

SOGTFO **at** **François** **Ghebaly**

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First —just to get this out of the way—it feels so good to be writing about an exhibition of big sculptures in a big gallery made by five women. When was the last time *that* happened?

Not that bigger is better. Neither are gender-exclusive shows necessarily the way to go, in this day and age. Doesn't it seem rather anachronistic to organize an exhibition defined by its participants' genitals? Of course it does, and that is what gives artist-curator Charlie White the license to do so in this purportedly post-gender world. All-male group shows raise nary an eyebrow. In the second decade of the 21st century, this feels confounding, not to mention exhausting. A 2015 update of The Guerilla Girls' 1986 Report Card of New York galleries' gender balance, by the Feminist collective Pussy Galore, makes for depressing reading.

Thankfully, White's exhibition did not simply gesture towards redressing this imbalance, but made an argument (or the start of an argument) about scale, form, and gender within the tradition of sculpture. Even though the show was future facing, the work included

was rather traditional: by and large, institutionally scaled sculpture, generously spaced, with a bias towards cast metals and things on plinths. Primary colors and primary forms predominated. I wouldn't even have guessed that it was a women-only show if it hadn't been flagged as such by the press release and the title.

Ah yes, the title. *SOGTFO* standing for "Sculpture or get the fuck out"—a play on the Internet message board acronym TOGTFO ("Tits or get the fuck out"). Maybe this is one of those terms that everyone else has been shrugging off for years, but to me, hearing it here for the first time is dumbfounding. Even subverted, its aggressive tone seems unfitting for the generally measured output of these five artists. None are polemical about their gender, and it is hard to imagine any of them coming up with a title as caustic as *SOGTFO*—which, of course, they didn't.

Andrea Zittel—at 49 years old—was the *grande dame* of the group, and former faculty at USC where White is a professor. Amongst this group of artists, it was Zittel's relationship to space that seemed most influential: whether sculptural or geographical, she approaches it as territory for autonomy, liberty, and difference. Hers is not the impulse to establish dominion over space, but rather to find a corner of the world that is not overlooked or fought over.

For Zittel, grandeur of scale allows for the creation of small things. This is as true of her 35-acre property in Joshua Tree, A-Z West, where she makes knitted garments and hand-made paper, as it was of its analog in the exhibition, an installation titled

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Flat Field Work #1 (2015). In the piece, Zittel arranges rectangular parcels of activity—hand woven rugs, enamel-painted plywood—on a large black carpet. A gorgeous watercolor in muted tones is pinned, low down, onto the back of a tung-oiled freestanding wall.

So space is freedom. Is that what Nevine Mahmoud had in mind when she placed her aluminum objects on large panels of color? In *Tunnel Chunk with Colored Plane* (2015) a small ring of acoustic foam, cast in rough grey metal, seems to float on the glossy red laminate. The plinth-cum-platform insulates the spiky, abrasive object from the world around it. Nearby, another cast metal ring, this time in bronze and made by Kelly Akashi, was slung on a taut rope between the ceiling and the wall. Akashi's *Ring* (2015) is larger than Mahmoud's—perhaps the size of a car tire—and appears inverted, its gloopy, stalactitic surface forming a hairy core.

Do we need to stop here and remark on the symbology of male and female bodies: the phallogentric forms of traditional sculpture (columns, obelisks, stelae, erect statues) and their female antitheses (discs, balls, rings, tunnels, voids and caverns)? It seems impossible not to, although I don't know what it will achieve, except to allow us to do our semiotic due diligence and then move on. Such Freudian readings seem old-fashioned and, to me, only serve to delimit the meanings of works as incommensurably strange as Mahmoud and Akashi's. Or, for that matter, Kathleen Ryan's—most notably a bunch of giant concrete grapes on a granite pedestal titled *Bacchante* (2015). A bacchante, by the way, being a female follower of Bacchus (or in modern, chauvinistic parlance, a lush.)

