

# Feminist Abstract Art—A Political Viewpoint

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There are many articles written on feminist art which try to pinpoint and define a feminist sensibility. Few of these articles go beyond the recognition that feminist art is based on the personal experiences of women by beginning to question its larger political implications and the role it plays in feminist revolution. Most articles originating from the art world tend to be formal descriptive attempts at documenting what women are doing, and do not attempt a feminist analysis of function and meaning.

In a reactionary escape from formalist criticism, most movement writing on feminist art deals with political issues, but lacks any real understanding of the creative process, how it functions for the artist and how it affects form and content. Without such an understanding it is impossible to evaluate the work as art. While feminist poets and writers comment on each other's work and write of their own processes, we visual artists tend to remain silent and let others do the writing for us. Our silence contributes to a lack of dialogue between artist and audience, to the lack of criticism from a feminist perspective, and ultimately to the misinterpretation of our work.

In this article I wish to focus on abstract art and show that it can have a feminist basis and therefore be political. Feminists are not only people to attempt political or revolutionary art, but because certain ideas and issues occur over and over, they are of interest to us and worth exploring. I will focus on one area of abstract art by discussing concepts of marking and language in feminist drawing and painting—to show its origin, meaning, and political potential.

In "Prime Time: Art and Politics"<sup>1</sup> Alexa Freeman and Jackie MacMillan look at how art is viewed in this capitalist, patriarchal society and criticize activists for reacting too quickly and overlooking the revolutionary potential of art. However, they in turn react to male establishment myths about abstract (non-representational) art and exclude it from feminist and political potential. They view abstract art as private expression which is not understandable or analyzable to the audience, and therefore irrelevant to feminist political goals. Thus they incorrectly see elitism as a pre-condition of abstract art, rather than realizing that this is how abstract art has been used by men as a defense mechanism against the alienation of their own capitalist system; that as well as fur-

thering the myth of artist as alienated and isolated genius, abstract art has offered an illusion of objectivity. Such notions suggest that the content of one's work can be separated from one's political beliefs. By sponsoring international exhibitions showing apolitical abstract paintings by former Communist Party members, the C.I.A. (via the Museum of Modern Art) has sought to impress other nations with the cultural freedom of the U.S.A. The way in which Abstract Expressionist art was defined and developed by the artists and then used by others to further cold war politics in the fifties is only one example of the manipulation of abstract art to create the illusory separation of art and politics.<sup>2</sup> Thus when women continue to respond to abstract art as "apolitical," they are reinforcing and maintaining myths established by men.

The Freeman/MacMillan article is typical in its analysis of art and politics. Abstract art has become taboo for most artists who consider themselves political feminists. Because of the history outlined above, it is difficult to determine abstract painting's relationship to feminist ideology. There are radical feminists who are making abstract art. Radical feminism operates from the belief that women as a class are oppressed, and that a mass political women's movement is necessary to overthrow male supremacy.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, we might ask, how are the visions of radical feminists analyzed and portrayed in this art?

It is necessary to break down the myths and fears surrounding abstract art and make it understandable. Women—artists and non-artists—need to talk about art, and talking about abstract art need not be more difficult than discussing portraits, nudes, vaginas, or whatever. Every work of art is understandable on many different levels. It is by talking about our work and work processes that we will not only begin to develop a new language for interpreting abstract art, but also to integrate this work with society. This language, which I see evolving from consciousness-raising techniques, will be able to be shared with any woman, regardless of class background. For artists, such a dialogue with the audience is essential, as it offers valuable feedback for the development of our art.

I want to reclaim abstract art for women and transform it on our own terms. It is interesting to note that much of women's past creativity, as

well as the art by women of non-western cultures, has been abstract. I'm thinking of the incredible baskets, pottery, quilts, afghans, lace and needlework women have created. Many of the motifs used were based on "the stitch" itself. The repetition and continuity of the stitch or weaver formed the individual shape and also the pattern resulting from its repetition. Usually these motifs and patterns were abstract and geometric. Patricia Mainardi points out that they had specific meaning for the women who made them, and in a sense formed a visual language in themselves:

In designing their quilts, women not only made beautiful and functional objects, but expressed their own convictions on a wide variety of subjects in a language for the most part comprehensible only to other women. In a sense, this was a secret language among women, for as the story goes, there was more than one man of Tory political persuasion who slept unknowingly under his wife's 'Whig Rose' quilt. Women named quilts for their religious beliefs...or their politics—at a time when women were not allowed to vote. The 'Radical Rose' design, which women made during the Civil War, had a black center for each rose and was an expression of sympathy with the slaves.<sup>4</sup>

