

Forms of Identity: Women Artists in the 90s

*won't you celebrate with me
what i have shaped into
a kind of life? i had no model.
born in babylon
both nonwhite and woman
what did i see to be except myself?
i made it up
here on this bridge between
starshine and clay,
my one hand holding tight
my other hand; come celebrate
with me that everyday
something has tried to kill me
and has failed.*

-Lucille Clifton, "Won't You Celebrate With Me?" (1991)

The last decade of the twentieth century marked a brief moment of rapid sociopolitical, economic and cultural transformation. At the time Lucille Clifton wrote these words, both civil rights and women's rights were on the forefront of women artists' conscious, confronted not only with issues surrounding gender equality, but also social crises such as the global AIDS epidemic, which polarized a variety of populations in the United States by gender, class, race, and sexuality, ultimately increasing further awareness of identity and "otherness." *Won't You Celebrate With Me* offers a poignant context for this exhibition; there is no speech, no manifesto, merely an invitation to join Clifton as she determines to shape her own identity, transcending circumstance.

Historically, women have been a consistently marginalized group, and here in the United States, there exists what writer Audre Lorde calls the "mythical norm usually defined as "white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure." Postmodernism, the prevailing art movement in the 90s, sought to address and deconstruct these assumptions and belief systems. While prior feminist movements primarily addressed overarching gender equality issues and women's rights, postmodernism expanded the critique of being 'the other' to subcategories of marginalization *within* womanhood, examining ethnicity, age, culture and gender politics.

Although this exhibition does not directly address the history of feminism, the 90s mark a significant transformation from the political to the personal. Artwork created by women artists cannot be discussed without acknowledging the influence of prior feminist activism. As politically engaged artist and writer Joyce Kozloff observed, "The Women's Movement has been a contributing force in giving artists permission to openly explore their inner lives in their art." Through protest and performance, The Feminist Revolution in the 1960s and direct action artist groups like WAC (Women's Action Coalition) publicly confronted barriers to women's rights in a male-dominated art market. Early efforts by these politically active feminist groups provided women artists new unbound freedoms to create art within a much more familiar and personal structure: their own identity.

All of the artists whose work is included in *Forms of Identity: Women Artists in the 90s* explore topics surrounding the self. **Rachel Lachowicz, Dawn Fryling, Linda Stark, Jacci Den Hartog** and **Helen Pashgian** forged new paths in the formal properties of art making and the use of unconventional materials. **Jessica Bronson, Diane Gamboa** and **Laura Aguilar** address culture, race, and gender identity politics; **Liz Craft, Polly Apfelbaum, Meg Cranston**, and **China Adams** reveal covert personal interior gestures; and artists **Millie Wilson, Leslie Brack, Erika Rothenberg** and **Alexis Smith** investigate female identities within the context of American and popular culture.