



ART REVIEW: “You Go Girl!” Celebrates Female Artists in Stories & Art from A Collection

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by Pat Rogers

There’s something both compelling and repelling about gender-central exhibitions. My internal warrior always wants to argue against the premise and the inclusion of art based on a genetic dice roll. The Heckscher Museum of Art quelled my conceptual fight when it presented its female-centric exhibition “You Go Girl! Celebrating Women Artists” with two companion exhibitions “Men at Work” and “Street Life: Private Moments/Public Record”. The companion shows were installed on one side of the museum with “You Go Girl!” installed across the foyer in the two galleries on the other side.

By presenting all three shows simultaneously, the museum was able to celebrate the talents of both genders while highlighting art made by women. All three shows presented art from the museum’s collection. [“You Go Girl!”](#) has its final day on April 3, 2016. [“Men at Work”](#) and [“Street Life: Private Moments/Public Record”](#) closed earlier this week.

Any concerns I may have harbored quickly dissipated after viewing “Street Life” and “Men at Work”. Instead of two warring camps, I found an unexpected introduction to “You Go Girl!” in the female artists and photographers in these companion exhibitions. “You Go Girl!” was an easy delight providing a subtly offered education through the individual experiences of being a female artist in a male-dominated field, especially during the times when males determined what was exhibited and who made the work. By pairing personal stories with art, “You Go Girl!” revealed why exhibitions featuring female only art can be a positive thing and a needed one.

Setting the educational substance aside for a moment, “You Go Girl!” presented a single artwork from nearly 50 artists with most based on Long Island. Not intended as a survey, all of the art in “You Go Girl!” is part of the museum’s permanent collection. The show includes work by Emma Stebbins (1815-1882), Georgia O’Keeffe (1887-1986), Esphry Slobodkina (1908-2002), Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney (1875-1942), Howardena Doreen Pindell, Hedda Sterne, Lillian Dodson, Evelyn Beatrice Longman (1874-1954), Berenice Abbott (1898-1991), Alice Morgan Wright (1881-1975) and others.



Emma Stebbins, Commerce, 1860. Heckscher Museum of Art; Gift of Phillip M. Lydig III. Courtesy Heckscher Museum of Art.

Artists with an East End connection include [Michelle Stuart](#), [Elaine de Kooning \(1920-1989\)](#), [Janet Culbertson](#), [Miriam Dougenis](#), [Audrey Flack](#), [Cornelia Foss](#), [Cynthia Knott](#), [Mary Nimmo Moran \(18942-1899\)](#), [Betty Parsons \(1900-1982\)](#), [Barbara Roux](#), [Miriam Schapiro \(1923-2015\)](#) and [Jane Wilson \(1924-2015\)](#).

“The Heckscher Museum of Art is fortunate to have a strong permanent collection including the work of many accomplished female artists, over 50 of whom are represented in this exhibition,” said Curator Lisa Chalif. “Many of these artists have lived or continue to live and work on Long Island. Berenice Abbott, Georgia O’Keeffe, Betty Parsons, Elaine de Kooning, and Jane Wilson are among the most notable artists included in the show and collection.”



Jane Wilson, *Midsummer Midnight*, 1993. Heckscher Museum of Art; Gift of Mr. John Jonas Gruen. Courtesy Heckscher Museum of Art.

Many of the female artists held by the Heckscher collection feature work made in a similar form and substance to their their male contemporaries, according to the museum. In this sense, “You Go, Girl” had the feel of an exhibition that gathered Long Island artists presenting art in conversation spanning time but with concentrations in landscape, abstraction and art inspired by the environment.

This artist disposition in the collection also explains why the show doesn’t present many works with feminism themes or those with a hard edge. Confrontation and challenges issued through art in the show can be found in works by early feminists Miriam Schapiro and [May Stevens](#) as well in art by Audrey Flack, [Howardena Doreen Pindell](#), and in a daring male nude, made before 1930, by [Alice Morgan Wright \(1881-1975\)](#). The edgiest art in the exhibition was May Steven’s *Big Daddy Paper Doll*, 1971, a serigraph on paper that addresses racism and the Vietnam War.



Lady Madonna by Audrey Flack. 1972. Lithograph on paper with gold leaf. 34 x 24 in. Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Samuel S. Mandel 1976.9.4. Courtesy Heckscher Museum of Art.

