

REVEALED

*an article written by Toti O'Brien
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In February 2007, the Los Angeles Municipal Gallery hosted a large exhibit: "Multiple Vantage Point: Southern California Women Artists: 1980-2006." The show featured work by 50 women, all active in the decades following the feminist revolution. It reflected, in fact, a feminist spirit of inclusion, displaying a variety of traditional and non traditional media (*multiple vantage points*). It witnessed, as well, some results of the feminist revolution, testifying the freedom of expression that, for sure, women have acquired, then preserved, in these last decades.

In the contest of the show, art and feminist historian Betty Ann Brown, along with artist Linda Vallejo, organized a panel, featuring 11 of the artists. They called it "Revealed: Women, Art, Life, Success", and they gave it the form of an interactive exchange, about themes, we can see, wide and crucial...

The guest's were Kim Abeles, Judy Baca, Samantha Fields, Diane Gamboa, Cheri Gaulke, Lezley Saar, Stacy Schultz, Ruth Weisberg, Terry Wolverton, Kim Yasuda and June Wayne... this last, in her ninety, already, and considered a pioneer, particularly in the field of printmaking.

The age span of these artists covered 6 decades, a pretty good range, and, because in Los Angeles, a wide pallet of ethnic backgrounds were, also represented: Hispanic, African American, Asian, Jewish, Native American, Anglo-Saxon.

The panel embodied an idea, that Ms. Brown already explored, years ago, in her book "Gradiva's Mirror" (an extended study about surrealist women artists).

At the end of each chapter, the artists (who's work, and life, had just been discussed), sat around an imaginary table, in a simple, domestic setting. There, they spoke to each other, for a little while, letting go of the narrator ... asking questions and leaving them open, to so many possible answers... Sure, that sound like a theatrical, like a cinematic device, quite rare in art history. But compelling, so, effective and fascinating. With 'Revealed', the invention came to life.

Ms. Brown and Ms Vallejo invited the artists to sit, in pairs, then, ask each other a question, chosen from a list of selected topics. Some examples: "how did your children influence your career", "who have been you models", "which ones are the art pieces that you love the most", "which ones make you mad", "how do you define professional, human, sexual success... do you think that you reached it", "where do you get your ideas", "did you already realize your best work of art", and "if you were not an artist, what would you be"? Ask those question, to each other, like if sitting at a café', or, in their dining room, with a friend. Yes.

The dialogue came out fresh, sincere and, often, surprising, as suggested by the title itself. As, certainly, the organizers, who tried to create a different kind of meeting, wanted it. Far from academic, informal, more like a performance, or a party. On the edge, so explored and still so uncertain, where the public/private barrier blurs and melts.

This particular choice translates a strong tendency, among women intellectuals and artists: the desire to revisit traditional forms of our culture, giving them a sideways "cut", another interpretation, more mixed and, essentially, more inclusive.

After the exchanges between artists, so, the microphone went to the audience, whose participation had been encouraged, and was, in fact, massive.

Probably, 'cause the general tone of the panel was enthusiastic, indeed, transpiring great energy, both creative and speculative.

Lets get into details.

The theme more responded and echoed, by the audience (that, so, had to be contained, in order not to take the lead), was the one of maternity and art. Both in California, and the US, in general, there are

associations of mother artists: strong groups, capable to confront, analyze, some times solve, the problems of who is a mom and an artist, at the same time.

But, because this condition is, now, represented, taken in account, the attempt of the panel was, mostly, to give space, also, to the artists who weren't, or did not want to be, mothers. The ones, for who to be a mother *and* artist meant a restriction, a frustration, and a dilemma. Just, to confirm, that there is *not* one positive chosen model, in either direction. At the opposite, all options are open.

To the voice "success", it seems that the women's experience, in the last three decades, gave a different meaning. All the artists present, in fact, believed that they had got it, not considering it, thought, under the traditional angle, of "only living by one's own art".

