

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Sean O'Hagan, "PhotoEspaña 2013: the 1970s feminist avant garde," *The Guardian*, June 14, 2013

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Sean O'Hagan
On photography



PhotoEspaña 2013: the 1970s feminist avant garde

A group show in Madrid takes us back to the first wave of female photographers, when art and politics were partners in

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In her words ... Francesca Woodman's *Self Portrait Talking to Vince*, (1975-78), on show at PHotoespaña 2013. Photograph: Sammlung Verbund, Vienna

My highlight of [PhotoEspaña](#), which opened in [Madrid](#) last week, was easily the group show, [Woman: The Feminist Avant Garde from the 1970s](#). It's an arresting selection of [photography](#) and video-based work by pioneering feminist artists from the [Samlung Verbund](#) collection in Vienna, including [Suzanne Lacey](#), [Renate Bertlmann](#), [Birgit Jürgenssen](#) and [Martha Rosler](#). In its provocation and mischief, it makes you wonder what has happened to radical political art in the years since.

I walked around the exhibition at [Círculo de Belles Artes](#) with the curator, [Gabriele Schor](#), and the veteran British feminist artist-photographer [Alexis Hunter](#), who has three pieces in the show. In one, *Identity Crisis* (1974), she presents a line of photographic portraits of her younger self, all but one taken by acquaintances who were given free rein to express how they perceived her. They range from the reflective to the glamorous, while the exception – her own glowering self-portrait – leaps out at the viewer as a more dark and feral expression of the self. Another work by Hunter consists of a series of photographs of a naked man in which his erection is being blotted out with an overlay of a woman's ink-stained hand. It is loaded with meaning, both sensual and political.

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I was taken, too, with Austrian artist Renate Bertlmann's darkly surrealist series of photographs, *Pregnant Bride in a Wheelchair*, which relates to a performance piece of the same name from 1978. These staged photographs of herself in strange doll-like costumes are often blurred to capture unsteady movement, and have a slightly unhinged energy. Bertlmann also photographed herself in various suggestive poses in a slip and leather boots, with a strange fright-mask and headgear furnished from a swimming cap through which plastic teats protrude. One image of her holding the mask between her legs is a prescient counterpoint to Tracey Emin's photograph of herself, in which she clutches a pile of banknotes and coins to her crotch. Bertlmann's work delves deep into the female psyche, while merging the erotic and the ominous to suggest how the female body has been fetishised.

Another Austrian artist, the late Birgit Jürgenssen, also works with entrenched stereotypes of women in a series of photographs of herself wearing a 3D apron in the shape of a cooker. Another image shows her neatly dressed and made up, pressing her face against a glass wall – the camera lens? – so that her cheek leaves a mark and her breath condenses on the surface. The title is *I Want Out of Here*. Jürgenssen had a way with words as well as images. "Women and irony is still a taboo theme, as is women and humour," she once said. "The price for this is, to a large extent, not being taken seriously."

There is seriousness aplenty here, though, not least in the photographs and video recordings by US artists Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz of a performance they staged in LA in 1977. Entitled *In Mourning and in Rage*, it was a response to the killings of 10 women by the so-called "Hillside Strangler" and the often sensational media coverage of the same. For the performance-cum-protest, the artists organised a motorcade of 60 women that followed a hearse to the LA City Hall, from which 10 very tall women emerged. They were draped in black robes that covered their faces and most of their bodies. Under a banner that read *In Memory of Our Sisters, Women Fight Back*, the women walked to a microphone one by one to read their statements of mourning and rage for the murdered women. Part ritual, part political protest, the video and stills of the action still have a strange power that is utterly singular.

There are early photographic works from [Cindy Sherman](#) in the show, too, as well as a stop-start video, *Doll Clothes*, all created when she was still a student in Buffalo in the mid 70s. And it is interesting to see [Francesca Woodman's](#) eerily beautiful photographs of herself in the context of the feminist avant garde. Her use of ghostly blur and movement, old and empty interiors, and recurring props – mirrors, flowers, fabric – lend her images a poetic undertow.

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As curator, Gabriele Schor pointed out many of the artists "were relating to each other even if they were unaware of each other". Their embrace of photography helped them escape and subvert the long shadow cast by the male-dominated history of painting. Still a relatively new medium in comparison, photography lent itself to all manner of political and artistic provocation; but it is the way in which the politics informed the art and the art informed the politics, without one diminishing or compromising the other, that is most evident here. A vivid glimpse, then, of a wilder, braver, freer time before the market sucked the radical politics out of art. It already seems like an eternity ago.