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Catherine Morris: Through Feminist Lenses

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What prepared you for the curatorial profession?

I became committed to studying art history when I was in high school. I grew up in Washington DC and I completed my undergraduate degree at the University of Maryland. I came in New York to do my Master's at Hunter College. I became an independent curator in the mid-1990s, right before the idea of an independent curator being a globetrotting high-powered voice in the Biennials and other international, thematic venues became popularized. I had a group of close friends in New York who I had known since I was an undergraduate; some were artists, others worked in art galleries and nonprofits and we matured in the art world together. Ingrid Schaffner and I worked together on the first exhibition I curated on feminism. Called *Gloria: Another Look at Feminist Art of the 1970s*, it was held at White Columns, the oldest nonprofit alternative space in New York City. The show attracted a lot of attention. During this same period in the early 2000s, the Sackler Center was under development at the Brooklyn Museum.

How does your particular curatorial vision fit within the Sackler Center?

Elizabeth Sackler, an activist and philanthropist, had acquired Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*, one of the iconic works of the second wave feminist movement, and was determined to find the appropriate home for it. The Sackler Center was conceptualized by her with Arnold Lehman, Director of the Brooklyn Museum. Founded in 2007, it is the only center devoted to feminist art within a larger historical institution. In 2009 I became Curator of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum. With the endowment of my position my title became Sackler Family Curator in 2013. I believe that two things are important to know about the Sackler Center. The first is that it was established, inspired, and built on the work of second wave of feminist artists, who came in age in the Sixties and Seventies. The second is that as part of the broader historical identity of the Brooklyn Museum, its purpose is to think at how art making, and the way we look at art today, has been impacted by feminism. Because the Sackler Center is located inside this historically focused museum, you can't look at anything else within its purview in the same way. I am interested in what that means, and this position allows me to think broadly, both historically and methodologically.

Basically, you can have exhibitions on feminist artists like Judy Chicago, but you can also have exhibitions on artists that are not necessarily feminists, like Judith Scott. How did you come across her work and decide to curate an exhibition?

I first saw Judith Scott's work a few years ago at an art fair in the booth of White Columns; the Director, Matthew Higgs, had discovered a place called Creative Growth, where Judith Scott worked. I saw this work and understood it as compelling contemporary sculpture, it has a clear



CATHERINE MORRIS

THROUGH FEMINIST LENSES

interview by LEDA CEMPELLIN
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dialogue with a lot of contemporary practices in fiber arts, in found objects, in abstraction. And then I learn Judith Scott's remarkable story of difference and disability. She was born in 1943 in Ohio with Down syndrome, largely deaf and mute. She has been institutionalized since she was six or seven and was considered completely uneducable. Eventually, in the mid-1980s her twin sister gained guardianship and brought Scott to Creative Growth, a non-profit organization founded in Oakland in the 1970s as a studio for artists with disabilities—this is an important distinction because it was not designed as a therapeutic environment. Months into her experience at Creative Growth Scott participated in a fiber workshop run by the artist Sylvia Seventy. Out of nowhere, she started making these objects and set out on a course of making art until she died eighteen years later. Our exhibition includes both the first and the last (incomplete) work Scott made, so it really is a comprehensive exhibition. The arc of Judith Scott's life follows the history of the disability rights movement, which emerged in the 1960s and whose practices, goals and methods were largely based on those of slightly earlier civil rights movements, including feminism. I found it an important curatorial challenge that Scott's incredible biography is not part of her art, rather what the artist invites us to talk about are formal issues of abstraction and materials. Knowing that Scott often incorporated found objects in her work, some of which are visible while others are not, people are curious about what's inside the pieces (they have been X-rayed, for instance), but I am not so interested in knowing what Scott hid from view. I am more interested in talking about what Scott made visible and discussing the inadequacy of terms such as insider and outsider within the artworld. As to her desire to hide things: the objects were clearly meaningful to her, but we will never know what they meant to her.

Why did you choose to display

most of the work horizontally and near to the floor? How about their placement?

Since the works have no clear orientation, we decided to show them, as closely as possible, to the way in which Scott would have worked on them. You could tell the way she would have sat them on the table at Creative Growth because they typically have flat bases. In some cases documentary photography exists. The works are all on a low platform, rather than at table level, because we wanted to give people the opportunity to see them more easily from different angles. We also want people who have different abilities to be able to see the work. At Creative Growth they kept records of the pieces: we know the year each work was made, so we set up the exhibit loosely chronologically, and then we just arranged the pieces aesthetically. There is only one piece hung on a wall. Judith didn't make pieces on the wall, but when you see this particular one horizontally, it's hard to understand it visually. Moreover, we have a picture of it installed vertically at Creative Growth during her lifetime, so it seemed appropriate in this case to hang it on the wall.

How do you see the development of your vision at the Sackler Center in the future?

I am thinking not only about individual shows, but about the way different shows talk to each other over time to develop an identity for the Sackler Center. In 2017, for the 10th anniversary of the Sackler Center, we are working at a project that will take into account this entire institution. In 2017 all the exhibitions from the different collections in the museum will be related to feminist methodology. This will be the first time that feminist lenses will be used to look at the entire Brooklyn Museum as an historical institution.