

Sign in

Support the Guardian

Fund independent journalism with \$5 per month

Support us →

News Opinion Sport Culture Lifestyle

Art

This article is more than 7 months old

Review

Women in Revolt! review – orgasms, punk protests and one long scream

Tate Britain, London

From women crying out in labour pain to a family made of meringue, this survey of feminist agit art is full of wit and collective anger. It couldn't be more timely

★★★★☆



Pure defiance ... 3 Minute Scream by Gina Birch. Photograph: Courtesy the artist, Gina Birch

Adrian Searle

Tue 7 Nov 2023 13.09 EST

A woman in labour wails and moans with effort, her body barely visible in her semi-darkened home, where she's giving birth. Surrounded by her family, and filmed by artist Robina Rose in 1977, it feels intrusive to look. Nearby, another woman just screams and screams and screams again, her face filling a big screen. Gina Birch is screaming for the brief length of a Super 8 film cartridge. Filmed in 1977, the same year that Birch formed the band The Raincoats with Ana da Silva, her 3 Minute Scream is pure defiance, ending with something like a laugh. Screaming, like childbirth, is exhausting work. The amplified sound of both these films in the second room of *Women in Revolt!* leaks between spaces. It echoes and leads you on even as you are confronted with the first

work in this compendious survey, Maureen Scott's 1970 painting in which a mother looks at us with a tired, silent stoicism as the child in her arms throws a full-on tantrum.

Throughout the show we keep coming back to women in extremis. These often parodic images and performances are women's attempts to claim agency over their own bodies, and how they are represented. Anne Bean is photographed, in a series of shots, shouting the word "mortality" while she apparently drowns in a bath. We watch artist Liz Rideal's face in a photo-booth as she records the moment of orgasm. This self-portrait, she said, "is about having control over my auto-portrait while in a state of lack of control". There is a low-budget, DIY feel to much of what's here. Coming from a period before the rise of the internet and social media, collectivity had to be found in person and via magazines, flyers, and ad hoc meetings. Music played a vital part. At once history lesson and archive (so many vitrines, so many magazine spreads and flyers, so many grainy talking head interviews and films shown on monitors, so many badges and slogans), you can't always tell the ephemera from the art. Often, they are the same.



📷 Linder, Untitled, 1976. Photograph: Seraphina Neville/Photo © Tate (Seraphina Neville)

Filled with intimacies and outrage, sizzling with the fractious energy of punk and the clamour of protests, with eruptions of laughter, cries and righteous anger, *Women in Revolt!* is as ructious as it is fascinating. Shocks and surprises await every turn. The exhibition takes account of feminist separatism, the Women's Liberation Front, Black feminism and feminism in the context of south east Asian groups in the UK. It staunchly refuses any stable idea of what feminism is, because there isn't one. At times, it is inevitably patchy. But in covering so many strands, it also refuses to be overly academic, polite or preachy.

Politics and social conditions are inextricably linked here, but the exhibition keeps bursting into life. Hang out at the Hacienda club in

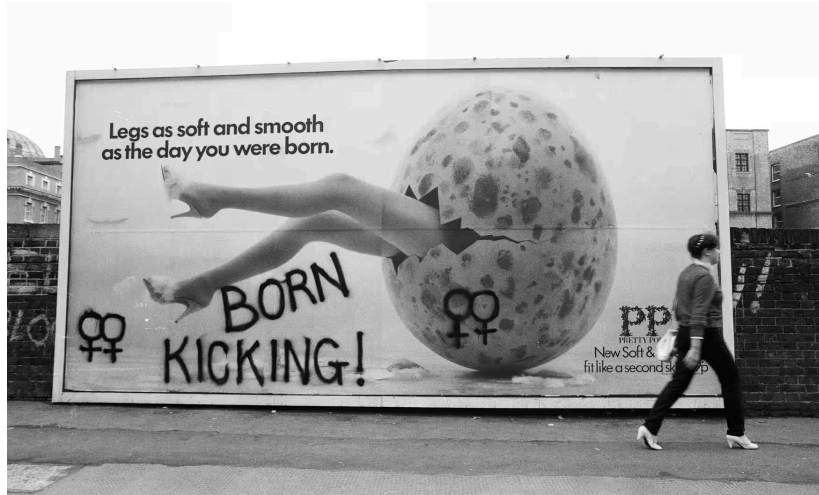
Manchester while the artist Linder performs in a meat dress in 1982.

