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An Art Show for Hundreds of Women. And That's Just the Artists.

Like so many good ideas, the Every Woman Biennial was born of a joke. Now it's in its third edition, displaying the work of over 600 female and nonbinary artists, and expanding to Los Angeles.



By **Melena Ryzik**

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What would you do, a friend asked the artist C. Finley, if you could curate the Whitney Biennial? Easy, Ms. Finley replied: It would be all women. “The Whitney Houston Biennial!” her friend announced.

That was in 2014. Ms. Finley laughed, and then she got to work — from that throwaway line, a festival was born. Now in its third edition, the Every Woman Biennial is the most expansive and ambitious yet. (Ms. Finley only recently changed its name from the Whitney Houston Biennial, for ease of fund-raising and after a polite but firm letter from the Houston family.) Opening Sunday, it features the work of over 600 women and gender-nonbinary artists — nine times the number of people in the actual Whitney Biennial that it is designed to run alongside. Ms. Finley's exhibition will also include a female-centric film festival and, for the first time, will pop up in Los Angeles, with new artists, next month.

It came together on a shoestring, with donations and a network of volunteers, most of them female artists who brought their power tools and multimedia know-how to two downtown spaces. This week, they were completing the installation of pieces in materials ranging from textiles to video, driftwood to Flamin' Hot Cheetos.

“There's this lady-power that happens,” said Ms. Finley, 43, a painter who splits her time between New York and Rome. “It's very connected; we're basically all putting our powers together and raising each other up.” An extrovert in glitter eye-shadow, she also wants the festival to be fun: The New York opening will include a parading flash-mob performance, set to Houston's “I Wanna Dance With Somebody.” (Anyone can join in; the choreography is available on YouTube.)

“NY1850” (2018), a painting by Jennifer Sanchez. Jennifer Sanchez

“Racquel Come to Me Two,” by Mickalene Thomas. Mickalene Thomas/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



“Palm Frond Moth” (2016) by the photographer Morgan Wolfers, a 13-year-old transgender girl from Colorado.
Morgan Wolfers

Though it's been described as an alternative to the Whitney Biennial, Ms. Finley said she conceived the Every Woman to supplement, not negate. Her aim was to lift up women in the art world, especially talented ones who are in a midcareer plateau, perhaps assisting better-known artists, raising children or otherwise not as focused on exhibitions. She scouted people on Instagram and did not charge a fee to apply, rare in the festival world. And there are art stars in her show, like Mickalene Thomas and Marilyn Minter, who are veterans of the Whitney.

Ms. Finley is also fairly loose about defining “every woman.” “I say, ‘if you're making work from a divine feminine place, send it over,’” she said. “We have a 13-year-old trans girl from Colorado with a GenderCool project,” an initiative to tell transgender young people's stories. In the first year, she added, the exhibition featured “an 89-year-old artist from New York City that I happened to find. Part of the ethos of this is to be really inclusive and really loving, so people can feel comfortable here.”

In curating, she had only two rules: no hate, and no headless women. “I don't want a nude body with her head cut off in the show,” she said. (There is also blissfully little Trump art.)

When she heard about the exhibition, Ms. Minter, 70 — the “nasty woman” of contemporary feminist art, as a recent Times review put it — was quick to participate. She sent over an inkjet print from her “Plush” series, with close-up, luxe images of pubic hair — created because, she said, “it seems to be disappearing. And it's not at all in art history.”

Clockwise from top: "Soliloquy of the Solipsist" (2019) by Genevieve Cohn; "through the cold deep" (2019), a Jillian Rose work made of barnacles, in blue at far right; "2 Women" (2019), fabric-and-string installations by Defne Tutus; two untitled works by Ashley Cortes from 2017 and 2018; and the triptych "Untitled (IUD Choices)" (2017), by Charlotte Woolf. Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Ms. Thomas, a friend of Ms. Finley's since their days as Pratt students, provided "Racquel Come to Me Two," a collaged print of her partner in what she called an empowering pose, one that represented to her the biennial's — and Ms. Finley's — mission. "Even as an undergrad, she was putting on shows and curating and definitely spearheading conversations," Ms. Thomas, 48, said. "She was definitely a leader, and one who was about mentorship and supporting other artists."

The show is hung salon-style in a donated space at 222 Bowery, once home to William S. Burroughs and studios for Mark Rothko and Fernand Léger. Now, there's a collage of fliers from lesbian bars, panels illustrating most of "Game of Thrones," and a platform, dotted with semiprecious stones, that invites meditation. (Almost everything is for sale, with prices starting low.) The sense of community is "better than any graduate school," said Liz Liguori, 40, a photographer turned multimedia artist whose work merges high and low tech. For this biennial, she created an interactive "drawing machine," in which a laser translates viewers' hand motions into fleeting shapes.

Gwen Shockey's "Girl Party Wallpaper," a collage of fliers from lesbian bars. Gwen Shockey

Ayo Jackson setting her installation “heiress to a vision of forbidden gardens.” Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Nearby, Ayo Jackson, a recent M.F.A. grad, was pinning cotton puffs into the background of her piece, while a mirrored version of her, with a braided unicorn horn, twirled above; it was inspired by the medieval Unicorn Tapestries at the Cloisters in northern Manhattan. “I like the last image, where the unicorn is resurrected,” she explained. “I wanted it to be an analogue for black stories that end in pain.”

Ms. Jackson, 41, a former dancer with Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Company, was introduced to the biennial through its dance component. It’s her first major show. “This is a huge first step for me,” she said.

The artist Deborah Kass, 67, whose sculpture “OY/YO” is installed outside the Brooklyn Museum, contributed a 2009 silk-screen edition, “Nobody Puts Baby in the Corner.” It will be on display at La MaMa’s Galleria, the biennial’s other venue. “I’ve been an artist in New York City my whole life, and I always wanted to be in a biennial in my hometown,” Ms. Kass said pointedly. “So why not this one?”

“Nobody Puts Baby in the Corner” (2009), by Deborah Kass. “I always wanted to be in a biennial in my hometown,” Ms. Kass said. “So why not this one?” Deborah Kass/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

In 2014, the year Ms. Finley’s show began, only one-third of the artists in the Whitney Biennial were women. (This year’s edition is more balanced.) “The real question is why, at this point in time, the gender disparity still exists in our institutions and exhibitions and galleries,” Ms. Kass said, adding: “It affects just about every woman. And let’s not forget the pay gap, which is enormous.”

Ms. Finley, a studio artist who takes commercial gigs to get by, is, of course, keenly aware of the inequities — she financed the last biennial herself, using money she got painting murals for the 2017 “Wonder Woman” reboot. She views the Every Woman Biennial as an extension of her own work, and a step toward professional fulfillment for artists of her stature. “I want studio visits, I want someone to encourage me, to show and sell my work — all the things that every artist wants, is what this show provides,” she said.

She even sees the choreographed flash mob as a growth moment: In the spirit of partnering with somebody, she is creating mentorship opportunities, connecting experienced art handlers with those hoping to learn the trade, say. Maybe they’ll meet mid-dance move, she said. “Cross-pollinating — baby, that’s what it’s all about.”

Every Woman Biennial

May 19-29 at La MaMa’s La Galleria, 47 Great Jones Street, and 222 Bowery, Manhattan. The exhibition’s Los Angeles edition will run June 2-12. everywomanbiennial.com

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