
margaret harrison
it hasn't changed: and babies?

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The British artist Margaret Harrison (b. 1940) examines the female condition in patriarchal society. Her drawings, paintings and installations explore the traditions, narratives and attitudes that shape women's subaltern position in relation to men. Specifically they consider the gendered dimensions of the workplace, domestic environments and lifestyles, art history, and pop culture through the lenses of sex and violence, challenging these social structures and apparatuses for their complicity in sustaining androcentrism.

Harrison became politicised during the late 1960s, influenced by the anti-Vietnam war movement and events such as May 1968, and began taking part in feminist demonstrations. In 1970, wearing fake breasts and a fake smile, she took part in a protest organised by the Women's Liberation Movement to disrupt that year's televised 'Miss World' contest.

She paralleled this mode of activism in her practice, making drawings that used irony to challenge gendered stereotypes. The most iconic of these is *He's Only a Bunny Boy but He's Quite Nice Really* (1971), a humorous depiction of *Playboy* magazine founder Hugh Hefner. This work was the centrepiece of Harrison's first solo show, held at the Motif Editions Gallery in London in 1971 and infamously raided and shut down by the police after just one day on grounds of indecency.

Harrison's representations of men – she depicted Hefner with bulging breasts, wearing a basque and bunny ears, for example – posed a moral problem to British authorities. Despite the works' participation in the bawdy tradition of satirical cartoons, they were deemed obscene. But, as the artist once put it, the images in fact served to question the 'idea of having a fixed sexuality', with the police only 'reacting as males to the notion that there were other manifestations of sexuality than the strictly heterosexual variety', which was 'threatening'.

A key concern for Harrison is the power, both symbolic and de facto, held by the male artist. For instance, the series *Olympia Model Role* (2010) reimagines artist Édouard Manet's iconic painting *Olympia* (1863) – which itself subverted art historical traditions by representing Venus as a prostitute, staring defiantly back at the viewer – with a cast of female celebrities. In these drawings, Harrison brings together stars with shared associations – Michelle Obama and Marilyn Monroe, Jennifer Lopez and Marlene Dietrich, Hattie McDaniel and Vivien Leigh – in role reversals to call attention to aspects of ethnicity and class that are disregarded in art history and often overlooked in debates around gender.

Many of Harrison's works consider the structural forces operating around gendered acts of violence. For example, in *Beautiful Ugly Violence* (2004), three groupings of pieces unpack the issue, expanding the perspective from the personal and private to the collective and public. First, depictions of household objects associated with incidents of domestic violence – a kettle, a knife, a hammer, a telephone – positioned on luxurious fabrics expose how harm can be disguised within genteel domesticity. Then, weaponised domestic items rendered on transcripts of dialogue from therapy sessions for abusive men connect individual gestures to toxic social constructions of masculinity. Finally, imagery and text inscribed on lengths of butcher paper catalogue the gender-based violences that are inscribed into global political, religious and economic systems.

Harrison's latest work, the triptych *Guernika-Aleppo* (2018), combines art-historical and political references to address the inhumanity of current and historic wars, specifically conflicts involving international military interventions such as the Syrian Civil War (2011-), the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and the Vietnam War (1954-1975). The title points to artist Pablo Picasso's iconic painting *Guernica* (1937), which was created in response to the atrocities of the Spanish Civil War, to which the Syrian Civil War has been likened. The inscription 'And babies?', visible in the work's three panels, cites a legendary anti-Vietnam War poster made by the Art Workers Coalition in 1969, which juxtaposed the brutal response of an American soldier when questioned about his role in the massacre of a group of Vietnamese women and children with an image of them left lying dead in the road.

At the centre of this painting is a reworking of *Saturn Devouring His Son* (1823) by artist Francisco Goya. Goya's work refers to the Greek myth of the Titan Cronus (romanized to Saturn in the title), who devoured his own children upon their birth for fear of being castrated by one of them as he had castrated his own father. The cycle was broken when their mother, Rhea, tricked Cronus by offering him a stone wrapped in swaddling cloth in place of their latest child, Zeus, who then survived to avenge his siblings. Here, Harrison replaces the headless child painted by Goya with a headless Wonder Woman, the superhero who has been considered a feminist icon since the 1940s. The painting also references the bombing of Aleppo in Syria and Guernica in Spain through depictions of houses in ruins and devastated women and children sourced from historic and contemporary war reportage. Harrison comments on the gendered forces of domination operating behind imperialist systems and their violent legacies, and suggests that it is a masculine tendency to repeat this destructive cycle of history.

The act of looking has always been both subject and strategy in Harrison's production. Some works combine delicately drawn or painted fragments of imagery sourced from pop culture and art history to create visual and verbal puns that turn the oppressive male gaze back on itself. Other works fuse household materials with texts and documents as incontrovertible evidence of male supremacy. All the works assert the feminist maxim that 'the personal is political'.

miguel amado & olivia heron.

bio

/ Margaret Harrison, Wakefield, England, 1940

Pioneer of British and European feminist art, Margaret Harrison questions notions of gender, identity, politics, class, violence and exploitation of women's labor and sexuality. Over her more than forty years working as an artist, Harrison has reported local and international cultural and political issues throughout a variety of media, including drawing, painting and installation. She uses art historical and popular iconography to reflect upon female, male and transgendered identity, often subverting with humor gender roles that the society has assigned.

She has had solo shows in institutions such as the New Museum in New York, the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern in England and Azkuna Centroa in Bilbao. She has participated in many group shows, including institutions such as Tate Modern and the Victoria & Albert Museum in London and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. Her works are included in collections of institutions such as Tate and the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, Kunthaus in Zurich and the University of California. She has won awards such as the Northern Art Prize in England.