



The Distaff Side

Composed entirely of works by women artists from the collections of Melva Bucksbaum and Ray Learsy, the exhibition *The Distaff Side* is a culmination of ideas and interests that Melva has been exploring for many years. It was in the early years of the women's movement—that pivotal moment when Linda Nochlin asked, “Why have there been no great women artists?”—that Melva became seriously engaged in the art world.<sup>1</sup>

Melva became involved with the Des Moines Art Center in the early 1970s, and her own collecting was influenced early on by her friend Louise Noun, an art collector and feminist activist who was acquiring works by women artists. Although none of the works in Melva's collection have been acquired specifically because of the artist's gender, she witnessed firsthand the decades during which the art world began to offer women increased representation and recognition. She has been a longtime collector and an ardent patron of the arts, but this exhibition at The Granary marks her curatorial debut. It includes works in various mediums by more than one hundred women artists, emerging artists as well as established figures, those known locally and those of international renown. As a whole, *The Distaff Side* weaves together the unique story of Melva's experience as a collector over the past four decades.

The feminist rallying cry “the personal is political” has been transformed in many ways as women artists have expanded the boundaries and even the definition of art. They have appropriated images, inverted stereotypes, undermined

Rineke Dijkstra. *Coney Island*.  
NY, July 9, 1993, 1993

A A A A B B C C D D E E  
 F F G G H H I I J J K K L L M M N N O O P P  
 S T V U W X Y Z 1 2 3 4  
 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15  
 A fool and his money  
 are soon parted.  
 P P E E S M I L B 1 7 6 8  
 2 2 B C D E F G H I J K L M N  
 O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z 1 2  
 A a B b C c D d E e F f G g H  
 H h I i J j K k L l M m N n O  
 O o P p Q q R r S s T t U u V  
 V v W w X x Y y Z z 1 2 3 4  
 X X B C D E  
 F G H I J K L  
 M N O P Q R  
 S T V W X  
 Y Z 1 2 3 4 5  
 I shop therefore I am.  
 Barbara Kruger, 1987  
 X B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T  
 V W X Y Z & 1 2  
 3 B C D E F G H I J K L M N O  
 P Q R S T U V W X Y Z & 1 2 3

X B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P  
 Q R S T U V W X Y Z  
 A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O  
 P Q R S T U V W X Y Z  
 a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z  
 DO AS YOU WOULD BE DONE BY.  
 M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z  
 X B C D E F G  
 H I J K L M N O  
 P Q R S T U  
 V W X Y Z  
 A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z  
 0 1 0 1 1 1 2 1 3 1 4 1 5  
 A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O  
 P Q R S T U V W X Y Z  
 K L M N O  
 P Q R S T U V W  
 X Y Z 4 5 6 7 8 9  
 A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O  
 P Q R S T U V W X Y Z  
 G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z 1 2 3 4 5  
 ABUSE OF POWER COMES AS NO  
 SURPRISE. JENNY HOLZER, 1977  
 G O E P Q R S T  
 M N O P Q R S T  
 V W X Y Z 3 4 5 6 7  
 A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O  
 P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

← Elaine Reichek, *Sampler* (Kruger/Holzer), 1998  
→ Barbara Kruger, "Untitled" (*When was the last time you laughed?*), 2011



assumptions, and renegotiated the very terms of identity—female, feminine, and feminist—and the body and its representations, as theoretical positions and as subject matter. Despite the advances that have been made since the 1970s, however, women artists still remain underrepresented in exhibitions in most art institutions, a circumstance that contributed to Melva's interest in curating *The Distaff Side*.

The exhibition takes its title from an expression used colloquially to describe the maternal side of a family. The word *distaff*, derived from the Old English *distæf*, refers to a tool used in spinning, a task traditionally done by women in the home and therefore associated with "women's work." While some of the works included offer insights into the lives and experiences of women, *The Distaff Side* did not originate as a thematic exhibition. As it took shape, however, curatorial connections arose. Melva's effort to bring together diverse artists, each with a singular view

of the world, will give viewers a sense of the extraordinary richness and scope of "women's work" that she has witnessed in the field of contemporary art.

