

# In Dishes and Dolls, a Foundation of Feminist Art

A new show, “Women’s Work,” will illustrate how modern female artists have taken inspiration from domestic objects of past centuries.

By Laurel Graeber

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This article is part of our latest special section on Museums, which focuses on new artists, new audiences and new ways of thinking about exhibitions.

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TARRYTOWN, N.Y. — Judy Chicago still grows amused — and not a little incensed — when she recalls how male critics first responded to her work and that of other pioneering female artists.

The men reserved special scorn for “The Dinner Party,” Ms. Chicago’s 1979 sculptural installation whose place settings, inspired by illustrious women, incorporate china painting and embroidery.

“The *womanly* arts?” she said in mock outrage during a recent video call. She added: “You’re not allowed to think about *them*. They’re not art, right? They’re *craft*.”

But Ms. Chicago, still an iconoclast with a head of silver and dyed-purple curls, has lived to get the last word. Her work has become a foundational piece of feminist art, and now prototypes for two of its plates are about to become revered guests at a different party. There, they will commune with an 1893 circular Shaker rug by Elvira Curtis Hulett, while an untitled aluminum head that Louise Bourgeois covered with tapestry fragments in 2002 will keep company with a silk brocade pin cushion that Dolley Madison, a former first lady, made from fabric scraps.

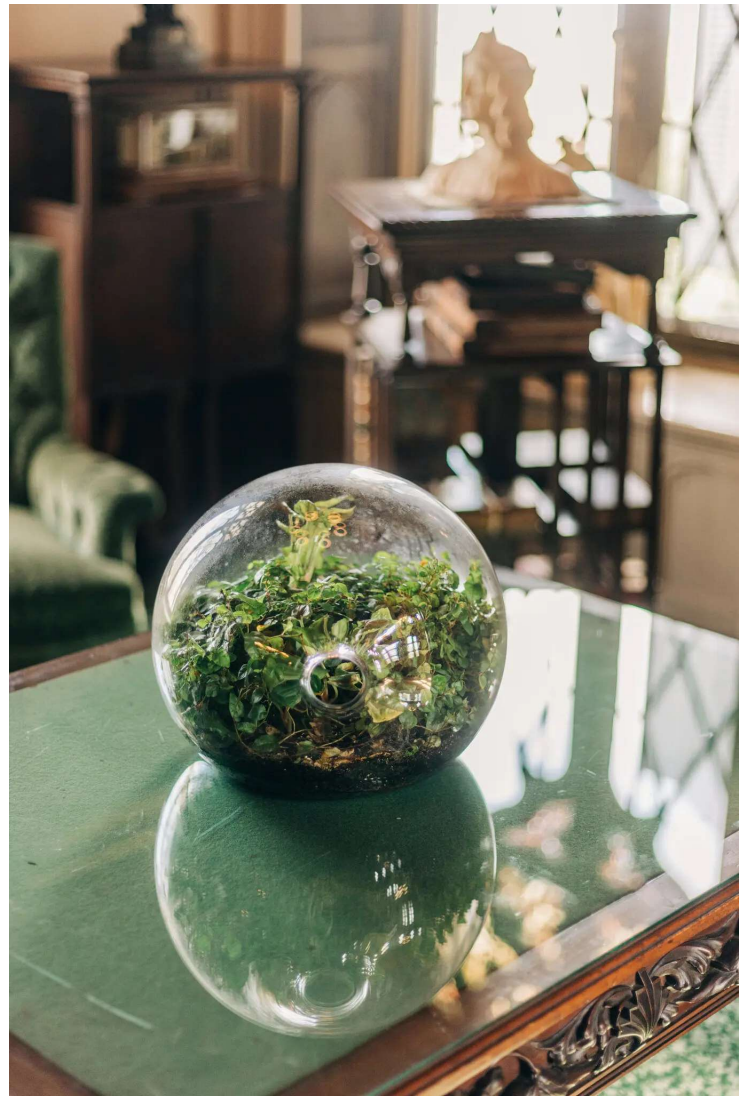
Such chronologically odd couples are at the heart of “Women’s Work,” an exhibition that will underscore how the creations of modern-day female artists draw from the domestic objects of past centuries, also nearly all made by women. Running from May 27 through Sept. 26 at the Lyndhurst Mansion, a Gothic Revival house museum in Tarrytown, N.Y., “Women’s Work” will display more than 125 artworks — almost all American — not only in the estate’s exhibition gallery but also in its period rooms.

In those opulent spaces, which recently served as the interior set for the hit HBO series “The Gilded Age,” the pieces will be “in conversation” said Howard Zar, the museum’s executive director. You can only imagine what a 1990 hand-painted porcelain soup tureen by Cindy Sherman, featuring a self-portrait of the artist as Madame de Pompadour, might have to say to the delicate early-19th-century hand-painted Sèvres cups and saucers beside it on the mansion’s dining table.

