

Fighting Discrimination: The Underrepresentation of Women in the Visual Arts

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Sitting on a white couch in her white-walled studio on West Broadway in Tribeca, Angela Belag is dressed in a blue button-down shirt with black jeans and all-black sneakers. The studio is filled with giant canvases on the floor propped against the wall of colorful abstract art; brown craft paper is taped over the floor to protect the wood. Black streaks of paint are smeared over the countertops in the open loft. Natural light shines through the expansive windows. Belag has a strong personality: she's stubborn, outspoken and direct when she has something on her mind, and right now she has something on her mind. Belag gets a glass of water. She talks about the discrimination she's faced over the years as a female artist. She's eager to speak.

Belag, 68, a native New Yorker, has been painting for most of the last 40 years. Her work has been shown in such museums and galleries as The Jewish Museum in New York, Pera Museum in Turkey, Edward Thorp Gallery in New York, Sprengel Museum in Germany, and the DCKT Contemporary gallery in New York, which is now closed. But none of it has come easily.

"I've had collectors come to my studio and say that they don't want to be part of supporting a mid-career female artist being re-contextualized," said Belag. "They would do it for a man, though."

The auburn-haired woman is the third-generation artist in her family: Belag's great uncle was a professional artist known in Europe and Israel and her mother was also a painter, though not a professional one.

Belag has been interested in the arts since she was a child. She was exposed to many different art forms such as dance, music, and theater and visual arts. But she decided she wanted to be an artist after taking an art class at the Arts Student League of New York. She was 15.

“I was mesmerized,” said Belag. “I loved making something with my hands and I loved drawing. It took me over, it took me in.”

Today, Belag teaches painting and abstract painting at the School of Visual Arts on the lower east side of Manhattan one day a week. Every other day, she is in her studio working on new paintings. “The most important thing in my life is to come to my studio as often as I can and everything follows from that.”

Even as a visual arts student at the small liberal arts Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y., Belag says she faced misogyny and disrespect as a female artist. “In school I felt I had to really prove myself before I was accepted in ways that the men didn’t,” said Belag. “I fought for that and I was then accepted and that meant a lot to me. But I had to fight for it.”

What drove Belag to become better was her determination and anger to get respect and be seen as equal to the men.

“Being undervalued can sometimes make you mad enough to do something good and creative,” said Belag. “I used my anger in ways that can be creative and can make my work stronger.”

Belag is not alone in feeling underrepresented and discriminated against as a woman in the visual arts. Underrepresentation of female artists is a recurring issue that is still prevalent in the United States.

According to a New York Times article on Sept. 19, 2019, 11% of the works acquired in the top 26 American museums were created by women from 2008 to 2018. Based on this percentage only 29,247 works by female artists were acquired out of 260,470 total works in the

top 26 museums in the United States. There is even less representation for minority women artists. Just 3% of the work acquired were by African-American women. In one study reported by the Smithsonian, 85% of men were featured on 18 major U.S. museum online catalogues.

“I’ve done two books on women artists, two collaborative books on women artists in which we included statistics about representation of women artists at museums, art galleries and in publications,” said Helaine Posner, the chief curator and deputy director of curatorial affairs at Purchase College’s Neuberger Museum of Art. “The statistics are not good. Women have about 20% of the opportunities that men do to exhibit their work, even after all this time.”

Ironically, women are more likely to achieve a Fine Arts Bachelor or a Master’s degree than men. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, between 2014 and 2015, 6,726 women earned a Fine Arts Bachelor’s degree compared to men achieving 3,138. During the same time period, 873 women earned a Master’s in fine arts compared to 581 men. While females dominate enrollment at fine art programs in universities, women artists still face struggles in finding opportunities to show their work.

“When I was in school, there were probably more women in the art departments than there were men,” said Rachel Owens, an assistant professor of sculpture and board of study coordinator at Purchase College. “But what happens when you graduate, it’s the men who get the opportunities.”

Briana Owsiany knows that well. Owsiany graduated from Purchase College in May 2019 as a painting/drawing major and is struggling with finding opportunities in her field. Since graduating, she has struggled to find motivation to do her art. “After graduating I haven’t really looked into gallery shows,” said Owsiany. “I’ve been having a hard time finding a job though in

the arts field. There was one specific job interview that I went to for a set handler position at a gallery [Robert Mann Gallery]. The woman was really nice who was interviewing but I felt like she was surprised that I was a woman or a recent grad. I don't think she was expecting me to get the work done that needed to get done for the job." Owsiany has been working two part jobs at Old Navy and Historic Hudson Valley on their seasonal events. "I still want to be an artist and I know that's what I'm meant to do, but at the moment I haven't felt the inspiration or the motivation to create," said Owsiany.

