

MENU

OVERDUE



A Woman's Place: 'Women in Revolt!' at the Tate

Opening image Claudette Johnson, 'Untitled (with wool and leather)', 1982.

Words Eloise Hallo

This November marks opening month for the Tate Britain's new 'Women in Revolt!' exhibition, and, as I'm certain I won't be the first to tell my reader, it's not one to miss. The cleverly curated collection spans the period 1970–1990, setting course – if not glaringly redundant to note – on feminist art and activism. It would be, perhaps, easier to mention what the exhibition neglects: from motherhood to misfit hood and the marginalised, quite unlike the Freidan feminism of the 60's, it has it all. However, such expansive celebration makes for difficult artistic categorising. The exhibition's gloriously widespread content nature does not lend itself to a brief recanting. As such, I've taken it fit to look at select works through two kinds of relationships women share and inhabit in both the artistic world and the world more widely, these being our relationship with space and physicality, and our relationships with one another.



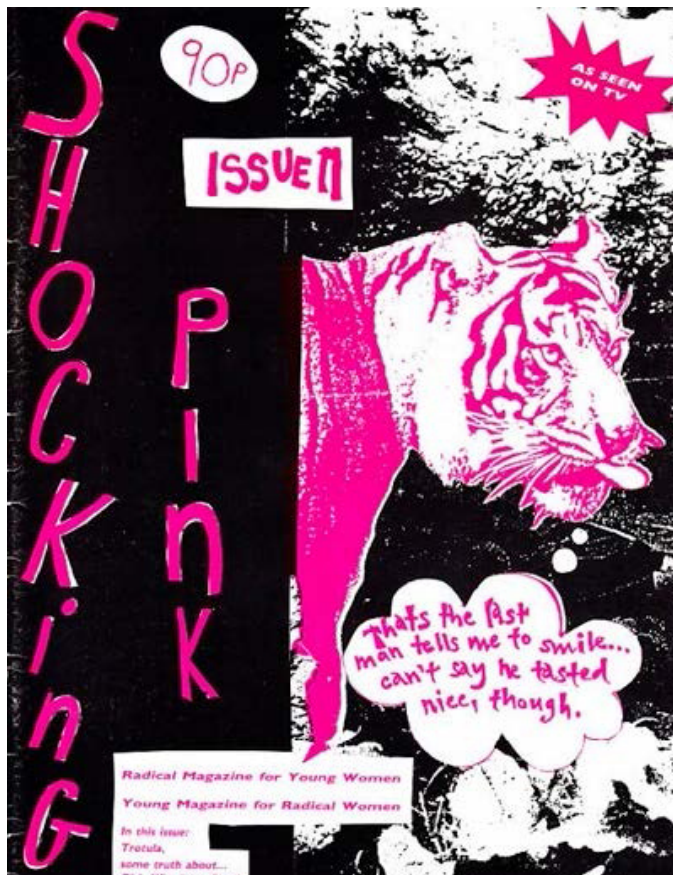
Anne Bean, 'Heat' – 1974 – 1977.



Hannah O'Shea, Still from 'A Visual Time Span' (A Visual Diary), 1975.

Femininity and art have long been tensely joined, the female muse – as I have suggested in other articles – was, *historically*, conceptually stagnant. Yet, in the century to which this exhibition belongs, itches began materialising around why exactly this need be the case. With feminism firmly founded and civil rights decidedly granted, female activists of the mid-20th century began to query what lingered in the artistic air that kept female depictions from the same level of dynamism as their male counterparts. Simply, why it was that masculinity in art could represent many things – power, war, sexuality, to name a few – when women represented little more than femininity itself. The problem, it turned out, was in the eye of the beholder. Artistic circles remained, largely, male-centric, figuring the female muse (despite all her modern affordances) as something still *merely* to behold. And so, contrary as ever – and thankfully so! – female artists taking a seat at the table in the latter turn of the century aimed to prove *their* form, and that of their muses, was indeed not static or *stuck*, but moveable, and teeming with possibilities of interpretation.

