Art That Looks at What Women See

An exhibition at a Swiss museum asks visitors to consider how female artists view their portrait subjects.

By Nina Siegal

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Is there such a thing as a "female gaze?"

For years, there's been a debate among art scholars about the "male gaze," or the ways in which men regarded women's bodies as subject matter when they have portrayed them, both nude and clothed, throughout history.

What happens when women create portraits, then? Do they look at their subjects differently?

This question was very much on the mind of the curator Theodora Vischer of the Beyeler Foundation while she assembled work for her current exhibition, "Close-Up," which opened on Sept. 19 at the Beyeler in Basel, Switzerland.

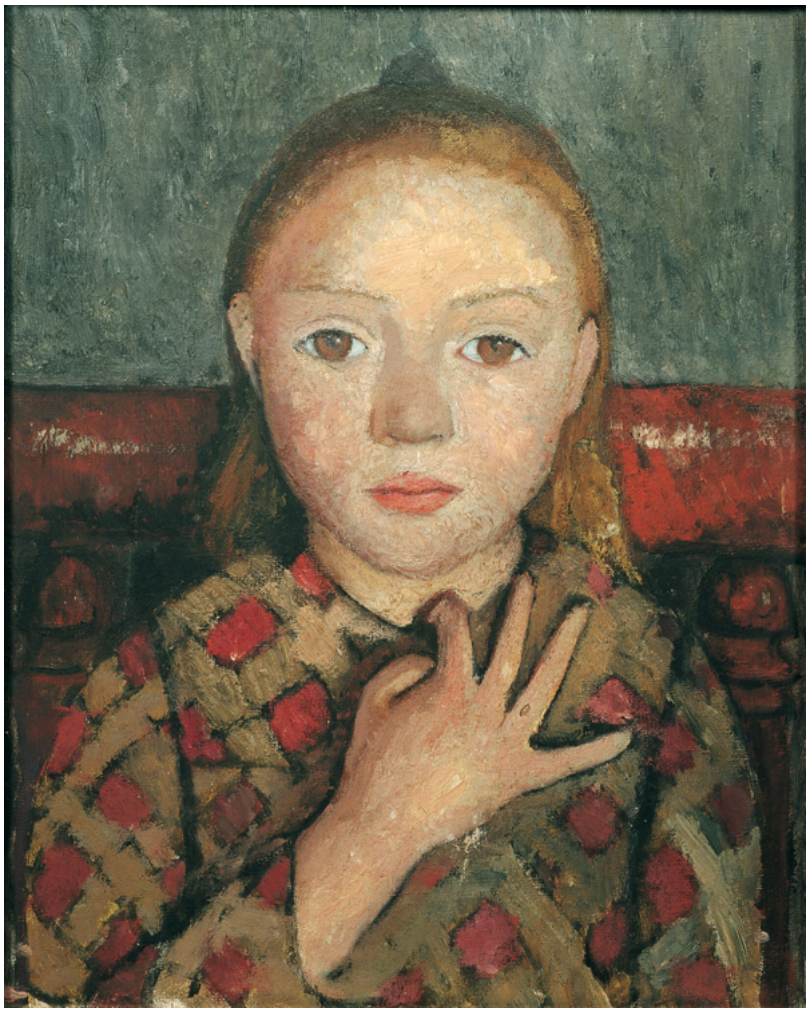
With about 100 artworks, the show presents portraiture (including self-portraiture) by nine women from 1870 until today, including Mary Cassatt, Frida Kahlo, Cindy Sherman and Marlene Dumas.

Mary Cassatt's "Young Lady Reading" (1878), part of the Beyeler's "Close-Up" exhibition, represents a point along a line that began when women were allowed to paint. 2021 Christie's Images, London/Scala, Florence

At first, the work of these artists might seem to be unrelated: What do Mary Cassatt's little girls playing in the dappled sunlight of a 19th-century garden have to do with Marlene Dumas's menacing 1994 portrait "The Painter," an image of her daughter finger-painting, in which the child's hands appear to be covered in blood?

For Ms. Vischer, they represent points along a line that begins with the moment women were "allowed" to paint and ends in the present, a time when their works are gaining increased appreciation and acceptance in the pantheon of art history.