Women studying art for their undergraduate degree face competition with finding work in their field and locating galleries to exhibit their work. "Over the past decades, we can see a real growth in art schools, people going to school getting a B.A., getting a B.F.A., getting an art education," said Helaine Posner. "There is a bigger pool of artists and more competition. There are also more museums and galleries, but the competition is quite stiff."

Even with art dealers who are women, there is still a significant disparity between the exhibition opportunities for female and male artists. Based on a 2017 analysis done by Artsy, an art magazine that promotes art news and is a platform for collecting art, women dealers still show more male art work than women throughout the United States. After studying 199 female-run and male-run galleries shown at the 16th edition of Art Basel in Miami Beach, male-run galleries were found to represent 75% of male artists and 25% female artists; female run-galleries showed 66% male artists and 34% female artists. The overall data shows a ratio of 72% of men represented and 28% of females represented, according to the Artsy analysis.

In an analysis of the 3,050 galleries in the United States according to the The Art Newspaper, a monthly print publication that covers events and issues in the visual art world,

economist Claire McAndrew found that as much as 10% of galleries have no female representation, while only 8% represent more women than men. Almost half of galleries (48%) represent 25% or fewer women artists.

Belag says her career growth has been challenged by obstacles for being a woman. She claims she has been consistently being paid less than a man when showing her work at a gallery and felt alone in the male-dominated industry. One strong example of misrepresentation that stands out for Belag was when she had her art exhibited in a Lower East Side Manhattan gallery (that she prefers to not reveal) in the early 2000's. The gallery was showing men's work originally before including female artists. At the time, the gallerist was only representing Belag and three other female artists when, according to Belag, some important art dealers came to visit.

At the end of the day, the director of the gallery informed Belag that her work would not be bought by the dealers. He explained that her work was priced at the lowest in the gallery by the dealers. Then he recounted why the dealers would not invest in her work. One dealer said that he did not want to invest in a middle-aged female artist when he could invest in a man's work. (Efforts to corroborate this story were complicated by the fact that Belag wouldn't reveal the name of the gallery.)

"I think this was more mean-spirited because you can still not buy something and keep your mouth shut and not make it so personal," said Belag.

Out of disgust, Belag left the studio and didn't come back; she wrote a three-page review, which Belag refused to share, of her experience on the gallery's review page. Despite this, she strived to continue her passion for creating art and to pursue her career as an artist.

## **Museums vs. Galleries**

Despite both museums showing a lack of representation of female artists, they both have different purposes for existing. According to the Neuberger's Helaine Posner, galleries are more commercial and care about selling the work, while museums exist to educate the public on different art genres and artists., "Museums are a bit more adventurous in showing the work of women artists, both in individual shows and thematic shows whereas galleries are less so because there's different missions," said Posner. "A museum's mission is largely to inform and educate the public. A gallery's a business and their responsibilities is to sell works of art. They are slower in responding because they are considering whether the work will sell and what price it will sell."

"You can pretty much equate wider representation with success, hence women are less represented or successful as a whole group," McAndrew said on a panel about female artists at the Talking Galleries symposium on Jan. 21, 2019, according to The Art Newspaper.

Not only are women unfairly underrepresented in museums and galleries, they also suffer from a significant gender wage gap. According to a report from the National Museum of Women in the Arts, 45.9 % of visual artists in the United States are women, but receive 74 cents for every dollar for their art made by a man in 2019. Women in the arts are found not to experience the motherhood penalty, a term developed by sociologists about working mothers experiencing systemic discrimination in pay after having children. But men in the arts, on the other hand, experience the marriage premium, which is an increase in pay for married men of roughly \$7,200 per year that neither women nor single men experience. Men working in the arts also receive an

income bump when they become fathers while women do not when they become mothers, based on information published by The Art Newspaper and the National Museum of Women in the Arts.

## **Rachel Owens**

The room was full of colorful sculptures at the Housatonic Museum of Art in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Long, dark colorful cones were hung from crystalized wood panels, as stained glass below reflected by the exuberant colors above. Other sculptures were incompatible physically. A second gallery showed a completely different mood. The contrasting sculptures with stools holding dark, ominous coal. A separate sculpture was a charcoal tower shaped as a top hat. Another sculpture was of a human shape, like a mermaid, while rainbow-colored seashells were molting off the figure. It was the opening night for Rachel Owens' exhibition, "The Hypogean Tip." The exhibition started as a project two years ago in Bridgeport about the historic homes of Mary and Eliza Freeman, who were unmarried women of color who bought their own homes in 1848. The wood panels from their homes were used in Owens' sculptures. The second gallery is about P.T. Barnum and how racism, industrialization, and capitalism changed the small community of what was originally called Little Liberia.