I was surprised and pleased to discover *Scene VIII*, 1979, by [Janet Culbertson](#). and Barbara Roux’s *Ecology: Glass*, 2002, as both works revealed a lesser known side to both artists and their shared

ecology activism art. A lovely work by [Michelle Stuart](#), *Voyage to the South Seas: Flora Australis*, 1989, represented a soft side of Stuart's environmental art. Already a fan of her work, I fell in love with [Lisa Breslow's](#) more traditional landscape, *Island Bay #2*, 2005.

Seeing work by painters Betty Parsons, Hedda Sterne, Elaine de Kooning, Cornelia Foss, Cynthia Knott and photographer Berenice Abbott was like running into old friends.



Betty Parsons, *Gulf of Mexico*, c. 1951. Heckscher Museum of Art; Gift of the Betty Parsons Foundation. Courtesy Heckscher Museum of Art.

While there were many artists whose work I was familiar with, "You Go Girl!" allowed for new introductions. This included [Anna Richards Brewster](#) (1870-1952) (*At Aswan on the Nile*, c. 1912) and a bronze sculpture by [Dorothy Dehner](#) (1901-1994) (*Landscape*, 1976). *Carageen II* by [Pauline Gore Emmert](#) was a favorite landscape in the exhibition. Other favorites included Jane Wilson's *Midsummer Midnight*, 1993, and *Goldenrod by the Sea, Belle Harbor, N.Y.*, 1904 by Emily Nichols Hatch (1871-1959). Each work possessed luminescence born from subtle colors with each painting manifesting a different quality that made the works stand out.



Pauline Gore Emmert, *Carageen II*, n.d. Heckscher Museum of Art; Gift of the Artist. Courtesy Heckscher Museum of Art.

I enjoyed Sue Contessa's *Blue Bamboo*, 2007, an acrylic painting on canvas with pencil that intrigued with close examination as well as seen from across the room.



Sue Contessa, *Blue Bamboo*, 2007. Heckscher Museum of Art; Gift of the Artist. Courtesy Heckscher Museum of Art.

Conceptual art was represented by *Blue Bulb*, 1974 by Margery Caggiano. I also enjoyed the grit of [Jane Hammond's](#) *Presto*, 1991.



Jane Hammond, Presto, 1991. Heckscher Museum of Art.
Courtesy Heckscher Museum of Art.

The shining jewel of “You Go Girl!” wasn’t found in the art only but in tandem with personal anecdotes on the panels located beside each work. Each experience was different and, taken with the others, painted a picture of what it must have been like creating art when it seemed like no one thought females should. Reading the wall text to discover the story required getting close to the storyteller and to the art itself: These personal accounts weren’t barked for an audience; instead they felt like confessions between friends.

For instance, artist [Rhoda Holmes Nicholls](#) (1854-1930) was divorced by her husband, Burr Nicholas, when her painting was accepted by the Paris Salon when his was not and she became the poster child against the downfall of female success. Women flocked to study with William Merritt Chase’s Shinnecock School because he would teach women in a time when other schools would not and encouraged them to paint. Mary Nimo Moran, wife of Thomas Moran, was the sole female member of England’s Royal Society of Paint-Etchers and gained entrance through family. She signed her works M.N. Moran to cloak her gender. Women’s suffrage activist Alice Morgan Wright was forbidden from sketching nudes at the Art Students League, as was typical of the time, and attended boxing and wrestling matches to get around the restriction.

For most, these struggles took place behind the scenes and as a matter of course. Many times their art doesn’t tell the artist’s story as it has one of its own. My experience of viewing the art through a 2016 lens, reading the historic stories and then looking back at the art and the exhibition as a whole helped illuminate the reasons why this museum and others around the county are now hosting female-only exhibitions. By gathering the experiences and presenting it alongside the art, female-only exhibitions have the opportunity to reveal art that didn’t make it through the lines of the gender divide but should have.

BASIC FACTS: “You Go Girl! Celebrating Women Artists” is exhibited December 5, 2015 to April 3, 2016 at the Heckscher Museum of Art, 2 Prime Avenue, Huntington, NY. The museum is open on Saturday and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission is half price as “Men at Work” is no longer on view. Normal admission is \$8. www.heckscher.org.

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