

Women's art: The awakening force

by Alice G. Guillermo

For women's art, it is the season of awakening, in preparation for the flourishing to come, when women's art will take its place as a new force in our environment. The exhibit of a group of women artists in the Philippines, *Kababaihan Para sa Sining at Bagong Sibol na Kamalayan (KASIBULAN)*, is a significant start towards this awakening.

Women's art takes various manifestations reflective of different concerns and orientation. It can, in fact, be divided into several categories.

First, there is women's art in the media traditionally associated with women, such as fiber art, including handwoven textiles, tapestries, even embroidery. These may either be traditional work done by women of the cultural communities or contemporary work done in these media with new designs, techniques, and contents. While it is true that textiles and fiber art, in general, were hitherto peripheral and outside the canons of art mainly because of male-dominated aesthetics, in recent times, with increasingly democratic and

feminist values in art, these art forms have been reevaluated and given their due importance.

Then there are art works by women but which lie outside feminist concerns. These works contribute to the artistic mainstream and may indeed win recognition. They are based, however, on the illusory premise of a politically neutral ground in which gender tensions do not exist and men and women freely compete in an open situation. Feminist consciousness does not enter here, as there is an absence of a critique of the prevail-



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ing patriarchal ideology which has consistently given more value, with its attendant opportunities and rewards, on the work of male artists and has correspondingly perpetuated social limitations for women artists.

These are likewise paintings by women foregoing feminine, though not feminist concerns. Often, their subjects are

women portraits or genre of women in daily life.

More importantly, they make use of traditional symbols and signs, referring to women's roles as wife and mother and the central events of marriage and childbirth. Some of these paintings reinforce the traditional roles of women by proffering stereotyped images in a closed universe. As such,

these roles are represented as natural and "in the order of things" rather than cultural and socially determined in a confusion of the natural and the cultural that calls for a demystifying process. However, in a feminist context, these roles are not rejected but are redefined and transformed in liberative terms. Nurturance, which includes mothering and childrearing, becomes a positive value through which woman voluntarily and in her own conditions participates in the human and social projects. Women's art which reflects this transformation moves from the feminine and biological to the feminist and sociopolitical.

Likewise, there is art by women which celebrate women. Paintings in this mode are done in a romantic idiom replete with flowers and nature. And their images primarily bring out ideals of beauty, often storybook ideals of beauty, calling to mind the slender and graceful heroines of fairy tales, such as Beauty and the Beast. Art Nouveau with its flowing curvilinear lines, its organic motifs, lends itself eminently to this mode. Paintings celebrate femininity in a kind of

idealized essence derived largely from Western fantasies. Woman is decontextualized and abstracted from her status in the real world as peasant, worker, or middle class professional and becomes Woman with capital W, an eternal and universalizing idea bearing the totalizing impulse of the dominant occidental models. So that while woman is indeed celebrated, she is at the same time turned into a creature myth, ideal and inaccessible, ultimately contributing to the mystification of woman. In this context, she occupies a realm apart, and at worst becomes a decorative image or a significant cut off from its referent in the real world.

Then there are the paintings by women of women subjects which shows a heightened woman's consciousness of themselves. The crux here is that the representation of woman goes from external appearances into a psychological probing of consciousness. There is the important realization that woman in the past had usually been represented as objects, especially in relation to men in position on subjection to male dominance.

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Emphasis has been placed on her external appearance, her beauty, grace, charm, etc., these traditional valuations which have been part of the packaging of women in art as consumer objects to answer male needs. For the feminist artist, it becomes

the question of how to represent women as Subject, self-reflective and self-determining, as well as an active and positive presence in the real world.

Along this line, there are paintings which espouse feminist issues, such as those which

have to do with the changing self-image, values, education, and the general projects of women's liberation. To be sure, these are not programmatic in tone, but have a conceptual complexity and refinement that belongs to a real work of art. Here, satire may come in, and in general, the protest against patriarchy may take the form of an artistic critique, subtle or sharp and biting, possibly in a strong expressionist vein. There are artists who may consistently focus on issues specific to women, but there are also a number who view women's issues as inextricably bound with larger social issues as woman actively engages in the process of finding her rightful place in society.

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