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Power Players

The feminist artwork on view at the CAMH isn't as dated as it should be.

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The television news last Thursday featured a video clip of five male religious leaders testifying before a house "oversight" committee about the White House birth control mandate. A female law student from Georgetown University, invited by Democrats, was not allowed to testify because Rep. Darrell Issa, the male Republican chair of the committee, deemed her not "qualified" to discuss the issue.

"Congressional Birth Control Hearing Involves Exactly Zero People Who Have a Uterus," was the headline on Jezebel.

Courtesy of Laurie Simmons



Laurie Simmons's staged photos done with dolls have a claustrophobic, creepy element.

Details:

"The Deconstructive Impulse: Women Artists Reconfigure the Signs of Power, 1973-1991"

Through April 15. The Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 5216 Montrose Boulevard, 713-284-8250.

That same day, I had revisited "**The Deconstructive Impulse: Women Artists Reconfigure the Signs of Power, 1973-1991**" at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. The show features decades-old work fueled by feminist cultural critique. You would think much of it would feel dated 30-some years later — a glimpse into the way things used to be — but, unfortunately, things haven't changed that much.

The traveling exhibition was curated by Helaine Posner, Chief Curator and Deputy Director for Curatorial Affairs at the Neuberger Museum of Art, and Nancy Princenthal, art critic and former Senior Editor at *Art in America*. The curators assert that deconstructive art was heavily shaped by women and that their role has been unacknowledged, with the movement's feminist origins subsumed into a larger, un-gendered cultural critique. It's an interesting and valid point.

The show features some classic works from some legendary women artists, 22 in all, plus the anonymous collective The Guerrilla Girls. If you've ever heard of any women artists from the period, you'll recognize most of the names and a lot of the art; if you haven't, it's a great opportunity to see these highly influential works. Jenny Holzer's *Truisms* are on view, as well as Cindy Sherman's early *Untitled Film Stills* and Carrie Mae Weems's *Untitled (Kitchen Table Series)*. A portion of Mary

Kelly's epic *Post-Partum Document*, chronicling her son's development and her experience of motherhood, is also included.

A few works feel somewhat shoehorned into the curators' organizing principles and the subcategories they set up — "Women's Experience," "Masquerade," "Appropriation," "Mass Media," "Fashion" and "Critique of Cultural Institutions" — but aside from the occasional curatorial quirk, the show is pretty

great.

Laurie Simmons's iconic staged photographs were made by using dolls and dollhouse furniture and accessories. Mom is in the kitchen in her June Cleaver dress, poised in the act of preparing a meal for her family. The scenes, with their carefully arranged toy props, look cute and kitschy on the surface, but there is an edge to the work. The doll figures and their eternally perfect, molded plastic hair sit and stand rigidly in their dollhouse environments, their smiles forever fixed. There is something claustrophobic and subtly Stepford-wife creepy in the photographs, more obviously in the black-and-white images. There is an unspoken narrative of entrapment and frustration emanating from these figures.

As with a lot of works in the show, I've seen these images by Simmons hundreds of times, but hardly any of her later stuff. With some Google searching, you can see clips from a film Simmons cast with hand puppets and a recent photo series featuring staged scenes incorporating the lifelike, 21st-century version of the blowup doll. I wouldn't mind seeing a retrospective of her work, and that holds true for a lot of these artists.

Sherman had a retrospective at MOMA last year, and it's coming to the Dallas Museum of Art but not Houston next year. There are similar stories for some of the other artists, but in general, they mainly show up in group shows of women. Adrian Piper is fantastic, but I pretty much only see her in group exhibitions about race or gender. Basically, most of this work is too often used to fill a niche or illustrate a point, rather than showcased as the creative output of a single artist.

One of my favorite pieces on display is Martha Rosler's 1982 video, *Martha Rosler Reads Vogue*. The magazine was, incidentally, also in the news last week, on the same Thursday as the birth control hearings, for featuring recording artist Adele on its cover in a photo that depicted the somewhat zaftig Adele cinched into a corset, her face angled up and dramatically lit to hide any jawline chubbiness. There were additional suggestions of aggressive photo retouching. In her video, Rosler flips through a copy of *Vogue*, filled with the fashion and hairstyles of '80s Reagan-era excess. Offering a running commentary in the 28-minute video, she chants, "inspiration, ambience, architecture, art...the new you, the woman who hopes and wants and identifies with her social betters, the rich...shopping, hoping, dreaming, spending."

Rosler analyzes the advertising and points out the (blatant) phallic imagery in cosmetic ads featuring models with fully extended red lipsticks clenched between their teeth. She indicts the manufacturing practices of the fashion industry, showing scenes from sweatshops and recounting a period controversy over the origins of Nancy Reagan's Adolfo couture. She explains to us that "40 percent of the clothes sold in the U.S. are made in the Third World." Today, 98 percent of our clothing is manufactured abroad.

The artist breaks down the magazine's circulation, its ad rates (one black-and-white, full-page ad, circa 1982, ran more than eight grand). She reads from some gushing article in the magazine about Cy Twombly's fabulous Italian home and studio. In short, Rosler reveals the magazine's appeal, its hidden messages, its agenda and its complicity in any number of social and economic injustices. While this kind of critique has become familiar today, it's still timely. At *Vogue*, it's Same Shit Different Decade. The agenda, like digitally and physically manipulating a chubby 23-year-old into something the magazine deems acceptable, hasn't changed.

In a quote from a *New York Times* review of the exhibition, which originated at the Neuberger Museum of Art, co-curator Helaine Posner said, "Younger generations of women artists have been the beneficiaries of all the work that was done previously, feminism has opened up many possibilities for them, so maybe their awareness of being women doesn't have to be as central as it was a few decades

ago. Feminism really has changed the world."

But the world could do with significantly more change, and so could museums. "The Deconstructive Impulse" includes some classic Guerrilla Girls posters from the '80s, including *THE ADVANTAGES OF BEING A WOMAN ARTIST* (1988), which features lines like, "Knowing your career might pick up when you are eighty," "Not having to be in shows with men" and "Having the opportunity to choose between career and motherhood."

As I pointed out in a blog post on Glasstire, these posters are sadly still relevant almost 30 years later. The CAMH, where this show is presented, hasn't given a main gallery solo show to a woman in almost five years. And all of the seven solo shows in both CAMH galleries last year went to men. [If you're following the diversity stats, except for one African-American artist, all the men were white, although three were openly gay. CAMH director Bill Arning sent me a thoughtful response to the post, acknowledging the disparity and stating that scheduling issues inadvertently resulted in the CAMH's "Year of the Guy." He also told me that two main gallery solo shows by women artists were in the works, with "Jane Alexander: Surveys (from the Cape of Good Hope)" scheduled for summer.]

It's telling that women get left out even by socially aware and well-intentioned institutions. The CAMH isn't pursuing some exclusionary anti-woman agenda, and, if you don't take gender into account, it has a pretty admirable record on diversity. But with women more than half the population, that this stuff simply happens, without specific exclusionary intent, is revealing of how entrenched these inequities are.

Deconstructive strategies have been around for a while, but they are still a powerful tool, in art as well as life. The kind of media analysis these artists practice has filtered into the culture at large. Last week, after all those men got together for that now-infamous birth control hearing, Democratic Senator Barbara Boxer's 16-year-old grandson got that something was off. Upon seeing a photo of the gathering, he immediately remarked, "It's all dudes."

Looks like some progress has been made. Thanks, ladies.