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Question: Explore how artists have approached the concept around gender in art practice, providing evidence from at least 2 artists and thinkers.

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Introduction

Throughout the 20th century and with the rise of first and second wave feminism, women have explored gender through abstract expressionism. Ever since the works of Hilma F Klimt, women have explored capturing the female experience through ineffable and automatist methods of painting. The fact that women have felt the need to paint in abstract or expressive means has inspired many, as if the art is for all women, capturing reaffirming notions of femininity. That they can do anything, and it means just as much or more than it would for a male painter to take several weeks on a single classicist painting. This essay explores the different ways women have expressed themselves through this means of work.

There are a lot of women who come from a poor, working class background without a strong female role model, because of this they don't get exposed to the reality of feminism and just what it can mean to them, breaking down the 'stereotypical' ideas of what a woman 'should be' and how you don't have to settle for anything less than what you desire, your desire is something you should follow and not let anything get in the way of that, desire is something which is personal to you as a human let alone a woman, it makes you and you should do anything to achieve that for yourself, to have desire and to acknowledge that in the first place is extremely important as it's your personal wants and needs from the world.

Survey of texts

‘Women, Art and Society’ by Whitney Chadwick (2012)

In the book *‘Women, Art and Society’* written by Whitney Chadwick, there is a quote that states; *‘Powerfully transformed the image of women into one of possession and consumption’* (Chadwick, p. 8) This image created of women by man has historically hindered the professional positions and opportunities of women, making it even more evident the issues us women still face today, topics such as the gender pay gap, equal work opportunities, reproductive rights, gender stereotypes and sexual harassment. This then relates back to the three waves of feminism, the first wave took place from the mid-19th century up until the 1920s, focussing on women’s suffrage and overturning legal inequalities, in this period there were many male painters, the art world was dominated by male presence and there was very little chance of women being recognised and established as artists. The second wave expanded to include the change of gender norms and women’s roles in society, trying to achieve legal and social equality, reproductive rights as well as equal pay, unfortunately these are still topics that women across the world are fighting for total reclamation of today even though the second wave took place from the 1960s through until the 1980s. The third and final wave includes issues surrounding individualism, diversity and intersectionality, discussing forms or oppression like racism, sexism and homophobia. Addressing issues of sexual harassment and again challenging gender stereotypes through diverse forms of expression.

The use of the word ‘powerfully’ in this quote suggests that male dominance wasn’t an issue back then, men took pride in having ownership of women’s rights and took what they thought they were entitled to control and did so in every way. They made these rules for women which, as a woman fail to work, they kept women under systemic oppression, unfortunately this is something till prevalent in places in the world today in the twenty-first century. The fact that

men had this pattern of thinking towards women has trickled down to men in the twenty-first century as 'entitlement', in the most harmful and hateful ways towards women and girls, Moreover, 'Powerfully transformed' is inferring that women were and in ways still are a product made by men, as if women owe men recognition for creating them as a so called 'product'.

'Qualities associated with 'femininity' such as 'decorative', 'precious', 'miniature', 'sentimental' and 'amateur' (Chadwick, p. 9) These words are degrading and belittling to use towards women who are trying hard to break systemic oppression and gender expectations. It makes women feel like their lives and goals aren't as valued as a man's. A woman's capabilities are completely undermined, resulting in a huge number of women feeling like they must put aside their own achievements and ambitions because they've been fed the lie that a man can do more and do it better than they can, this is normalised sexism towards women. Women in the field of working in an expressive and abstract way have been hindered by the words of someone like Havelock Ellis, a British physician, psychologist, writer and social reformer stated that *'this painting is so good you'd never know it was done by a woman'* (Chadwick, p. 302) he uttered this abhorrent phrase to Lee Krasner, this was the *'highest praise he offered his female students'* leaving them to feel weakened about their work or even lose faith in the growth and acknowledgement of women as a whole and women working in the field of being artists/painters. Especially those who were choosing to go out of their comfort zone at the time of mass sexism with regards to anything surrounding expressionist and abstract art.

‘TATE-Feminism’ written by Bernardine Evaristo (2021)

In the *TATE* book *‘Feminism’* by *Bernardine Evaristo*, Evaristo states *‘A world class art museum can no longer get away with being overwhelmingly white and male’* (Evaristo, p. 18) in recent history this is seemingly becoming true, however there is still a long way to go for galleries representing women artists, there is a statistic stating that *‘only 13.7% of living artists represented by galleries in Europe and North America are women.’* (https://nmwa.org/support/advocacy/get-facts/)

Although the statistics for women being represented in galleries is on the rise, there is still a dramatic number of women and minority artists that are yet to have the opportunity to be recognised by world major galleries. There continues to be a huge disparage between white male artists being represented in comparison to women artists, women artists of colour and minority artists in general. ‘*Women’s art has been historically undervalued and underrepresented in collections. Few people would question the veracity of that statement. The history of art in Britain has been fuelled by powerful white men, and we know from recent research in America that 85% of artists featured in major permanent collections there are white, while 87% of them are male.’* (Evaristo, p. 16)

A group of artists who have and continue to shine a light on this factor would be ‘*Guerrilla Girls’* whose art is all about the underrepresentation of women and minority artists in galleries throughout the world and how this needs to change, there needs to be opportunities for artists other than predominantly white men, especially in today’s society, the twenty-first century.



