

## **Flying High. Women artists beyond double marginalization**

*Gloria Marchini*

From 15 February to 23 June 2019 the Bank Austria Kunstforum (Wien) has hosted exclusively feminine Art Brut works for the first time.

93 women artists coming from 21 countries and 31 collections, in all their international and historical diversity - from 1860 to today - have spoken exclusively through their creations, leaving aside biographical background and diagnostic aspects.

It is certainly an important exhibition: collecting works produced by women is surely interest of, but thinking of a female exhibition of "outsider" women artists only is an even braver step, because it allows to give voice to the "minority of the minority" of art.

In a time of gradual destruction of the barriers between "official" Art and "Art Brut", an exhibition on the margin reminds us that the vision of art is changing: the aesthetic criteria are gaining more and more importance compared to the diagnostic aspect and the gender of the creators.

The art world has always been populated more by men than women, being - like many others - a difficult territory in terms of gender social relations. There are many episodes of reversal of this situation, just think about the suffragette Mary Richardson, who broke into the National Gallery in London in 1914 to rub Velasquez's "Venus and Cupid" with political intent or, 71 years later, the Guerrilla Girls. Their gorilla, with Ingres' naked body of Odalisque, appeared on New York buses polemically wondering why women could enter the Met mainly as (naked) subjects of the artworks and not as artists, who at the time represented a clear minority.

And even more, Linda Nochlin's famous studio "*Why Are There No Great Women Artists?*" published in 1971, analyzed the numerous institutional impediments to women artists, who have always been difficult to acknowledge according to the of art history canons.

A new sensibility seems to animate more and more consciences today, for example the struggles against sexual harassment supported by the young #MeToo movement and the battles for LGBT rights.

In this social context, an exhibition of outsider women can certainly let the artists "take flight" (as the title suggests). Hannah Rieger, collector and curator of the exhibition together with Ingrid Brugger, thinks that "*Art Brut still has to fight for its equal status alongside the academically recognized high art*", but her "*deeper mission, as a collector and Art Brut activist, is to support this process of emancipation*"<sup>1</sup>.

Even before entering the first room some muscular figures stand out around the visitor: they are of Misleidys Castillo Pedroso's characters (1985, Cuba).

Misleidys has always suffered from serious hearing problems; after a period spent in a facility for disabled children she returns home with her mother and brother, but lives in a condition of social isolation. One day she started painting big bodybuilders, initially with pastels and watercolors, she hung them on the wall with brown scotch and talked to them. Her powerful "pop" figures are almost in antithesis with Aloïse Corbaz, who seems to represent the female imagination to the nth power, through his love stories populated by voluptuous women and lovers in military uniforms. As you enter the first room, you are overwhelmed by a long display case specially built to contain "*Le Cloisonné de théâtre*" (1950-1951), 14 metres of paper covered with the so typical figures of one of the artists most loved by Jean Dubuffet himself. Unlike the *brutality* of many male exponents of art brut, every detail is linked to a personal symbolism and it is hidden under an apparent lightness.

However, love is not the dominant theme, and this is demonstrated by a dinosaur, at Aloïse's side,

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<sup>1</sup> Text from Gloria Marchini's interview with Hannah Rieger (26-05-2019).

produced by Julia Krause-Harder, one of the artist of Atelier Goldstein in Frankfurt am Main. Her artistic goal is clear and precise: she represents every single dinosaur (about 860 specimens). Scientific research is an important part of her art since she studies the history of dinosaurs by studying dinosaur bones at Natural History museums, investigating the construction of skeletons, as she is convinced that the not yet discovered ones call her from underground. She has created about thirty large-format sculptures with different materials: the "*Nanotyrannus*" (2013), exhibited in the first room, was produced with plastic materials for the body and cable ties for the details, or the skin of the specimen of "*Maiasaura*" (2016), in the following rooms, is composed of a transparent plastic from which you can see small dinosaur bodies made with candy's tinfoil. To confirm the variety of feminine worlds and to conclude the trio of artists in the first room, some works by Judith Scott, the famous artist of the Creative Growth Art Center in Oakland, set up a dialogue between past and present.

