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Guerrillas IN OUR MIDST

'Guerrilla Girls: Rattling Cages Since 1985' is on exhibit at Bob Rauschenberg Gallery

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BY NANCY STETSON



HERE'S A FRIENDLY LITTLE POP quiz for you: grab a piece of paper, and in the next three minutes, see how many artists you can name.

Living, dead — doesn't matter. Just list them, off the top of your head. Don't Google them, don't use the internet.

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Don't list the Sunday painter down the street or a dabbler, but people who have made a career of making art.

You may have seen their work in a museum or in the pages of a book or art magazine.

... OK, time's up.

Look at your list.

How many of those artists are women?

One? Two? Five?

None?

OK, here's another challenge. Take five minutes — heck, take 10 — and name as many women artists you can.

Still stymied?

Can't name as many women as men?

Not surprising.

That's because even now in the 21st century, women — and artists of color — are exhibited in disproportionately lower numbers than white men.

If you look at art museums and galleries, you would think that the art world is overwhelmingly white and male.

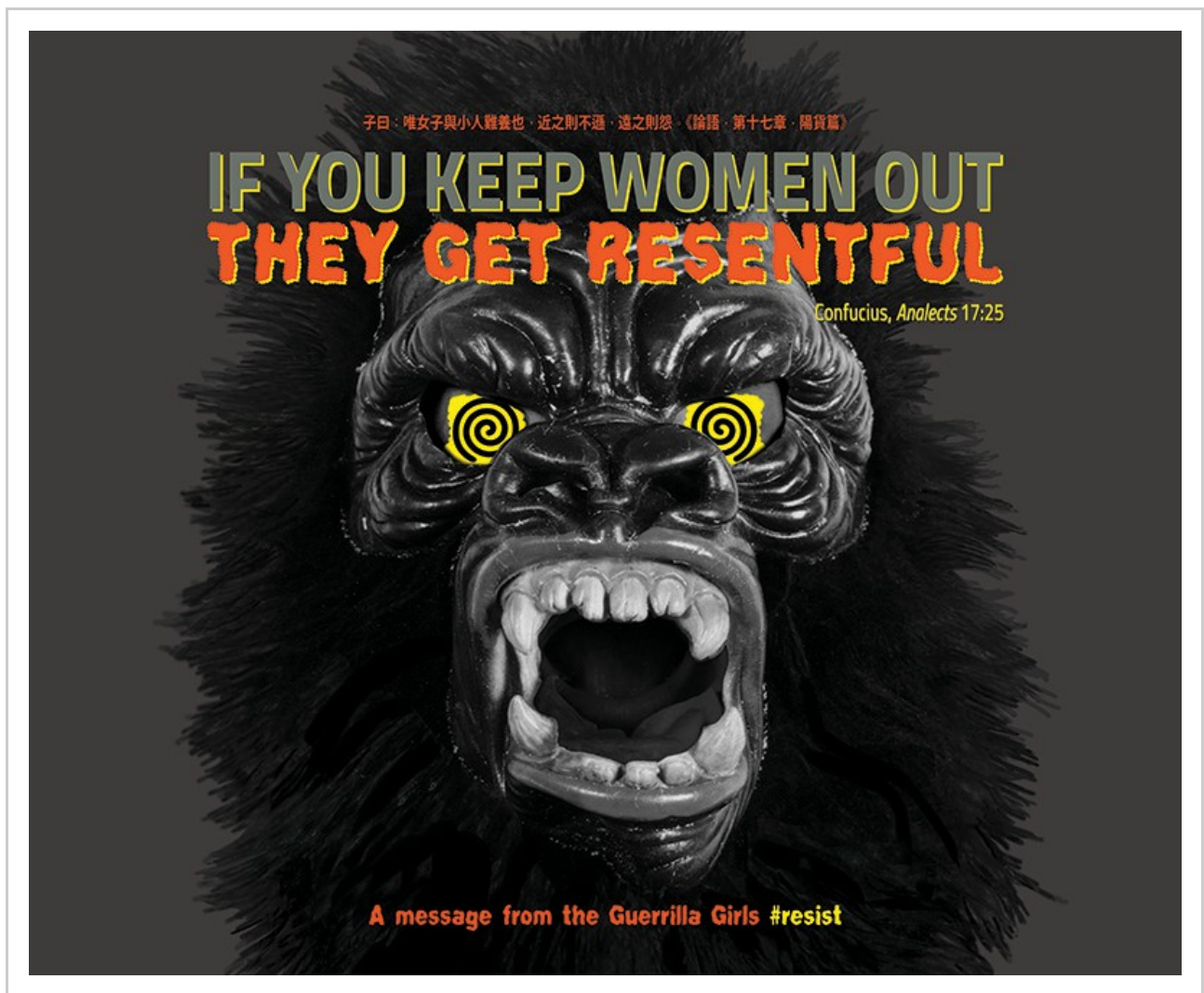


But in reality, “The art world is huge, large and diverse,” says Frida Kahlo. “Why does everyone want the same handful of artists? Why do we listen to the art market and have them dictate what museums acquire and show?”

This Frida Kahlo is not the Mexican artist known for her colorful, surreal folk art paintings. This Frida is a founding member of the Guerrilla Girls, a group of feminist activist artists who’ve been fighting sexism and racism in the art world since 1985. Its members are all anonymous, so they wear gorilla masks while in public, and have taken on the names of famous artists for purposes of identification.

Guerrilla Frida took on the Mexican artist’s name because back in the ‘80s, she had just read the first English-language biography about Frida Kahlo, who died in 1954.

“I read the bio and fell in love with her personality, how outspoken she was,” she says. “She could call people out. She was just a role model for being outspoken. It was an honorific (to call myself by her name), reminding people of who she was.”



The Guerrilla Girls got their start when the Museum of Modern Art held an exhibit in 1984 called "An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture."

Of the show's almost 200 artists, only 13 were women and even fewer were artists of color.

"How could this be truly an international exhibit?" Guerrilla Frida questioned.

The show's curator, Kynaston McShine, further infuriated non-white, non-male artists by declaring that, "any artist who wasn't in the show should rethink his (sic) career."