A conceptual piece by Elaine Reichek that takes the unassuming form of an embroidered sampler embodies the spirit of *The Distaff Side*. For Reichek, the sampler "is this fascinating, pregnant combination of text and image."<sup>2</sup> In Europe and the United States, needlework was historically an integral part of the education of young women, for whom embroidery would be a pastime or source of income in adult life. Samplers made as demonstrations of skill commonly contained religious or moral verses. Amid the needlework alphabet in Reichek's *Sampler* (Kruger/Holzer) (1998; left), traditional proverbs ("A fool and his money are soon parted," "Do as you would be done by") are juxtaposed with texts from well-known works by Barbara Kruger ("I shop therefore I am") and Jenny Holzer ("Abuse of power comes as no surprise").



← Jennifer Rubell, 'Engagement (with Prince William sculpted by Daniel Druet), 2011 (detail)  
 → Jennifer Rubell with her sculpture 'Engagement (with Prince William sculpted by Daniel Druet), 2011

By incorporating her contemporaries—both known for their nontraditional text-based works that encourage viewers to question dominant cultural values—Reichek has masterfully altered the message of the medium.

Individual works by Holzer and Kruger are on view in *The Distaff Side* as well. Directly addressing the audience, Holzer's LED projections and Kruger's bold typeset one-liners are reminiscent of propaganda or advertising but instead ask viewers to think for themselves and to reconsider the status quo. Holzer's *Stripes* (2007; pp. 36, 109) features statements from her *Truisms* and other series, including "A man can't know what it's like to be a mother." Kruger's "Untitled" (*When was the last time you laughed?*) (2011; p. 23) poses an unsettling question.

Several works in *The Distaff Side* reveal a sly wit. Upon entering The Granary, the visitor encounters Jennifer Rubell's 'Engagement (with Prince William sculpted by Daniel Druet)' (2011; left), a life-size sculpture of Prince William placed slightly off-center on its base. It becomes a participatory work: in a twist on the "glass slipper," a visitor can step onto the pedestal, take William's arm, and slip her finger through the replica of a sapphire engagement ring attached to his sleeve. A piece by Sophie Calle, *La cravate* (1992; pp. 166–67), also plays on the idea of the female fantasy of the perfect man, this time using a man's accessory, a tie, as the signifier.

Louise Bourgeois's artist's book *Ode à l'oubli* (2004; pp. 18–19, 30) takes its materials from the



domestic realm, or the distaff side. The pages of the book are made of linen hand towels from the artist's 1938 wedding to the art historian Robert Goldwater; her monogram, LBG, is visible on many of them. Collaged onto the pages are pieces of clothing and other recuperated textiles, fragments of Bourgeois's past, which are stitched together using various needlework techniques.

The most prominent work in the exhibition is Mika Rottenberg's video installation *Cheese* (2008; right), which was first seen at the 2008 Whitney Biennial. The work presents a fictionalized portrayal of the Sutherland Sisters, seven sisters from upstate New York who toured with P. T. Barnum in the late nineteenth century, performing a musical sideshow act, and became famous for their floor-length hair. They made their fortune by selling a hair elixir whose ingredients supposedly included their own Rapunzel tresses and the mist of Niagara Falls. Mika Rottenberg's wooden installation houses six video projections on which we watch long-haired women at work on a farm tending to small livestock and engaging in laborious hair-care routines. Standing in the middle of the low, dark structure amid barnyard sounds, the visitor is made to experience the close quarters within which the women work while watching them humorously milk their locks, herd goats with their hair, and stare at the cheese that they have produced.

Rottenberg's agrarian-themed videos resonate with the rural surroundings for which *The Granary* itself is named. Within the walls of *The*









← Louise Lawler, *Discus and Venus*, 1997/2002

→ Marina Abramović, *The Kitchen V, Carrying the Milk*, from the series *The Kitchen, Homage to Saint Therese*, 2009

Granary, one video, featuring wandering chickens, is projected outside the wooden structure and is seen beneath Louise Lawler's *Discus and Venus* (1997/2002; above), a fitting curatorial choice given that Lawler herself is interested in the area around a work of art, often taking photographs of art in its "natural habitat" or behind the scenes of the installation process. For logistical reasons, the *Cheese* structure was installed before the other works in *The Distaff Side* due to its scale, and accordingly, the works placed around it take on associated meanings when seen through its apertures.

