that runs throughout the collection of work in *Strohwitwe*, alluding to various feminine stereotypes such as the spiky feminist or the barren and shriveled old shrew that are endlessly iterated by a fertility and youth-obsessed culture. One could almost discern the delighted laughter of writer and feminist icon Virginia Woolf echoing through the rooms of Gernedel's flat; the exhibition's domestic site, its focus on the work of an older woman artist, and its sardonic title coalesce to invoke Woolf's dictum that, in order to be an artist, "a woman must have money and a room of her own." [10] For Woolf this was a space to write, for these others it is a space to make and exhibit visual art.

This exhibition affords an opportunity to reflect upon the history of low-key collaborations between women artists in Glasgow at a time when Scottish and Scotland-based women artists are receiving long awaited recognition in a number of high profile group exhibitions: *Studio 58: Women Artists in Glasgow*

Since WWII in the Mackintosh Gallery of The Glasgow School of Art, *Equals* at Paisley Museum and *21 Revolutions* at Intermedia Gallery at Glasgow's Centre for Contemporary Art [11]. In the face of a culture that tends to mythologise individual male artists, these exhibitions make welcome local contributions to our understanding of Glasgow's historical and contemporary art scenes. Moreover, as Glasgow's recent art scene has become intrinsically associated with DIY initiatives, emblematised by the tenement flat gallery, some of the history briefly mapped here might act as a timely reminder of the particularly powerful resonance such sites and collective activities have when presenting feminist curatorial practices and / or feminist art. The women artists mentioned here—and many who are not—did not 'wait' for something to happen. Instead, they got together and made things happen.

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Rachel Bradley, 'Frequent flyer', 2012, scarred Opuntia family cacti, cacti soil, plastic beer cups, dimensions variable

- [1] The CalArts Feminist Art Program grew out of the Fresno Feminist Art Program, which was also initiated by Judy Chicago
- [2] For further discussion of *Womanhouse*, see: Temma Balducci, 'Revisiting 'Womanhouse': Welcome to the (deconstructed) Dollhouse,' *Women's Art Journal*, Vol. 27, no.2, Fall/Winter, 2006, pp.17-23
- [3] Ephemera relating to *Women in Profile* and *Castlemilk Womanhouse* is available at the Glasgow Women's Library
- [4] Lucy McKenzie, email interview with author, July 2012
- [5] Ibid
- [6] For further discussion of this point see Julia Kristeva's 'Women's Time' *Signs*, Vol. 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1981), pp.13-35
- [7] The Wilding/Davis partnership is rooted in correspondence, letter writing to be specific, a process they continued even when on a joint residency at Cove Park, and which has led to a series published texts and a joint exhibition, *The Long Loch: How Do We Go On From Here?*, which took place at the CCA as part of GI in 2010.
- [8] See discussion between Lucy Stein and Manuela Gernedel in this issue of *Map*
- [9] For a discussion of feminist curating in the context of recent international feminist exhibitions see: Connie Butler, Amelia Jones and Maura Reilly, 'Feminist Curating and the 'Return' of Feminist Art,' in Amelia Jones (ed.), *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp.31-48
- [10] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Mariner Books, 1989), p.4
- [11] *Studio 58*, curated by Dr Sarah Lowndes runs from 7th July - 30th Sept 2012; *Equals* curated by Andrea Kusel runs from 29th June – 2nd Oct 2012; *21 Revolutions* curated by Glasgow Women's Library runs from 21st – 13th Oct 2012

