
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.

Harrison paralleled this mode of activism in her practice, making drawings that used irony to challenge gendered stereotypes – as in, for instance, *Woman and Roses* (1971), which depicts a starlet in sexy lingerie reclining, legs akimbo, on a bed of roses. She replicated the sexist visual regimes of the time, which presented a vision of women informed by heterosexual male fantasy, then skewered this surface effect by subverting dominant patriarchal attitudes.

The most iconic of these drawings 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'.

If These Lips Could Only Speak (1971), for example, refers to a ballad in which a man laments the loss of his young wife, whose perfect image is captured in a painting. In the drawing, a woman dressed up in a feather boa, peek-a-boo bra and thigh-high boots lounges provocatively, cigarette in hand and legs audaciously open. Here, the sex object threatens to talk back.

Also notable is *I Caught Him in Park Lane* (1971), depicting a woman stretched out on a rug made from the skin of Hefner, whom she pins down with the heel of her kinky crocodile-skin boot. Twisting the sexist trope of woman as prey to be hunted and captured as trophy, the work also toys with the opposite stereotype of the sexually dangerous *femme fatale*.

High Speed Gas (1971), in which a woman stands in front of a gas fire wearing kinky underwear, is another example. Here, the discord between her provocative outfit and the domestic environment she occupies demonstrates the pressures women face to fulfil multiple, seemingly divergent roles: sex object, wife, mother. The statement scrawled across her body highlights the struggle to assert alternative understandings of womanhood to those inscribed through the mass media.

Harrison's output since the late 1990s has addressed new dialogues around gender fluidity and sexuality. For instance *The Fantasy Footballer* (1998) depicts a man in lingerie kicking a football, head thrown back in ecstasy, while *Ejaculator* (2007) depicts a female superhero with a look of disdain, holding at arm's length a handbag containing a miniature Superman, now relegated to the position of sexually incontinent lapdog. Both works question the differential idolisation of male and female celebrities and/or fictional characters, and demonstrate how such figures reproduce and support gender stereotypes.

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.

The Golden Phallusy (2010) depicts *Siren* (2008), artist Marc Quinn's solid-gold representation of fashion model Kate Moss contorted in a yoga pose, alongside a corresponding statue of Quinn with his blood portrait, *Self* (1991), as both head and offspring. The inscriptions on the pedestals compare the biographies – particularly focusing on education and privilege – of Quinn and Moss, highlighting the traditional conceptual split between male genius and female muse.

Allen Jones and the PTA (2010) depicts Dolly Parton – icon of self-constructed hyper-femininity – pointing and laughing at artist Allen Jones's controversial sculpture *Table* (1969), a topless female mannequin dressed in fetish gear, on all fours, supporting a sheet of glass on her back. The title of the drawing refers to a famous Parton song about a woman judged by her small-town community for her appearance and behaviour. Parton's incredulous look calls out hypocrisy in the parallel objectification and policing of women's bodies, and jabs at the fragility of the male ego.

In 1972 Harrison collaborated with artists Kay Hunt and Mary Kelly to investigate the working conditions of women in a factory in Bermondsey, London. The resulting work, *A Document on the Division of Labour in Industry 1973-75* (1973-75) combines photographs, documents and personal testimonies. This work marked Harrison's move towards a research-based modus operandi that integrates the material and political realities of women's lives into the field of art, with various subsequent works evidencing this material and stylistic transition.

From Rosa Luxemburg to Janis Joplin No. 2 (1977-92) centres on a succession of portraits of iconic women, from the socialist politician Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919) to the blues singer Janis Joplin (1943-1970). Harrison documents the violence or personal trauma many of them faced as a corollary of defining their own image in contradiction to societal expectations of female behaviour. The slogan 'Anonymous Was a Woman' – originating from Virginia Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929), which discusses the marginalisation of women through history and the concomitant social circumstances constraining their creativity – is stencilled across the top of the painting, highlighting women's continued struggle for freedom. The lower half includes photographs and text highlighting the gender imbalance in contemporary British and German politics, pointing to the structural roots of women's subjugated position in society, and building solidarity across contexts.

Craftwork (The Prostitution Piece) (1980) brings together diverse materials: samples of traditional handicrafts with painted and photocopied representations of them; fragments of text and quotations discussing the relationship between craft, industrial production and alienation; an audio interview with a representative from the English Collective of Prostitutes outlining the economic factors influencing women's entry into sex work and their struggle for working rights. Harrison considers sex work and craft work – both traditionally female forms of labour – in parallel to track the historical trajectory of the incorporation of female bodily ability into the industrial economy, and examines the corresponding effect on women's employment opportunities and self-identity.

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 violence 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 been both subject and strategy in Harrison's production since the early 1970s. 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 evidence of male supremacy. All the works assert the feminist maxim that 'the personal is political', making Harrison's practice as relevant and urgent today as it was when she began her career. Then, it was the context of the second wave feminism emerging in the Western world; now it is in the framework of resurfacing identity politics, particularly new movements challenging patriarchy, from demands for equal pay for women to the contestation of institutionalised sexual harassment.

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