

# Women, pop art and feminism



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It is only recently that female artists have debunked the patriarchal paradigm of artistic expression and American female artists have a special role in this advance.

The America of the late forties and fifties represented a conservative, pragmatic, industrial and down-to-earth culture that idealized public conformity. However, the 1960's brought days of unbridled idealism, rampant destruction, youthful exuberance and revolt; it was the first time people were willing to openly challenge the norms and were willing to fight for freedom and equality. With the backdrop of the women's right movement, female artists began to express social themes linked to feminism and femininity vis-a-vis the aesthetic of pop art of the 1960's. Although the beginning of pop art takes on a sexist bravado of popular culture, French/American artist Niki de Saint Phalle expresses a complex feminist message in her painting "My Heart Belongs to Marcel". With the use of found objects, color and overall composition, Phalle crudely depicts the pressures of women in society and seeks to present the pathos of chauvinism.

The painting echoes the image of a box of chocolates. Phalle has created a heart-shaped papier-mache image edged with lace. Without considering the found objects placed inside the slightly uneven and imperfect heart, the painting espouses a romantic, feminine and soft quality. However, within this girly image, we find readymade objects which starkly juxtapose the inviting figure of the laced heart. Populated with skulls, spiders, lizards, plastic babies and a devilish mustached man; the seemingly innocent heart presents a more complicated reality.

The use of these manufactured plastic toys expresses an unwavering connection to the elements of pop seen in the Flux boxes movements of the 1960's and also in artist such as Daniel Spoerri (Kischkas Breakfast) or Arman (Madison Ave. ). These artists, just like Phalle, create art through utilizing of mass-produced visual commodities created out of an industrialized/capitalist society. Phalle takes these plastic toys and removes them from their context, while combining them with other objects to illicit contemplation. It is not the object itself that creates the art, but the isolation and composition of the object that generate meaning.

The collection of objects transmits not only a sense of eerie discomfort, but also represent themes specific to the feminine. At the locus of the heart we see the image of a plastic woman in fetal position, almost protecting herself from the encroaching dangers. Interestingly enough, these ' encroaching dangers' aren't limited to the daunting bearded face on the right, nor the spider crawling near her head. The plethora of babies hovering around her head seems to be even more suffocating as they are at closest proximity. The reason behind placing of these eyeless disturbing babies alongside other, more blatantly menacing images, brings forth a message of femininity.

As the woman hides and covers herself from the encroaching babies, it seems as if she is rejecting the concept of motherhood. It is not a coincidence that the woman herself is in the fetal position. The concept of femininity and motherhood are things that have consistently been linked. In conformitive society (such as that of America during the 1940-1950) women's role was limited to her role as a mother. However, with this <https://assignbuster.com/women-pop-art-and-feminism/>

imagery, it seems as the woman is rejecting motherhood; bringing forth the question of the female role in society. In other words, as society attempts to mold the feminine into the simple and passive image of the heart, the tumultuous and difficult reality inside proves to be violent, intricate and disturbing.

A fleshy, skin colored paint covers the entirety of the surface; consolidating the seemingly unrelated objects into one image. This skin-like pinkish color exudes the feeling of a womb; reiterated by the fetal-like woman in the center. A hole at the left curvature of the heart drips blood-like paint down to the bottom of the canvas. . In fact, while creating the painting, Phael placed a bag of dark red paint behind the papier-mache heart and shot a bullet through it. This violent act which aided in the creation of “ My Heart Belongs to Marcells” recalls the use of atypical techniques also utilized by artist such as Richard Serra in his work “ Splash Piece” in which molten lead was violently thrown against the wall and floor.

With the skin-pink and blood-red paint, this piece truly exudes a feeling of flesh, and bodily fluids. The bleeding perforation presents a wound in the feminine heart which recalls imagery of menstruation as a reiteration of the crude realities of the female. As the papier-mache heart attempts to simply symbolize the romantic image of the feminine; within this heart we are exposed to a fleshy, bloody, unattractive reality. My Heart Belongs to Marcel” appropriates the simple image of the heart, and complicates it with a web of materials.

It is no coincidence that Niki de Saint Phalle titles this piece after another French artist, Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp, a pioneer in 20th century Dada movement, questioned the notion of art by presenting readymades as art. With Phalle's use of readymade plastic toys, there is a clear inspiration rooted in Duchamp's "anti-art" ideals that sought to question the concept of art. However, there is also a feminist message behind the Duchamp inspiration.

By titling her work after one of the most influential men of the post-modern art movement, it is possible to read her social commentary on patriarchal art structures as her work [the feminine], belongs to "Marcel" [the masculine]. Once again, the oppressive relationship between male and female comes to light. In conclusion, Niki de Saint Phalle creatively crafts a feminine piece which grapples with the concept of femininity in the modern world.