

Nina Katchadourian



A look at 21c Museum Hotel's latest exhibit, 'The Future is Female,' with curator Alice Gray Stites

By Sara Havens, November 21, 2016.

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The moniker "The Future is Female" first appeared on T-shirts in the early 1970s as a promotion for the first women's bookstore in New York City, Labyris Books. It was a statement the feminist movement rallied behind, and it has resurfaced throughout the decades, most recently as an empowering affirmation of women's rights.

Alice Gray Stites, museum director and chief curator at 21c Museum Hotel, loved the powerful, succinct message so much that she decided to construct a contemporary art exhibition around it using work from the museum's permanent collection. Although the artists come from various backgrounds and nationalities, there is one constant: They're all female.



Alice Gray Stites

Insider met up with Stites to walk through the exhibit and hear her reasoning and affection for each piece in the show.

There are many themes and broad tangents in the exhibit, which sprawls throughout the hotel lobby, gallery and hallway toward the restrooms. The main purpose, however, is to investigate the ongoing influence of feminist art from the 1970s.

“Identity in art started in the ’70s with the help of feminism,” says Stites. “This exhibit examines that from both a conceptual and craft-based perspective and touches on identity, mythology, the environment, consumerism — all through radical transformations of materials, myths and art-making.”

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Gone are the masculine guns and bullets from the [previous show by Al Farrow](#), and now a hodgepodge of mediums and messages from different artists hang on the walls to incite conversation. We wondered if going from one extreme to the other was intentional or just coincidence.

“What that shows is the museum programming is trying to explore the most important issues that are shaping all of our lives,” Stites says. “We have the privilege of working with contemporary art, and we have a responsibility to address what is happening in the world today.”

And while this show features some of the best female artists creating today, it is by no means soft, unassuming or uncontroversial. Several pieces, including Alison Saar’s “Hades D.W.P.,” touch on forced displacement, and others, like Kathleen McQuade Olliges’ “Supply and Demand” and Frances Goodman’s “Medusa,” examine society’s obsession with beauty and appeasing the outside world.

“Supply and Demand” by Kathleen McQuade Olliges | Photo by Sara Havens
Olliges’ piece in the show is situated (purposely, says Stites) directly outside the men’s restroom. “Supply and Demand” is a full-sized female mannequin with latex and silicone nipples adhered all over her body.

“It examines the struggle of women to feed themselves when they’re constantly trying to feed others,” Stites explains. “The female is typically called upon to satisfy the needs, the wants and the hungers of families, friends, lovers, etc.”

Goodman’s “Medusa,” meanwhile, plays upon female vanity. Large tentacles jet out from the wall, and as you get closer, you notice each one is made up of thousands of acrylic nails. This piece relates back to a construct popular in ’70s feminist art, the “male gaze.”

“Goodman’s obsessive craft process references our own obsession with beauty and supports a consumer industry that preys upon vulnerabilities we have about how we look,” says Stites. “Medusa’s weapon was her stare — she turned her victims to stone with one look into their eyes.”

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Another interesting and interactive piece is Nina Katchadourian’s “Under Pressure,” a video installation she shot in an airplane bathroom that depicts two women singing along to the title song by David Bowie and Freddie Mercury. The artist uses whatever she can find on the plane — from napkins to scarves — and films various characters doing what one might call “bathroom karaoke.”

“There’s a lot of humor, but there’s also a lot of tension depicted by her facial expressions,” Stites notes. “She’s intently hostile toward her double.”

Monica Cook’s “Phosphene” is one of the main pieces in the exhibit, a life-sized sculpture of a decomposing man and woman crashing through layers of glass of a car windshield. The windshield acts as a gateway between life and death, and the couple appears to be submerged in water, since barnacles and sea flora are growing all around.

The bodies on the top of the glass are somewhat lifelike — with skin still intact. But the other side of the glass reveals only skeletal remains.

“We’re confronted again with the power of water to both destroy and preserve life,” says Stites. “The artist is interested in the cyclical nature of birth and death, and she also uses a lot of unusual materials.”

Along with glass, plastic and ceramic teeth, Cook lists blood, urine and bleach among the materials in the sculpture as well.

Stites suggests, especially with this piece, you see it up close and personal to truly get the three-dimensional experience it offers.

“The Future is Female,” which includes works from three local artists as well, continues through June of 2017. It marks the second exhibition organized in honor of 21c’s 10th anniversary.