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Cindy Sherman's "Madame de Pompadour (Née Poisson)" soup tureen, designed in 1990, displayed with Sèvres porcelain coffee cups depicting French aristocrats, from 1804-9. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times



Paula Hayes's "TM1," from 2009, is the artist's interpretation of a 19th-century terrarium, shown in the mansion's library. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

Mr. Zar said in an interview that he got the idea for "Women's Work" after Helen Molesworth was dismissed from her position as chief curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in 2018 for what the museum described as "creative differences." (Some in the art world maintained that she was fired for her staunch support of female and minority artists.) He drew further inspiration from "Womanhouse," a 1972 installation of pieces by feminist artists in a Victorian mansion in Hollywood, which was organized by Ms. Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, whose work is in the Lyndhurst show, too.

The new exhibition is "a discussion of what these women did, what was revolutionary about it, what was beautiful about it," Mr. Zar said. But it is designed not just to highlight how contemporary female artists have reclaimed and reinterpreted traditional techniques, but also to demonstrate that those early handicrafts are more than just, well, women's work. Often art in their own right, they provided a precious avenue for self-expression and independent income.



When women “didn’t have a family to take care of them, they had to find a way to survive,” said Nancy Carlisle, the senior curator of collections at Historic New England, a heritage organization in Massachusetts with objects dating to the colonial era. Ms. Carlisle organized “Women’s Work” with Becky Hart, an independent contemporary-art curator who recently retired from the Denver Art Museum.

Their selections help rescue from obscurity figures like Idelle Weber, one of the early Pop artists, as well as historical women like Elizabeth Adams (1825-98), whose copy of the self-portrait of the French court painter Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun will hang in the Lyndhurst Mansion’s picture gallery. Adams “had the advantage of being well-to-do and not being married, so she could have the determination to learn to be a painter,” Ms. Carlisle said.

But some women in the show remain anonymous, like the creator of an early-20th-century Black rag doll, in cap and apron, believed to have been made for a white child by her African American nanny. It will occupy one of the museum’s bedrooms with “Brenda,” Faith Ringgold’s 1976 soft sculpture of an elegantly dressed Black woman.

“This was a Black woman representing herself,” Mr. Zar said at the museum, referring to the century-old doll, “and likely what she was at the time was a servant, without agency. And I wanted to put it next to this Faith Ringgold doll, because this is about a Black woman claiming agency.”



A set of topsy turvy dolls, skirted figures that display a different face when turned upside-down. One made by an unknown woman in the 1860s, far left, is displayed with two created by the artist Kiki Smith in 2002: “Little Red Riding Hood” and “Owl and Pussycat.” Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

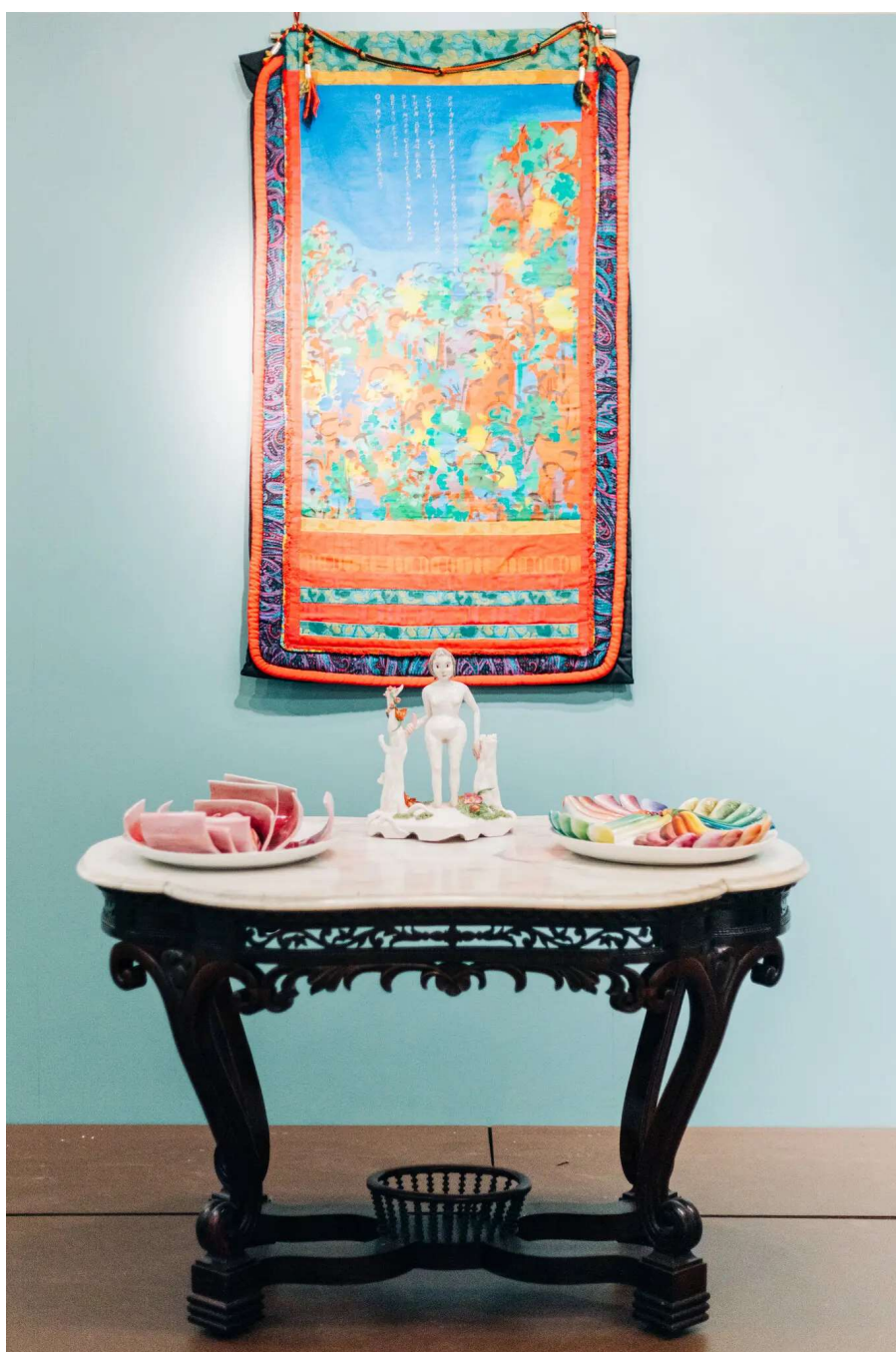
That museum bedroom will also include fairy tale-inspired cloth dolls by Kiki Smith that combine 19th-century folk art forms with her own painting. “I’m very appreciative of the creativity of the past,” Ms. Smith said, but “for it to live,” she added, “you have to re-embellish it or revitalize it, or breathe life into a form.”