From the first room it is clear that Flying High does not only talk about women, but also about the evolution of Art Brut in general: it tells, through artists, the gradual inclusion of mediumistic art, "lone wolves" and disabled artists, an expansion that also derives from a radical change in psychiatric medicine and its institutions. The very structure of the exhibition, initially articulated on the four main collections (Prinzhorn, Morgenthaler, Collection de l'Art Brut, L'Aracine), develops so as to end up far from the pathological vision typical of the original psychiatric collections of which Hans Prinzhorn and Walter Morgenthaler were the main exponents.

The works of Prinzhorn Collection populate the second hall. It is interesting to note that the Heidelberg Collection, out of about 5,000 works, contains only 20% of works produced by women, an imbalance that is also reflected in the famous book of 1922, *Bildneri der Geisteskranken*. Thomas Röske, in the essay in the catalogue<sup>2</sup>, tells how in the psychiatric context women's works were apparently less attractive, mainly because it was more difficult for them to obtain drawing material. In such contexts, as in the works of Emma Hauck, Elise Mahler, Maria Puth, Barbara Suckfüll, recurrent themes are related to life before internment and decorative motifs related to bourgeois life.

This section presents works of different types, especially drawings and paintings such as those of Else Blankehorn (1873-1920), who lived in a hospital on Lake Constance since 1899: artistically skilled, she made oil paintings that also impressed Ernst Ludwig Kirchner.

In Art Brut the living conditions of the authors are most evident in their creations: in fact, the textile skills of some women who daily carried out "women's" work were often an inspiration for the production of more complex works.

These skills certainly benefited Emma Mohr (1833-?) who made a tapestry in the Asylum of Nieleben ("*Staats-Album*", Private Collection) between 1872 and 1876: around a self-portrait there are 48 biblically themed images and depictions of Emperor William I, together with other scenes of life, while on the back there is a petition to the Emperor and some letters telling about what happened to her after her hospitalization in 1866. The purpose of Mohr was to send the artifact in secret to warn the Emperor of the criminal acts of his civil servants, obviously referring to her personal experiences<sup>3</sup>. Her willingness to communication was expressed in a polemical and courageous act, an incredible technical job, but even more beautiful for her will of justice.

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<sup>2</sup> Röske, Thomas, "Vom Feminismus zur queer theory. Deutungen von Werken weiblicher Anstaltsinsassen in der Sammlung Prinzhorn", in "Flying High. Künstlerinnen der Art Brut", 15 February - 23 June 2019, Bank Austria Kunstforum Wien, Kehrer Editions, Heidelberg-Berlin, pp. 221-223.

<sup>3</sup> Röske, Thomas, "Unschuld hier eingesperrt und ausgeplündert"-the embroidered state's almanach (1871-76) of Emma Mohr from Erfurt in "Medizin, Gesellschaft, und Geschichte: Jahrbuch des Instituts für Geschichte der Medizin der Robert Bosch Stiftung, February 2006, pp. 361-369.

The exhibition continues into the heart of Jean Dubuffet's collection, here limited to a selection that gives a historical view of the creators who aroused the admiration of the French artist between 1945 and 1976.

On display in this section you find the works by Madge Gill, Laure Pigeon, Magali Herrera, Jeanne Tripièr, Jane Ruffié, Henriette Zéphir and Madame Bouttier, representatives of the "spiritual" movement. As with all Art Brut exponents, the biographies of these artists often share cases of social isolation or existential upheaval. The impossibility of dedicating oneself to art, children's loss, mental illness, have often become obstacles for the development of an autonomous artistic action. As women they did not feel authorized to do artistic work and this is demonstrated by Jane Ruffié who justifies herself with Dubuffet by writing "*Je ne suis rien qu'un crayon et une main*", as Sarah Lombardi recalls in the catalogue<sup>4</sup>.