Owens is a successful multi-media sculptor who has exhibited in The X Krasnoyarsk Biennial in Rutgers University, the Franco Soffiantino Contemporary in Italy, the Austrian Cultural Forum in New York, and The Frist Museum in Tennessee. Her work has also been reviewed in publications such as, The New York Times, Art in America, Modern Painters, Flash Art and Triple Canopy Anthology. Since she was a child, Owen's was always interested in creating art. "I was always building things in my room, or building things in the backyard. I think I was



always pretty interested in the physical world,” she recalls. She got her undergraduate at the University of Kansas and her graduate degree at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Throughout her education and career, she says she has not faced much discrimination as a female artist and considers herself lucky for her rewarding career. However, she has seen the inequality between male and female artists with other female artists.

“You have this false idea where art is gonna be better than the rest of the world, it’s gonna be more fair or more progressive,” said Owens. “Sexism is deeply embedded in cultures, crosses economic levels, and everything.”

Owens frequently shows her work at the New York City contemporary art gallery, ZieherSmith, which mostly represent male artists. “The gallery, for instance, three-quarters of their artists are men,” said Owens. “Then they show three women.” The men that are represented in the gallery usually become more successful artists with more opportunities than the female artists that are represented there.

“Eddie Martinez [a painter and sculptor who is best known for creating humanoid figures and object forms in his art work using oil paint, spray paint, and studio debris], and I started showing at the ZieherSmith,” said Owens. “He’s now moved on to a bigger, fancier gallery. His work sells for hundreds of thousands of dollars. He’s a multi-millionaire, which is not my goal, but it would be nice to make a little bit more.”

### **The History of Female artists’ Underrepresentation**

Women have always been underrepresented in the arts since the sixteenth century. According to an article, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” published in ARTNews in 1971, by Linda Nochlin, an art history expert, historically female artists were not accepted ever as female painters. From the Renaissance era to the end of the 19th century, studying a nude model was essential to training young artists and the production of history painting, which was seen as the highest category of art at the time. Even at the end of the nineteenth century, female students were not admitted to life drawing at the Royal Academy of London. After women artists were accepted into the academy, they still could not see models naked, but would have to paint or draw them partially draped. At that time, the social roles of women were to be a wife and mother while the men achieved professional success. According to Nochlin’s article, “It is only by adopting, however covertly, the “masculine” attributes of single mindedness, concentration, tenaciousness and absorption in ideas and craftsmanship for their own sake, that women have succeeded, and continue to succeed, in the world of art.”” Women had to fight against social institutions on gender roles to be able to be successful artists.

Jane Kromm, a professor of art history at Purchase College is familiar with Nochlin’s work., “She [Nochlin] raised the issue about how much of a loss certain projects in the history of humanities are. One of those lost causes would be trying to fix it and trying to answer questions like, ‘why have there been no great women artists?’ Because you can’t win that argument. It’s set up against you. The standard of greatness is defined by what men can do that women by definition couldn’t.”

The dawn of the women’s rights movement led to women speaking up about equal representation in all sectors of the economy, including the arts. According to “The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970’s History and Impact,” a book by Judith K.

Brodsky, beginning in the nineteenth century, women artists began fighting for a voice in the art world by joining social movements. In the United States, women artists supporting each other at the Philadelphia Centennial of 1876 led to the first all-female exhibition in the Women's Pavilion and prompted another exhibition created by only women in the Women's building in the Chicago World's Colombian Exposition of 1893 based on "The Power of Feminist Art."

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, art schools in the United States showed a significant increase in female enrollment, but many still were far behind men in terms of recognition. New Deal Art programs such as the Works Progress Administration, were created in the 1930's and offered professional employment to female artists that was intended to be egalitarian. According to Women Arts, a website dedicated to increasing the visibility of women artists and fighting for gender parity, there were thousands of women artists working for the WPA, but there is not a complete list of them and they are lost to history.

