ARTSY

Curator's Choice: Women and Nonbinary Artists Subvert the Politics of Portraiture
Written by: Ayanna Dozier
April 25, 2023

Alannah Farrell, Omari (FiDi), 2023

In her 1974 video piece *Art Herstory*, the artist Hermine Freed used green screen, special effects, and performance to interrogate portraits of women in Western art history. Using herself as both an object and a subject, Freed provides commentary on the silencing of women's voices—and by extension, artists who exist outside of gender binary classification—through recreations of iconic portraits by male artists across the art historical canon.

Although Freed's piece is nearly 50 years old, it demonstrates how troubled the field of portraiture is for women artists who have resisted thousands of years of imagery and iconography that portrays them as archetypes lacking any interiority or subjecthood.

Shona McAndrew

Moreover, for women and nonbinary artists, the politics of portraiture are not restricted to Western art history alone—mainstream media production has also contributed to the flattening or erasure as well. Although portraits are more readily accessible now than ever before, women and nonbinary artists continue to use the genre as a political tool for challenging the erasure of themselves and their communities.

This curated selection gathers five women and nonbinary artists—Shona McAndrew, Apolonia Sokol, Megan Lewis, YoYo Lander, and Alannah Farrell—who use portraiture to inject fresh perspectives on identity, community, representation, and subjecthood that both play with and rebel against classical archetypes of the genre.

Shona McAndrew

Shona McAndrew's lush paintings draw inspiration from classical iconography of Western portraiture to present contemporary images of modern women that resist archaic classifications. McAndrew most readily plays with the reclining nude, as seen in the work of Titian or Manet, for example. Whereas the reclining nude in art history framed women as "odalisque" (meaning a potential sex worker), McAndrew instead normalizes women's sexuality within the sphere of the home.

In her most recent exhibition, "Rose-Tinted Glasses" at New York–based gallery CHART, McAndrew explored intimacy in quiet moments of being at home, nude, and embracing her partner against a pink, lavender, and pastel blue color palette. Other portraits, like In Too Deep (2022), demonstrate the tenderness of the body as her partner grabs a fistful of her stomach. McAndrew's portraits evoke an intimacy of touch and eroticism of women's portraiture that is often simplified in larger publics.

Megan Lewis

With Megan Lewis's paintings, the artist makes her portraits from photographs she takes of subjects, who are largely individuals at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). She then repaints these using her signature layered brushstrokes. Her current exhibition, "Soft Landings," is on view through April 26th with Art Genesis, an incubator from ArtLeadHER that provides exhibition space for women in the arts.

A painting such as Memories of you are everywhere (2023) features a young Black femme sitting at a table with a glass of wine as they stare back at the audience set against a tropical print background. A work like this conveys how Lewis can capture the specificity of a subject's story through attire, facial expression, and props. But the artist stops short of anything that places them in a specific location or time, rendering her portraits of Black individuals timeless.

Yoyo Lander

YoYo Lander's collaged watercolor paper portraits celebrate women of color across diverse body types. Like Lewis, Lander's work begins with taking photographs of her subjects before translating those images into a layered watercolor collage painting. The artist's assemblage technique can be seen as a metaphor for 18th-century philosopher David Hume's bundle theory, which describes how our identities are bundled together from past experiences. Lander's portraits then resist the image as a singular presentation of the self and remind audiences of how the selves come together through memory, culture, and experience that exceed one image.

Apolonia Sokol's paintings of queer communities use narrative to render these portraits personal, while her flat painterly style creates a distance between audiences and subjects. The artist, who had a successful sold-out solo booth with The Pill® at Untitled Art Fair in Miami in 2022 and is the subject of the documentary Apolonia, Apolonia (2022), is making waves for her directness in portraying vulnerable communities.

Apolonia Sokol

In her portraits, Sokol sheds light on how alternative spaces such as clubs can cultivate spaces for familial connections to exist beyond biological relations. Sokol's portraits can be viewed as an archive of chosen families, working against the image of the traditional family portrait that is contingent upon representational likeness. In Sokol's portraits, her subjects definitely gaze back at us; they watch us watching them. Sokol produces a provocative question about the gaze, power, and subordination across her work as audiences bear witness to her subjects, at times, in explicit acts.

Alannah Farrell's work portrays queer communities with work that intentionally troubles the presentation of gender. The artist opens the conversation as to how nonbinary individuals are viewed through systems of classifications. Their current show, "Serenade," on view at Anat Ebgi through May 26th, comes at a timely moment where legislation across the United States targets the appearance and healthcare of nonbinary and trans individuals.

Alannah Farrell, Study for AI (Madonna Inn), 2023

"Serenade" captures tender representations of sitters amid brooding landscapes. Farrell also plays with the history of painting by using classical grisaille underpainting while also transforming the relationship between painter and subject to create an emotional dynamic with their subjects.

Across a variety of mediums, women and nonbinary artists are reminding audiences of the politics of portraiture and the power of representing oneself and community.