As we examine some contemporary abstract art by women, it is important to develop a sense of identity and connection with our own past creativity rather than that of the oppressor who has claimed "fine art" and "abstract art" for himself. In fact, the patriarchal putdown of "decorative" traditional art and "craft" has outright racist, classist, and sexist overtones. Elizabeth Weatherford states:

Art history assigns creative products to two categories—fine arts and crafts—and then certifies as legitimate only the fine arts, thereby excluding those creative traditions of primitive people, peasants, women, and many other groups outside the mainstream of Western history.<sup>5</sup>

Until recently, decorative art, or craft techniques and materials, have been valid only as sources for contemporary male artists. While women working with these ideas, techniques, and materials have been ignored (Ann Wilson first painted on quilts in 1958) or put down for doing "women's work," men like Shields, Oldenburg, Stella, and Noland are hailed as innovative. But times have changed. Today many female artists are connecting to a long line of creativity by proudly referring to women's traditional arts in their own work. They are recording the ritual of women's artmaking both in the past and the present, thereby reflecting a feminist concern not only with the end product but with the daily process and function of mak-

ing art. Sewing techniques and materials as both process and content are used in a variety of ways in the abstract works of Sarah Draney, Pat Lasch, Nina Yankowitz, Paula Tavins, Patsy Norvell, Rosemary Mayer, and many other women. Barbara Kruger says that she first learned to crochet and sew when she decided that these techniques could be used to make art.<sup>6</sup> For women, the meaning of sewing and knotting is "connecting"—connecting the parts of one's life, and connecting to other women—creating a sense of community and wholeness. Other women, drawing on women's traditional arts, make specific painterly reference to decoration and craft. Miriam Schapiro utilizes remnants of fabric, lace, and ribbon along with handkerchiefs and aprons in large collages, thus making the very material of women's lives the subject of her art. Joyce Kozloff and Mary Gregoriadis explore decoration as fine art, basing their paintings on the abstract patterning of Islamic architecture and tiles, Tantric art, Caucasian rugs, and Navaho weaving.

The way many women talk about their work is revealing, in that it often denies formal art rhetoric. Women tend to talk first about their personal associations with the piece, and then about how these are implemented through visual means; in other words, how successful the piece is in its own terms. This approach to art and to discussing art has developed from the consciousness-raising experience. It deals primarily with the work itself, what it says and how it says it—rather than with an imposed set of esthetic beliefs.

In her excellent catalogue introduction to "Changes," an exhibition by Betsy Damon and Carole Fisher, Kathryn C. Johnson comments that "intent" is most important when defining feminist art. She states that it is "a powerful oneness of subject and content" that makes certain work feminist:

...Their work both is and tells about the pain of their life experiences. It is about pain and is painful, but does not present woman as passive victim. The pain is presented with deep understanding of its sources and effects, and the anger which follows confrontation with the hurt.<sup>7</sup>

Fisher writes:

Betsy looked at the work and recognized the fact that I worked to survive, to keep from growing crazy, and to keep the pain from becoming too great. She recognized the pain in my work instantly! This was something I had only come to recently recognize and acknowledge in my work. Like many women in our culture, I had become adept at hiding and covering my pain. I had gotten all the messages that to be vulnerable in our culture is to be weak and despised.<sup>8</sup>

It is this "oneness of subject and content" that carries their work through feminist consciousness beyond the personal to the political. It is also present in abstract paintings that seem superficially more related to the male modernist tradition than to women's creativity in that they involve the physically expressive manipulation of paint on a two-dimensional surface.

In much of this work the reoccurring stitch of women's traditional artmaking becomes the repetitive mark, taking on a new form as a "visual diary." Such works are daily records of thoughts and are used as such by the artists. Just as the weaver continues from day to day, from one physical and psychic location to another, materials and dyes changing slightly, irregularities and tension showing, the painted marks also reveal daily emotional changes and tensions. They are a record of present feeling, a ritual giving in to the repetitive gesture, a language to reveal self—a woman's mantra.