Four women in the WPA stood out: Lucienne Bloch, a visual artist, Hallie Flanagan, an educator, Mary Kellogg Rice, an educator, and Dorothy West, a novelist and short story writer. Bloch was a photographer, muralist, sculptor who worked for the WPA's Federal Art Project from 1935 to 1939 and created the 1935 mural for the Women's House of Detention in New York City. Flanagan was the director of the Vassar Experimental Theatre when WPA head Harry Hopkins, FDR's close advisor, picked her to head the new Federal Theatre Project in 1935. Kellogg Rice was the art director of the WPA Milwaukee Handicraft Project from its creation in 1935 to 1942. When she was a senior at Milwaukee State Teachers College, her teacher Elsa Ulbricht asked her to help develop a WPA initiative for women lacking employable skills. Lastly, Dorothy West was known for winning a Boston Post fiction contest at 14, and in 1926 at age 19, she tied with Zora Neale Hurston for second place in a writing contest sponsored by Opportunity, the National Urban

League's journal. She is also famous for founding the journal *Challenge*, a magazine covering current affairs in economics.

In the pre-feminist 1950's and 1960's, only a few female artists were able to become known professionally, such as Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell, and Helen Frankenthaler, who gained recognition as second-generation Abstract Expressionists. Georgia O'Keeffe is another artist who was a professional in this time period, known for her work in Modernism, American Modernism, and Precisionism. Even with this visibility, the women still faced criticism and were seen as imitators of men's work. This time period was tough for female artists because they were especially discarded and unworthy in the visual art world after H.W. Janson, a professor of art history, wrote the iconic textbook, "History of Art," in 1962 without including a single female artist. Janson later explained his reasons: "I have not been able to find a woman artist who clearly belongs in a one-volume history of art."

Janson's original textbook is still used in art history departments today, including at Purchase College. Students in the introductory level of art history study Janson because, Kromm explains, "Students have to start with something more limited in terms of the artists included. It's hard to get initiated into the lower levels of a field without it, but we want everyone to be aware, the limitations, so that you know there's a bracket around the trace of these artists, which is an unfair bracket." However, writers have expanded Janson's original survey text; the latest edition used in Purchase's art history department includes more ethnic groups, women, and artists of color.

It took until the Feminist Art Movement of the 1970s for female artists to fight to be represented and have their voice heard in the art industry. According to an article from *Widewalls*, an online magazine, art database, and gallery network, "How Art Fought for Women's Rights,"

female artists formed their own galleries to promote their work and founded schools for feminist art. American feminist artist and art educator, Judy Chicago taught the first women's art class at Fresno State College [now California State University] in 1971. Chicago's work "Womanhouse," was initially a feminist art installation and performance space before becoming a feminist art exhibition and a feminist studio space that promoted women's art. She also created one of the most famous feminist installations in the art world called, "The Dinner Party," which was produced from 1974-1979. In that work, Chicago forms a triangular table with 39 plates that resembles a vagina as an homage to historical female figures.

The 1970's was also a time when female artists were fighting not only for recognition, but also respect. Nancy Bowen, an associate professor of sculpture at Purchase College, attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago where she earned her B.F.A. While earning her Bachelor's degree, Bowen had to prove her worth as an artist.

"I had to act like a guy," recalls Bowen. "I had to prove that I could carry a 100-pound bag of plaster on my shoulder. I know schools aren't like that anymore, but at the time it was very much like that."

Bowen said she was also discriminated against by a male professor while taking a critique class in her junior year. Originally Bowen's class was taught by a female professor; after her death in a car accident, she was replaced by a male professor from the fine arts faculty. When she was having her final work graded at the end of the term, Bowen was insulted just for being a woman.

“When we had our critiques, I remember he looked at what I was making and said ‘This looks like women’s work.’” said Bowen. “That meant to say that women’s work back then didn’t look good to him.”

Female professors in the fine arts programs also faced discrimination. While Bowen was in college, of the 11 professors in the fine arts faculty, only one was female. Once she graduated, there were a total of three female professors on the faculty.

Amy Finkbeiner, 52, who attended the Kansas City Art Institute between 1988 and 1991, said she also witnessed discrimination against a female art history professor.

“I remember in college there was a big protest because there was a woman teaching art history [art history professor] there who was much beloved by the students and she was up for tenure and she didn’t get it,” says Finkbeiner, who today is a multidisciplinary artist in New York. “Everyone was furious and statistics were being put out that there were no tenured women in several of the art departments.”

While she was earning her degree, Finkbeiner says, “The whole atmosphere was completely sexist and exclusionary. Looking back I don’t recall any non-white teachers in my own department and a lot of disappointment. Like, ‘wait this is supposed to be this radical, liberal environment, it’s the art world, and I feel like I’m in a frat house.’”

