

## **On Making the Impossible Possible**

**Artwork presented to CAS Museums through Valeria Napoleone XX**

**Contemporary Art Society, 2016-2024**

**by Helena Reckitt**

That museums across the UK are full of art by dead and almost-dead white men is hardly news. But what measures museums can take to redress systemic bias, especially in today's climate of reduced public funding for the arts, is often less than clear. Now celebrating its eight year, the **Valeria Napoleone XX Contemporary Art Society Scheme** partners with regional museums to acquire significant works by living women artists. Supporting institutions to take concrete steps to redress gender disparity across their collections, it anticipates a future when our art institutions not only engage with, but truly represent, the diversity of UK publics.

During Frieze Week, 2024, curators from **VN XX CAS** partner organisations gathered at Napoleone's elegant High Street Kensington home, sharing reflections on the fund's impact. Speaking in a room installed with artworks from Napoleone's collection, which speak to her taste for dynamic and witty female expression, they explored how XX has been a catalyst for critical reappraisal and institutional change.

For Manchester City Art Gallery, acquiring Berni Searle's photographs *In wake of* (2014) and *Untitled (Red)* (1998) was central to their project of reconsidering the place of female nudes, painted by white men, in their collection. This reappraisal provoked an unprecedented furore and press and social media commentary when, in 2018, Sonia Boyce temporarily removed *In Pursuit of Beauty*, an experience that, said curator Sarah Brown, 'traumatised' the museum. *In wake of* shows the prone, naked artist, covered in coal dust, lying atop a black platform, clasping gold coins. The work commemorates the 2012 Marikana massacre, during which police shot striking mineworkers at close range. Also in Searle's *Color Me* series, the earlier *Untitled (Red)* depicts the artist from shoulder up, sprinkled with paprika-red spices, eyes staring from her otherwise obscured face. The work alludes to the Dutch East India Company's global trade, and ensuing legacies of racialised segregation and oppression in Searle's native South Africa.

The entry of Frieda Joranzo Jaeger's *The Disorder of Desire*, 2022, into the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art in Edinburgh, similarly supported an institutional shift from the white male-dominated canon and its colonial underpinnings. Combining embroidering with oil, the exuberant canvas depicts a car dashboard festooned with flowers and plants. Vernacular forms of artmaking pay tribute to the artist's indigenous heritage, alongside devalued craft and decorative traditions. The work was a centrepiece of the museum's recent rehang prioritising women artists, underscoring how, when it comes to gender representation, as curator Lucy Askew noted, "the dial has definitely shifted."

The first depiction of women of colour to be collected by Norwich Castle Gallery, *Susan, Aarti, Keerthana and Princess, Sunday in Brooklyn*, 2018, by Mexican artist Aliza Nisenbaum, was also the first in the museum to represent same sex adopters. The large Alice Neel-inspired family portrait, which joyfully evokes cross-cultural family life, is a great conversation starter, said curator Rosy Gray, and the work most requested for gallery tours by the learning team.

The acquisition for the Royal Pavilion & Museums Trust in Brighton of feminist artist Mary Kelly's short film, *Antepartum*, 1973, is significant on various counts. Not only did Kelly teach at Brighton Polytechnic, contributing to the city's strong, albeit male-dominated, artist film community, but her depiction of a pregnant stomach at full term preceded her iconic psychoanalytic exploration of the mother-son dyad, *Post-Partum Document*, 1973-1979. Moreover, of the five copies made of *Antepartum*, this is the only one to remain in the UK.

These historical revisions, enacted by curators in Manchester and Edinburgh, Norwich and Brighton, are necessary, given the systemic neglect of women artists, especially those of colour, across UK museums. CAS partners shared statistics of women artists represented in their collections: 7% in Norwich Castle; 8.5% in Manchester Art Gallery's painting collection; 12% in the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art's contemporary holdings, while just 4% in the collection overall.

The contribution of women artists to 'minor' genres, such as drawing, watercolour and ceramics, shows a rather different picture. Here they are more strongly

represented: York Art Gallery ceramics collection includes a noteworthy 50% of work by women, versus 7% across the collection overall. This higher level of activity is not really surprising, however, given these media's historic lower cultural status and economic value. The situation for curators wanting to expand female artists' representation also gets complicated when the conservation requirements for exhibiting works on paper — typically every five years, for six months, as one contributing curator suggested — are factored in.

How to encourage conservation colleagues to reconsider their rules in the pursuit of gender equity animated conversations during the CAS meeting. At the Hunterian in Glasgow, easy-to-open cabinets have expanded the number of works on paper displayed by women artists, pieces curator Dominic Paterson described as “jewels in the crown.” Elsewhere in Scotland, the use of a light-measuring machine at the Scottish National Museum of Modern Art, which assesses the impact of light on fragile works, has enabled conservators to rethink exhibition restrictions. News of this device provoked a flurry of excitement amongst panellists, and requests for further info.

Light-measuring equipment aside, curators were perhaps most animated when reflecting on the public impact of works acquired through XX. At Leeds Art Gallery, viewers gravitated to Martine Syms' *A Pilot for a Show About Nowhere*, its exploration of genres of the pitch and the sitcom resonating with media savvy younger viewers. Similarly, *Private Quarter (Midnight-Midday)*, a three panel work by Iranian artist Maryam Hoseini, became attracted younger visitors to the York Art Gallery. Paired with 'clay paintings' by Black British ceramicist Phoebe Collings-James, Hoseini's evocation of headless bodies in flight evoked urgent concerns with female bodily and political autonomy. For museums run by local councils, whose comms departments seem not to 'get' the specific PR needs of the art world, these works' ability to capture public attention is a boon.

Napoleone's international artworld connections have proved invaluable for CAS curators working in regional contexts, and without internal travel budgets, wanting to broaden their collections' global relevance and reach. Yet despite the careers of some XX artists like Martine Syms taking off, Napoleone is quick to point out that she

is not driven by artworld fashion. Seeing how markets for certain artists and practices rise and fall, she prefers to look to the side of current trends, investing in artists before they receive widespread support, in the hope that they will not give up and become “a hairdresser or a bar tender.” Seeing senior female artists whose work has previously been overlooked receive their due is another source of pride. Above all, Napoleone sees the scheme as a stimulus for change, laying the grounds for collecting communities based on resource-sharing and collaboration.

Presentations ended with a new work currently in development for the Heritage Doncaster. Artist Rachel Horn, who hails from a coal mining family in the region, is making a piece to mark the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UK miners’ strike. Envisaged by curator Neil McGregor as “aspirational, engaging, and energising,” the commission will pay tribute to women from mining communities who, in the depths of economic devastation and political turmoil, found their inner strength and their public voice.

While female artists are certainly under-represented across UK museum collections, the same cannot be said of women working in the industry. The commitment of XX’s predominantly female curatorial collaborators, together with CAS’s powerhouse director Caroline Douglas, and Napoleone herself, give us reason to believe that the future will indeed be female. As Dominic Paterson, one of two male contributors to the afternoon, put it, borrowing words from artist/composer John Cage: What once seemed impossible, might in fact be possible.

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