

# Half the World Was Silent: *Women Forward, Part I* at the Williamsburg Art and Historical Center

Robert Zaller

The Williamsburg Art and Historical Center, on Brooklyn's Broadway, is located in a converted Kings County Savings Bank--and yes, Virginia, people did save dimes in the days before it became fashionable to vaporize trillions. The brainchild of the noted Japanese-American artist Yuko Nii, it's become a pivotal point in the revival of Williamsburg as a cultural center, with its three floors hosting lectures, performances, and exhibitions.

Ms. Nii has put together a multimedia celebration of Women's History Month that actually extends through May. The centerpiece is a two-part exhibition of women's art, the first part including work by women born before 1950, and the second, which opens April 25, featuring women born after midcentury.

Exhibitions of women's art is no longer a particularly novel idea, which is not to say it isn't a valid one. Women are still underrepresented in galleries and especially museums; the art world remains largely a male preserve. Anne D'Harnoncourt rose to the top in Philadelphia, but, *pace* Frida Kahlo, did relatively little to promote women's art.

A pertinent question arises here: should women's art *be* promoted as such, rather than the work of individual artists? And that raises a further question: is there, really, any such thing as women's art, as opposed to the work of particular artists? There is, to be sure, women's propaganda, serving one feminist agenda or another; a particularly unfortunate example was the exhibit a few years back at the Brooklyn Museum. In any case, self-ghettoization has never seemed to me a good way of advancing any cause.

Ms. Nii curated the present show herself. I'm happy to report that the artists chosen--some well known, like Judy Chicago and Janet Fish, others less so, and some entirely new to me--represent a high standard; individually, their work was all eminently worth visiting, from Liz Biddle's ceramics and reliefs to Donna Moran's silkscreens to Hildy Burns' books and cutouts. Some of the artists use consciously female motifs; some don't. One of the most impressive, the Palestinian Samia Halaby, eschews the idea of producing feminist art entirely: in the studio, she writes, "I am thought, not gender."

Is this, then, a show of women's art, rather than of art by some quite good painters, sculptors, and collagists who happen to be women? After viewing the exhibit on two different days, my answer is, both. If I'd encountered the same artists in a different setting and with their names removed, I'd have said of some of the work that it appeared to be by women, and of some that it was difficult to say. But the overall impression of Ms. Nii's ensemble was unmistakably feminine, and in the best sense--a certain sensibility, a certain sense of form and color, a certain way of taking the world that, until less than a century ago, was largely confined to samplers and quilts. And that sensibility is simply *enriching*--for me, a mode of perception that makes the world a more capacious and vibrant place.

What's painful to reflect is not only that the struggle for recognition is still uphill for many women, but that their vision is virtually absent from the first seventy centuries of civilized fine art. Looking at a show like *Women Forward*, one is grateful for what's there, but deeply struck by what's missing in the record, and forever silent.

Capsule: *Women Forward I*, the first of a two-part show of women artists at the Williamsburg Art and Historical Center in Brooklyn, poses the question of whether there is such a thing as women's art apart from the work of individuals who happen to be women. The answer, I think, is yes: and *vive la difference*. The exhibition runs through April 12; Part II, featuring artists born after 1950, will run from April 25 to May 31. 135 Broadway, Brooklyn. 718.486.6012; wahcenter@earthlink.net.