

'There's a lot of grief to process': how the #MeToo movement gripped Art Basel Miami Beach

This year's collection of installations and exhibits showcased a variety of female artists using their work to speak out against rape culture

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Contrary to how Art Basel Miami Beach may appear on Instagram, the debaucherous art fair does not take place inside a bubble. The tumult of our political climate makes its way into the booths, where the art discloses underlying anxieties over the administration, white supremacy, and now more than ever, the traumas of the female body.

Artists left the booths to combat sexual assault out into the open. Carrying a riot shield that read "PUSSY GRABS BACK" in pink capital letters, Michele Pred led a Parade Against Patriarchy through the streets of South Beach. On a terrace at the Edition hotel, Tara Subkoff, who had come forward with her own Harvey Weinstein harassment story this year, staged Synaptic Fatigue/Dear in the Headlights, a

performance piece of 16 women, scored live with arias of paralysis and grief, reliving a singular memory of harassment or assault. For an hour, blinded by floodlights, they wept.

“There’s a lot of grief to process,” said actor Selma Blair, who performed in Subkoff’s work and also recently went public with her own story of sexual harassment. “This reckoning is coming with a lot of pain, but also the joy and hope that women are finally being heard.”

Other feminist issues manifested themselves in the conventional gallery spaces, like at the Bass Museum, where Mika Rottenberg’s absurd, all-female films illustrated the ills of late capitalism. There and throughout the fairs, hair served as the recurring symbol of female identity, beauty, and status: Rottenberg’s disembodied, bouncing ponytails, the cascading tresses of a wall-mounted Tanya Aguiñiga sculpture at Design Miami, or the blonde wig Kalup Linzy donned daily at the David Castillo booth at Art Basel, assuming his alter-ego Katonya and adding dimensions of queerness and color to our discourse on femininity.



FlucT: dystopic choreography. Photograph: Jamie McCarthy/Getty Images for Bombay Sapphire

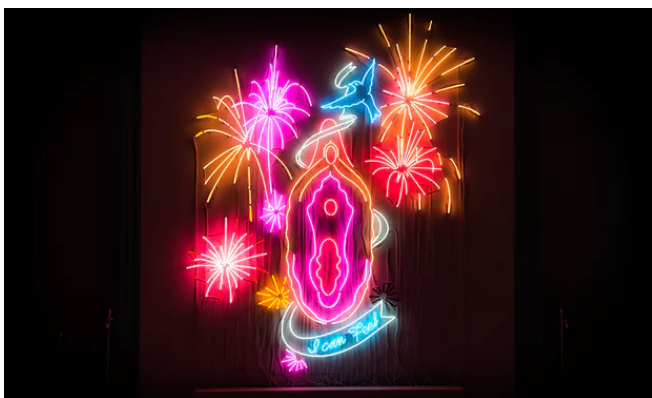
Other favorite works include FlucT’s dystopic choreography against rape culture, commissioned by Artsy Projects; Aneta Grzeszykowska’s photographs at Nada that recast beauty masks as torture devices; and a solo show at Nina Johnson Gallery by Katie Stout, an artist who, through the guise of being a furniture designer, reappropriates the domestic space. Her Lady Lamps brought to mind the caryatids that bear the weight of Greek antiquity, except for their deflection of the male gaze through their cartoonishly misshapen bodies, including the electrical cords emerging from their genitals.

Gallerists throughout the fairs have taken note that museums, pushed by shifts in popular culture and the political sphere, are now urgently filling the gaps of art history in terms of both racial and sexual representation. Consequently at Art Basel, a seminal generation of radical female artists including Judith Bernstein, Carolee Schneemann, Letícia Parente and Zilia Sánchez were finally enjoying their place in the spotlight, now 40-odd years into their respective careers. Between their work and Suzy Kellems Dominik’s I Can Feel, a pink neon vagina orgasming in a 12ft halo of blinking fireworks (installed in the Nautilus Hotel lobby with a built-in platform for

selfie-taking, no less), it seemed that feminism had finally gone completely mainstream.

