

# Dismantling the Master's House?

## Gender Discrimination in Museums

**Tania Muir**

Writer, feminist, and civil rights activist Audre Lorde questioned the capacity for change within our current institutions and power structures when she stated, “the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change”.

Over the last decade, museum conferences, publications, and forums have celebrated the capacity of museums to act as agents of change, engaging marginalized communities and providing a fertile platform to address diverse social justice issues. However, the idea that museums should serve a larger ideological purpose is not entirely new. And historically, the values and objectives espoused by museums have, in many cases, contributed to the creation and reinforcement of repressive ideologies in regards to gender, race and class, and not to dismantling the current power structures.

Feminist scholars, museum practitioners, and activists have critically challenged the patriarchal policies and practices of museums noting the lack of documentation of

women's experience, failure to acknowledge and celebrate women's accomplishments, and the disproportionate representation of women artists in our public galleries. How do our museum collections and exhibitions express our unspoken assumptions and values as a society? And is it possible to transform our institutions to reflect the true diversity of our public(s)?

### How do our museum collections and exhibitions express our unspoken assumptions and values as a society?

Anthony Kiendl in the forward to the Banff publication *Obsession, Compulsion, Collection, Collections: On Objects, Display Culture and Interpretation*, delves into how our museum collections not only reveal assumptions about societal values, but also play a significant role in governing our understanding of the world. In order to unpack some of the stories our collections tell, it is important to understand the context from which our collections have emerged beginning from private collections, to the development of cabinets of curiosity, and eventual birth

of public museums in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

In *The Origins of Museums*, Olive Impey and Arthur MacGregor document how the practice of collection and display began with the exploits of wealthy gentlemen who had the means to travel the globe and bring back its wonders. The display of objects functioned as the social construction of the gentleman communicating the power, prestige and privilege of the owner. Curated through the eyes of the bourgeois elite male traveller, the subsequent collections portrayed women as passive, superfluous, or as a muse or object in relation to the male subject. As national museums emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the collections and exhibitions continued to privilege the male experience reinforcing narratives of nationalism, masculinity and colonization. The Philadelphia Museum, which opened in 1786 by established artist and collector Charles Peale as one of the first museums in North America, is an excellent example of the patriarchal museum structure of the period. As seen in this monumental 1822 self-portrait entitled *The Artist in his Museum*, Peale depicts himself as the master of his museum, pulling



**Above:** Charles Willson Peale, *The Artist in His Museum*, 1822, in the collection of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts.

back a draped crimson curtain to reveal the collection he developed to reinforce his status and world-view.

Rosalie Favell, a contemporary Métis artist from Winnipeg, Manitoba, directly responds to Charles Peale in her 2005 image *The Artist in her Museum*. Inverting Peale's image of the male connoisseur, Favell inserts herself within the image as an Indigenous woman, disrupting the patriarchal narrative and the colonial context of early museum collections. In contrast to the museum collection developed by Peale, Favell's collection tells of her journey to discover her own personal history and identity through images from family photo albums.

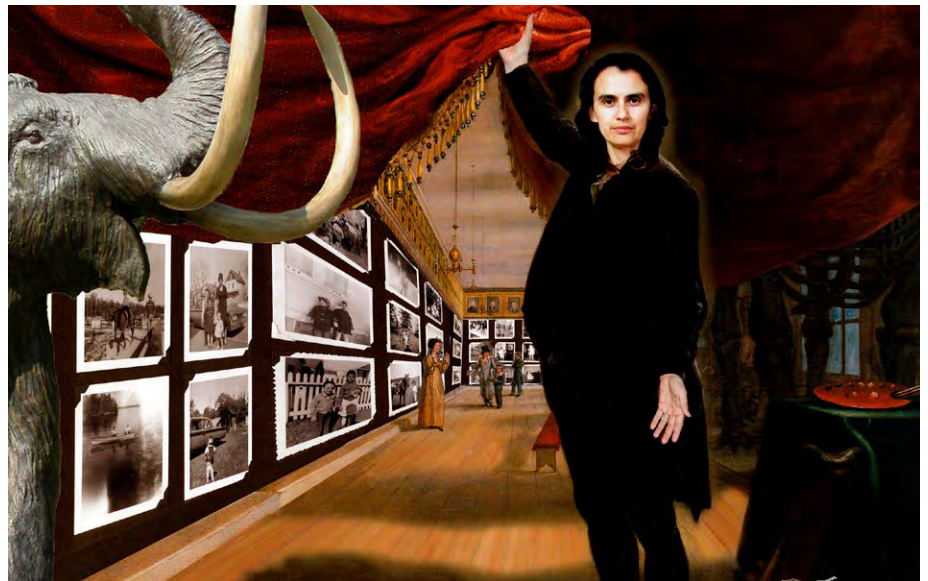
Like Favell, feminist historians have responded to the inequitable representation of women through the task of recovery and inclusion, looking for ways to reinsert women back

into our shared history. This reconstructive method has in many cases provided an opportunity to appropriately recognize and celebrate the accomplishments of women throughout history. And while feminist historians look to address the past, contemporary feminist artists

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It has been over 30-years since the New-York based group of women artists the *Guerilla Girls* banded together to protest rampant discrimination within our public art museums, exposing the small percentage



**Above:** Rosalie Favell, *The Artist in her Museum*, 2005

of women artists being collected and exhibited in comparison to their male counterparts. Unfortunately, the number of women represented in collections continues to be well below that of their male peers. A 2015 feature in *Canadian Art* magazine, looked at the demographics of solo exhibitions of living artists at Canadian public institutions. The results were underwhelming, with 64% of solo exhibitions allocated to male artists.

