

Guerrilla Girls in Fort Myers: Gorilla-masked activists show feminist work at FSW

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A promotional image for the exhibit "Guerrilla Girls: Rattling Cages" at Bob Rauschenberg Gallery in south Fort Myers. (Photo: Special to The News-Press)

Frida Kahlo is on the phone.

No, it's not the famous Mexican artist — *that* Frida Kahlo died in 1954. This is another female artist — an anonymous one who uses Kahlo's name and wears a furry gorilla mask whenever she appears as a member of the Guerrilla Girls (<https://www.guerrillagirls.com/>).

All members of that New York-based activist group wear gorilla masks and use the names of famous female artists for public appearances. That's what gives its members — many who are women with art careers of their own — the freedom to expose sexism and racism in Hollywood and the art world.

"Early on, we decided to be anonymous because the art world is such a small place," Kahlo says in a phone interview with The News-Press. "We really didn't feel like we could actually criticize the art world without repercussions to our careers."

"Early on, it was self-protective. ... But it soon became a source of our power."



Kahlo has referred to her gorilla mask as a "super power." It gives her the ability to open up and say what needs to be said.

"If you have to face a difficult situation or a difficult person," she says, "I suggest you put a mask on. You'll be surprised what comes out of your mouth."

Kahlo and The Guerrilla Girls have been saying controversial things and speaking "truth to power" since 1985. Now the feminist collective is the subject of a new art exhibit at [Florida SouthWestern State College's](https://www.fsw.edu/) [Bob Rauschenberg Gallery](http://www.rauschenberggallery.com/) (<http://www.rauschenberggallery.com/>) in south Fort Myers.

"I've certainly followed them for many years," says gallery director Jade Dellinger. "They were a force to be



One of the Guerrilla Girls' most famous posters criticized The Metropolitan Museum of Art for its lack of diversity in 1989. (Photo: Special to The News-Press)

The famous group has been waging "gorilla warfare" on art institutions since the mid-80s, including a notorious poster campaign from 1989: An image of a nude woman wearing a gorilla mask and reclining beneath the provocative question, "Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?" The poster went on to say that fewer than 5 percent of The Metropolitan Museum of Art's artists were women at the time, while 85 percent of its nude art featured the female form.

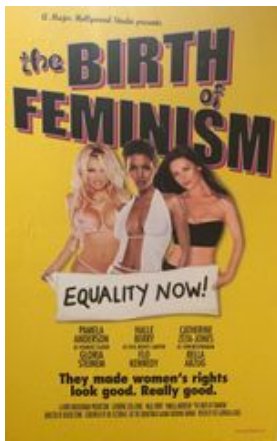
"We went and counted the number of women artists and the number of nude female figures and paintings," Kahlo says, "to sort of see that it's much easier to get into the Metropolitan Museum if you're a naked female in a painting than if you're a female artist."

Other poster and sticker campaigns have pointed out more shortcomings when it comes to diversity in the art world: The image of a segmented dollar bill to show the difference in pay for female artists (one-third of what male artists make), a promotional poster for an imaginary Hollywood movie called "The Birth of Feminism" (starring Pamela Anderson as feminist leader Gloria Steinem and Halle Berry as civil rights lawyer Flo Kennedy) and a re-imagined award called The Anatomically Correct Oscar ("He's white & male, just like the guys who win!").

That last piece shows the Guerrilla Girls have been taking on sexism and racism in Hollywood long before the current #TimesUp, #MeToo and #OscarsSoWhite movements.

"In 2002, we started putting up billboards about diversity in Hollywood," Kahlo says. "So we redesigned [the Oscar statue] to sort of look like a middle-aged film director who was losing his hair and gaining weight [laughs]."

The Rauschenberg Gallery exhibit features all those posters and more — many of them blown up much bigger than the originals. In the 80s and 90s, Dellinger explains, the members of the Guerrilla Girls were limited to whatever they could print at a local Kinko's — and they'd show up to do the copying job wearing their signature gorilla masks, too.



The Guerrilla Girls created a fake poster for a Hollywood movie championing feminist heroes. (Photo: *Special to The News-Press*)

The group had originally considered wearing ski masks to hide their identities as they pasted posters on city streets, walls and windows near their targets, but a mix-up of the words “gorilla” and “guerrilla” led to them using gorilla masks instead. And the Guerrilla Girls were on their way to notoriety.

“We wanted to interject some discomfort into the world of art,” Kahlo says. “So we claimed that we were guerrillas and we were infiltrating the art world. We put up a couple of posters, and they were really very successful and everybody started to talk about it.

“We wanted to be freedom fighters in the art world, and we thought that would get everyone’s attention.”



This 1985 Guerrilla Girls poster showed the difference in pay between male and female artists. (Photo: *Guerrilla Girls*)

It certainly did. Thirty three years later, Kahlo says, the Guerrilla Girls have made a difference in the art world, with more women and minorities represented in galleries and museums everywhere. Now the group has been taking aim at another problem: The influence of money and billionaire art collectors on the idea of what is and isn’t art.

The Rauschenberg Gallery exhibit keeps that Guerrilla Girls tradition alive, including an interactive piece inviting people to write down their own complaints about the art world, museums and even Rauschenberg Gallery (a gallery that has done its share to spotlight women artists, including exhibits from Yoko Ono and Ann Hamilton). A 16-foot chalkboard prompts visitors with this introduction: “I’m not a feminist, but if I were, this is what I’d complain about.”

That interactive art piece has appeared at many Guerilla Girls exhibits, Kahlo says, including those in New York, Ireland, Poland, France and Brazil. “It’s become one of our signature pieces, and it’s interesting because it becomes a little time capsule of a time and a place. ... Each one of them is unique.”

The exhibit’s Jan. 17 opening comes at a particularly good time. Amidst the ongoing #TimesUp and #Resist movements, there’s this weekend’s Women’s March with marches happening nationwide, including one happening at 11 a.m. Sunday in downtown Fort Myers.

“The issues that are addressed in the work of the Guerilla Girls are, sadly, issues that continue to be relevant,” Dellinger says.



A promotional image for the exhibit "Guerrilla Girls: Rattling Cages" at Bob Rauschenberg Gallery in south Fort Myers. (Photo: Special to The News-Press)

In other words: The Guerrilla Girls still have work to do. And Kahlo says they plan to do just that — in gorilla masks, of course.

"Anonymity is something that's constitutionally protected," Kahlo says. "If you look into the history of the American republic and all of our rebellions, anonymity has always been a condition of speaking truth to power. And there's also the American literary tradition of anonymous masked avengers."

Kahlo hopes their example continues to lead the way and inspires more people to take a look at their cultural institutions — movies, art museums, whatever — and speak out against sexism, racism and other issues.

"Diversity doesn't just happen," Kahlo says. "It's something we have to work at."

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If you go

What: "Guerilla Girls: Rattling Cages Since 1985" exhibit

When: Jan. 17-March 23. Opening night includes a lecture by FSW Humanities professor Dr. Wendy Chase at 6 p.m. and a public reception from 7-8:30 p.m.

Where: Bob Rauschenberg Gallery at Florida SouthWestern State College, 8099 College Parkway S.W., Building L, south Fort Myers

Admission: Free

Info: 489-9313 or [rauschenberggallery.com](http://www.rauschenberggallery.com) (<http://www.rauschenberggallery.com/>)

