

Mary Moser's Friends, Caro Halford, The Cut

'Writing about art has traditionally been concerned with that which is interior to the frame, whereas feminism has focused primarily on what lies outside the frame of patriarchal logic, representation, history and justice – which is to say the lives of most women.' (1)

Feminists rooting around in the archive have been central to restaging the possibilities of art as a political and aesthetic practice. Their approach continues to be necessary as the institutional obstacles to female artists outlined in Linda Nochlin's germinal essay 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' are almost as obdurate now as when it was first published in 1971. Caro Halford's multi-layered work derives its urgency from the vanished and vanishing women artists of the 18th and 19th centuries. In sculpture, performance, collage, painting, and printmaking, Halford sets up an investigative dialogue, through text and materials, with these female pioneers, not only as a strategy to acknowledge and revive feminist forbears, but also to stage her own inventive, often absurd response to them. And in doing so, she engages in a testy and important intervention with British art institutions who at best, guard, and at worst, ignore this legacy.

The central figures of Halford's research and retrieval are the two 'Lady Academicians', Mary Moser, and Angelica Kauffman, who were the only two women founding members of the Royal Academy in 1768, and whose work is largely held captive in museological storage. Both were the most well-known female artists of the 18th century, excelling in still lifes and portraiture, with Angelica Kauffman also daring to take on historical painting, a genre that was considered the sole preserve of men.

Halford's practice circles these pioneers, trying to become them, learn from them, talk directly to them, as if history and its patriarchal omissions and elisions did not even exist. There's a bonkers boldness to this approach. In 'Mary Moser's Friends', 2019, a series of several works, Halford goes 'to meet' Mary Moser at the National Portrait Gallery. There, dressed in a version of a fringed, 18th century costume, she stands in front of George Romney's portrait of Mary Moser (1771) and enacts an enthralling monologue: 'Mary', she asks, 'did you manage to find the right colours to work with? I imagine that would have been difficult to source... Mary, I just bought some pigments at the Venice Biennale. Would you be able to show me how to mix them? ... 'And Mary,' she goes on, her dry, sincere tone staying just this side of irony and neediness as she hunts for advice, 'I'd like to know about your methodologies of painting and selling.' Finally, she says, with sweet brilliance, 'Talking to you, Mary, is like talking to a white wall.' Halford ends the piece with new evidence of what appears to be sexist exclusion by reading an email telling her that an Eighteenth-Century Summer School at the RA in which she was enrolled, about 18th century women painters, has been cancelled. The voice is insistent, nearly desperate and the effect hilarious and deeply poignant about the omnipresent male privileging of the art world.

Unlike the agit-prop tactics of the Guerrilla Girls, Halford tries to physically jump the barriers that rope off female artists, then and now, by posing beside a portrait of Kauffman at Tate Britain and taking photographs. Her email correspondence with the Tate to gain permission to do this becomes part of an audio piece called 'Angelica and I', 2019. Here Halford presents a giant dabber – the leather pad used in the etching process to press the ink into the lined plate – with a tube with a funnel at the end that acts as a listening device. The dabber, made of cream papier-mâché looks part timebomb with fuse and part breast or belly with umbilical cord. The influence of both the wackiness of Franz West and the embodied femininity of Eva Hesse is notable. Halford demonstrates a bold confidence with materials, plying gold leaf, silver foil, a cake cover, glitter, netting, foam, plaster, and hairpieces that often resemble slightly misshapen items hauled out of a dressing-up box full

of the faded glamour of another era. These materials work to underline the masquerade of femininity and the tragedy that painters are still judged by fixed codes of gender rather than by their talent.

In another sculpture, the deep red shawl in George Romney's portrait of Moser transforms into a large, red, bulbous form, a little like a deflated balloon with a puff of red netting emerging from the top, like frills from a neckline. But the colour also suggests a blood-red organ, a heart, once powerful, that is now somewhat forlorn. As Amy Sillman writes of the shapes that appear in her paintings: 'There is some kind of discomfort or complexity that makes the object troubled in a way. The object is endangered, its stability imperilled in some way; it's tipping over, or you can see through it. Or it is abject.' (2)

There's nothing abject about the glittery, semi-spherical hood called 'Are you enjoying the attention, now, Mary?' 2019. It is suspended from the ceiling like the carapace of some tropical gold and blue beetle until Halford puts her head inside it and continues to speak. Based on the shape of the lips of Louisa Greville, a 18th century printmaker, Halford struggles to inhabit a neglected body of work, a lineage that's been denied, that results in dramatic self-presentation as if to say, 'I'm here. This is my work. I am part of them. They are part of me.'

Halford's less interested in paying glorifying homage to these earlier artists than in leaning into the fine art tradition they upheld. She excels in small sculptural collages like 'Angelica II', 2019, in which the photocopied self-portrait of Kauffman is mounted on a sheet of copper plate, partially obscured by two flat disks of beige enamel paint. The near obliteration stands in accusation of the art institutions. 'The Ghost of Sylvia Gosse', 2019, is a sturdy, torso-like block wrapped in fabric and coiled by wire that trails to the ground, suggesting a story of amputation. Gosse was one of the 'missing lady-etchers' of the 19th century that Halford unearthed, who she imagines as a friend or follower of Moser, a hundred years later.

We are left with the echo of Halford's recorded voice saying, 'I feel my world is pressed against these disappearing women' and we too are pressed against the absence that Halford's work so beautifully exposes. Her practice acts like a glitch in the mainstream playback of art history: it disrupts and brings the discriminatory staging into plain sight with a wacky and emotive sculptural wit, and a revelatory, performative persistence.

- (1) Peggy Phelan, 'Survey' from *Art and Feminism*, eds Helena Reckitt, Peggy Phelan, Phaidon: London, 2001
- (2) Amy Sillman, cited by Helen Molesworth, *Amy Sillman, one lump or two* (Boston ICA, 2014), p.51, exhibition catalogue.

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Caro Halford lives and works in London and Suffolk; her research is on the vanishing women artists of the 18th and 19th century. Her research title is: '*Reimagining the women from the long eighteenth century in museums - 'Institutions & Obstacles'*' on the PhD programme at AUB. She received her MRes from the Royal College of Art in 2019 and MFA from Goldsmiths in 2016. Halford's work is in private and public collections at Fora Space, London and Schio Public Collection, Italy. Recent Performances have included '*Are you enjoying the Attention Now Mary?*' In 2021 Caro set up Mill Street Etching Studio in Suffolk and has been an Art & Design Lecturer in London since 2017.

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