Many of the show’s works do this in intriguing ways. Sabrina Gschwandtner’s “Quilts in Women’s Lives V” (2014) consists of strips of 16-millimeter films of women sewing and working on crafts — documentaries that the Fashion Institute of Technology had relinquished from its collection. And Paula Hayes has reinvented the

19th-century terrarium, giving her designs a womblike shape and a side opening. “It doesn’t seem like a radical difference, but it is,” Ms. Hayes said.

Other pieces, either subtly or blatantly, subvert their historical antecedents. In the mansion’s library, the cut-paper silhouettes in Kara Walker’s 1997 book “Freedom: A Fable” may look like the work of genteel Victorian ladies, but they embed narratives of racial oppression. Ms. Ringgold delivers a similar surprise in “Feminist Series: Of My Two Handicaps #10,” part of her decades-long sequence of Tibetan-style thangkas (scroll paintings). Its stitched vertical lettering, however, is not Tibetan script.

“On these painted landscapes, I printed in gold paint statements made by Black women, dating from slavery times until the present,” Ms. Ringgold wrote in an email. This one features words from Shirley Chisholm, the first African American congresswoman: “Of my two handicaps, being female put more obstacles in my path than being Black.”



A tableau of 20th- and 21st-century works: Faith Ringgold's "Of My Two Handicaps," a cloth-framed painting from her decades-long "Feminist Series," hanging over Shary Boyle's "Curupira" sculpture (2014). On either side of Ms. Boyle's work are two 1970s prototype plates from Judy Chicago's "The Dinner Party": one for the "Virginia Woolf" setting, left, and one for "Elizabeth Blackwell." Jeenah Moon for The New York Times



A close-up of Ms. Chicago's first test plate for the "Virginia Woolf" setting in "The Dinner Party." Originally mocked by male critics, the installation is now considered groundbreaking. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

Even some of the smallest objects in "Women's Work" make outsize comments. A jewelry case will feature 19th-century cameos, with their ethereal portraits of womanhood, alongside a raw, realist version by Catherine Opie. Her 2019 gem-bordered cameo for the LizWorks jewelry line depicts herself, tattooed and bare-chested, nursing her son. The case will also include "Pocahontas Jewelry Set" (2014), a ring, a pendant and earrings by the Native American artists Keri Ataumbi and Jamie Okuma, who were inspired by colonial paintings of the woman Ms. Ataumbi called "the iconic Native female."

"Great dialogue in there," she said of the case's group display.

But perhaps the sharpest criticism will come from the exhibition's 1966 video of Yoko Ono's performance "Cut Piece," which invited audience members to come onstage, one by one, and snip off a bit of her clothing as she remained seated and silent. Ms. Hart views this work as capturing "a history of violence against women's bodies" that will especially resonate in a heavily decorated Victorian setting.

"I think that this Yoko Ono piece kind of cuts through all of that in a way that nothing else in the show does," she said.

"Women's Work," however, will also consistently attest to just how much female artists have achieved. Its assemblages will represent their progress in erasing the distinctions between art and craft, in asserting that any medium was worthy and that the intimate, the personal and the domestic were legitimate creative subjects.

"It's something to be celebrated, that artists can be themselves in their work now," Ms. Chicago said. But, she added, "this struggle is a long way from over."