

CLASS 11 : FIGHTING FOR HER PLACE

A. WOMEN ON WOMEN

1. Class title 1 (Judy Chicago)
2. Tower: *Fanfare for the Uncommon Woman, #1*
3. — still from the above

Today we are listening to, looking at, and reading works that are not only written by women, but whose subject is womanhood itself. The music there was *Fanfare for the Uncommon Woman*, written in 1986 by the American composer **Joan Tower** (1938–), her riposte to **Aaron Copland's** *Fanfare for the Common Man* (1942), using the same instrumentation. Tower, like Copland, was writing in praise of women who don't normally make the headlines. But the piece, the first of six such fanfares, is also dedicated to a specific individual, **Marin Alsop**, whom you saw conducting it, and very much a headliner. I have organized the class around this dichotomy, between works that address issues of women in general [**THEY/THEM**], and those that address the artist's personal situation [**I/ME/SHE**].

4a Section list

So in the second hour, we will be dealing mainly with artworks which are specific and personal; in the first, we will be looking at writers and artists who have addressed the situation of women in general.

4. Section title A: Women on Women

Most of what I show will be painting, sculpture, music, or poetry, but let's start with a brief survey of **prose writers** who have addressed the subject directly; some of these are people we have met before. Each will have a picture and a brief quote.

5. Christine de Pizan: *The City of Women*, 1405

We met **Christine de Pizan** (1364–1430) in the third class, as one of the first women in history to make her living through her writing. One of her books was *La cité des dames* (1405), a compilation of great women in history, written as a guide to the education of princesses in her own time.

6. Mary Wollstonecraft: *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, 1792

I would love to have been able to devote a full segment to **Mary Wollstonecraft** (1759–97). This portrait of her by **John Opie**—no wig, no lace, little makeup, and wearing an informal house dress—hardly portrays her as a typical subject of the 18th century, but as a modern woman. She too made her living as a writer, including a first-hand account of the **French Revolution**. While trapped there for several years, she became involved with an American operator, and had a daughter by him. When he decamped, she returned to London and married the philosopher **William Godwin**, a man who cared little for

convention, and whose love for her as a person triumphed over any aura of scandal. I would not say, however, that Wollstonecraft was an advocate of free love, or that she thought that men and women were equal in the real world. She merely sought to affirm equality of spirit in the eyes of God. We can see her genes expressed in the child she had with Godwin, a daughter who would in time become the writer **Mary Shelley**. Wollstonecraft herself, alas, died of postpartum septicemia five days later.

7. Virginia Woolf: *A Room of One's Own*, 1929

We spent some time with **Virginia Woolf** (1882–1941) two weeks ago. I merely want us to remind ourselves of the importance of *A Room of One's Own*, which she gave as a lecture in 1928 and expanded into a book in 1929.

8. Simone de Beauvoir: *The Second Sex*, 1959

When I was in college, the book that we were all reading was *The Second Sex* (1949) by **Simone de Beauvoir** (1908–46). I don't think our motives were feminist at all; it is more likely that we hoped for some titillating inside scoop, a peep into the powder room. But de Beauvoir was one of the first to address womanhood as a matter for philosophy, and as such was the forerunner by some two decades of the groundbreaking feminist texts of the 1970s.

9. Germaine Greer: *The Female Eunuch*, 1970

And here is one of them, *The Female Eunuch* (1970) by the Australian writer **Germaine Greer** (1939–). This quotation explains the title; she asserts that a woman compelled to fit into the limited molds established for her is like a castrated man, not fully in possession of her true being. I might equally have featured *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) by **Betty Friedan**.

B. PAUSE FOR A PUZZLE

10. Section title B: Puzzle Interlude

Here and there in the class, I am going to play you things without pontificating about them; they are puzzles of a kind; the point is for you to tell me. I would like us to deconstruct this 5-minute film made in 2005 by director **Ridley Scott**, who is of course a man, but it was thought up by his daughter **Jordan Scott**, so it qualifies. It is called *Thunder, Perfect Mind*. I won't say more just now, except to remind you to pay as much attention to the text as the images.

11. Scott: *Thunder, Perfect Mind*

12. — text from the above (extract)

What did you make of that? Is it feminist or exploitative? And, if you don't happen to know it already, what do you make of that text? It is in fact far more ancient than any of the quotations I have given you so far, probably dating from the Second Century CE. It is one of the **Gnostic Gospels** found at the

Egyptian site of **Nag Hammadi**, consisting of various books that did not make it into the Christian Bible. Its language is very much like that of the *Revelation*, so it may be allegorical. But as a statement of the conflicting dynamics of womanhood, it feels strikingly modern. The woman on the escalator is the Canadian former supermodel **Daria Werbowy**; I am not sure how many other roles she plays; obviously the more guises we see her in, the more it has to say about women. Does it diminish it to use it in a Prada ad?