For the artists in the panel, "success" meant to be able to keep working, in their expressive field (they were writers, art historians, muralists, painters, sculptors, video artists, photographers, performers), *in spite of all and everything*, and, of course, at the price of infinite mediations, delays, suspensions, sacrifices.

But, without giving up, without losing it.

A success, so, woven with ferocious patience, and still wearing no cape, no crown.

Admitting compromise. Yes, and this controversial word took, in the light of what was said, a positive meaning. The meaning of "composing a life", as a very intelligent puzzle of roles, functions, occupations. Requiring versatility and obstinacy.

"Where do you find your ideas"? Anywhere, of course... Inspiration, for these artists, was all over: at the red or green light, in the car, at the laundry mat or in bed, in the kitchen, in dream, at school, in the hospital, at the supermarket, on duty, on vacation.

Ideas: always too many, and not enough time to realize them.
Found in everyone's daily life, in the eye, in the hands.

But, with a dominant note and a common thread: nature, the earth. For many. More than all, for Hispanic and Native American artists. Yes, for them, in particular, the tie with the land appears ancient and powerful, vibrant and alive.

As if, they could nurture themselves directly, on the skin, in the heart of our planet. As if, they better knew how to get oriented, or grounded, right here.

One more theme: the relation with time. Which ones are the strategies, that these women adopt, to keep working, even when their art doesn't make enough money, even if there are thousands other things to do, if partners and children claim them, elsewhere? Two guidelines: discipline, on one side. On the other, the private rituals.

*I go to the studio each morning for 20 minutes, even if I don't paint, I clean up and, I wash my brushes. If I am at the computer, I use Internet for no more than 10 minutes, then, I start writing.
Each time that the baby falls asleep, I go in the garage and play music, until she wakes up. On Sunday, when my husband goes jogging, I regularly shut myself in the studio.*

They are often, always, fragments, corners of time. But the fragments, for each of the artists in the panel, built a tower.

Certainly, not an ivory one. No. One like the famous Watts Tower, in LA, by Simone Rodia, an Italian immigrant, or, Facteur Cheval's tower, in France. Meaning: made with colored shards, tassels of broken vessels, broken mirrors. An incredible mosaic, though, like a Nicky's de Saint Phalle's...

And a tower, indeed: because all artists in the panel reached renown, with an excellent body of work. Piece by piece.

Still, at the question "which one is your better piece", they unanimously answered: the one I haven't done yet. The age doesn't matter, no: the wish of expression keeps projecting itself forwards, in progress. In the

attempt of getting, of doing better (not pretending, I'm sure, to reach any top, but just, to keep climbing) until the last day.

'Revealed' was an open panel (no gender seclusion) but, in fact, only a couple men were present, in the full house. Too bad. Between them, a young boy asked: "did somebody ever try to stop you"? Many answered. Yes, of course. They've tried, but they didn't succeed.

Betty Ann Brown is an art historian, art critic and curator. Her work focuses on feminism, identity, and art as a political instrument. In 1989 she wrote, along with Arlene Raven, "Exposure, Women & Art", a volume of essays on 50 contemporary American women artist. Her book on Surrealism "Gradiva's Mirror: Reflections on Women, Surrealism & Art History" (Midmarch, 2002) won the CSUN prize in 2003.

Linda Vallejo is an artist working in many medias, a teacher and curator. She's always been extremely active in the community, as a supporter of traditional and indigenous values, especially, but not only, for Native American and Chicana women. In the past twelve years she has hosted the All Nations Women's Tea Circle. For the past eight years, she hosted a dinner celebration for the Annual Ancestor's Walk, feeding over 200 dancers, supporters and their families. (www.lindavallejo.com)

Toti O'Brien is an artist, born in Italy and living in L.A. She works in a wide range of medias, from dance to poetry, from music to visual art. She writes for several Italian magazines, contributing articles about life and art abroad. She teaches a number of art programs, often helped by her son, Francesco.