



ART REVIEW: Gurls on Girls at RJD Gallery

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by James Croak

The first woman painter invited to join the great male artists of the Accademia della Arti del Disegno in Tuscany, circa 1650, spent her career repeatedly painting the decapitation story from the Old Testament Book of Judith. Woman painter Artemisia Gentileschi couldn't get enough of the female heroine chopping off the head of the invading male, Holofernes. According to legend she had seduced him, fed him wine, and then trotted home with his severed noggin.



"Judith Beheading Holofernes" by Artemisia Gentileschi.

The rage demonstrated by Gentileschi toward men in her Baroque paintings has not abated in many contemporary women artists, who routinely blame the male dominated art world for their lack of traction.

At the RJD Gallery in Sag Harbor we are lucky enough to have a good example of a new countercurrent to this seething anger, known as Women Painting Women www.womenpaintingwomen.blogspot.com, and indeed this is used as the title of the current show, which remains on view through November 10, 2014.

The sculptors of Pompeii were known for their penis-points-the-way signage, wherein they used images of the male member for directing foot traffic. The best way to have a woman painter go all Judith on you is to suggest that this world view no longer exists. It's a source of anger and an unresolvable subject among female artists.



Penis signage from Pompeii.

Fortunately, this endless harangue is not apparent in the recent Women Painting Women subculture that began with a popular blog of the same name by Diane Feissel, Alia El-Bermani, and Sadie

Jernigan Valeri. They initiated an interesting show theme of women doing portraits of other women or, just as often, self-portraits. These exhibits have appeared at many galleries around the country, including Principle Gallery in Charleston, S.C. and Customs House in Clarksville, TN. At least six other galleries will mount exhibits of Women Painting Women this season.

At the RJD Gallery, an annual contest seeks the best representations of this genre and in its third year the gallery's mailbox was stuffed with more than 250 entries. The 28 selected and curated winners reflect both the Baroque tastes of the gallery and the mood of these highly skilled women painters.

One dead-on painting in this show is *It's a Man's World* by Terry Strickland, a self-portrait for which she posed with a lock of her hair held as a moustache. Painted with simple colors, an uncluttered image and a clear idea, it is miles ahead of the illustration-culture that labors much of the other work. Strickland brings humor to her subject as well as superb craft.



"It's a Man's World" by Terry Strickland. Oil on canvas, 16 x 20 inches.

Over the past 400 years, painting has transitioned from providing a window into another world into something more opaque that, while giving a nod to the desire for a window, provides the viewer with a world of its own.

Relevant objects are in the here and now, as seen in the work of the included artist Katie O'Hagan. In her *Suspension*, a woman lies on her bed in the early light studying a spider hanging by a thread of silk above her, an ominous metaphor of what she imagines the day holds for her. Beautifully painted, a clear subject, and uncluttered; it's a good painting.



"Suspension" by Katie O'Hagan. Oil on linen, 36 x 42 inches.

At the other end of the quality meter in this large show featuring 28 women artists, we see young girls with tiny heads in costumes gazing obliquely while animals of the woods prance about them; these are book illustrations from maturation literature for young girls. This is not fine art.

Another special and involving painting is Mary Chiaramonte's *These Memories Too Are Bound to Die*. The overly melodramatic title aside, this realist painter doesn't need to show her ability to paint smooth skin but instead turns the subject away from the viewer. A woman staring at fading

stencil-printed wallpaper has been painted with subdued colors and enough mystery to ensure that this work will not tire but will continue to be an object of contemplation for a long time.

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"These Memories Too are Bound to Die" by Mary Chiaramonte. Acrylic on wood panel.

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BASIC FACTS: "Women Painting Women" is on view through November 10, 2014 at the RJD Gallery, 90 Main Street, Sag Harbor 11963. www.RJDgallery.com.

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