"The show allows you to participate in an alternative form of art history," said Donatien Grau, a French writer, art critic and a curator at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, who wrote one of the catalog essays. It is, he said, art history as seen through the eyes of women artists.



Women tended to paint the people in their immediate circles — children, women, men, themselves. The show includes Paula Modersohn-Becker's 1905 oil, "Portrait of a Girl With Her Hand Spread Across Her Chest." Antje Zeis-Loi, Medienzentrum Wuppertal

In the span of 150 years, the period that "Close-Up" covers, women in general and female artists in particular were able to expand their sphere of influence beyond the home and into the larger society. The shift was mirrored in an evolution in portraiture from domestic, intimate subject matter to images that reflected societal issues more broadly.

"The idea of the portrait underwent a sweeping transformation at the beginning of the period relevant to our exhibition," Ms. Vischer writes in the exhibition catalog. This movement is "linked to a fundamental revaluation of the concept of individuality."

Impressionist painters such as Berthe Morisot, whose works are also in the exhibition, and Mary Cassatt took the first radical steps in the late 19th century, Ms. Vischer said, daring to portray the people in their immediate circles — women, men and children, as well as themselves.

Frida Kahlo focused her gaze on herself in this “Self-Portrait in a Velvet Dress” (1926). Banco de México Diego Rivera & Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, México D.F. / 2021, ProLitteris, Zurich

“Today that may not sound so special, but then in those times it was incredibly important,” she said. “They created a shift, a change in perspective, from being the model, the person a painter is looking at, to being the painter herself.”

Of the 294 portraits Berthe Morisot painted, for example, only about 10 depict men. The rest are women and children. This was partly because women were restricted from using live models until the mid-19th century, and partly because, she said, “Decidedly I am too nervous to make anyone else sit for me.” Her models were her mother and sisters, so in a sense she was creating an image of the world in which she lived.

“Close-Up” is arranged chronologically, with each artist given a room of her own and displaying about a dozen works, Ms. Vischer said. Other artists represented include Paula Modersohn-Becker, Lotte Laserstein, Elizabeth Peyton and Alice Neel.

“It is important to really just present the artists with their portraits and then let visitors make the comparisons themselves,” Ms. Vischer said. “I’m sure, for example, coming from the room of Alice Neel and entering the works of Marlene Dumas it will be obvious that there is a connection. Or when someone is in Elizabeth Peyton’s room, they will think back to Berthe Morisot at the beginning of the exhibition.”

Ms. Neel, recently the subject of a major retrospective, “Alice Neel: People Come First” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, can serve as a link among the nine artists, Ms. Vischer said. She is “crucial because her work covers this period from the 1930s to the beginning of the 1980s, so she really gives a kind of panorama of the work of the last century.”

Some of Marlene Dumas's work can appear menacing. This is "Teeth." Marlene Dumas and David Zwirner. Photo by Kerry McFate

As the Met's exhibition emphasized, Ms. Neel's portraiture was both intimate and public; her paintings depict activists, artists, her neighbors in East Harlem, pregnant women and mothers, frequently nude. The subject matter was, and remains, inherently controversial, in part, said Mr. Grau, because it reflects "subject matter that was not to be depicted."

In Mr. Grau's view, these artists are often explicitly interested in the relationship between the artist and their sitter, and they depict that dynamic on the canvas.

Their work "captures those interactions as part of the creation of an alternative world," he said. "It doesn't have to be the so-called 'major' world of history, it can be instead the world around you, which is its own political landscape."

Cindy Sherman's 1982 photograph, "Untitled #109," is part of the history portrayed in "Close-Up," which takes the works of women artists up to a time when their art is gaining increased appreciation and acceptance. 2021 Cindy Sherman

Put another way, as Mr. Grau observes in his catalog essay about Ms. Peyton: "A portrait does not have to be the image of an individuality, conceived as an island no one could access but the portraitist. A portrait can be the way to plunge into the sea of life."

So is there such a thing as a "female gaze?" Ms. Vischer said that she ultimately concluded that there probably was no single way to define how women artists perceive their subjects. But she did concede: "The female artists' gaze is shaped by their lived experiences, which are different for women and men."

For Mr. Grau, the female gaze might be defined as simply training one's eyes on different subject matter, in new ways. "Looking is a way of world-making," he said, "and it's political."