This is no truer than in the works of Anne Bean, who chronicles movement in films, performance art, and stills. In all, her female muses challenge the idea of being observed quietly. Similarly, in Hannah O'Shea's *A Visual Time-Span*, her model performs in animal markings, cut with film from women and gay rights demonstrations, adjoining the idea of social movement with that literal movement of her artistic muse, in so doing, asking that we reassess the more sinister rootings in the histories of both. In each example, and others, as marked by the Tate, female artists of the era worked to vanquish femininity and the female form from what the male gaze had long reduced it to. The tyrannous auteresses of the 70's had, by becoming the beholder themselves, destroyed the notion of being beheld: female art both for and by female artists. The mass exodus of such artists from appeal to male audiences was reiterated by the Punks of the following decade, as journeyed in the exhibition.



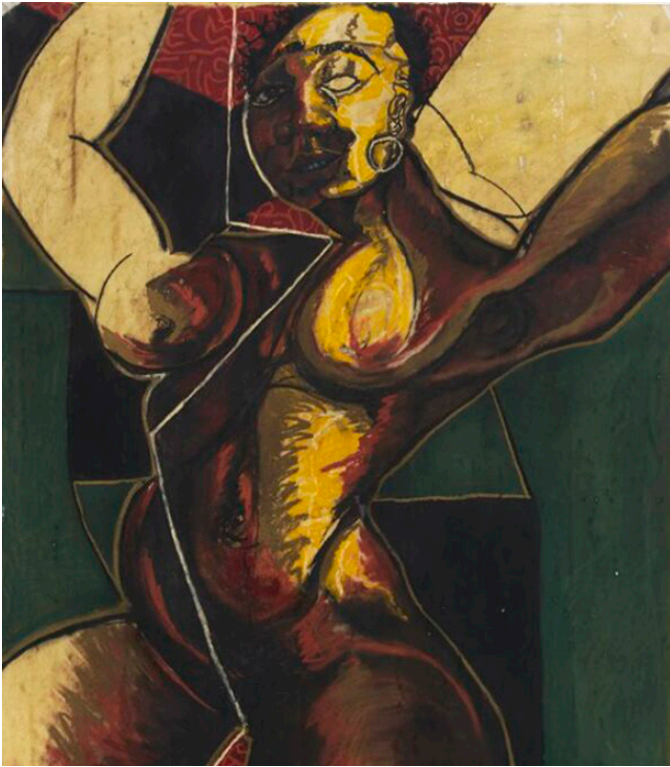
Shocking Pink Cover, (Issue 11).



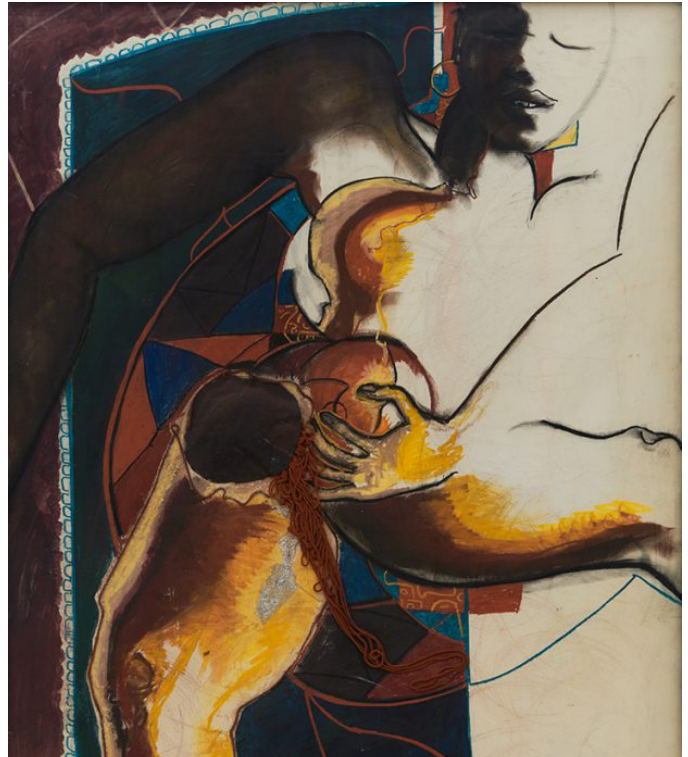
Shocking Pink Cartoon, (Issue 9).

