

Paint Like a Girl...

Someone once said to me: “That’s an awfully big painting for such a wee girl”. While it really was a big painting, the remark has stuck with me. Fast forward twenty odd years and I recently had some artworld feedback on a painting of mine that: “a few people have commented that you can tell it was painted by a woman.” Hmmm. This was followed with a suggestion that perhaps it was the soft pastel colours, “try making some work with darker colours, maybe add some black?” Again, hmmm. I’m open to constructive feedback on my work, in fact working alone in my studio I am often desperate for it! But this didn’t feel true, or constructive, and I find myself wondering... how in 2023 can ‘painting like a girl’ even be a thing, let alone a negative thing?

There are so many kinds of women, and so many kinds of painting. I for one, am a cis-gendered, heterosexual, tertiary educated, white woman, and a mother to three children. So while mine is a privileged kind of girl position to be sure, it is still one that comes with many challenges in a patriarchal society, ones that I hoped would have faded by now, and ones that I really hoped wouldn’t still exist for my growing daughters.

A few years ago, in a gallery, I happened across a video of a male artist at work. His process included making sudden splurges of inky paint onto his canvases. It was, I reflected, an almost ejaculatory act, complete with grunting in the moment, and applauding himself after the fact. I never saw this critiqued anywhere as “painting like a man”. It was certainly someone painting in full confidence of their place in the art world.

We all know that women are under-represented in all the arts, particularly so in the gate-kept world of gallery representation. The reasons are complex (hello, patriarchy!) but the fact remains that here we are in 2023 and women are still coming up against ways our work is interpreted via the lens of our gender, rather than on its own merit. We are still conflating “feminine” attributes with gender (or even biological sex), and I don’t believe those are necessarily the same thing.

Also, let’s be clear, so-called “feminine” attributes; emotion, softness, intuition, passivity, nurturing, are still somehow viewed as less than, or weaker, than those attributed to the masculine; strength, bravery, boldness, logic. The separation and prioritising of intellect over emotion seems an inherent part of patriarchy (and Western, white-based culture) and its inevitable ties to industrialism and capitalism.

The art world has been party to this dynamic as much as any industry, although I do believe art at its best challenges such stereotypes and assumptions.

The feminist activist art group **Guerrilla Girls**, in their current exhibition at the Tate Modern in London, present one of their characteristic text based pieces, a tongue-in-cheek flyer titled “*The Advantages Of Being A Woman Artist*”. Among the (depressingly accurate) list of “advantages” I noted “Being reassured that whatever kind of art you make, it will be labelled feminine”. Bingo.

I find it interesting that work by men featuring softer colours is not dubbed feminine, and the work featuring darker colours is not labelled masculine... Even more interestingly there are male artists working in ways that might be considered feminine by conventional terms of reference: soft colours in the case of Ash Keating (although he sprays paint with a fire hydrant so I guess that seems manly? ;) And Jonny Niesche, whose work is on polyester fabric with mirror glass edges – slick, but not dismissed as decorative.

I regularly compile lists of potential titles for my works, some that reference ways women are still side-lined, minimised, manipulated - in the art world, or by the beauty industry, or the world at large - some tongue in cheek and humorous, some genuine tributes to those creative women that came before me and to whom I feel indebted;

Radiant

Luminous

Former Gallerina

Pink Bits

Maybe add some black?

You're soaking in it

Male Pattern Blindness

For Helen, For Grace, For Agnes, For Bridget.

My use of liquid paint, and unprimed canvas (fabric) more stained and soaked than painted, is a deliberate choice of softer, Lo-fi materials and fluid techniques which perhaps reinforces the potential for this to be seen as feminine. On the other hand I have attempted to mitigate the apparent delicate nature of my work with an increased scale. *(If I make them really big will they be taken seriously!?)*

In all seriousness, I believe that creating work on a large scale requires a certain embodied focus, or immersion, in its production, and thus has greater potential to offer an immersive experience for viewers. While my recent work has focused on our relationship with the natural world through painting with various waters collected from the sea, lakes, or rain water, the work in this show seeks to call into question the assumptions and judgements that are still being made about being a woman, or painting like one.

Earlier this month I listened with interest to the New Zealand composer Gemma Peacocke on RNZ Concert talking about having to overcome her "squeamishness" about expressing emotion in her music: "You have to be comfortable enough in your own skin to say something that's human, that we can't necessarily express another way". There it is: self-expression is *human*, not inherently feminine. To "paint like a girl" is to paint like a human.

Kiran McKinnon 2023