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Are All-Women Shows Good or Bad for Art?

By HOLLAND COTTER MARCH 16, 2016

LOS ANGELES — Everyone — almost everyone — agrees. Artwise, Los Angeles is having a moment. Again. Or still. Numbers say so. Not long ago, galleries here numbered in the few dozens; now there are around 200 — huge, teensy, rich, shoestring — clumped across the city. Several of the largest are imports from the East Coast and abroad. And last week a contingent of out-of-town art power flew in for the debut of one of them, the largest so far, Hauser Wirth & Schimmel, in the downtown arts district.

The new space is declaratively, competitively immense. Housed in a revamped industrial complex — a flour mill built in incremental sections in the late 19th and early 20th centuries — it’s a commercial gallery on an institutional scale. At 113,000 square feet, with 24,000 devoted to gallery space, it’s bigger than either the Met Breuer or the New Museum in New York. And despite having Zurich roots, it comes with strong local credentials. It represents several major Southern California artists, and Paul Schimmel, the former chief curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art here, is a Hauser & Wirth partner and director of the new branch.

Mr. Schimmel could have gone for Instagrammable red carpet splash with his inaugural presentation. Instead, he has opted for intelligence, politics and history in a show called “Revolution in the Making: Abstract Sculpture by Women, 1947-2016.” He made a particularly smart choice in his co-curator, Jenni Sorkin, an art historian who worked on the 2007 exhibition “Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution,” one of the great history-writing shows of the century so far, and one that originated at the

Museum of Contemporary Art here.

Though celebratory in spirit, ‘ “Revolution” raises difficult questions, as “Wack!” did, one being whether all-women shows, unless driven by strategic necessity or shaped around an incisive theme, are a healthy idea. Do such roundups — several are scheduled at American museums in the year ahead — help correct the gender inequity of the art world, which is very real (look at auction figures and exhibition schedules), or perpetuate it? Do they give women a visibility that will lead to their full integration into the larger art system? Or do they position them forever as outsiders, separate but, in terms of rewards, unequal?

In an essay for the Hauser Wirth & Schimmel catalog, Ms. Sorkin advances a thematic justification for her show. She proposes to trace, through the work of 34 women of different generations, an alternative strand of art history, a history of hands-on, largely studio-produced abstract sculpture. This has gone against the grain of male-dictated art fashion for nearly 70 years, from the era of Abstract Expression in the 1950s, through Minimalism of the 1960s, and on to strains of Conceptualism that continue today.

Ms. Sorkin’s thesis remains loose and elusive. It doesn’t define a particular style, or a set of ideas about what it means to be a woman or an artist, or both. But it does define, as demonstrated in the work gathered here, the shared reality of an experimental impulse with materials and forms that has proved incalculably influential. And what a splendid show the demonstration of that reality makes.

The installation is a contributing factor, with its canny matching of art to architecture. A high point comes right at the start, in a skylight-covered double-story hall just inside the main entrance. The space once held mill offices and an employee bank. With its narrow height, it’s an ideal setting for a cluster of suspended, bulbous, basketlike sculptures from the 1950s and ’60s by the California-born Ruth Asawa, a self-described knitter-with-wire, whose art was long dismissed by the mainstream market as too crafts-like and is only beginning to find a wide audience now.

Her work is an ethereal backdrop for a brigade of stark-elegant bronze and carved wood totems — one is titled “Depression Woman” — by Louise Bourgeois, who had her first museum retrospective at 71. Nearby, six classic, craterlike Lee

Bontecou pieces line one wall; a Louise Nevelson assemblage, as dark and bulky as a church organ, fills another. In the foreground, in a place of honor, sit several glass-bejeweled metal tangles by Claire Falkenstein, who died in Venice, Calif., 20 years ago and may now finally be coming into her own.

There's tough, radical beauty at every turn ahead. Some of it is monumental: Magdalena Abakanowicz's 1973 "Wheel With Rope," shipped from Poland, looks like a prop for a titanic production of "Mother Courage." A wall piece by the Brazilian artist Lygia Pape you can barely see. Composed of light glinting off stretched gold thread, it's invisible until you're inches away.

The works tend to grow physically more encompassing as they approach the present. A 2014 sculptural installation by Abigail DeVille, called "Intersection," originated as a stage set and became, with some gouging and puncturing, a witty, right-on sendup of Richard Serra.

The Abakanowicz was borrowed from a museum; the Pape sculpture from a New York gallery that handles the artist's estate. At least one of the five Bontecous is from an unidentified private collection. "Intersection" came directly from Ms. DeVille. For some art world insiders, this mash-up of sources, public and private, is potentially a problem, particularly because some of the art, close to 20 percent of it, is available for purchase (including the DeVille). So we are seeing a "museum-caliber exhibition" (to quote gallery press material) that is also a sales show. That being the case, we have to wonder whether the accompanying scholarship has been enlisted, and shaped, to move select items, at enhanced value, on the market. Such maneuvers are increasingly common. Los Angeles certainly has no corner on them. That's the way the art world is, and it doesn't pay to be too fastidious a viewer. I'm just glad to learn new history whenever I can.

Which brings me to my problem with the show: It doesn't have enough new history. Its main argument about the influences of alternative art practices by women is sound, if broad, but almost all the artists chosen to illustrate it are familiar, some very well known. Surely an essential justification for an all-women show is to introduce new names, unseen work, understudied lives. I suspect that if this show, a centerpiece of the current Los Angeles moment, had been organized by Ms. Sorkin

alone, that's what would have happened.

And what's a "moment," anyway? Supposedly, a point of positive change, expansion, growth. Is that what's happening with art in Los Angeles? In terms of volume, sure. More galleries, more artists, more money, some sexy exhibitions. (A two-pronged Robert Mapplethorpe retrospective opens at the Getty Art Center and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art this weekend.) But isn't all of this really business as usual, just bigger, not fundamentally better? For some years now, we've seen the same kind of growth in New York, where money drains art of blood, and slow death by gentrification is far advanced.

The news media dotes on the idea of Los Angeles and New York as cultural rivals. But Los Angeles can do much better, look much higher, by taking New York as a cautionary example and paying close activist attention to itself. In the city's Boyle Heights neighborhood, adjacent to the downtown arts district, working-class Latinos, along with artists, are being pushed out as galleries move in. A few blocks from Hauser Wirth & Schimmel's new home is one of the largest encampments of homeless people I've ever seen in an American city. If even a fraction of the Los Angeles art world would seize the moment to try to come to grips with the realities of the impact, both dire and redeeming, of culture on urban life, this city would be much more than just the new art capital the media buzzes about. It would start to re-envision and redraw the American cultural map in a way that New York hasn't yet.

"Revolution in the Making: Abstract Sculpture by Women, 1947-2016" continues through Sept. 4 at Hauser Wirth & Schimmel in Los Angeles; hauserwirthschimmel.com.

A version of this review appears in print on March 17, 2016, on page C1 of the New York edition with the headline: Los Angeles Embraces a Feminist Moment.

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