In the 1980’s the Guerilla Girls came into power to push the feminist art movement into the spotlight. The Guerilla Girls, an anonymous group of female activists, were known to fight against sexism, racism and discrimination in the visual arts. The group was founded in 1985 by seven women after viewing The Museum of Modern Art’s, “International Survey of Recent

Painting and Sculpture” 1984 exhibition in which only 13 out of 169 contemporary artists invited to display their work at the exhibition were women. The Guerilla Girls were significantly popular and controversial throughout the 1980’s and 1990’s while protesting against discrimination of women artists and artists of color in museums and galleries. The group created a poster, “Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?” that shows a reclining naked woman wearing a gorilla mask along with statistics. The statistics demonstrated that “less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art Sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female.”

Following this protest, the Museum of Modern Art in 2005 established the Modern Women’s Fund (MWF) to buy work from women artists in their collection and exhibitions. This occurred after an arts patron, Sarah Peter, approached the museum with a request to find a way to support women artists. The Feminist Art Project in 2006 was another initiative to bring recognition to feminist artists, which was founded by Maura Reilly, Judy Chicago, Arlene Raven, Dena Muller, the Director of New Initiatives at The New York Foundation of the Arts, Judith Brodsky, a curator and founder of The Brodsky Center, Ferris Olin, a feminist curator, librarian and educator, and Susan Fisher Sterling, the Director of the National Museum of Women in the Arts. The initiative was to jumpstart and promote feminist art exhibitions, events, education, and publications that is held every year at the annual conference for the College Art Association.

Female art recognition was steadily progressing at this point. “I was actually in graduate school at that time, working on my Ph.D,” said Tracy Fitzpatrick, the director of the Neuberger Museum of Art. “Certainly women artists were better recognized then than they had been previously, but I’d say there was still a lot of ground to cover in terms of recovery work and recognition.”

However, even with the significant progress of representation and visibility of women in the art world, there were setbacks that led to regression after 2010 according to the book, “Cultural Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating.” The 2013 Venice Biennale under Massimiliano Gioni only represented 16 percent of work made by female artists despite the step forward for female artists in the 2009 Venice Biennale, in which almost half of the artwork represented was done by women.

This led to media speculation that in September 2013, men were taking over the art world, along with reports that major museums in New York City were exhibiting solo exhibitions of male artists and no solo exhibitions of women. For example, Robert Indiana was represented at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Robert Motherwell was represented at the Guggenheim and Balthus at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Rene Magritte at the Museum of Modern Art. According to art critic Deborah Salomon from one of her talks on WNYC radio in “Cultural Activism,” “This is an art season that could make you think that the feminist movement had never happened.”

### **The level of female art underrepresentation today**

Katya Grokhovsky, 43, is a New York-based artist who was born in Ukraine and raised in Australia. She is also an independent curator, educator, and a founding artistic director of The Immigrant Artist Biennial, a multi-site project presenting work by over 40 U.S.-based immigrant artists with an aim to facilitate conversations of diverse work. Throughout her career she has created numerous exhibitions such as the Art in Odd Places Public Art Festival, the Westbeth



Gallery in New York City, the Lesley Heller Workspace in New York City, and the New York Art Residency and Studios (NARS) Foundation.

Grokhovsky left Ukraine when she was 15 just after the Berlin Wall came down. She had no choice but to leave since her parents were Soviet Russian refugees. The family moved to Australia. Grokhovsky's parents always supported her passion for the arts; they were liberal and contemporary, despite the majority of Ukraine being conservative.

“Countries like Ukraine don't actually believe all artists can be female, which I was told when I was little,” said Grokhovsky. “It's still a very traditional culture, it's still based on women being caregivers. There, it's very unregulated and it's pretty much who has the money-, -it's usually a rich man they show men and it's kinda a vicious cycle.”

While getting her undergraduate degree at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in Australia, Grokhovsky worked at a gallery, which she prefers to not reveal, at the age of 23. She found out that she was receiving lower wage than a male co-worker, who was also a friend. By chance she found out when he showed her his paycheck. “A guy was working with me, the same hours, the same work as students supporting ourselves, was getting 17 dollars an hour and I was getting paid 15,” said Grokhovsky. “That's very clear discrimination right there without any reason. That's only two dollars an hour, but then you realize that you're being pushed down. It's a clear couple of bucks, but a couple of bucks can become a couple of thousands.”

In July of 2019, Grokhovsky was contacted by a Russian curator who was preparing to research the best place to show an exhibition for the gallery she worked for in Moscow. Grokhovsky learned how unprogressive gender equality was in the art world when she learned

that the exhibition was only representing male artists. “Her words were ‘we’re not that progressive,” said Grokhovsky. “We don’t even think that. We think men are artists.””

They discussed the idea including more female artists into the exhibition before the curator went back to Russia to convince her superiors. Grokhovsky hasn’t heard back from her since.

## Source List

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