"That did it," says Guerrilla Frida. "It got us thinking and realizing: there's a lot of discrimination going on in the art world."

They realized that, "not only did white males have a tremendous privilege in the art world, (but they) were the universal standard. A bunch of us went up and joined a protest there (in front of MoMA). It was very traditional, with a picket line and placards and chants."

But it didn't do much except frustrate the patrons trying to go into the museum.

"We were unable to provoke them to think about this situation," she says. "Most people interested in the art world really thought it was a pure meritocracy, but we knew it wasn't."

And so they decided to find new ways to provoke people's thinking about this inequality.

"At that point we decided we had to provoke and shake everybody up, so we met with some friends and decided we'd name names of people who participated in the art world and were held complicit in it."

They made a poster that named 42 male artists, including Chuck Close, Basquiat, Keith Haring, Donald Judd, Richard Serra and Roy Lichtenstein, under the heading in bold, black capital letters: What do these artists have in common?

Underneath the list of names, it said: "They allow their work to be shown in galleries that show no more than 10% women artists or none at all."

"We went after the galleries and then the critics in The New York Times," Guerrilla Frida recalls. They weren't shy about naming names.

"We went after the collectors. We wrote them that pink letter, with a frowning daisy. It said: 'Dearest art collector, It has come to our attention that your collection, like most, does not contain enough art by women. We know that you feel terrible about this and will rectify the situation immediately. Love, Guerrilla Girls.'"

Another poster in 1985 asked: How many women had one-person exhibitions at NYC museums last year?"

And underneath, it listed the Guggenheim, the Metropolitan, the Modern and the Whitney. Each museum had a zero next to it, except for MoMA, which had a one.

"Everyone was passing the buck, saying it was everyone else's fault. We went after every subgroup in the art world and put them on the spot," she says.

The group would go out in the middle of the night on a Friday and wheat-paste their posters on walls in SoHo and the East Village.

"We took the streets," Guerrilla Frida says. "We claimed the streets as our forum. We claimed the space we could."

They went out late on a Friday night because Saturdays were a big day for gallery openings. Then they'd hang around the posters on a Saturday afternoon and listen to how people reacted to them.

"It was like being spies, spies on ourselves," she says. "And it gave us ideas for the next batch (of posters)."

People would say they're ridiculous, or accuse them of putting up the posters as a career strategy.

"You can't tell strong-minded women what to do," Guerrilla Frida says.

