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ART SY

Contemporary Female Artists Are Making Minimalism Political

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Lindsay Preston Zappas



Installation view of "Escape Attempts." Courtesy of Shulamit Nazarian, Los Angeles.

Minimalism emerged in New York in the 1960s as a reaction to the more expressive styles of its day. Artists involved, like Ellsworth Kelly, Kenneth Noland, Frank Stella, and Robert Ryman, privileged geometry and simplicity above all else. And while several women have been noted as participants in the movement (Anne Truitt, Agnes Martin among them), the minimalists that predominantly come to mind are almost exclusively male.

A new show of contemporary female artists at Shulamit Nazarian in L.A., titled "Escape Attempts," revisits Minimalism, though rather than attempt to revise the canon, it tips a hat to it, through the work of seven contemporary female artists.

Curated by Kathy Battista, director of contemporary art at Sotheby's Institute of Art, the show's title is drawn from a 1972 essay on Minimalism by esteemed art critic Lucy Lippard. "The word Minimal suggests a tabula rasa—or rather the failed attempt at a clean slate," Lippard wrote. "A utopian wish of the times that never came true but was important for the goals and desires it provoked." Artists featured in the show embody this idea in their work, adopting minimal visual language to address salient political and social issues of their time.

"[I'm looking] at how women artists, most of whom are younger women artists, respond to themes of minimal art in their work," Battista tells me as we walk through the show. "Not in the way of pure Minimalism, but in a way that injects gender and subjectivity into it." Battista, who is also a writer, curator, and scholar, has coined a new term to describe this type of work: Feminin/alism.

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Installation view of "Escape Attempts." Courtesy of Shulamit Nazarian, Los Angeles.

Feminin/alism, Battista continues, describes artists who "look to the past for inspiration, without being hindered by political compromise." These artists sample from art history in their work, though they do so with reverence. "Now originality is also how you cut and paste," Battista muses. "The digital isn't overt in this exhibition, but it's there as part of the upbringing of these artists."

"When I was studying [feminism], I felt that there were so many rules," she continues, pointing to examples of artists who were deemed anti-feminist for using nude bodies or makeup. "What I love about this generation is that it is much more complex. Even the idea of gender is more complex; it's such a fluid scale now."

A prime example of young artists taking this approach is Cindy Hinant, whose row of dark photographic prints recalls the monochrome color field paintings of Ryman or Wally Hedrick. Upon closer inspection, though, upside down female figures emerge. Hinant sources these images from "upskirt" paparazzi photographs taken of celebrities; the works are simply titled by the celebrity's first name, *Kim*, *Angelina*, *Emma*. Both homage and critique, the works compound minimalist principles with contemporary references to image culture, privacy rights, and sexualization of women in the media.



Sarah Meyohas, *Canvas Speculation*, 2015. © Sarah Meyohas. Courtesy of Shulamit Nazarian, Los Angeles.

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Virginia Overton, *Untitled (Waterfall)*, 2016, Shulamit Nazarian

Nearby, is the work of Sarah Meyohas—photographs taken using a two-way mirror. Meyohas is known for inventing the BitchCoin, a form of viable currency that one can buy stocks in, at the rate of one BitchCoin to every 25 square inches of Meyohas’s photographic prints. Meyohas takes on not only minimalism, but another notable patriarchal construction: capitalism.

Virginia Overton’s *Untitled (Waterfall)* (2016) responds to the minimalist cube, and specifically to Robert Morris’s 1961 work *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making*. The work is a found, cube-shaped trunk, with a decal of a woodsy waterfall scene, and is topped by a tissue box printed with a mountain landscape. Inside the trunk, a white noise machine hums. “It takes Robert Morris and makes it kitschy,” Battista notes.

“I was thinking of Morris’s *Anti Form* pieces of the ’60s,” Battista continues, gesturing to the square fiber works of Naama Tsabar. “Morris talked about the figurative incident disrupting minimalist form—Tsabar takes that minimal shape and then disrupts it with the body.” Tsabar’s large square fabric swaths have been injected with carbon fiber and outfitted with piano strings and guitar tuners. Viewers are welcome to pluck these sculptural instruments, or pound of their felted bodies, to produce a deep low bass. Tsabar put on a performance with these works at the show’s opening with a punkish intensity, embodying emotion and powerful female angst—a fitting expression in light of pressing concerns over women’s rights and equalities under the Trump administration.

“The sad thing is that if you asked me five years ago, I would have said that maybe we are post-feminist,” Battista confesses. “But now, with this new administration, we are not...and feminism is just as important,” she adds, acknowledging that we’re fighting the same battles that were at the heart of the Civil Rights and Women’s liberation movements of the ’60s.

Like many, Battista is eager to see what art will come out of this turbulent political moment. “I feel like it’s going to be maybe less overt than those wonderful artists of the late ’60s,” she says, though quickly adds, “but I like the way that this generation fights the battle in a much more subtle way.”

<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-contemporary-female-artists-making-minimalism-political>