

SEATTLE:

A CELEBRATION OF "ELLES"

It wasn't enough to take over the museum. "Elles: Women Artists from the Centre Pompidou, Paris," on the fourth floor of the Seattle Art Museum, and its Northwest response "Elles: SAM," a series of exhibitions in the Modern and Contemporary Art Galleries on the third floor of the Seattle Art Museum, feature female artists from the last five decades, (and in the case of the Pompidou exhibit, since 1907). Through paintings, sculptures, drawings, photographs, video and installations, each exhibit attempts to highlight significant historical breakthroughs made by the "weaker sex." Featuring heavyweights such as Louise Bourgeois, Sonia Delaunay, Frida Kahlo, Dora Maar, Diane Arbus, Cindy Sherman, Yayoi Kusama, and lesser known local female artists like Wynne Greenwood and Victoria Haven, both exhibits (opening October 11, 2012, with "Elles: Pompidou" running to January 13, 2013, and "Elles: SAM" continuing to February 17) staunchly prove that weaklings, women are not.

With the majority of "Elles: SAM" on loan from local collectors, supplementing works drawn from the permanent collection, visitors have ample opportunity to catch works rarely on display in SAM's newly feminized Modern and Contemporary Art Galleries. The downside? The individual tastes of collectors could potentially overshadow—or sidestep—the art produced in the region by contemporary females artists. Enter "Elles: Seattle." As a community-wide response to "Elles: Women Artists from the Centre Pompidou," "Elles: Seattle" offers a host of presentations, exhibits, and panel discussions that celebrate the contributions women have made across a variety of sectors, and in doing so fills in a multitude of gaps not able to be filled by a single institution. Catharina Manchanda, Jon & Mary Shirley Curator of Modern & Contemporary Art at SAM and former Senior Curator of Exhibitions at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, notes that, "We didn't set out with the sole idea of offering an answer. Opening up the discussion allows the museum to determine what we've got and to be more conscious of how we operate not only within the context of this exhibit but further out."

Events, held in both traditional institutions and lesser-known gathering spots will continue through the fall months, and include panel discussions with experimental performance artist, composer and musician Laurie Anderson; readings by feminist critic, author, and teacher, Camille Paglia; and close participation with the city's most established institutions, such as the University of Washington (to host "New geographies and Feminist Art: China, Asia and the World," November 15-17), the Henry Art Gallery, and The Frye, thereby extending the reach of the museum and the scope of the exhibit. When SAM was unable to accommodate acclaimed video artist Pipilotti Rist's video work *A la belle étoile*, the Henry Art Gallery stepped in to offer the solution. Similarly, an extension of Jenny Holzer's *Inflammatory Essays* (shown on the third floor of SAM Downtown) appears one block away on an exterior wall of Paper Hammer.

While some events focus on the difficulties of being a working-woman artist—Melissa Weinman's lecture, "Working Artist: Mother of Two," will address the artists decision to raise two children before returning to a full-time studio practice—others are focused on the more assertive side of female production. The Project Room, in conjunction with the premiere of "These Streets: A Rock n' Roll Story" at ACT Theatre, will present oral history interviews and personal memorabilia collected from female musicians who rocked Seattle during the grunge years; Jennifer K. Stuller author of "Ink-Stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors: Superwomen in Modern Mythology" will discuss her book and examine the significance of female heroes in our modern-day mythology at Humanities Washington. And the Women's Funding Alliance opted to show the dizzying breadth of issues associated with womanhood. Films on view range from *Miss Representation*, how the media's misrepresentations of women have led to underrepresentation of women in positions of power and influence; *The Invisible War*, an investigative documentary about the epidemic of rape within the US military; and *Wonder Women! The Untold Story of American Superheroines*.

At Greg Kucera Gallery, female artists are clearly in the driver's seat: Women artists were asked to select women artists for a group show called "Ladies' Choice." A number of other local commercial galleries are also hosting female-centric shows for the duration of "Elles."

"Soft Power, Activated," in the Jacob Lawrence Gallery on the University of Washington campus, organized by a woman, Susie J. Lee, and a man, Kolya Rice, used the opportunity to explore the larger notion of relationships with intimate gathering, performance, or interview nearly every day of the show's run. The term, soft power, is political, and used to define a society's transformation, not by threats of violence, coercion or fear, but by communication, relationships and culture. The motivation behind "Soft Power, Activated" is the notion that relationships are the heart of cultural endeavors. Lee notes, "In the case of contemporary art, it's not the objects, the shows, the sales, or the single artist that moves things; it is relationships of the curators to the artists, of the artists to the students, the students to professionals, and the university with the community at large."

RUFFLE, an installation by Gail Grinnell at Suyama Space, offers a visual exercise in just how literally layered these kinds of relationships can be. Suyama Space, a former automotive garage turned architectural office cum art gallery curated by Beth Sellars hosts large-scale site-specific installations that respond to the space's rough-hewn aesthetic, scale, and history. It is a space whose roots are undeniably male—a former automotive sign still looms large amidst the rafters. In conjunction with "Elles," Sellars invited Gail Grinnell to fill the lofty, soaring ceilinged space with delicate frilly fragments of what appear to be tracing paper—Grinnell's specialty—and in which, if viewers look closely, skeletons can be spied. Tacked to the ceilings and falling to the floor, Grinnell's *RUFFLE* creates bower-like visual shelters—places to find protection, or perhaps be trapped permanently. The artist's work is inspired in part by the relationship with her mother, a seamstress who constructed Grinnell's clothing with care and attention to her daughter's developing form. The pair of "Elles" shows currently at SAM bears some similarities, attempting to cloak, as it were, works by female artists onto a body of work that is constantly evolving. Have women outgrown it? Suyama Space confronts the issue head on. Overlaying the vestiges of an automotive space run almost certainly by men, with the underpinnings of a female artist, shines a bright light on the implied expectations of the sexes, the complications of a show centered uniquely on female artists, and a virtuosic response to a complex subject.

—SUZANNE BEAL



"RUFFLE," INSTALLATION AT SUYAMA SPACE, 2012, Gail Grinnell
PHOTO: MARISA VITIELLO, COURTESY SUYAMA SPACE