Publications like *Shocking Pink* spread a distinctly feminist message to an increasingly anti-male demographic, which had – by the hand of earlier works (like Valerie Solanas' infamous *SCUM Manifesto*) – found safe-strongholds in some denominations of the counter-culture. Embracing feminist art and activism's new wings, however, meant readdressing their span; making room for those women who had been marginalised in the movement's first and second waves. Artists like Claudette Johnson, who 'Women in Revolt!' rightly heralds, acknowledged the neglect this new dynamism for white female muses and art imposed on those otherwise othered by both. Of *Untitled*, 1982 (below), she notes, "I am not interested in

portraiture or tradition. I'm interested in giving space to Blackwomen presence. A presence which has been distorted, hidden, and denied", in so doing, beckoning for this same freedom from depiction as stagnant, and reclaiming a resemblant outpost to paint her own proverbial image.



Claudette Johnson, 'Untitled (with wool and leather)', 1982.



Claudette Johnson, 'And I Have My Own Business In This Skin', 1982.

This new-found occupation of entirely concentric female art invited the realities of lived female experience to a space of artfulness from which it had been previously refused. Having mediated the feminine figuring as something newly capable and changeable, artists moved from celebrating their fresh expanse to celebrating those expressly female relationships with which they shared it. Motherhood and sisterhood, namely, became topics of artistic conversation, which the exhibition spotlights in works by Maureen Scott and Caroline Coon.



Maureen Scott 'Mother and Child at Breaking Point', 1970.



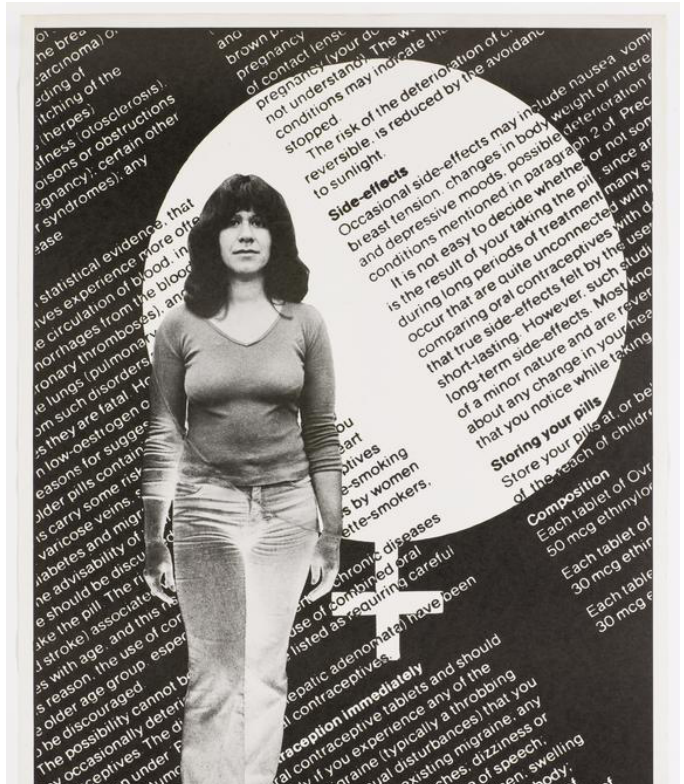
Caroline Coon, 'Between Parades', 1985.

In these pieces, and others selected by the Tate, the complexity and influence of both maternal and sororal relations are foregrounded, echoing the true notion that, to no small degree, some semblance of feminism involves what we mean to each other. The mother, as Coon's sex-workers alike, portray the obvious and enduring sentiment throughout the exhibition that there is beauty in the comradery of female experience and that, in the interests of feminism, it matters more what joins us, of which there is *always* ample. Such experience is explored down other avenues also. Penny Slinger satirises the patriarchal structuring inherent to marriage in 'Wedding Cake', and in Loraine Leeson's poster 'Women Beware of Man Made Medicine', she does the same of that particularly feminine posit to be medically ignored. Of it all, the curators' choice to situate *Birth Rites* (a 49-minute home birth video) and Gina Birch's *3-Minute Scream* such that their overlaying cries follow you through the gallery is perhaps – or at least in my opinion – the most apt reminder of the struggles to feminine predisposition.

'Women in Revolt!' is a veritable anthology of female fortitude, and it makes no mistake in declaring that fortitude a product of demanding artists and activists who pushed their way into occupying artistic space and celebrating sisterhood. Narrating that narrative, the exhibition proclaims 'a woman's place' as precisely anywhere she pleases.



Penny Slinger, 'Wedding Cake', 1973.



Loraine Leeson, 'Women Beware of Man Made Medicine', 1980.

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