

‘Women In Revolt!’

Art ★★★★★ Recommended



Gina Birch, still from Three Minute Scream, 1979. Courtesy the artist

Time Out says

★★★★★

If anger is an energy, there's enough here to power the Tate for decades. The gallery is buzzing with the violent ire and shrieking fury of second-wave feminism, because after all the freedom and liberation promised by the Swinging Sixties, British women in the 1970s had to deal with the reality: that not much had changed. And they were furious. This is an exhibition of 100 feminist artists and collectives kicking violently against the system.

It's a sprawling, complex mess of a show. It opens with photos of marches and Women's Liberation conferences, equal pay placards and protest posts, a world where society was being remade, and art was too. The most interesting early art here uses performance and photography. Penny Slinger presents herself as a cake, ready for male consumption, Anne Bean screams underwater, Hannah O'Shea covers herself in animal markings, Cosey Fanni Tutti cuts wound-like holes in her clothes, Helen Chadwick transforms herself into a kitchen. Performance and its documentation allowed these artists to centre themselves, to tell stories with their own bodies. They became their own zines, their own pamphlets and placards. Their bodies became weapons against sexism, domesticity, the burden

1970s anger became its own movement. Punk is everywhere here; it's in Linder's iconic photographic montages and meat-draped performance with her band Ludus, it's in The Raincoats' Gina Birch's incessant ear-piercing scream film, Delta 5's Chila Kumari Singh Burman's splodged prints of her naked body. All that anger was fertile creative ground.

“ This is art made on the margins, in an attempt to kick back at an unjust society ”

But anger just wasn't enough. The 1980s brought Thatcherite neoliberalism, nuclear threat and endless racism; things hadn't changed. So a different tack was needed, and the non-white artists in the show (largely centred on the Black Art movement) took a more traditional approach to art. Instead of rejecting art forms of the past like everyone else here, Claudette Johnson, Marlene Smith and Lubaina Himid embraced painting, appropriated it and reshaped it in their own image.

The show doesn't end on much of a high, and the whole thing is so long, dense and bitty that it works better as a book than an exhibition. But there are loads of gems, from Caroline Coon's stunning painting of sex workers to Bobby Baker's family made of cake, Jill Posener's hilarious anti-sexism graffiti and Lubaina Himid's scathing painting of a white man dangling a carrot in front of a Black woman. Vicious, searing, necessary stuff.

But don't come here looking for nice, easy art. This is not a pristine, consumable, blockbuster show of market-ready paintings or Insta-tastic installation. It's room after room of zines, protest posters, graffiti, photocopies, scrawled invective and social research. This is art made on the margins, in an attempt to kick back at an unjust society. It's not meant to look good on a millionaire's wall, it's meant to change the world. And it did.

Written by Eddy Frankel Tuesday 7 November 2023

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