



Carol Neiman, Ruth Weisberg and Cheri Gaulke, from left, are among the members of Women's Caucus for Art who will be on the steps of City Hall at noon Saturday to protest the lack of gallery space devoted to women artists.

Fighting for a fair share of the gallery

Media drive seeks equal opportunity for women artists

By Hunter Drohojowska

Just when you thought feminists everywhere had gone into permanent retirement, the Women's Caucus for Art has drummed up a nationwide media event to take place at noon Saturday.

In Los Angeles, the Women Artists Visibility Event will occur on the steps of City Hall. Hundreds of women are expected to gather, wearing costumes of blue and black and holding masks bearing the faces of famous women artists, to unveil a monolithic Egyptoid female deity. In New York, the same image will be at the head of a parade and in protests all across the country, women will be carrying placards crying "Genius has no gender."

The artists claim that statistics reveal startling disparities between the number of professional women practicing art and the exhibitions of their work in national museums. Nationally, 38 percent of professional artists are women and in L.A., they represent 33 percent of the total. Yet, local protesters point out that since 1980, neither the L.A. County Museum of Art, nor the

Museum of Contemporary Art has mounted a single major retrospective of work by a woman artist.

LACMA has been the target of protests before, the last being in 1981 when women gathered in front of the museum carrying masks with the face of Maurice Tuchman, senior curator of 20th-century art, who organized the all-white-male exhibition "Art in Los Angeles: Seventeen Artists in the Sixties."

The statistics compiled by the women artists did not include university or commercial galleries, though the Municipal Art Gallery at Barnsdall Park is cited for its exemplary record of showing 44 percent women artists.

The women also take issue with L.A. newspapers, pointing out that reviews in High Performance magazine average 38 percent women, Artweek averages 30 percent, Artscene reviewed 32 percent, while the L.A. Times averaged only 24 percent in reviews of solo exhibitions and the Herald averaged only 10 percent. (This last statistic applied only to Sunday reviews by Herald critic Christopher Knight and did not include feature stories on women artists by this and other Herald reporters.) These statistics also did not include the many reviews of solo exhibitions in national art magazines.

Artists Carol Neiman and Cheri

Artists

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Gaulke have organized the L.A. protest as a way of drawing attention primarily to neglect by the museums. "Between 1970 and 1980,

there was a growth in the professional women artist population of 162 percent, according to a National Endowment for the Arts study. We hope to affect some sort of change in the area of more exhibitions for women artists with catalogs and documentation in our major institutions."

Neiman explained that their group didn't have the resources to compile more complete statistics on the performance of other exhibition centers and magazines. "We did what we could in terms of public institutions since they are mandated to educate. We'd like to continue this ongoing observation of what's going on in Southern California. Maybe in the universities, graduate students will make a project of it."

She continued, "We are all arts professionals and we should be making art rather than doing this. But somebody has to because it is apparent to all of us across the country that in major institutions there is a disparity between the exhibition schedule and cataloging and in the actual amount of professional women artists in the population."

Regarding LACMA, the group cites the following statistics: Of the solo exhibitions held between 1980-86, 11 percent were women artists, and none had a catalog; and of the smaller solos shows in the Gallery 6 program, 27 percent were women. During a walk through the Ahmanson Galleries, of 207 paintings, only one was executed by a woman, Rosa Bonheur, and in a Graphic Arts Council show of 20 years of acquisitions, only 9 percent were women.

LACMA director Earl A. Powell III defended his institution, explaining first that the Ahmanson galleries are hung with historical paintings from the 15th and 19th century when relatively few practicing artists were women.

"We've never gotten into establishing quotas and don't believe it is an appropriate thing to do. I think in recent times, certainly, all mu-

seums have become more aware that it is sensitive issue, and we have responded in favorable way. In 1977, we were the only museum at the time to organize an exhibit of women artists from 1550-1950, the first international exhibition of its kind.

"I don't want to take issue with their statistics but I can think of many women we've shown. We've highlighted women in photography with shows by Susan Rankaitis, Eileen Cowen and Barbara Kruger. We did a solo show of Susan Rothenberg, which was not a major retrospective but gained attention nationally; a show of Maren Hassinger. But these solo shows are disputed by the caucus because they are not major retrospectives.

"We have added art by women to the permanent collection, a Nancy Graves sculpture, a sculpture by Elaine Carhart, an installation by Alice Aycock which hasn't even been seen yet. We may not correspond entirely to the percentages but we certainly have been sensitive to the issue and responded by focusing on the qualitative aspects of really fine art."

According to the group's statistics, New York is no more responsible to its women artists than Los Angeles. The Whitney Museum of American Art has allotted only 8.7 percent of its solo exhibition to women; the Solomon Guggenheim Museum gave only 3.8 percent of its solo shows to women. (The statistics did not include the Museum of Modern Art in New York.)

Of L.A.'s MoCA, the caucus claims that only 9 percent of their solo and group exhibitions involved women; that only one-half of 1 percent of the artists were women in their opening show at the Temporary Center.

ever, 32 percent of their performance and video program involved women artists.

MoCA director Richard Koshalek explained, "I don't know about the statistics and percentages, and I haven't sat down to work them out, but I would like to say that we are aware of their concern and will continue to work with that in mind.

"It is interesting that our two curators are both women, Julia Brown and Julie Lazar. I can think of women we have shown: Betty Saar, Jill Giegerich, Jo Ann Gellis, Mary Corse, Maria Nordman. We are taking the Elizabeth Murray retrospective from the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts from July 28 to Sept. 20."

MoCA's permanent collection has mostly been compiled through gifts, but recently, the museum received a grant of \$250,000 to be used specifically for acquisitions of work by Southern California artists. Koshalek points out that the first purchase was a work called "Asphalt Jungle" by Alexis Smith, and that their second purchase will be a piece by Jill Giegerich.

In a surprise announcement, Koshalek also told the Herald that curator Brown was leaving MoCA for a position at the Des Moines Art Center in Iowa. Mary Jane Jacobs, curator at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art, will be her successor.

"Jacobs built her reputation on being supportive of feminist art," said Koshalek. "She did 'A Decade of Women's Performance Art' and the Magdalena Abakanowicz retrospective."

Jacobs, interviewed by phone in Chicago, agreed that she had made it a priority in her career to organize major exhibitions of work by women artists. "It is sad to see how much things have changed in the '80s. I am conscious of women having a lesser role and less visibility, and I think it has much to do with the market situation.

"Maybe people feel that if they are spending \$100,000 on a work of art, they want it to be a male artist. At MoCA, I will work to continue to address women artists, but as part of the mainstream, as they deserve."

Hunter Drohojowska writes regularly about art for the Herald.