

**Women without Pathos**

By Eleanor Antin

I agree with Linda Nochlin that the question "Why have there been no great women artists?" is a useless one and that there are very real questions to be considered about the relation of women to the arts. Just now I consider myself something of an authority on the position of women as subject matter, having just mounted a show of object biographies called "Portraits of Eight New York Women." I think my experiences with that show have some relevance to the discussion.

The show was conceived from the beginning as an argument against Flaubert, Tolstoi, Dostoyevski, etc. With the exception of Defoe and Ibsen, we have always been losers. It has been part of woman's glamour as an artistic subject that she was seen as pathetic, passive, in short—the superb victim. Most artists are gentlemen and treat us with compassion—liberals are always compassionate—but their verdict is inexorable. Anna Karenina doesn't leave her up-tight husband to become commissioner of railroads. She leaves only when she finds another host to live off. Tolstoi calls that bizarre practicality a romantic nature. Flaubert may say he is Madame Bovary, but *she* never locked herself into a room to write unpopular novels or went to court to defend them. I was determined to present women without pathos or helplessness. Since a life style is the ability to recognize in the morning the same person who went to bed at night, it can be said to be a person's most important decision. My women had all chosen life styles independent of men's. It is true that some life styles proved more successful in practice than others, but they were all interesting and complex enough to be worth the try. Finally I deliberately chose styles whose linguistic structures were ambiguous, because a puzzle is harder to love than a fact.

My sculpture is made of brand-new American manufactured consumer goods. In my previous show ("California Lives") the portraits were done with objects purchased in discount centers. California is pathetic. It is Nixon's world, lethal and very sad. I listened to Jeannie Sealey records for months while doing the show. And all my Californians were pathetic, men as well as women. I suppose one might say I was democratic in this. As in Chekhov. They all sat around while the redwoods fell down. For "Portraits of Eight New York Women" I deliberately chose expensive, shiny, glamorous objects. I chose bright colors, reds and pinks. And as much chrome as possible. I didn't want the viewer to come too close. We women have had enough love. Frank O'Hara said once that he loved Marilyn Monroe. Protect us from such love! If Monroe hadn't had yellow teeth or if her body hadn't been deformed, would he have loved her then?