

**Reflections from**  
***A Studio of Their Own: the Legacy of the Fresno Feminist Experiment 1970,***  
**Exhibition and Symposium, September, 2009**

**By Genevieve Walker**

*Fresno, California, 1970. Judy Chicago holds auditions for her Feminist Art Class (FAP) at California State University Fresno. She chooses fifteen young women to participate. The program as originally designed lasts one year, attracting press and a graduate student from UCLA who makes a short film documenting the program. By the end of the year the program has moved to CalArts in Los Angeles where it culminates in the exhibition Womanhouse, 1972. The Feminist Art Program carries on at Fresno State, though no longer taught by Chicago. In 2009, Nine of Chicago's original students and one from the following year taught by Joyce Aiken come together for a show of the work they produced during the FAP, the art they currently make, and to participate in a symposium. The women to participate include: Dori Atlantis, Vanalyne Green, Shawnee Wollenman Johnson, Suzanne Lacy, Karen LeCocq, Jan Lester Martin, Chris Rush, Faith Wilding, Nancy Youdelman, and Jacqueline Doumanian from the fourth year of the program.*

As I walked through the small Conley Art Gallery at Fresno State I felt the reverential calm that comes with the presentation of art. Dark corners with illuminated paintings and sculpture made the space eerie yet romantic - a catacomb dotted with altars. The body of work was dramatic, carrying with it a sense of the mystery being explored by the artists. The first images I was confronted with were three snapshots of the "Cunt Cheerleaders" taken by the unofficial historian of the FAP, Dori Atlantis. There were four women in cheerleader costumes, each with a different letter sewn onto her shirt and together spelling the word "cunt." The young faces sketched in charcoal tones looked oblivious to the ramifications of their game; unaware, as if somehow they had mistakenly rearranged themselves into a dirty anagram.

The collaboration between Nancy Youdelman, Dori Atlantis, Jan Lester and Suzanne Lacy titled *I Tried Everything* was perhaps the most melancholic of the work in the gallery, despite being invoked in irony. The piece features a series of photographs in which Youdelman is naked from the waist up measuring her breasts, posing daily with hand written notes on the effects from a gambit of breast augmentation recipes. In one frame she is cupping a breast and craning down as if to coo sweet nothings, another features her half-heartedly pulling an elastic cord meant to augment the pectorals. Below the photos in a glass covered case are the original ads for the products featuring iconic images of buxom blonds with pert features - legs and feet arched in a Betty Page *come-hither* or crossed at the ankle - all dimples and acceptance. Youdelman's face is expressionless, but to me she looked sad. Whether she was sad that she didn't resemble the image of "woman" that the ads were telling her to be or sad because she was trying to make herself into it was left to my appraisal. The image of a naked woman in a moment of private introspection was poignant: she was the woman behind the attempt.

I turned away from this series to face an equally quiet and methodical set of graphite portraits. What struck me at first were the filamentous pencil strokes, like grains in wood they swerved around their dark center. It wasn't until I stepped back from my contemplation of their interior

and craftsmanship did I realize that I was looking at Wilding's larger-than-life renditions of the vulva, more sea-urchin like than genitalia. The young women in the FAP were showing themselves and the public that their genitalia was first and foremost functional, second it was theirs to decide its connotation and third, it was formal - extant - of form and feature. Leslie Batty, a graduate student at Fresno State, said of the work made by the women in the program, "I do not consider it as primarily sexual. Rather, it reads as an assertion... an alternative point-of-view - which prior to this movement, had no voice."

The evening of September 17th, during the exhibition reception, Faith Wilding performed a partial enactment of a *SubRosa* project, a group that she cofounded and works with, called *the International Markets of Flesh*. Sacks of vinyl in deep umber and rust filled with beans or sand were passed around the assembled group in the gallery - representations of body parts, as Wilding discussed the trafficking of human organs on the black market. Faith Wilding's book, *By Our Own Hands* had been one of the first I had picked up on the FAP and it was her voice that has recalled the program in greatest detail over the years. That evening Wilding wore a baseball cap and physician's gown as she encouraged audience members to tell stories of people whom they had known to participate in the selling of organs and later could estimate the worth of their flesh and organs to receive a certificate for that amount.

While I stood holding a jellybean shaped sack next to my liver as Wilding instructed I watched an elaborately dressed and stately woman step from a door just to the left and behind the *SubRosa* performance. She wore a white lace gown and decadent length of pink satin ribbon in her hair. She looked the way Alice might have if she had not been permitted to leave Wonderland for forty years. This was Karen LeCocq about to reenact *Léa's Room*, a *Womanhouse* performance that she had collaborated on with Nancy Youdelman. I passed my "liver" to my neighbor as the *SubRosa* performance came to a conclusion, gripped with the anticipation of witnessing something so rare as LeCocq's performance. When *Womanhouse* opened in Southern California in 1972 Nancy Youdelman and LeCocq created a Victorian era bedroom with a vanity table covered in makeup and jewelry to set the scene for the performance inspired by Colette's novel *Chéri*. The novel depicts an aging courtesan reassessing her life as her beauty fades. In 1972 the young LeCocq sat at the vanity table applying makeup to her face in a slow, deliberate manner, scrutinizing her face, pulling and pushing at her skin. The performance given by a very young woman has a different effect than that of an aging courtesan - one that elicits something rather contrary to the Léa of Colette's novel: a young woman trying to fit the roll of a seasoned courtesan, or a seasoned woman. The video of LeCocq performing *Léa's Room* in 1972 had been playing in the gallery - her eyes were dark and watery, lips slightly parted she seemed on the edge of tears or rage - an edge that an acting coach will try in vain to evoke from students. LeCocq said later at the symposium that the abyss in her stare was no less than a deep depression that had taken her over at that point in her life. A mature Karen LeCocq took her seat at the vanity for the second time. She began to apply her makeup with the same slow, methodical strokes as years before. She pulled at her cheeks and stared back at herself. The audience watched the ethereal presence of her younger self mirroring her movements on the television to her right. It was daring, a frontier that the young women had not been able to approach forty years ago - that of aging.

The event culminated on September 18th with the symposium moderated by Moira Roth during which the audience could ask questions of the artists sitting on the panel. The issues of contemporary feminist art, class, dissension between Chicago and students were all raised during the two-hour discussion. The debate was often heated and each new line of thought remained open as Moira Roth gently encouraged the women to proceed to the next question. It was this way with almost every question - the women on the panel tore it open and were forced to leave it hanging in the interest of time. It was a curious mirror of the seventies movements in a way, breaking ground and leaving the outcome to their audience.

The warm air wafted through Laura Meyer's craftsman style home where the post event celebration was taking place. The back doors were open to the yard and the guests were carrying glasses of white and red wine as they breezed from one room to another. The women who had participated in the symposium sat around a large dining room table signing each other's exhibition catalogues like a bunch of yearbooks being addressed with "have a great summer!"s and "see you next year!"s. Something had been achieved, though it was more than a well planned event and a marathon of speakers and exhibits. It was as if the original program could not have been completed without this addendum years later, something that Judy Chicago could only have dreamed of requiring from her students and naturally they would have achieved it anyway - they had reopened their inquiry for another generation.