In a tongue-in-cheek 1988 poster titled The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist they list a

number of things, including “Working without the pressure of success,” “Being reassured that whatever art you make it will be labeled feminine” and “Not having to undergo the embarrassment of being called a genius.”

The posters caused a stir in the art world. They made people think and started discussion.

In 1989, they counted the number of women artists and the number of nudes in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and came up with the infamous poster that asked, “Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?” And next to a female nude wearing a gorilla mask was this statistic: “Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art Sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female.”

Becoming gorillas

When they were asked for publicity photos, they realized they couldn’t show their faces.

“The name Guerrilla Girls came before we had gorilla masks to wear,” she says. “We were just anonymous freedom fighters embedded in the art world. But when our earliest posters got a lot of attention and requests for press photographs, we realized we had to have a disguise.”

They thought about wearing ski masks, or stockings on their heads.

But one of their group was a bad speller, and instead of writing “Guerra,” the Spanish word for war, she misspelled it, Guerrilla Frida says.

“That was an ah ha! moment. It wasn’t a lengthy theoretical discussion. It was just a serendipitous thing that happened.”

They also reclaimed the word “girl.”

“The word ‘girl’ is used to belittle and infantilize women,” she says. “We decided if we used the word ourselves, it wouldn’t hurt us.”

The gorilla masks were certainly headturners. And, as Guerrilla Frida has been quoted as saying, “Wearing this mask gives you a certain kind of freedom to say whatever you want ... If you’re in a situation where you’re a little afraid to speak up, put a mask on. You won’t believe what comes out of your mouth.”

She agrees when asked about that comment.

“With the mask come freedom,” she says. “When you’re free of your identity, you can speak your mind, speak truth to power when there are no strings attached.”

Bananas and Bob

Jade Dellinger, director of the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery, recalls seeing the posters when he lived in New York in the late ’80s/early ’90s. And so, he asked the Guerrilla Girls to come up with an exhibit for the gallery.

"Guerrilla Girls: Rattling Cages Since 1985" will open Jan. 17 and run through March 23. Dr. Wendy Chase of the Florida Southwestern State College will give a lecture opening night. Bananas will be served

"Working with the Guerrilla Girls is a tremendous honor," Mr. Dellinger says. "They're part of the canon, as we think of the canon of art history. And their message is always relevant."

The exhibit is retrospective in scale and content, he says, installed in a way that's site-specific and immersive.

Mr. Dellinger notes that his first exhibit as director of the gallery featured the work of Yoko Ono. He says he's "not aware of the percentages" of women artists to male artists exhibited at the gallery, but, "it's become very apparent to me that we've done less than we should ... It continues to be an issue and will continue to be addressed."

The exhibit will include two billboards in Fort Myers, donated by the Diamond District.

Any change?

Thirty-four years after forming, have the Guerrilla Girls been able to change much in the art world?

After all, in 2015, they revisited their "How many women had one-person shows in NYC museums last year?" poster, and the numbers weren't much better. (The Guggenheim, Metropolitan and Whitney had one, and MoMA had two.)

"In the art world, I think some things will never go back now," says Guerrilla Frida. "I don't think the history of art can be written (now) with just the history of white men. No way can that be taken back, even in museums that only collect art by white men and art collectors who collect art by white men and a few tokens."

They've planted the issue in people's consciousness now, she says.

"We were able to give it a public face that everyone talked about. We were riding the crest of a wave, not being the whole wave ourselves."

Ironically, their posters are now in the collections of almost 15 museums worldwide, including the Walker Art Center and the Whitney in the U.S.

"They continue to bite the hands that feed them and confront these institutions on their very walls," says Mr. Dellinger. "What's sobering to me about doing this project is that things have not changed as much as we would hope."

"Our work tells a different story of the art world," says Guerrilla Frida. "We hope it will pique the conscience of curators and directors. A wagging finger comes along with (our work). And our nagging voice."

"Change has to come from all sides: inside out, outside in, upside down, under the table, through the ceiling.

"We're the hair in the soup. We're the thorn in the flesh." !

'Guerrilla Girls: Rattling Cages Since 1985' exhibit

>> When: Jan. 17–March 23

>> Where: Bob Rauschenberg Gallery, 8099 College Parkway, Fort Myers

>> Cost: free

>> Information: 489-9313 or www.rauschenberggallery.com

>> Gallery hours are 10-4 Monday through Friday, 11-3 Saturdays

>> The gallery is closed Sundays and holidays.