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ART VIEW; Women's Work Is (Sometimes) Done
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The Womb Room, Faith Wilding

IT ALL BEGAN IN THE "WOMB Room" -- my conversion to feminist art, that is.

Like many women of my generation -- too young or too out-of-it to have paid attention to what our older sisters stirred up in the 1970's -- I harbored prejudices against the art of the early women's movement. It seemed embarrassing, preoccupied with bodily fluids and occasionally so bloody that it might have been executed at the scene of a traffic accident. Paradoxically, much of it also seemed bloodless -- encumbered with so much theory that all the red paint in the world couldn't make it come alive. And it was old news; after 25 years, who cared?

But that was before I experienced the "Womb Room," a category-defying work now at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, 1040 Grand Concourse, in a show called "Division of Labor: 'Women's Work in Contemporary Art." The exhibition, which opened on Friday and runs through June 11, presents more than 50 works by 35 artists.

From a distance, the "Womb Room," which was tamely titled "Crocheted Environment" when Faith Wilding made it in 1972, looks like a giant free-form tea cozy. It consists of a rope web filled with contrasting crochet patterns. It is at once a shelter and a craft item, a linking of the male domain of architecture with the female world of needlework.

But one cannot appreciate its power until one stands inside it. Close-up, the yarn and cord, knotted in a rough pattern of bumps and gaps, resemble a wall of cells in the body. The viewer feels enveloped in an organic space -- eerily, disconcertingly in utero. Or that was how I felt watching Ms. Wilding, swathed in a flea-market muffler not of her own knitting, assemble the structure in the unheated museum a week before the show's opening.

Lydia Yee, the staff curator who organized "Division of Labor," said the show "deals with many divisions: the social division of work roles based on race, gender and class, the different ways female and male artists approach art making, and the distinction between so-called high art and applied art." These were also the concerns of feminist art in the 70's. And although the show features many pieces from the 80's and 90's, Ms. Yee dares to place the new work in the context of the old, exhibiting pieces that because of their art-world unfashionability have spent nearly 25 years under wraps.

The "Womb Room" was originally part of "Womanhouse," the legendary 1972 exhibition mounted in an abandoned Hollywood mansion by Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro and participants in the Feminist Art Program, which Ms. Schapiro and Ms. Chicago founded at the California Institute of the Arts in 1971. To look at recent work, Bronx Museum visitors must walk through a partial reconstruction of "Womanhouse," which, after its long absence from public view, has acquired the naughty fascination of the forbidden.

In the 80's, when theory was all the rage, feminist artists who used traditional women's crafts to comment on the condition of women were tarred as "essentialist" and excluded from exhibitions. "There was a retreat from the original aims of the feminist art movement and a marginalization of those of us who had pioneered them," Ms. Chicago explained.

Norma Broude, the author, with Mary D. Garrard, of the 1994 book "The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970's, History and Impact," said, "The movement was literally written out of history, when it wasn't being denigrated." Ms. Broude and Ms. Garrard attribute the renewed interest in feminist art to young women who missed it the first time around.

Yet the revival cannot exactly be described as full-fledged. Big studies like "The Power of Feminist Art" are usually accompanied by major exhibitions, but, because no museum was willing to mount one, the book was published without a linked show.

The years in storage, however, have neither eroded the contents nor diminished the power of "Womanhouse." A visual joke in Miriam Schapiro's and Sherry Brody's miniature "Dollhouse" anticipates the 80's feminist obsession with the so-called "male gaze," which objectifies women. In a studio atop the house, a nude male model awaits the objectifying gaze of a female artist.

Nor has Ms. Chicago's installation "Menstruation Bathroom" lost its capacity to disturb -- though it is far from an exact replica of the original. "Lydia Yee calls me up and says, 'Do we have to get all the same feminine hygiene products?' " Ms. Chicago explained. "Well, no, it's not a museum of menstruation, but there has been a major change in the size and shape of Kotex and Tampax since that time."

Two decades have also altered the place of women's crafts in society. When Faith Wilding was growing up, she associated needlework with tradition and "enforced femininity." But for many of today's students, whose liberated mothers did not teach them crafts, needlework is a subversive medium.

"My students are begging me to teach them crocheting, embroidery and knitting," said Ms. Wilding, who teaches painting at Cooper Union. "It's a rebellion against what's taught in art school -- a polemic about hand art in contrast to computer work. Men in particular are asking me. But then, men have always ripped off women's activities and gotten famous from them, so I'm not going to teach them."

Still, many men have learned, including several who are represented in the Bronx Museum show. They include Jim Isermann, who uses rug-hooking techniques in his shag paintings; Michael Cummings, whose narrative quilts tell political stories, and Charles Ledray, who stitches Barbie-doll-size clothes into soft sculptures.

Even the most resourceful men, however, cannot comment autobiographically on motherhood -- a theme that until the feminist art of the 70's had not been widely explored. "Division of Labor" spotlights two ground-breaking interpretations of motherhood by mothers: Mimi Smith's "Knit Baby Kit," a hand-knit, featureless, diapered blob inauspiciously emblazoned with the message "The Baby Is Dead," and part of Mary Kelly's "Post Partum Document," a work that includes her son's diaper liners.

Ms. Kelly made a point of keeping pictures of herself and her son out of the work so that its message about mother-child relations would be universal. Still, one wonders what has become of her infant collaborator, now in his 20's. Is he an investment banker?

"No," she said. "He's an artist and a photographer. He asked me to pose for some of his photographs, which of course I couldn't refuse, could I?"