Jenny Snider's nervous lines recall ancient Chinese calligraphy, which has both a letter/character reference and a body/figure reference. Her drawings are made with and are about her nervousness and vulnerability. She "is" the mark, the line. As the marks are repeated and contained in different spaces (usually grids or rectangles suggesting fabric, rooms and houses), the quality and feeling of the line changes and she becomes more comfortable in some spaces than in others. She explores her self-image and feelings about her body in relationship to other people and spaces. Snider describes these works as "figurative." To me, it is the mark and its repetition that is most important. Her works are figurative in the sense that Chinese calligraphy is figurative—in having a direct body reference. Works are sometimes combined or used interchangeably with the markings, reinforcing Snider's commitment to the diaristic mode. As she says, "The words and lines come from the same psychological place and gesture and are not intended to describe or explain what the drawings are in terms of images—but rather express the fact that they come from a nervous hand and a yakking heart." Phrases such as "little sounds arose (and it showed)"; "Well, for one thing, never step on broken glass"; and "Remember when we saw the ocean? It was just like this, wasn't it?" tell where the drawing is coming from and what the drawing is about.

Louise Fishman's paintings also function as a place for personal confrontation and as a statement directed towards other women. Earlier, Fishman ripped up her old paintings and reconnected them by sewing and knotting them together with fragile thread. Her past was used to make a statement about her present. The strips and connecting thread formed loose grids, transformed in later work to a series of strokes or marks repeated across the page or canvas or

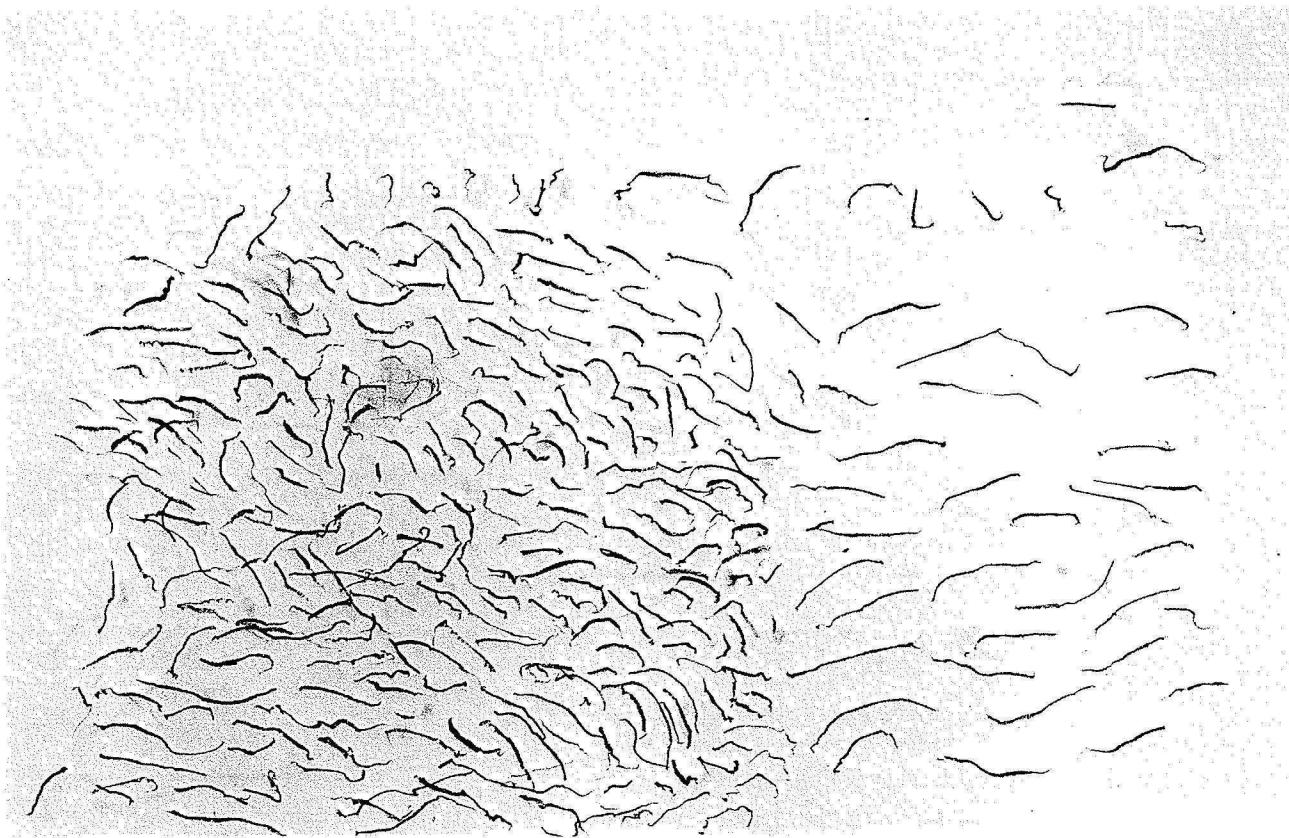
within the confines of a "particular felt shape" (a circle or a piece of irregularly cut masonite). The marks of paint, layered on top of each other, lead eventually to a rich sensuous surface. The top layer usually consists of strong marks holding the partially revealed undermarks to the painting surface—feelings revealed and hidden. Fishman has always talked about her work in terms of hiding, guilt, vulnerability, anger, and personal individuation.