The "solution" of producing by means of a spirit would certainly have allowed them to free themselves from the burden of creative fatherhood, because they could speak "out of nothing", through ghosts, deceased relatives, religious exponents who personified themselves in psychic experiences and ritual events.

To conclude the journey through the collections, a space was given to the works of L'Aracine Collection (now at the Lille Métropole, Musée d'art moderne, d'art contemporain et d'Art Brut, Villeneuve-d'Ascq), founded in the second half of the 20th century by Madeleine Lommel who, together with Michel Nedjar and Claire Teller, collected works by Art Brut with a particular interest in works on paper.

The focus is then on the more local reality, Gugging's "Haus der Künstler", founded by Leo Navratil in Maria Gugging's psychiatric clinic, where very few women have had access to the atelier, including Karoline Roszkopf, Barbara Demlczuk and Laila Bachtiar. Regarding the latter, Hannah Rieger recalls, she "*came into the Art Brut market 2007, although she had been an "artist in residence" in the House of Artists in Gugging already since 1990 and since 2003 she has worked regularly in the atelier Gugging*"<sup>5</sup>.

In the last rooms the evolution of Art Brut is told in a more "globalized" and "globalizing" perspective including artists of different nationalities from different collections.

From America are exhibited the works of Mary T Smith (1904-1995), self-taught artist, suffering from serious hearing problems: in a situation of serious poverty, she began to paint what was around her, on planks of wood or corrugated iron, with one or two colours, sometimes adding inscriptions addressed to her love for God.

Also from the United States are the drawings of Beverly Baker, an artist from the Latitude Artist Community of Lexington (Kentucky) whose works are so full of writing that no word is any longer recognizable, becoming airtight and strongly intimate.

The presence of the text and the subsequent creation of a personal vocabulary can also be found in the Chinese and Japanese examples, exhibited in the last room: Tae Takubo, Megumi Otori and Keiko Abe often repeat decorative motifs that become an independent expressive language. Among the various artists, the Chinese artist Guo Fengyi is also on display, her creative process becomes a means of meditation to achieve a state of balance and calm.

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<sup>4</sup> Lombardi, Sarah, "Weibliche Art Brut im Sinne von Jean Dubuffet", in "Flying High", pp.225-227.

<sup>5</sup> Text taken from Gloria Marchini's interview with Hannah Rieger (26-05-2019).

In this climate of total elevation and in the face of the incredible variety of materials, techniques and themes, the exhibition concludes by recalling that the "silence" in which female art has lived until now is certainly not due to a lack of originality or quality, because in this exhibition women have shown that they can "fly as high" as or more than men, often having to fight to defend their identity.

However, this is not the first exhibition that speaks about "outsider" women: we can just think of some solo shows, such as the recent one on Emma Kunz (she was also present in this exhibition), at the Serpentine Gallery in London or "Les Femmes dans l'Art Brut? ", an exhibition that began in October 2018 and ended this February at Art & Marges in Brussels, where artists and female portraits made by men were exhibited.

Unlike these Flying High is different and more radical: the path created with the 316 works on display really tells the emancipation of women, not only of the outsider world, but of women in general.

Hannah Rieger, talking about her collecting logic, says that she initially dedicated herself only to male Gugging artists. Since 2007 she has collected more than 40 works by Laila Bachtiar; moreover, with the works of Barbara Demlczuk and Karoline Roszkopf she had won two other rare Gugging artists.

Her desire to emancipate herself from the Austrian reality and her will to "internationalize" pushed her to discover more and more artists, such as Martha Grunenwaldt, Madge Gill, Mary T Smith, until today in which her interest is mainly directed to living artists.

The curator also specifies that " *I realized that there are fantastic female Art Brut artists, but only a few independent female collectors of Art Brut in Europe. There are even fewer women who collect works by female artists.*<sup>6</sup>". This consideration invites us to extend the issue far beyond women artists, but also to collectors, art lovers and women in general who need to start "flying high" for real.

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<sup>6</sup> Text taken from Gloria Marchini's interview with Hannah Rieger (26-05-2019).