Viewed through one of the Rottenberg "windows" is a conceptual garden: Jorinde Voigt's *Botanic Code—M. M. Gryshko National Botanical Garden, Kiev (August 2010)* (2010; p. 16), comprising twenty-four painted aluminum rods, represents the artist's walks through a garden in Ukraine, one of many all over the world in which she has documented the plants and flowers. Louise Nevelson's *December Wedding* (1984; p. 81), somewhat obscured by Rottenberg's installation, shares with it a material similarity. In contrast to Rottenberg's abundant use of pallet wood, Nevelson, who preferred to install her work in dark spaces, includes a single piece of wood within this dark assemblage,

which is enclosed in a wooden frame. Adjacent to the Nevelson but best seen through another Rottenberg "window" is Cindy Sherman's untitled photograph (1982; p. 83), which is shrouded in its own shadows. Sherman's face is nearly hidden in this work, an atypical turn from the multitude of faces and personas that she has adopted throughout her career, and her attire is akin to that of the long-haired women of Rottenberg's videos, whom we watch through the shadows of the structure. As one exits the installation, the migrant mother portrayed in Lisa Ruyter's *Dorothea Lange "Destitute peapickers in California. Mother of seven children. Age thirty-two. Nipomo, California"* (2009; p. 4) comes into view. Although Ruyter's colorful palette wipes away the grit of the original black-and-white Depression-era photograph, the pathos of Lange's iconic image is hardly lost.

Posing a stark contrast to the spirited cacophony of *Cheese* is Marina Abramović's *The Kitchen V, Carrying the Milk* (2009; right) which quietly presides over the opposite end of the main gallery. Here Abramović performs her own version of women's work, appearing in the video as a solitary figure holding a bowl of milk, on which her gaze is fixed. The video belongs to a series inspired





**Su-Mei Tse** (Luxembourger, b. 1973)  
*Swing*, 2007  
 Neon, motor, transformer  
 104 3/8 x 16 1/2 x 8 3/4 in. (265 x 42 x 21 cm)



**Nicola Tyson** (British, b. 1960)  
*Man and Woman*, 1997  
 Gouache on paper (diptych)  
 2 parts, 33 5/8 x 26 5/8 in. (85.4 x 67.6 cm) each



**Jorinde Voigt** (German, b. 1977)  
*Botanic Code—M. M. Gryshko National Botanical Garden, Kiev (August 2010)*, 2010  
 Industrial paint and ink on aluminum rods  
 24 parts, 118 in. (299.7 cm) each



**Kara Walker** (American, b. 1969)  
*Restraint*, 2009  
 Etching with aquatint and sugarlift  
 31 x 23 7/8 in. (78.7 x 60.6 cm)



**Paloma Varga Weisz** (German, b. 1966)  
*Untitled*, 2004  
 Watercolor and pencil on paper  
 16 1/2 x 11 3/4 in. (41.9 x 29.9 cm)



**Paloma Varga Weisz** (German, b. 1966)  
*Gesicht nach rechts gerückt*, 2005  
 Aquarelle and colored pencil on paper  
 16 1/2 x 11 3/4 in. (41.9 x 29.9 cm)



**Paloma Varga Weisz** (German, b. 1966)  
*Tumor Man*, 2005  
 Aquarelle on paper  
 14 3/4 x 11 1/2 in. (37.5 x 29.2 cm)



**Rachel Whiteread** (British, b. 1963)  
*Daybed*, 1999  
 Beech wood and multidensity foams with wool upholstery  
 16 3/4 x 77 1/2 x 33 3/8 in. (42.6 x 196.9 x 84.8 cm)



**Lisa Yuskavage** (American, b. 1962)  
*G. with Flowers*, 2003  
 Oil on linen  
 20 1/2 x 21 in. (52.1 x 53.3 cm)