Figure oO (2015), by Akashi, is a major work that also uses the primary

forms of the field and the void. A deep, freestanding white wall has two circular holes cut through it, one bigger than the other. The interior lip where these holes intersect provides a shelf for a grotesque burgundy wax cast of a female hand holding a smooth lump of glass. Like Zittel, Akashi seemed to be clearing space—both actual and metaphorical—for a singular expression that is gendered but which is not principally *about* gender. *Figure oO* is rather elegant, even precious, until you walk around the back of the wall and find that it has been defiled by extravagant splashes of off-white liquid, now crusty and dried, that may or may not be intended to look like so many giant wads of cum.

Thank goodness for Amanda Ross-Ho, who wasted no time in abstract evocations or symbolic allusions. Her main contribution to the show, *Untitled Sculpture (ONCE U GO BLACK)* (2015), was a six-foot high pair of female mannequin legs wearing seven pairs of thong underwear, each pulled down slightly more to display a range of grey-scale fabrics, progressing from white to black. A photograph on the exhibition announcement email, presumably the inspiration for Ross-Ho's sculpture, showed a similarly dressed mannequin in a store, with different slogans on each pair of panties. "DON'T BE A PUSSY / EAT ONE," or "IF YOU THINK I'M A BITCH YOU SHOULD TRY ME IN BED." The image is as graphic an example of the appropriation of women's voices by men, of female culture made by men for men, as you're likely to see.

The unavoidable fact is that this was an exhibition curated by a man, an academic patriarch if you will, in a gallery run by (and named for) another man. In her brilliant, internally conflicted exhibition text,

Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer writes, at one point, about the paranoia “inherited from feminism that always asks who and where the power is in any given situation.” “Who’s setting the terms of engagement,” she asks, “who’s making the rules?” Then, a beat later, “Can there be a wrong spokesperson for the right cause?”

White is an intelligent and reflective artist, and these contradictions are not lost on him. That is why he chose that image for the exhibition announcement. Nevertheless, pointing them out is not the same as resolving them. In his essay, bluntly titled “An Argument,” White hauls around such terms as “status,” “power,” “sovereignty,” “dominion,” and “genius.” But the argument itself, though compellingly developed, remains curiously unresolved. He rails against the hegemony of scale, and an art industry which renders exhibitions “tertiary” (behind the “global conferences” of biennials and art fairs) and which reduces once-active viewers to passive spectators. It is the market, he says, that has chiefly benefitted from society’s “alpha-object fetish,” although he places the responsibility for change at all of our feet. How then, by curating an exhibition of large-scale work in a spacious commercial gallery, is he moving these issues forward? Or rather, by curating an exhibition of work by women, is he making it possible for us to “abolish the internal pattern of imposing specific expectations on either gender,” as he says we must?

I suddenly feel like I want to go back in time and see the show all over again, to try and look at this work without thinking about gender, about wombs and phalluses, about misogynist internet trolls. Under the overbearing curatorial conditions of *SOGTFO*, however, that would have been difficult, if not impossible.

Maybe White was deliberately provoking his audience by emulating a defunct model. Was this the single-gender exhibition to end all single-gender exhibitions? Given that it principally drew attention to certain problems by replicating them, perhaps we should hope (with the best will in the world) that this kind of exhibition doesn’t happen again anytime soon.

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Amanda Ross-Ho, *Untitled Sculpture (ONCE U GO BLACK)* (2015), high density foam with urethane coating, latex paint, knit jersey, thread, wood, steel, and formica, 37.5 × 75.5 × 48 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and François Ghebaly, Los Angeles (Photo: Robert Wedemeyer).

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Kathleen Ryan, *Bacchante* (2015), concrete, stainless steel, granite, 46 × 50 × 65 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and François Ghebaly, Los Angeles (Photo: Robert Wedemeyer).

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SOGTFO, François Ghebaly, Installation View. Image courtesy of the artists and François Ghebaly, Los Angeles (Photo: Robert Wedemeyer).

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Nevine Mahmoud, *Tunnel Chunk with Color Plane* (2015), aluminum, laminate, wood, 49 × 12 × 108 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and François Ghebaly, Los Angeles (Photo: Robert Wedemeyer).