C. GLANCING BLOWS

13. Section title C: (Louise Bourgeois installation)

13z O’Keeffe, Tanning, Bourgeois

The Feminist movement is generally dated to around 1970, and I will be coming on to direct artistic expressions of that in a moment. But even earlier in the century, and continuing to this day, you find artist who present feminist themes obliquely rather than through visual polemic. One such is **Louise Bourgeois**, whose work you see here, but let me mention a couple of other artists first, **Georgia O’Keeffe** and **Dorothea Tanning**; the three approaches could scarcely be more different.

14a Georgia O’Keeffe: *Black Iris* (1926, NY Met)

14. — the same, with text

Georgia O’Keeffe (1887–1986), whom dealer and critic **Samuel Kootz** called “the only prominent woman artist,” painted many subjects throughout her life. But feminists have embraced her for her close-up paintings of flowers, which seem to have a clear genital imagery. The same Samuel Kootz who praised her felt that these paintings lessened her stature by insisting on her sex in a field where it should be irrelevant. But she responded—and continued to maintain all her life—that it was indeed irrelevant, and that people who saw her flowers as vulvas were merely acting out their own hang-ups. Go figure!

15. Dorothea Tanning: *Birthday; Self-Portrait at 30* (1942, Philadelphia)

16. — the same, with text

American Surrealist **Dorothea Tanning** (1910–2012), who became the third wife of **Max Ernst** after his divorce from Peggy Guggenheim, painted this self-portrait on her 30th birthday. Her description here does not come close to explaining its disturbing qualities—for example that her overskirt is not made of seaweed but of tiny writhing human bodies—but then Surrealism seldom does. Although this is a self-portrait, you sense that she is saying something about Woman in general.

17a Louise Bourgeois: *Destruction of the Father* (1974)

17. — the same, with text

The 1974 installation *Destruction of the Father* by French-American sculptor **Louise Bourgeois** (1911–2010) sits halfway in between the O’Keeffe and Tanning pieces. Its color and close internal feel is like a uterine response to O’Keeffe’s irises, yet the scenario it purports to represent is as fantastical and

oblique as anything by Tanning or most of the other Surrealists. Bourgeois has talked openly about the constant verbal abuse poured on her by her father—I'll post a video online that I have shown before in another course—so in that sense the work is personal. But, whatever its psychic origin, most of her work seems to speak to women's concerns more generally.

18. Louise Bourgeois: sculpture installation

19. Louise Bourgeois: *Nature Study* (1984)

Let's look at the two main figures in the installation photo I showed before. The crouching sculpture, which she produced both in painted plaster and bronze, is called simply *Nature Study*, but it obviously has female characteristics—and, more disturbingly, animal ones also.

20. Louise Bourgeois: *Maman* (Bilbao)

The spider at the other end of the room is one of a series she began in the early 1990s, almost all called *Maman*, or "Mother." Apparently she sees the spider as a positive image, a productive and protective figure, but she also knew that most people would not, and presumably played on its ambiguity as the source of its power. This is a huge version outside the Guggenheim in Bilbao, but there are other versions all over the world.

~~21. Louise Bourgeois: *Arch of Hysteria* (1983)~~

D. HITTING THE TARGET

22. Section title D (Barbara Kruger: *You are not Yourself*)

23. Barbara Kruger: *Your Body is a Battleground*, 1989

Just as we got writers like Betty Friedan and Germaine Greer writing polemically about what was now being called feminism in the last decades of the 20th century, so we got a number of polemical artists attacking the subject head-on, instead of treating it obliquely by implication. One of this was **Barbara Kruger** (1945–), who used the language of advertising to make a number of text-and-photo collages on explicitly feminist themes.

24. Mary Beth Edelson: *Some Living American Women Artists* (1972, NY MoMA)

25. — annotated version of the above

Another collage artist was **Mary Beth Edelson** (1933–2021). Her best-known work attacks the same target as the poster by the Guerilla Girls that we saw in the first class. What she has done is to take a reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* and paste on the faces of living American artists; Georgia O'Keeffe is Jesus. There are a lot more artists in the border.

26. Judy Chicago: *The Dinner Party* (1974–79, Brooklyn)

Even though Edelson's piece is in the Museum of Modern Art, I personally hold no brief for it as an artwork in its own right. But I showed it a bridge to another work about women around a table, which is a true masterpiece. This is *The Dinner Party* created between 1974 and 1979 by **Judy Chicago** (1939–), and now in the Brooklyn Museum. It has place settings for 39 women around a triangular table, with the names of 999 more inscribed on the tablecloth and floor. Some of the women are mythical, but most come from two millennia of history, right up to Judy Chicago's contemporaries. Each place setting contains an embroidered cloth with the person's name, a unique ceramic plate, a goblet, and utensils. Although the artist designed everything, she chose to have it executed in embroidery and ceramics—*applied* arts which are traditionally the province of women, rather than the paint and canvas associated with male-dominated fine art. The work was widely panned at its first showing, largely I think because the genital imagery on the plates was even more explicit than Georgia O'Keeffe's *Irises*, but it has since been acknowledged as the masterpiece it is. Here are three more of the settings, after which I'll play a section of a television interview in which the artist herself explains the whole work.