Encounter a man in a rubber gimp suit, enjoying some quality leisure time with his dominatrix in a series of small black and white photographs. Watch the Neo-Naturists flash their painted naked bodies on Soho pavements and cavort in the water feature at the foot of Centre Point in London's West End.

Later, reality crashes in. In her recently remade 1985 portrait, Marlene Smith depicts Dorothy "Cherry" Groce. She appears to be opening her front door with a smile, the moment before being shot at her home in Brixton in 1985 during a police raid (she eventually died of her injuries in 2011.) On the wall behind her are the words "My mother opens the door at 7am. She is not bulletproof". This is one of several moments in the show that stop you with a jolt.

We also visit Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp (which ran for 19 years), and examine the gruelling lives and working conditions of women employed at a metal box factory in south London during the implementation of the equal pay act in the early 1970s. The exhibition's low light levels, the freestanding plywood screens, with their black metal sectional supports, the vitrines and the posters and the noticeboards may at times lend the show an air of some subterranean redoubt in a mid-century university. It may be

exhausting as well as exhaustive, and too much to take in on a single visit. But Women in Revolt! is never boring.



📷 Jill Posener, Born Kicking, London, 1983. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist

WACK: [Art](#) and the Feminist Revolution, which travelled from MOCA in Los Angeles in 2007, and featured around 120 artists from 21 countries, presented a litany of key art works and famous names. Women in Revolt!, Tate's first attempt at surveying feminist art with any sort of depth and seriousness, focusses more on context and collectivity, and on work often made in limited circumstances with little material or financial support. As much as anything, it is about foment and agitation and protest. There is a marked absence of what you might call labial romanticism. There is little of the Georgia O'Keeffe or Judy Chicago vibe here. There are no totemic vulvas.

Instead, we get videos of bulging bellies and Susan Hiller's photographic and text work Ten Months, charting the progress of her pregnancy. The facts of women's bodies, of their medicalisation and the rigors of pregnancy, childbirth and the work of motherhood and care, lend this show its British character. That, and the strong emphasis on subversive, biting humour. Instead of the Goddess or the Earth Mother, we get instructions for the use of a plastic speculum from Down There, an illustrated guide to self-exam, and informative posters by the See Red Women's Workshop. Motherhood here is viewed as less than redemptive. As Rachel Garfield writes in the catalogue about women and punk, expressions of sexuality are "a gritty face-off with reality". Perfection in women, as Garfield writes, is "a requirement of patriarchy". Little wonder we later meet Sutapa Biswas, who renders herself as a vengeful goddess Kali, wielding a blood-stained machete and wearing a necklace of severed white heads.

There is an insistence on real life here, and art that reflects material conditions, with all its difficulties and aspirations. This is evident even in the work of Jill Posener and her friends, who made graffiti adjustments to advertising billboards. A Fiat car advert claims "If it were a lady, it would get its bottom pinched", to which Posener added: "If this car were a lady she'd run you down". A bloke in denim for a Lee Cooper campaign is overwritten with "I'm a macho bore". Posener went on to produce two books of photos of her spray-can graffitied adverts, but their real power was in the shock you felt coming across her work on the street, with all its witty subversions. Posener may not have bought down capitalism, but her interventions made one feel a bit less subjugated by the forces of consumerism.

Sign up to Art Weekly

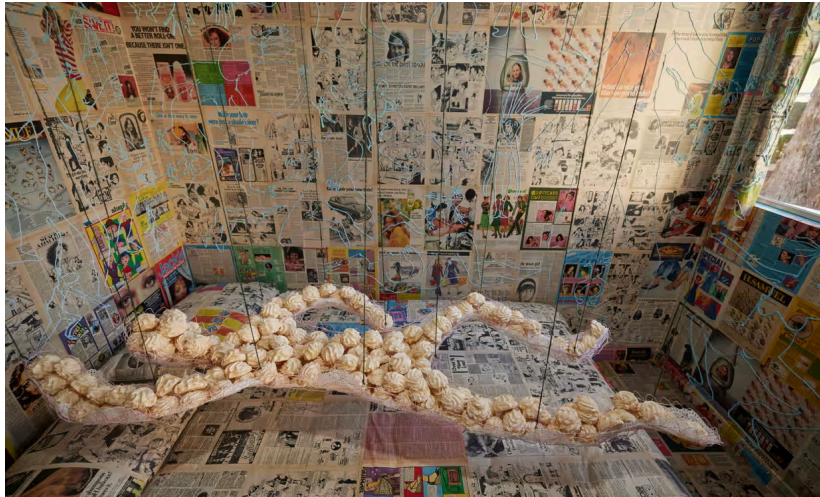
📧 Free weekly newsletter

Your weekly art world round-up, sketching out all the biggest stories, scandals and exhibitions

Enter your email address

Sign up

Privacy Notice: Newsletters may contain info about charities, online ads, and content funded by outside parties. For more information see our [Privacy Policy](#). We use Google reCaptcha to protect our website and the Google [Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms of Service](#) apply.