In a seven-panel reversible painting on unstretched canvas, Fishman deals with her feelings about her mother, also an artist. One side of each canvas is painted with calm strokes, while on the other side the marks explode into intensely scrawled letters reading "A letter to my mother about painting." Another canvas has the star of David and the words "I am a Jewish working-class dyke" scratched into the surface. Just as consciousness raising leads to political awareness; this work moves from the personal into the political. Titled *Angry Jill, Angry Djuna, Angry Paula, Angry Sarah*, and so on...they seem to be painted with the anger. When she made these "angry paintings" Fishman said that all she could feel was her rage. When she looked around at other women, she saw that they were crippled by their anger too. These paintings were made to force women to confront it rather than letting it turn inward and become self-destructive. Grouped together as a wall of women's anger, the paintings show a tremendous amount of energy that can now be redirected towards feminist creativity and revolution.

These women as well as others (Joan Snyder, Carla Tardi, and Pat Steir, to name a few) have used words and marks fairly interchangeably as abstract gestures with concrete feminist meanings. Words are marks and marks are words; their repetition becomes not only an interior monologue but also a dialogue with other women. Like Damon and Fisher, these artists make individual feeling and experience the subject of their work, while the content deals with the difficulties and ambiguities of being a feminist artist in a patriarchal society.

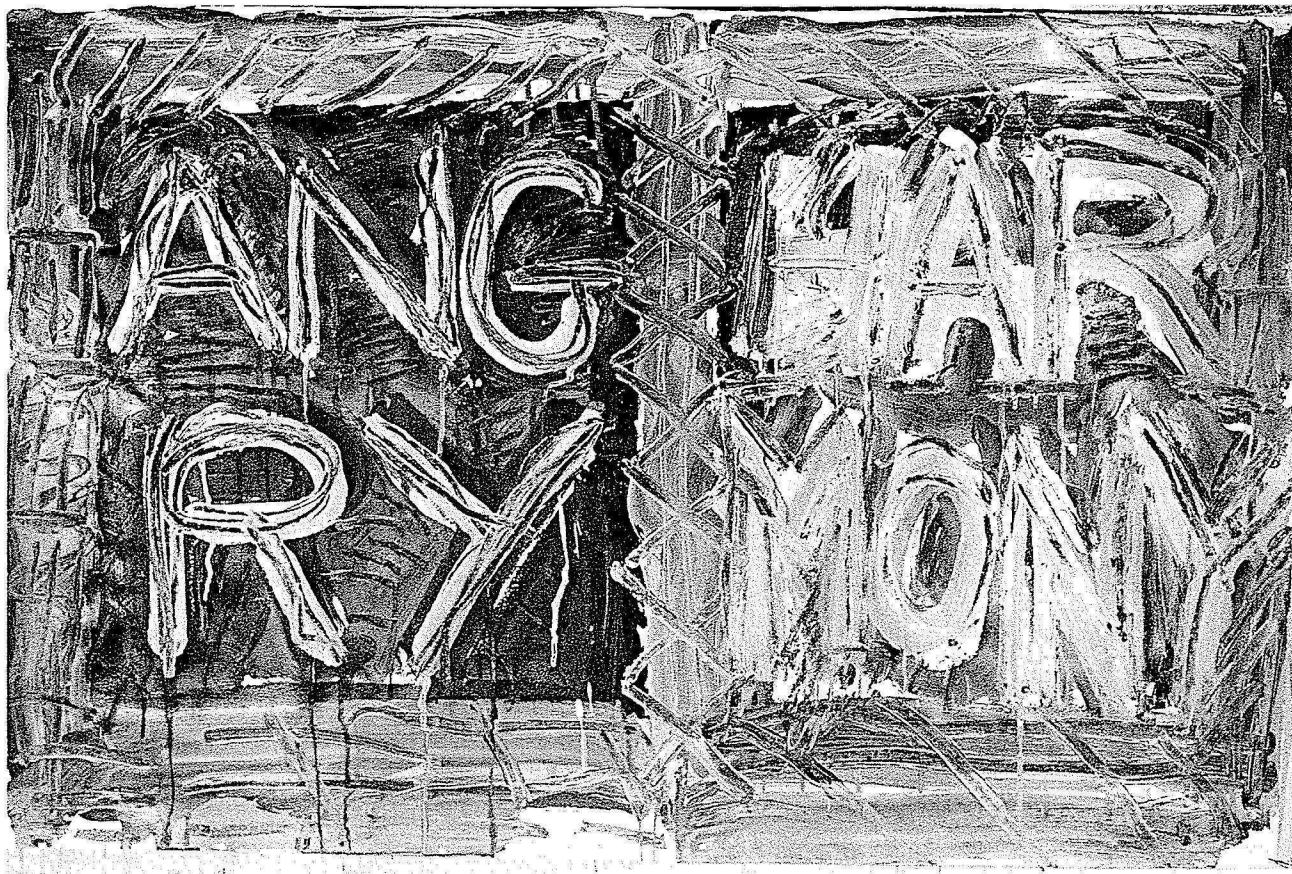
Their painting surfaces are often violated or mutilated; cut, gouged, ripped, scratched, or torn. The reversal of the usual additive process of painting refers to the violation of the traditional painting surface and also to the physical and psychic violation of women. The thick paint applied with a palette knife in Fishman's work, for instance, acts both as poultice for wounds and cement for holding self together. In Joan Snyder's recent work the marks, cuts and burning combine with words and color to make a passionate statement about sexuality.