27. Judy Chicago: *Dinner Party* (Eleanor of Aquitaine, Sojourner Truth, Emily Dickinson)

28. Judy Chicago on *The Dinner Party*

E. ATWOOD'S DYSTOPIA

29. Section title E (Margaret Atwood)

In her poetry, novels, and stories, Canadian author **Margaret Atwood** (1930–) has maintained a strong interest in looking at familiar things from the female point of view. The first thing I read by her was a comparatively minor work, *The Penelopiad* (2005), which retells the *Odyssey* through Penelope's eyes, showing her as much more of an independent agent than even **Homer** painted. *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), probably her most famous work, also addresses the subject of women's agency, but by depicting its opposite: a dystopian society that reduces fertile women to the single task of bearing children for the male elite. We are in the United States, some years in the future. Following a coup, the government has been taken over by a fundamentalist cult, who have suppressed all other religions and imposed their own version of holy law. Through a combination of environmental pollution and radiation, most women have been rendered infertile; the few that can still bear children are groomed to do just that, becoming members of a special group called Handmaid. This is the 1990 film by **Volker Schlöndorff**, with script by **Harold Pinter**. I will play two scenes from relatively early in the film; they show, respectively, the heroine's first night in the training facility going on into breakfast the next morning, and then a horrible parody of a group therapy session.

30. Atwood: *The Handmaid's Tale*, the first night

31. Atwood: *The Handmaid's Tale*, group therapy (perhaps omit?)

32. Class title 2 (Denied their Place)

F. I AM WOMAN

33. Section title F (Helen Reddy)

I shall also be jumping around in time a bit during the second half of the class, but I am trying to focus on pieces by and about women that use the pronoun “I” rather than “She” or “They.” It’s not a hard distinction, and I am sure there will be things in one half that could as easily be in the other, but still. I am bookending it between two songs; the first is iconic and totally clear; the second is ambiguous, in effect a follow-up to my puzzle video by Ridley Scott.

34. Helen Reddy: *I am woman*, first three stanzas

The 1971 song “I am woman” by the Australian singer **Helen Reddy** (1941–2020), with music by **Ray Burton**, became the unofficial anthem of the nascent Feminist movement. Not only that, but it was chosen by the United Nations as the official theme song for the **Year of the Woman, 1975**. Here are the opening stanzas. Probably you know it already, but imagine you hadn’t heard it, and tell me how you think Reddy’s persona and delivery affects the impact of the song.

35. Helen Reddy: *I am Woman* (1971)

36. Reddy on the origin of the song

What did you think? Before I saw this, I assumed the text “I am Woman, hear me roar” would be aggressive and strident. But Reddy comes over more like the girl next door than a feminist icon; she makes it personal. And it is clear that her inspiration was indeed personal.

37. — the same, with harrassment quote

She talked, for instance, about going on stage as a warm-up act for a comic, who then made a lewd joke about her as he came on. But personal though its inspiration may have been at the start, and even though Reddy herself maintains that the song was about personal empowerment of *any* sort, it quickly became a political rallying cry in its own right. Note how the context has changed in the 30-odd years between that first clip and her appearance at the **International Women’s Day rally in 2003**. But note too how she herself remains always gracious in her intensity, never ranting.

38. Helen Reddy: *I am Woman* (2023)

G. ME IN MY DAMAGED BODY

39. Section title G (Frida Kahlo: *Roots*, 1943)

If we are talking about the **Female “I”** in art, we simply have to turn to **Frida Kahlo** (1907–54). I’ll show you an extensive video about her in a moment that tells you most of the necessary facts, but for now let’s see what we can deduce for ourselves by looking at this one picture: *Roots* (1943).

40. Frida Kahlo: *Roots* (as above, without section title)

What do you see? Like much of her work, it is a self-portrait. She is lying, fairly comfortably it would seem, but on rough fissured ground. It's called *Roots*, but what seems to be growing out of the space where her heart ought to be are luxurious vines with verdant leaves. Yet they seem to have little hairlike roots coming out of them. So what is this: a flowering or an entrapment? Or both?