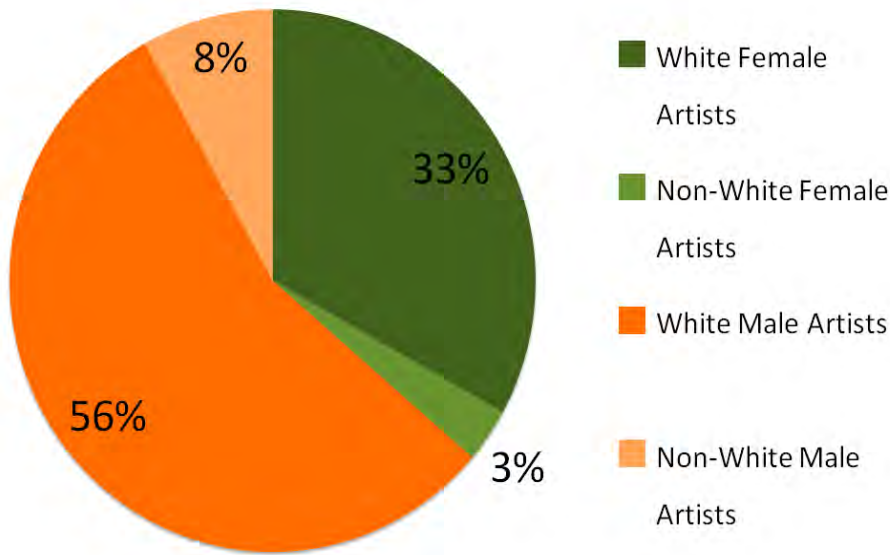
As art historian, curator and cultural policy specialist from York University Joyce Zemans has demonstrated, the work of feminist scholars, activists and decision-makers have made an impact on the overall advancement of women in the sector. Having conducted extensive re-

search in 2001 to analyze the status of women artists in Canada and the nature of institutional discrimination, Zemans returned her study in 2013 to identify if there had been a substantial change within this twelve-year period. While there is still a long way to go, Zemans in her 2013 report was able to identify a positive trend for women in terms of arts grants, national awards, acquisition into major museum collections, and the exhibition of female artists in group and solo exhibitions.

While the pie chart from *Canadian Art* illustrates the gendered hierarchy of representation for women in our art museums, it also demonstrates a related and further troubling trend regarding the racial distribution of artists. Of the

36% of solo exhibitions committed to female artists in 2013, only 3% of those were to non-white female artists. The combined effects of gender and racial discrimination have a particularly negative effect on the representation of women. In her 1982 publication *Ain't I a Woman*, feminist and American author bell hooks invited mainstream feminists to acknowledge the intersection between racism and sexism, challenging the category of womanhood as a discrete category of analysis. Feminists such as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) and Nira Yuval-Davis (2006) have built on the work of hooks with the concept of intersectionality recognizing that systems of oppression such as racism, sexism, class exploitation and homophobia do not act independently from one another. Instead, systems of power intersect with one another often further marginalizing diverse voices.

Many museums have responded to issues of diversity and identity-based exclusion with temporary exhibits focusing on an individual identity or through the development of identity-based museums such as the National Museum of the American Indian or the Aga Khan Museum. While these interventions into historical and contemporary narratives occur in separate or temporary spaces, mainstream museums continue to develop Euro-centric heteronormative collections and exhibition programs. In order to



**Above:** Gallery Demographics Average, included with permission from Cooley, A, Lou, A. and Morgan-Feir, C. "Canada's Galleries Fall Short: The Not So Great White North," *Canadian Art*, April 2015

transform the museum as an institution in a fundamental way, an intersectional approach to museology is needed to critically challenge the structures of power that inform our organizational structure, our processes of collection and curation, and the physical structures of our museum spaces.

Some museums over the last decade have indeed taken up the task of intersectionality, creating what Eilean Hooper-Green has described as the “post-museum”. Here, the museum as an institution can evolve from a repository of objects to a model of participatory pedagogy focused on working collaboratively with communities in the creation and sharing of knowledge. Sharing authority with their public(s), these institutions bring multiple (often under-represented) voices to the table to develop their institutional strategic plan, determine best practice for collections policy, and develop exhibitions co-created by local knowledge keepers, museum professionals, scholars and community members.

In many ways, the concept of the museum was developed as the “master’s house,” reinforcing patriarchal narratives of exploitation and colonization. However, museums can also function as critical sites for constructive dialogue and discussion around issues of representation, inclusion and equity that make a positive impact on the lived experience of community members. Working with tools both from within museum practice, as well as those tools that emerge from knowledge and resources within our communities, it is possible to transform the museums and enact real change.

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