📍 An Edible Family in a Mobile Home by Bobby Baker. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

One thing that is inescapable in *Women in Revolt!* is the inequalities of everyday life. What makes this show so timely is that social conditions are as parlous now as 30, or even 50 years ago. Legislation may have moved on but inequalities in pay, access to higher education, including art school, and the housing crisis make life even more difficult than in the days of the squatting movement. Racial inequality is still rife.

The links between past and present are exemplified by Bobby Baker's reconstruction of her 1976 *An Edible Family in a Mobile Home*, which presents a lifesize family made of cake and meringues inhabiting the early 1960s prefab house where Baker first presented the work. It was where she lived. Prefabs were a temporary answer to the postwar housing crisis, and some are still occupied. As well as the edible figures, the house's floors, walls and ceiling are papered with tabloid pages of the period. It is as if the contents of the family's brains have spilled into their surroundings. "VIP's In Huge Vice Probe" shouts the *Daily Mirror*, which also celebrates our 1973 entry into Europe. The headlines and stories are frequently stupid, racist and sexist.

The Vietnam war rumbled on until 1975 and wars and climate emergency have led us even closer to the precipice. Life for many is arguably tougher than in the 1970s or 80s. Revolt and protest are as necessary now as before. This show is an interim report. Women are still in revolt.

Women in Revolt! Art and Activism in the UK 1970-1990 is at [Tate Britain](#) from 8 November until 7 April

You've read 8 articles in the last year

Article count [on](#)

I hope you appreciated this article. Before you move on, I wanted to ask if you would consider supporting the Guardian's journalism as we enter one of the most consequential news cycles of our lifetimes in 2024.

With the potential of another Trump presidency looming, there are countless angles to cover around this year's election - and we'll be there to shed light on each new development, with explainers, key takeaways and analysis of what it means for America, democracy and the world.

From Elon Musk to the Murdochs, a small number of billionaire owners have a powerful hold on so much of the information that reaches the public about what's happening in the world. The Guardian is different. We have no billionaire owner or shareholders to consider. Our journalism is produced to serve the public interest - not profit motives.

And we avoid the trap that befalls much US media: the tendency, born of a desire to please all sides, to engage in false equivalence in the name of neutrality. We always strive to be fair. But sometimes that means calling out the lies of powerful people and institutions - and making clear how misinformation and demagoguery can damage democracy.

From threats to election integrity, to the spiraling climate crisis, to complex foreign conflicts, our journalists contextualize, investigate and illuminate the critical stories of our time. As a global news organization with a robust US reporting staff, we're able to provide a fresh, outsider perspective - one so often missing in the American media bubble.

Around the world, readers can access the Guardian's paywall-free journalism because of our unique reader-supported model. That's because of people like you. Our readers keep us independent, beholden to no outside influence and accessible to everyone - whether they can afford to pay for news, or not.

If you can, please consider supporting us just once, or better yet, support us every month with a little more. Thank you.

Betsy Reed
Editor, Guardian US



One-time	Monthly	Annual
\$5 per month	\$13 per month	Other

Continue → **Remind me in July**

Related stories

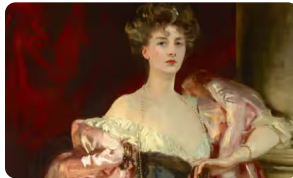
Now You See Us: Women Artists in Britain review - this changes everything
★★★★☆

14 May 2024 35



Sargent and Fashion review - tragicomic travesty is a frock horror
★★★★☆

20 Feb 2024 219



A colossal artistic joke - Flaming June at the Royal Academy review
★★★★☆

18 Feb 2024 43



More from Culture

Julia Louis-Dreyfus
Actor pushes back on Jerry Seinfeld's 'PC crap' comments

8h ago

Daniel Brühl on playing Karl Lagerfeld
He never lost touch with the pulse

14h ago

// After the Winnie-the-Pooh slasher, now there's a Mickey Mouse horror movie. This is not necessarily a bad thing

11h ago