

In The Margins

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INTERVIEWS

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Interview with MELISSA MEYER

Artist,
Interviewed by
M.G. Lord

MGL Do you feel that participating in a women's only show marginalizes your work?

MM Well, isn't the margins where the corrections are made?

MGL Would you say then that you work in opposition to the established system?

MM What is 'the established system'? I think it's a big secret, that some people know and some people don't. You can't find out--or maybe create your own system and your own secret. I had to figure out how to survive. I don't know if I work within the system or not.

MGL But you're represented by Holly Solomon, a well known New York dealer. How can you see yourself as an outsider?

MM I feel like I slipped in right before they closed the door in 1990. After the eighties, it got harder for artists. A lot of galleries closed. And Holly took a chance. When other dealers visited my studio, they'd come back six times and say 'When you have something new, give me a call.' Holly visited a couple of times, sent the people who worked for her, and said, 'We won't get rich, but we'll see what we can do.'

MGL Have you managed to support yourself through your art?

MM I've always been lucky with grants. Whatever money I've made I've put back into my supplies and studio time. I've made sacrifices, because I never really wanted a more complicated life. And I've been supported by Yaddo; I've been there seven times since 1974.

MGL Do you think the evaporation of public arts funding will hit women harder than men?

MM It's hard to say. In the late seventies, when there wasn't any money around, women artists were more visible. In 1980, when I was at the American Academy in Rome, I remember seeing a group photo of contemporary women artists on the cover of *Art News*. But by the mid-eighties, when the money came, women were less visible. By 1981, Neo-Expressionism had come through. I saw a catalogue for an English show called *The New Spirit in Painting*, and it was like twelve Germans and no women. But now that the money's gone, women are visible again. Because women's art is often less expensive to buy. Its purchase price is sometimes less than what it cost to make.

MGL Is there value to working--as the Guerilla Girls have ironically phrased it--without the 'pressure' of commercial success?

MM Both failure and success are distracting. Artists need time to waste--to let their thoughts play. And that costs money. Some people do

- MM (continued) very well in success and soar. Other people get paralyzed by it. It's hard to predict what will happen. Artists like Picasso and Matisse knew how to have staying power. They were businessmen, which is kind of a dirty secret. Last summer I read a book about Paul Klee, another favorite artist of mine. He presented himself as not being involved in his career, when he actually had a lot to do with it. But he wanted to create the myth that he didn't.
- MGL Is it harder for a woman to be openly ambitious?
- MM Well, somebody said that when you're running a race, if you don't keep looking ahead--if you look sideways at the competition--you lose momentum. But I'm embarrassed to say that I'm competitive. And then I feel embarrassed that I'm embarrassed.
- MGL After thirty years of feminism, shouldn't it be easier for women to compete?
- MM Thirty years of feminism? There have been advances and retreats; I'm not sure they add up to thirty years of advance.
- MGL How does your work relate to that of other women artists?
- MM I once read that Matisse said not to be too involved with your contemporaries, and I've been accused of only liking dead artists. I know what's going on, but try not to have it in my studio. Maybe I'm just so competitive that I can't allow it. It's hard: you have to be ambitious and competitive without being mean-spirited and ungenerous.
- MGL Yet you have a shelf in your studio with books about the artists you admire.
- MM And it's at my level, that shelf, so I can reach it. I don't have to stand on anything! (I'm five foot one and three-quarters.)
- MGL You own a lot of Joan Mitchell catalogues. Why do you admire her?
- MM Her work is so powerful. Georg Baselitz once said he thought Joan Mitchell was a man--like Joan Miro, Joan Mitchell. There are all these cliches about power. When I was a student and I made work that was big and powerful, they'd say, 'You painted like a man.'
- MGL Have you ever thought about camouflaging your gender by using a more androgynous name?
- MM Not really, no. But if all names were genderless, it would be interesting to see how people would react to art. When I was a student, I did an 'art test' to see if people could tell the gender of the artist from his or her painting. I'd show, say, two white paintings--one by Claude Monet and one by Berthe Morisot. And I'd ask 'Which was done by a man and which by a woman?' People would say the lighter one was done by a woman because 'lightness' was part of their idea of femininity. What my test really showed was how people use language--and the associations they have with attributes that have names.
- MGL Given that art history remains largely male, have you ever felt the need to seek out women role models?
- MM My women role models aren't necessarily visual artists. They include creative businesswomen like Coco Chanel, and writers like George Eliot and George Sand. They were women who did what they wanted to do, and didn't care whether society--or anybody--accepted it.

- MM One of the problems with women in the visual arts that is some of the so-called heroes are also victims. Frida Kahlo, Eva Hesse, Ana Mendieta and Moira Dryer died young and under unhappy circumstances. It's as if they had to meet a tragic end to achieve sainthood. At least Georgia O'Keefe managed to get credit for her achievements in her lifetime. But I admire her endurance more than her work.
- MGL Who are your artistic role models?
- MM I identify with young jazz musicians, who are working in an art form that was once avant-garde and now is traditional. I've studied Eastern art, and the Japanese do not discard any art form that ever gave them pleasure or satisfaction. But in this culture, everything is disposable. People act as if abstract art were over--seventy years old and it's finished. In reality, it's still a teenager. It's not even grown up yet.
- MGL Is this part of the all-my-favorite-artists-are-dead syndrome?
- MM In my life, I've had two recurring career dreams. One involved Willem deKooning, and we had a one-night stand. He apologized about being 'too old'--which meant, I think, Abstract Expressionism was 'too old.' And I told him 'That's all right, we'll do what we can.'
- The other dream was with Mick Jagger. He told me, 'When you have a record, you have to promote it and you have to really take care of it.' And when you have a painting career, you have to take care of it, too.
- MGL Would you call your work feminist?
- MM People have called my work 'female,' but my life is definitely feminist. I make my own money; I'm not dependent on anyone. I make the work I want to make--to satisfy myself. But I also think that we come from both male and female. And all the great artists were in touch with their masculine and feminine sides. The best art has both. If it doesn't, we don't always know what's wrong with it, but it could have something to do with that.

M.G. Lord writes on art and culture for The New York Times, The New Yorker, and Vogue. She is the author of Barbie: The Unauthorized Biography of a Real Doll.