

# The shadow of an “ism”

## Portraying women’s art without a feminist lens

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Art created by women is often labelled “feminist art,” a description that carries particular, politicized connotations. The automatic association of “feminist art” with “female art” can be debilitatingly restrictive to the work of many women artists. Despite the fact that many women create art without specific political agendas, many people, myself included, look for feminist messages in work created by women. “Féminin Pluriel,” a new exhibit at Galerie Trois Points, displays the work of three women artists under an explicitly “non-feminist” banner. According to the gallery, “Féminin Pluriel” is an exhibition without a specifically “feminist point of view.” This emphasis, on the particularly “non-feminist” qualities, makes for a compelling viewing experience.

Unified in “Féminin Pluriel” by a common use of paper, the artists Elmyrna Bouchard, Natalie Reis, and Julie Voyce offer varied approaches to the medium. Reis uses paper as a surface to create new renderings of figures in art history and popular culture with acrylic paint on white backgrounds, while Voyce uses abstract collage to emulate the work of engravers such as Honoré Daumier or Giovanni Piranesi. Bouchard sews small rolls of paper onto canvas, creating intricate patterns and structures in the most abstract work of the three artists.

The artists’ individual styles and shared use of paper combine to offer a fresh view of artistic material and expression. Bouchard’s abstract organization of tiny paper rolls and embroidery thread allows for free and varied interpretations of her work. I overheard one woman saying that she imagined each scroll contained a message.

Reis’s acrylic renditions of figures in popular culture and art history were the least abstract work in the exhibit, offering an innovative take on traditional portraiture. Her subjects included traditional busts of Greco-Roman art historical figures, as well as a recreation of the mugshot of death row inmate Kenisha Berry entitled “Kenisha Berry with Headdress.” This piece, one of the more compelling in the exhibit, features a headdress of birds, hands, and a penis. According to Galerie Trois Points, this composition adds an “intriguing” element to the piece, rather than simply one of shock and awe.

All the work showed vibrant creative vision through the artists’ compositions and use of materials. Yet I found myself returning repeatedly to the works of Julie Voyce. Her innovative and engaging layered collages pushed the viewer to look deeper. Particularly outstanding was a piece that used lithograph and Kozuke paper. Titled “Library,” it incorporated different textures, colours, and shapes to create movement and dynamism.

“Féminin Pluriel” offers a unique viewing experience: the chance to see art done by women and publicized as such without a politically “feminist” element. The emphasis on the “female, not feminist” as a promotion strategy, however, raises numerous issues. On the one hand, it may give these artists a chance to show their art to an audience that might not normally see it. This designation also encourages the viewer to look for divergent messages in art made by women, rather than immediately connecting female art with feminism. It is important for women artists to be able to express themselves without the pressure of supporting an explicitly feminist agenda. However, it is also vital for these artists to be able to express feminist convictions without fear of losing part of their audience. “Féminin Pluriel” is an exhibit that examines the balance between political and non-political art by women, and offers an unexpected and imaginative consideration of what it means to be a contemporary woman artist.