

'At Home' exhibit showcases pioneering feminist art

By Hunter Drohojowska

At first glance, "At Home" might seem an unlikely theme for an exhibition celebrating a decade of feminist art in 1970, when the movement began in Southern California, women artists were reacting angrily against the confines of the home. But Arlene Raven, guest curator of the show now on view at the Long Beach Museum of Art through Nov. 4, says times have changed. Besides, Raven says, "everyone is 13 years older. They're all

at least 35 now."

The exhibition, which includes installations by Eleanor Antin, Helen and Newton Harrison, Leslie Labowitz, Suzanne Lacy, Lili Laskich, Miriam Schapiro, Faith Wilding, and selections from Judy Chicago's work-in-process "The Birth Project," owes its roots to "Womanhouse," the first large-scale, public, feminist-art statement organized in Southern California. In 1972, Chicago and Schapiro, while teaching the feminist art program at CalArts, con-

verted an abandoned Hollywood mansion into a series of installations. As then described by Chicago, "The age-old female activity of homemaking was taken to fantasy proportions. 'Womanhouse' became the repository of the day-dreams women have as they wash, bake, cook, sew, clean and iron their lives away."

The home as metaphor is retained in the current exhibition, but it undergoes a significant transformation in the hands of the represented artists. "At Home" is

also a showcase for the variety of art styles pioneered by the feminists and subsequently adopted by some male artists. Included are pattern and decoration painting, autobiographical and narrative art, artists' books, performance art, body art and collaborations.

Raven, who was a co-founder of the Woman's Building and "Chrysalis," a feminist art magazine, thinks "the theme is viable not only as family and home but as an idea

Feminist/C-2, Col. 2



Faith Wilding's "Scriptorium" — which refers to a room in a convent — is part of a feminist art show at Long Beach Museum of Art through Nov. 4.

Paul Chinn/Herald photographs

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of comfort — when and where people feel 'at home' and how we'll extend the area where we feel 'at home.'"

Raven says the initial anger that characterized feminist art was important because it demanded attention, but, in terms of aesthetics, it was undeveloped. "Now, as the form has evolved, the content has evolved. Every issue and subject that I can think of is being addressed in this art."

In putting together the exhibition, Raven selected artists who've been active in the woman's movement for 13 years. She wanted to use the home as a metaphor to describe the evolution of the women's movement, from the individual and private concerns of self-discovery to the political and public issues of peace and ecology. "It wasn't to the values of the home that the women's movement was opposed. It was to the stereotyping ... that women could only be in the home," observes Raven. "If there is a sense of relatedness between home and the workplace ... if we care about people in other countries and cities as we do our own mother, sister or friend, then that is the relatedness that is at the core of the women's movement. And that caring comes from the sense of the world as a home."

According to Raven, "At Home" is the first large-scale museum-sponsored show of contemporary work by feminist artists. In the collaborative spirit of feminism, Raven asked other curators to organize events tied to the main exhibition. (See related story below.) Accompanied by a 72-page catalogue, with a long essay by Raven, the show was coordinated without the benefit of a grant.

Of the eight artists represented, only Miriam Schapiro works in a remotely traditional vein, specializing in paintings made from fabrics and materials — "femmages." Trained in the classical tradition by male teachers, the 60-year-old artist was one of the mothers of the feminist art movement. "Womanhouse" changed her life, she recalls, because "it was content-oriented art born out of women's own autobiographical struggles. One area of thematic content had to do with the origins of woman's security, which ... were the confines of her home. There she raised children, nested and made art familiar to her — interior decoration, needlework, clothing. After 'Womanhouse,' I realized that I was going to choose a new audience for my art — women. I wanted to layer the surfaces of my canvases with materials, the stuff, which as a woman, you touched in your everyday life."

In addition to Schapiro's "femmages," quilts of teacups and teapots, cozies and costumes, she also asked 20 other artists, both men and women, to submit small, assembled "rooms" to mount within the drawn shape of a house on a wall. Though it alludes to "Womanhouse," there is no hostility in the piece. The absence of anger, she says, should not be surprising. ("Feminist art" can't be as confrontational as it was in the early 1970s. Wouldn't you suppose that, given 10 years of work, women would expand their original premise? Become less broad, more subtle, less general, more specific, less an outsider, more an insider?)

