

A Fabulous and Frightful Crossroads for Feminism: One Art Critic's Story

by Elisa Turner

With the honk of a FedEx truck and the hyper-enthusiastic barking of my dogs, art books have announced their presence at my home for years. But recently, two art books arrived with my presence in them curiously muted. As an art critic with over twenty years of experience, I found this event at once thrilling and sad.

At a time when women visibly reap fruits of their labors begun during the “second wave” of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, my recent experience with the FedEx truck seems emblematic of how far women have come and how far they still need to go.

With all due humility, I think my experience as an art critic seems, in a microscopic way, to echo the historic juncture for feminism we witness now. This juncture is reflected in the prescient exhibit “Under the Influence” at the Girls’ Club, which includes a ballpoint drawing by [Tara Donovan](#) from 2002. Plans for the show were underway before Donovan won the MacArthur Foundation Genius Award in September 2008.

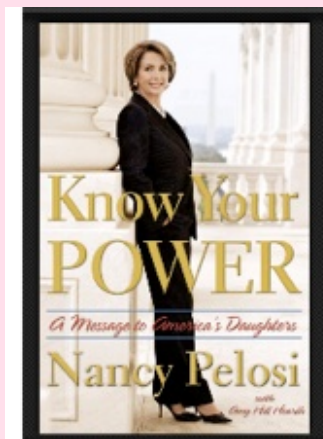
What influence are these artists under?

They make art under the influence of the 21st Century Feminist Mystique.

A careful look at contemporary art and culture shows that we stand at a feminist crossroads, both fabulous and frightful. To see it more clearly, notice this confluence of facts in popular culture and life itself.

In the summer of 2008, Meryl Streep starred in the popular movie “Mamma Mia!” Radiant with beauty stemming from wisdom acquired through a pioneering life, she plays the classic older but wiser woman. She’s very proud of her bright and beautiful daughter, who’s about to marry the young man of her dreams. A second-wave feminist who once sang in a rockin’ “girl group,” Mamma Meryl scorned easy money and convention throughout her life. As the movie starts, she’s asked her accomplished and rockin’ girlfriends from that distant time to join her for her daughter’s wedding. They proudly sing at the performance of their lives, dazzling the bride-to-be and her girlfriends.

This iconic scene from popular culture is echoed in recent events. Consider the summer 2008 book by Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, *Know Your Power: A Message to America's Daughters*. Publishers Weekly called it “a gentle account from a tough politician.” On October 6, 2008, Carlotta Gall reported in *The New York Times* how brave and bold women in Afghanistan steadily work to change a centuries-old culture that denied them education and jobs.



Especially visible today are two generations of bright and assertive women—let’s call them grrrls. There are those shaped by the seminal years of *Ms. Magazine* and the young Gloria Steinem, and those up-and-coming professional women whose recognition today is paved by lonely efforts of women who came before. They were pioneers when Ivy League colleges admitted men only. While few women applied to law and med school, other women in college cheerfully said they wanted an MRS degree. At lunch this summer, a friend of mine—a lawyer in Miami for years—and I, told our daughters about that time. They looked at us as if we’d gone to college on another planet. They didn’t know anyone who wanted an MRS degree.

So while grrrl power is on the rise globally, it’s more important than ever for grrrls to raise their voices for what’s right. The fall 2008 campaign for United States President unleashed virulent strains of misogyny, racism and xenophobia. Journalist Carlotta Gall noted that a prominent Afghan female police captain “was gunned down on her way to work” in September.

Art isn’t a frivolous matter. The best artists, like canaries posted in mines, warn us when peril threatens. Now the

the shirt & trousers matter. The best artists, like children posted in mines, wait as when born orphans. Now the world desperately needs new ideas, these women artists, along with men like Kevin Arrow in this show, help us think about ways to make things better. They celebrate an inclusive vision for making art, recycling the familiar into the new and beautiful. "Untitled" by [Ghada Amer](#) embraces the patient, sensual virtues of needlework, once scorned as "women's work." Paintings by [Lynne Golub Gelfman](#) recall the interconnected threads of lace, now prized for its fashionable style.

Art in "Under the Influence" suggests vital ways to prevail over tough times.

This summer I opened Art Basel Conversation: Transcripts, recording panels for Art Basel Miami Beach 2007. The final panel was "Criticizing Art Criticism," in which I took part. Asked to participate the afternoon before, I was told the panel needed a woman and someone from Miami. Thrilled to share the stage with internationally famous art critics, all men dressed in black, I wore black pants, also a colorful tunic and sparkly sandals. In Miami style, the sandals showed my red pedicure. As daring fashion designer [Vivienne Westwood](#) says, "You have a much better life if you wear impressive clothes." Months later, I proudly read my comments in the book. Yet I was shocked to see that for all the panelists, there was information included about their professional accomplishments, except for me. Tactfully I pointed this out to the Basel powers-that-be. They apologized and asked me to submit this information for their website, which I did.



In *Life Is Short, Art Is Long* by Michael Mendelsohn, I was excited to see that a quote from José Bedia, taken from my ARTnews profile of him, opened Chapter 5. As I looked through the book, a primer on estate planning for collectors, I noticed that every chapter began with a man's quotation.

So yes, my experience as an art critic from Miami shows that now more than ever women must advocate for themselves. Otherwise our ideas and years of hard work will be diminished.

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