This work is certainly political. Yet Freeman and MacMillan, in their attempt to distinguish protest from political art, to show that specific forms are more conducive to one or another,



Above: Jenny Snider. *Split Scribble*. 1972. Pencil on paper.  
24" X 38". (Photo: Jenny Snider.)

Below: Louise Fishman. *Angry Harmony*. 1970. Acrylic and  
pastel on paper. 30" X 40". (Photo: Sarah Whitworth.)



still ignore the political potential of abstraction.<sup>9</sup> They accept male definitions of what art is, and do not deal with the evolution of a feminist creative process or feminist art forms. Theirs is a reformist approach to a revolutionary endeavor.

I am reminded of Andrea Dworkin's "afterword"—"The Great Punctuation Typography Struggle"—in her book *Woman Hating*, where she explains how the text was altered against her will by the publisher's insistence on upper-case letters and standard punctuation. She had wanted the book to be as empty of convention as possible, to create a new form that would merge with the content.

reading a text which violates standard form forces one to change mental sets in order to read. there is no distance. the new form, which is in some ways unfamiliar, forces one to read differently—not to read about different things, but to read in different ways.

to permit writers to use forms which violate convention just might permit writers to develop forms which would teach people to think differently: not to think about different things, but to think in different ways. that work is not permitted.<sup>10</sup>

The fact that innovative form is so feared by the male establishment shows that like content it has a power of its own. If our lives and our art are connected, and if "the personal is political" in the radical sense, then we cannot separate the content of our work from the form it takes.

As abstract artists, we need to develop new abstract forms for revolutionary art.

The women's work I've discussed here, and I include my own, is moving in this direction. We are not yet there. Hopefully, as we create art within the context of other women's art, and within the context of evolving feminist theory, we will develop a new visual language. Art in transition is political, for it both *is* our development and *describes* our development. In a sense we are coming out through our art, and the work itself is a record of the ongoing process of developing a feminist esthetic ideology.

1. Alexa Freeman and Jackie MacMillan, "Prime Time: Art and Politics," *Quest: A Feminist Quarterly* (Summer, 1975).
2. Eva Cockcroft, "Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War," *Artforum* (June, 1974).
3. Brooke, "The Retreat to Cultural Feminism," in *Feminist Revolution*, ed. Redstockings (New York, 1975).
4. Patricia Mainardi, "Quilts: The Great American Art," *The Feminist Art Journal* (Winter, 1973).
5. Elizabeth Weatherford, "Craft for Art's Sake," *Ms. Magazine* (May, 1973).
6. *Ibid.*
7. Kathryn C. Johnson, catalogue introduction to "Changes," exhibition by Betsy Damon and Carole Fisher at the College of St. Catherine (St. Paul, Minn., 1976).
8. *Ibid.*
9. Freeman and MacMillan, *op. cit.*
10. Andrea Dworkin, *Woman Hating* (New York, 1974).

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Joan Snyder. *Small Symphony for Women II*. 1976. Oil and mixed media on canvas. 24" X 72". (Photo: Libby Turnock.)