41. Frida Kahlo: *Two Self Portraits*

42. Frida Kahlo: *The Two Fridas* (1939)

There are four things you should know about her art. (1) Her visual language combined both traditional Mexican styles and European Surrealism. (2) Much of her output consists of self-portraits, and many of these depict her in some kind of pain. (3) Much of this pain was physical; as the video will explain, she was seriously injured in a bus accident when she was 18, and spent most of her life enduring or recovering from surgical operations. (4) Some of the pain was also psychological, springing from her turbulent marriage to fellow-artist **Diego Rivera** (1886–1957). The video, by an Englishman called **James Payne**, will discuss this and more, focusing upon the picture here, *The Two Fridas* (1939). The original is 15 minutes long, but I have reduced it to about 5:30 by making some not-very-smooth cuts and stopping before the end. I hope you find it worthwhile.

43. Frida Kahlo: *The Two Fridas* (1939), video by James Payne

H. ME, AND OTHER INDIVIDUALS

44. Section title H: Adrienne Rich

45. — the above image with quotations

I'll give you a segment on another visual artist in a moment, but first I want to return to the written word, with a Baltimore-born poet, **Adrienne Rich** (1929–2012). She is clearly a feminist, as you can see from the quotations here, but she is neither confessional nor obvious.

46. Adrienne Rich: *The Springboard* (1951), text

47. Adrienne Rich: *Power* (1977), read by the author

48. Adrienne Rich: *An Atlas of the Difficult World* cover

In my first version of this class, I represented her by her most famous poem, *Diving into the Wreck* (1972), plus two shorter ones that she read herself. The collection won the **National Book Award**, but Rich refused to accept it alone. Instead, she invited the two runners-up, both of whom were also women, to accept it with her on behalf of women artists everywhere. However, the three poems I originally chose were just too difficult to take in at one reading; I would have needed the full hour to break them down. So instead, I will play you her reading the Dedication from a more recent collection, *An Atlas of the Difficult World* (1991). I wouldn't say that the body of the book is any less challenging than her earlier work, but the Dedication, which unusually comes at the end, is simplicity indeed. She

simply imagines a dozen different women in a dozen different situations, a cross-section of womankind. Rich is not a ME poet, but she is definitely a WE, and her “WE” is made up of many different “I”s, none of whom is her, but to all of whom she is connected.

49. Adrienne Rich reading the Dedication from *An Atlas of the Difficult World* (1991)

50. Adrienne Rich: *Diving into the Wreck* 1

51. Adrienne Rich: *Diving into the Wreck* 2

52. Adrienne Rich: *Diving into the Wreck* 3

53. Adrienne Rich: *Diving into the Wreck* 4

54. Adrienne Rich: *Diving into the Wreck* 5

55. Adrienne Rich: *Diving into the Wreck* 6

I. ME, IN BORROWED BODIES

56. Section title I (Cindy Sherman *Bacchus* and *Madonna*)

Here is another puzzle picture; can anybody guess what it is? It is in fact a combination of two separate pictures, the *Bacchus* and the *Madonna*, but they are not as the artists originally painted them. They are from a series called *History Portraits*, done around 1990 by the photographer **Cindy Sherman** (1964–). She has posed for both, with the assistance of a good deal of make-up and, for the *Madonna*, a strap-on plastic chest! Here are the originals.

57. Caravaggio: *Young Sick Bacchus* (1593), with Cindy Sherman: *Untitled 224* (1990)

58. Fouquet: *Madonna Lactans* (1458), with Cindy Sherman: *Untitled 216* (1990)

59. Sherman: *Untitled Film Stills*

Sherman started photographing herself in various guises in the late 1970s, choosing mostly familiar situations, and basing her style on B-movie stills from the fifties or sixties. I don't think any are based on specific movies, but they involve her constant changes of setting, outfit, and appearance. I have put a few together to a period-appropriate soundtrack of **Patti Smith** (1946–). What do you think is going on?

60. Sherman: *Untitled Film Stills*

60z Sherman: *Untitled Film Stills* (repeat)

What do these do for you? Is she examining what it was to be a woman—or perhaps whether being a woman of any kind is also a question of acting a role. Here's what she says about it:

61. Cindy Sherman: about the *Untitled Film Stills*

J. THIS IS MY HAND

62. Section title J (Shara Nova)

Finally, as a bookend to Helen Reddy's *I am Woman*, with which I started this hour, here is a video that I found on the internet, called *This is My Hand*. It was written in 2015, so it might as easily have come into next week's class. The writer is **Shara Nova** (1974–), whose compositions stretch into the classical field as well (we may hear one next week). Here she is performing with her group **My Brightest Diamond**. I watched the first half minute, and found it so perfect in summing up the many concerns we have been examining today—the “me,” womanhood, the body, sexual fluidity and identity—that I couldn't pass it up. Now, having seen it several times more, I am less convinced that it is a feminist song at all. But I'd like to hear from you. Treat it as another of my puzzle videos!

63. Shara Nova: *This is My Hand* (2015)

64. Class title 3 (Shara Nova)

So what was that all about? A simple love song? A woman defined as a sex object for men? Or a woman in full possession of her sexuality? You tell me!