Figure 1: Guerrilla Girls, (unknown title)

Guerilla Girls are a feminist activist group made up of anonymous practicing artists and art professionals, shining a light on how women in the art world are not as seen and heard as their predominantly white, male counterparts. They came together as a group in the year 1985 in response to only 13 women out of 169 artists being displayed in an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, USA. Working against the oppression that women and artists of colour must go through, fighting for them to have recognition in today's art world.

The representation for women is slowly changing in the art world, it still and will for a long time take more effort for women to be noticed in the same light as male artists, however this years (2025) Turner Prize winner (https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c5yqvz9wljqo) happened to be an autistic, learning disabled woman of colour by the name of Nnena Kalu, she is non-verbal however her artworks speak an abundance, with them being expressive in nature, brightly coloured sculptures, being wrapped and draped in ribbon, tape, fabrics and string, with her drawings being repetitive swirls made of a multitude of colour and layering. Expanding the inclusivity of artist representation by having Kalu win something as big and as world widely known as the turner prize. Representing a disabled, woman artist of colour is something that is inspirational for a lot of young people and people overall, furthering their belief in all artists, that

they’re not going to be shot down by a male dominated art world, they have just as much of a chance for their voice and actions to be as valid and as heard as a man’s.



Figure 2: Lee Krasner, ‘Night Creatures’

Lee Krasner was an American artist who is best known for being a pioneer and one of the only women in the Abstract Expressionist movement. Her early career was often overshadowed by her husband and fellow artist, Jackson Pollock. However, she is now recognized as a major artist in her own right, her work evolved throughout her life, beginning with more landscape depictions and ending with large scale abstract expressionist works. Exploring the themes of feminism and expressionism through large scale mark making and gestural forms, questioning the gender stereotypes towards large groups of primarily white male artists, teaching women that they shouldn’t let gender inequalities stand in the way of their own creativity and passion. The expressive nature behind the forms created represents and conveys thoughts and feelings, without explicitly painting them. Opening this and many of her paintings up to a wider audience as the mark making and paintwork is up for interpretation of what it makes you think and feel. Breaking the stereotype of expressive paintings like this just being done by men, women also shared the same capabilities. Krasner has been a huge influence on other women artists and continues to do so, not letting systemic oppression be the ruler of who gets to express themselves through art.



Figure 3: Gillian Ayres, ‘Antony and Cleopatra’ (1982)

This artwork by Gillian Ayres was created during the winter of 1981-1982 in North Wales. In comparison to other works, this painting in particular feels a lot looser due to there being more smaller brush marks spread throughout the whole length of the canvas, the marks are more expressive and the fact that there are a lot more colours spaced out through the painting draws your eyes in to it as a whole image rather than there being large, solid, abstracted shapes. The mixing of the paint is happening directly on the canvas instead of using a palette, giving the viewer the impression that this piece was made in a short period of time, alongside it being more about the feelings behind putting the paint down rather than planning and mapping out each mark. More vigorous brushstrokes come across as playful and less uptight, planning a painting beforehand can sometimes lead to overthinking, but if you go straight into a painting you can work with unintentional mistakes to make them become intentional and a part of the painting. Paintings like this exert an element/feeling of freedom, both in the artists confidence in their ability and the subject of the art itself, breaking down the stereotype of the ‘typical role’ of a woman and woman artist. Showing others that the sexist and misogynistic ideology towards

women artists doesn't stop women from creating expressive pieces of art and to not be afraid of putting art out there.

In relation to a previous quote, women have historically been underrepresented within galleries and also amongst artists when discussing great artworks and renowned artists, Even someone like Joan Mitchell didn't get the credit she deserved until later on in her career, all because her skills were and in some regards still are overlooked and undermined, however when someone like Willem DeKooning creates a painting, it's seen as monumental for the abstract expressionist community, there ceases to be much difference in the capabilities between Mitchell and DeKooning, they can both create expressive and uniquely stylised artworks, talking about and showing sensitive, sociopolitical, sentimental topics.

Ultimately, this research and the hard work put in by women and artists of colour is making a difference to their representation within galleries across the world, there is a long way to go however this seems to still be a new, emerging topic especially for the last 20 plus years, with the political climate growing in todays society there will hopefully be more opportunities for understanding and appreciation across the board when it comes to art being made by not, predominantly white men and also a growth in people's art collections overall. Minority artist representation and recognition of skill/ability is an important thing for not just the art world but society as a whole, acceptance of difference makes a world of change. Sanguinely within the next few years there will be an influx of confidence with regards to supporting women, artists of colour and artists with disability, making the art world a lot more successful and comfortable for said artists to be within.

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