

ALEXANDRE

Gender Gets a Boost: Women Artists on Top

By [Mario Naves](#) · 08/25/03 12:00am

Walking through Challenging Tradition: Women of the Academy, 1826-2003, an exhibition on display at the National Academy of Design, I was reminded of a conversation with the artist Elizabeth Murray that I heard on a radio talk show about eight years ago. The occasion for the interview was an exhibition Ms. Murray had organized for the Museum of Modern Art as part of the "Artist's Choice" series. Aiming to "weave together a sense of the genuine and profound contribution women's work has made to the art of our time," she chose roughly 100 pieces by women artists, all culled from MoMA's permanent collection. The moderator, having glanced on the woman-centric theme, commented that Ms. Murray must have had an easy time curating it. After all, he caustically intoned, she didn't have to worry about quality in selecting the pieces.

To this day, I don't know if the statement was a sly dig at prevailing art-world orthodoxy. I certainly

taken off-guard, as if it had never occurred to her that politics, however well-intentioned, could hijack the aesthetic. The interview never recovered from the impasse. Luckily for Ms. Murray, whoever initially chose the pieces for MoMA had an eye for what makes art tick. The show consisted of stellar works of art; she didn't have to worry about quality after all. Still, the whole venture left me wondering: What would Sonia Delaunay have said if you told her that the artistic merits of a painting were subordinate to the gender of the painter? She'd probably have laughed in your face. Then she would have picked up a brush, loaded it with paint and got down to business.

No one expects agit-prop from an institution like the National Academy, of course. As an examination of "women's role over the past two centuries in the American art world," Challenging Tradition isn't deep or wide, but it is solid. The early portions tend to the decorous, the latter to the various. All of it is accomplished, if unspectacular. Significant artists are included, but not represented by their strongest Susanna Coffey edgier. Whoever thought to highlight a material sensualist like Helen Frankenthaler with a print must have been out of her gourd.

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The brightest moments of Challenging Tradition are supplied by Leatrice Rose and Anne Arnold. At first glance, Ms. Rose's depiction of a kitchen (Untitled, circa 1993) is blandly bucolic—that is, until the painting's deadpan realism divulges a wry, almost cutting sensibility. As for Ms. Arnold, her Portrait of Lois Dodd (1961), bluntly carved from wood, is a miracle of economy. Plugging into the arts of Africa and rural America for inspiration, the piece emits a light that is, by turns, generous and acerbic. Ms. Arnold's sophistication is as unadorned and down-to-earth as a white picket fence, her humor as straight-faced and droll as Buster Keaton. If the National Academy wants to extol its women members, it should reward the most accomplished of them with a retrospective. Ms. Arnold gets my vote to be first up for the honor.

Challenging Tradition: Women of the Academy, 1826-2003 is at the National Academy of Design, 1083 Fifth Avenue, until Jan. 4, 2004.