"Scriptorium," an installation of detailed, elegant paintings and wall writings by Faith Wilding, another artist represented in the show, refers to the room in a convent where nuns would copy and illustrate manuscripts. "I chose that room because convents were the only place in the Middle Ages where women could learn to read and write, be independent of men, and express their creativity," she explains. "The concern of my work has to do with life force, the interaction of plant, animal and human life. It's being at home with nature in a sense and how we are closely interwoven with it."

Wilding, 40, who also worked on "Womanhouse," agrees that the aesthetics of feminist art have strengthened with age. "The art is richer, more embracing of all of life. Now that many of us have gone through marriage and families, we can allow



Miriam Schapiro works in a remotely traditional vein, specializing in paintings which she calls "femmages."

ourselves to be softer, to enjoy female qualities."

Leslie Labowitz's art, too, has moved from an early preoccupation with violence against women to more personal issues. In 1977, she was busy organizing protests against sexist illustrations on record-album covers, starting an incest awareness program and creating the performance-art piece "In Mourning and in Rage" — a dramatic memorial for the victims of the Hillside Strangler rape-murders.

Since 1980, however, Labowitz, 37, has redirected her political interests. The result is "Sproutime," which is both her art and business. For profit, she grows a variety of bean sprouts and sells them at the Farmers Market. As art, the Venice performance artist used the sprouts as part of an installation exploring her childhood. "As an activist and artist, it's important to be able to nurture the other side of yourself, the side that has to do with life rather than death," she replies when asked about the "At Home" theme. "My home is not a prison the way it was. It seems all of us are thinking about that — it's symptomatic. But healing the world is important and it's hard to do when you're burnt out, unhappy, and don't have love in your life."

Suzanne Lacy, 37, with whom Labowitz has collaborated over the years, has been arranging dinner parties and performances to discuss how women of all ages, classes and races will survive in the 1980s. At the museum, her installation is a room filled with sofas, audiotapes and photographs of the women's comments during those discussions. She says her more recent work may be less confrontational because society has become less hostile to the feminist position. "When I was first involved with feminism, there was little to many people."



"At Home" exhibit organizer Arlene Raven.

support. Everytime you put a piece out, it was received with aggression. So we developed aggressive stances. As the bulk of experience grew in the culture, we could relax more, because we were believed."

In her catalogue essay, Raven concludes: "This is the culmination of looking back on what we had done. I needed to review what had happened. Even if it's only to remind people to be full of spirit and hope. Many people are dispirited and depressed, today. You need something else — home, spiritual comfort, relatedness in terms of family and friends to counteract the feeling of doom. And you don't have to be a feminist to feel that, I believe. Feminism is just one way of speaking about things of common interest to many people."

Where to celebrate a decade of feminist art in Southern California

"At Home," the art exhibition at the Long Beach Museum of Art, is one of many events celebrating a decade of feminist art in Southern California. Other activities concurrent with the show at the museum are: "Roles, Relationships, and Sexuality," a survey of feminist videos organized by Kathy Huffman, curator of the museum, and Lyn Blumenthal, director of Video Data Bank in New York; "Artist's Books by Women," an exhibition assembled by Susan King and Barbara Pascal, in the museum's bookshop gallery; and "Haunted Womanhouse," a special Halloween event with live music and continuous performance-art shows, Oct. 29, 8 p.m.

Other events include "Video River," a multimonitor installation by Shigeko Kubota at the Japanese American Cultural Community Center, 240 S. San

Pedro, Sept. 10-25; "Political Perspectives," a video show that will include Blumenthal's "Social Studies (Part I)," Nancy Buchanan's "An End to All Our Dreams," Martha Rosler's "Secrets of the Street: No Desire," at L.A.C.E., 240 S. Broadway, 3rd Floor, Sept. 28, 8 p.m.; "At Home at the Women's Building," a performance-art series organized by Rachel Rosenthal and Cheri Gaulke, at the Women's Building, 1727 N. Spring St., through the month of October; "Videotapes by Joan Jonas," at Beyond Baroque, 681 N. Venice Blvd., Oct. 1-30; and "The House of Women: Art and Culture in the '80s," a national conference on women's issues, at Cal State Long Beach, Nov. 4-6. For additional information, a copy of the master calendar can be obtained by calling the Long Beach Museum of Art, 439-2119.