“When Monika Sprüth opened her gallery in 1983, one of her main objectives was to give female artists equal representation to male artists, which back in those days was very unusual,” said Sprüth Magers senior director Andreas Gegner. At the gallery’s booth at the main fair, there were works by prominent feminists Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer, whose 1970s truism, Abuse of Power Comes as No Surprise, has just become the rallying cry against sexual abuse in the art world.

Today, however, only about 30% of the artists Sprüth Magers represents are female, making “those days” that Gegner mentioned not as distant as one would hope. Their ratio is on par with the industry average, according to Micol Hebron’s Gallery Tally, a data visualization project on the economics of inequality in the art world. (During Art Basel Miami Beach, it was shown at the new and very excellent feminist satellite exhibition, Fair.)



Suzy Kellems Dominik’s I Can Feel. Photograph: Madison McGaw/BFA

When confronted with these numbers, gallerists who take credit for championing female artists begin to backpedal. “There’s been a huge emphasis on female artists in the last two years, but it’s a hype,” said Gegner. “[Sprüth] represented female artists next to the male artists; it was not about gender, it was about talent. Any kind of movement tends to go over edge and then fade, so it shouldn’t be a movement. It should be a natural thing.”

Similarly at the fair Untitled, Eric Firestone posited his gallery as a platform to champion underdog artists marginalized from the cannon. His booth featured a 1960 painting by Miriam Schapiro, whom he praised for founding a feminist art program at CalArts when the art world “was” male-dominated. He does, however, believe there’s an excessive emphasis on the statistics of representation.

“Ultimately, if the work doesn’t hold up, I don’t care who you are - black, white, female, male, Latin - I just want to show the best possible work,” he said. “I believe that speaks to being a feminist: equality. It just happens that I have a pretty even balance.” (According to Firestone’s website, men on his roster actually outnumber women two to one.)

Behind these contradictory sentiments, there are several prevailing mythologies at play: that success is based purely on talent – not mentorship, investment, or visibility; that with enough good intentions, the gendered power imbalance of the status quo will magically dismantle itself; and that top female artists are on equal footing with their male peers. In reality, however, equality is like oxygen; the higher you go, the less there is. After the first three days of sales at Art Basel, the Everest of the art world, the most expensive reported work was a Bruce Nauman installation that went for \$9.5m. The most expensive work by a female artist was a \$1m piece by Yayoi Kusama, the only woman reported to break the million-dollar mark.



Katie Stout at the Nina Johnson Gallery. Photograph: Art Basel Miami

“Every year, the top sellers at the fair are men, and if you do see a woman on the list, it’s at one-tenth of the price,” said Hebron. As for gallery representation, “when galleries do all-women shows but don’t actually represent more women, they benefit from the cache without changing their operational model,” she added. “When it comes down to supporting careers and investing financially in women, they’re not doing the work.”

Gallerists will say that their rosters respond to the whims of the market, collectors, and institutional backing; curators will say their shows respond to gallerists; and collectors will say they’re buying what’s being shown to them. Amid the blame-shifting, neon vaginas, and premature self-congratulations, real change is going to require dedicated course correction, investment in female artists, and a commitment to the long game. And so the question remains: who’s going to do the work?

“I’m putting in the investment,” said Seattle gallerist Mariane Ibrahim. “I’m putting in the energy and the risk.” At Untitled, across the aisle from Eric Firestone’s booth, she presented collaged paintings by gender-fluid artist Clotilde Jimenez and portraits by Johannesburg-based painter Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi. At the last two Armory Shows, she said, she’s only shown the work of female African artists, perhaps one of the least represented groups in the art world.

“The first year, I sold out, and the second year, I won a prize,” Ibrahim said. “I’ve taken the risk, but I’ve been rewarded, because yes, there is a demand. There’s a gap between the demand and what’s on offer. I’ve seen so much of that attitude everywhere: ‘No, we don’t have the market.’ Then create the market. We need to be at the table starting the conversation.”