

ALEXANDRE

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ART IN REVIEW

ART IN REVIEW; 'Challenging Tradition' -- 'Women of the Academy, 1826-2003'

By Ken Johnson

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National Academy of Design

1083 Fifth Avenue, at 89th Street

Manhattan

Through Jan. 4

Why, in the immortal words of Linda Nochlin, have there been no great women artists? Because they are by nature more genteel and less aggressively ambitious than men. Or so you might conclude after viewing the National Academy of Design's selection of works by its female membership.

Of course, it makes more sense to blame the exhibition's prevailing conservatism on that of the academy itself, which has been a dusty bastion of backward-thinking traditionalism for many years. It would be nice to think that women were a source of subversion within the institution, but contrary to the title, "Challenging Tradition," nothing about the show supports such a fantasy. Women have been more or less welcomed by the academy since shortly after its founding in 1825, but there's little evidence that they had any altering effect on its mission. Indeed, many of the most compelling works on view are by artists now barely remembered who expressed themselves with consummate gentility: Clare Leighton, for example, who in the 1930's made wood engravings of rural America with exquisitely refined craft. Gertrude Lathrope was another remarkably skillful printmaker as well as a fine animal sculptor. Her bronze life-size rabbit is a marvel of zoological realism subtly inflected by a smooth, slightly abstracting Modernism.

Among artists of earlier periods, there's a lovely small etching by Mary Cassatt, an image of girls studying a map in which feminine tenderness is matched by an assertive, velvety black line and confident abbreviation. Otherwise there are few early works that rise above the level of decorous academicism.

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There is more excitement in the post-World War II era. Elaine De Kooning's life-size 1978 portrait of Joe Montgomery is a good likeness realized in lively painterly gestures. Catherine Murphy's view into a forest of sumacs, painted with acutely observed precision, casts an understatedly mysterious spell. Anne Arnold's affectionately humorous, roughly chiseled portrait in wood of the excellent painter Lois Dodd is a fine blend of Modernist and folklike impulses. And Susanna Coffey's compact self-portrait with eyes shut mixes painterly and psychological self-examination to haunting, almost painful effect.

According to the exhibition catalog, women today make up just 20 percent of the academy's membership. No doubt that figure should be improved, but what is more urgently needed is a less blinkered relationship to contemporary art in general. KEN JOHNSON

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