

Saatchi Gallery's all-female exhibition could start to shift male gaze of the art world

Jonathan Jones

Champagne Life exhibition, featuring 14 female artists, seems to represent all the oppressed generations who never got the chance to pick up a paintbrush

Wednesday 6 January
2016 20.33 GMT

A white-haired woman looks unnervingly across a huge white space in the Saatchi Gallery from ashen eyes magnified by huge tortoiseshell-framed spectacles. What has she seen? What does she know? And why does her judgment seem so severe?

Ljubica is one of three colossal portraits of older women by Jelena Bulajić that feature in Champagne Life, an exhibition entirely by female artists that opens at the Saatchi next week. Bulajić is in her 20s, but the women she portrays bear the marks of time: they are “old women”, but here one of modern society’s most marginalised identities is painted into power. These faces seem to represent not just themselves but all the oppressed generations who never got the chance to pick up a paintbrush or sell an unmade bed at Christie’s.

For most of history, an exhibition like this would have been inconceivable. Artists were men. The rare women who became professional artists were regarded as freaks or patronised as mascots. The overwhelming absence of female artists until recent times has left a black hole in the history of art. It means the world is only seen through one eye, a male eye, in most of the world’s great art. Venus shivers in our museums, looked at but not looking.

No wonder Ljubica seems to be judging me. Even today, male critics find reasons not to give women the top rankings. The late Brian Sewell argued ludicrously that women cannot be great artists. He should have known the reality: that before modern times, painting was regulated by patriarchal guilds and apprenticeships that made it very difficult for women to learn the complex skills traditional art required. By contrast, you only need pen and paper to write, which is why there have been so many more great female writers in history than artists.

Is Charles Saatchi the man to put this right? His very public exposure in an act of violence towards his then wife Nigella Lawson in 2013 did not exactly leave him with a reputation as one of the great feminists of our time. Yet Champagne Life - the first exhibition of his gallery’s 30th year - left me with a strange sense of nostalgia. It’s reminiscent of the terrific shows he used to put on at the original Saatchi Gallery in Swiss Cottage, with a bold selection of artists - 14 women - getting plenty of space to show what they’re made of.

The first time I ever visited the Saatchi Gallery in the 1980s was to see Cindy Sherman's cinematic self-portraits. It was at the Saatchi that Sherman's provocative visual essays on identity and desire were first made famous in Britain. Yet three decades after she and others broke the ice, the waters of the art world are still gelid.

Just 4 of the top 50 auction prices paid in 2015 were for works of art by women, while even the most expensive painting ever sold at auction - a \$44m (£30m) work by Georgia O'Keeffe - looks distinctly cheap beside recent male record setters such as Picasso's *Women of Algiers* (£102.6m) and Modigliani's *Reclining Nude* (£113m). Just to add insult to injury, the Picasso and the Modigliani are both pictures of women with no clothes on.

As a feminist art historian once pointed out in an essay called *The MoMA's Hot Mamas*, not nearly as much has changed as might appear from the fame of a few artists such as Frida Kahlo, O'Keeffe, and Tracey Emin. That bed, remember, only fetched £2.2m, while some living male artists are making in the region of £40m these days.

The Saatchi Gallery has resorted to the artistic equivalent of a women-only shortlist in the face of overwhelming evidence that women find it harder to make a name in the art world and earn less money - even at the top. Even when they die famous, female artists are often belittled as minor talents overpromoted by feminists, as is often said of O'Keeffe, Kahlo and the 17th century visionary Artemisia Gentileschi.

Yet why does it matter? It is an art collector's distorted perspective, surely, to think the most pressing problems women face in the 21st century come down to the difference between making £4m and £40m in art auctions. The art market is so insane that using it as a measure of any kind of justice or injustice is faintly absurd.

The real reason women need to be represented properly in the art world is so the world can be fully represented in art: so all those centuries of one-eyed art come to an end. The artists in *Champagne Life* may not include the next Sherman but they put across a bold slice of real life. Stephanie Quayle's gloriously sloppy sculpture of a leonine male nude displaying his cock turns the tables on centuries of staring. Mequitta Ahuja's pictures of godlike women are joyous parodies of Gauguin's exotic fantasies. Maha Malluh's wall covered with 233 used cooking pots is an epic monument to everyday work. These are 14 women and 14 chances to put history right. Ljubica is watching and I can't get her eyes out of my head.

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