

## JUDY CHICAGO AND MIRIAM SCHAPIRO

### FEMALE IMAGERY

**O**'KEEFE BEGAN, SHE PAINTED A HAUNTING mysterious passage through the black portal of an iris, making the first recognized step into the darkness of female identity. That step moved her out of the reference points of art making as it had been defined by men, throughout history. She painted out of an urgency to understand her own being and to communicate as yet unknown information about being a woman.

What does it feel like to be a woman? To be formed around a central core and have a secret place which can be entered and which is also a passageway from which life emerges? What kind of imagery does this state of feeling engender? There is now evidence that many women artists have defined a central orifice whose formal organization is often a metaphor for a woman's body. The center of the painting is the tunnel; the experience of female sexuality. In the case of O'Keeffe, the metaphor is extended into a world of life and death. In "Black Iris" the forms suggest and then transcend womanliness to metamorphose into an image of death and resurrection. [See Frontispiece.]

There is a contradiction in the experience of a woman who is also an artist. She feels herself to be "subject" in a world which treats her as "object". Her works often become a symbolic arena where she establishes her sense of personal, sexual identity.

She asks: "Who am I? Am I active or passive? How does the vulnerable center inside me affect my perception of reality? How does my own sense of interior space and receptivity differ from the sense of being outside and thrusting inward? Where is the mirror in the world to reveal who I am? If I repeat the shape of my question many times, will that shape be seen?"

In answering these questions she often defines a sculptural or pictorial image which is central and, in doing so, she gives out her own information about who she is, often to a world that doesn't listen, doesn't look, and certainly doesn't care.

When women began to speak about themselves, they were not understood. Men had established a code of regulations for the making and judging of art which derived from their sense of what was or was not significant. Women, thought to be inferior to men, obviously could not occupy center stage unless they concerned themselves with the ideas men deemed appropriate. If they dealt with areas of experience in the female domain, men paid no attention because they were not used to women making their experience visible. In fact those women whose work was built on their own identity in terms of female iconography have been treated by men as if they were dealing with masculine experience. This is a false assumption since the cultural experience of women has differed greatly from that of men. For centuries, women were educated to different tasks and remained outside of the scientific and mechanical culture built by men. Now that women are beginning to recognize their right to display their own symbology, they find themselves met with a mask of non-comprehension on the part of the male art critics.

The best example of this is the case of Georgia O'Keeffe. Here is a woman of major stature who appears in the 20th century.

In 1923, a year before she married Stieglitz, O'Keeffe painted a 48" × 30" oil on canvas called "Grey Line with Black, Blue and Yellow". In this painting, which resembles a water-color more than an oil in its transparent paint quality, we see a central image constructed like the labia of the vagina, opening into a thin, black, membranous cavity. The entire central orifice is surrounded on each side by a white, sheltering form which rises and moves out from the center to embrace another space beyond the flesh of the flower like orifice, a space which suggests infinity. Describing the central opening are a series of delicately painted folds, which suggest nothing less than orgasmic throbbing or contractions of labor. There is in the uppermost regions of the orifice, a dark movement towards a peak where again the sensuous perception is that of the highly focused feeling of clitoral sensation.

In 1946, the year Stieglitz died, she painted an oil on paper, 30" × 24", called "In the Patio I." The essential motif of this painting as well as others, is the patio of her house in the southwest. Again the central image appears. Here in opposition to the repeated oval and/or circular motions in the last painting discussed, we find the central image in the shape of a rectangle, actually housed within the space of a larger rectangle (perhaps a door frame or a window frame). Seen through the space of the central image are several more rectangular, periscoping spaces. In order to understand the preoccupation with building structure, one has to read it as a metaphor for a housing or casing of the soul or the body. Once we acknowledge this proposition, then the opening in the middle of the picture provides an insight into the mystery of black and white forms intertwining in the Yin/Yang manner; we see a complexity of meaning stemming from O'Keeffe's preoccupation with life and death. There are light motifs in the painting, such as the two darts in the large framework and the curve upwards of the framework itself, as well as the ambivalent floor opening on the left hand side of the painting. All of this iconography seems to subordinate itself to the larger issue of looking through the window or door into infinity; or discovering the view of the soul; or tunnelling forward into infinity or backwards to the past which now becomes black and white or "clear".

In 1964 she painted an oil on canvas, 24 1/2" × 30 1/2", "Road Past the View". Here we see other aspects of O'Keeffe's femininity. The painting is a landscape which conveys the curves of flesh in the quietness of a dream. The color is as soft as has ever been seen in abstract painting, not just pale, but soft like a cloud or a light caress. As a woman, O'Keeffe has no taboo (as in the case with men) about allowing herself to be gentle and tender. Women in our society are allowed to retain this aspect of themselves — the expression of softness inside themselves which has been acculturated into the mothering aspect of the female role. For men, conditioned to the role of toughness, fragility is associated with womanliness and men cannot allow those feelings in themselves lest they risk the fantasy of emasculation. Because O'Keeffe doesn't have this problem, the range of expression in her work is far greater than one ordinarily sees in the lifetime of a man's work.

O'Keeffe's oeuvre opens up the possibility of human expressiveness heretofore unavailable, particularly to men. Implicit in this is a suggestion that just as women have suffered when measured by male standards, so men might be found lacking when measured by the standards of that work by women which asserts softness, vulnerability and self exposure.

Better to deny, obscure or mystify the achievements of women than to have to be measured by those achievements. The structure of male personality has led to an artmaking that aggrandizes abstract ideas, formal innovation, and concern with materials and tools. This reflects the conditioning of men towards manipulation of reality and away from exposure of

vulnerability and dependency. It is with this conditioning that men approach the work of women, and whatever expressiveness lies outside the possibilities of their own acculturated perception, remains unseen. If the emperor's new clothes are really the vestments of women's feelings, then the men are unprepared to see them, because they have not been perceptually educated to accept the language of female form.

Let us examine the work of a number of women artists from the point of view that we are suggesting, and see what we discover. Remember, we are looking for the ways in which these artists' femaleness shapes both the form and context of their work. The central image is frequently used by these artists, either alone or in repetition, which asserts the identity of the form by repeating it.

- 1 In Emily Carr's "Forest of British Columbia" an ominous landscape becomes the metaphor for the murky, unknown female interior. The winding and binding forms sometimes cavern, sometimes womb, sometimes forest, reiterates, as in O'Keeffe, the mysterious and infinite life process.
- 2 J. de Leo's "White Rose" is composed of layer upon layer upon layer of paint applied, then scraped off, over a period of several years, finally encrusting the canvas with memories of the now hidden manifestations of female sensuality. This voyage conveys an almost frightening process of revealing and obscuring self.
- 3 Lee Bontecou's drawing "Unknown" is part of a series of work that made a profound contribution to an understanding of female identity through imagery. In Lee Bontecou we find the essential answer to one of the perplexing questions about the nature of female identity. The question is: Is woman passive or active? Society defines women's vaginas and hence women as passive, receptive, responsive and acceptant; yet women know that their vaginas expand in childbirth, contract in orgasm, rip, bleed, want, assert, and in doing so define their nature in defiance of the society's narrow definition. The large, velvet lined cores of Bontecou's work deal exclusively with defining the central cavity of the female and thus the female herself. Bontecou establishes definitely that female identity is both active and passive.
- 4 In Deborah Remington's painting "Ansonia", the red egg recalls early Mother cult symbology and floats in a landscape of a machine culture. The deification of the egg, respondent in its place of honor, clearly in the center of the painting, speaks for itself.
- 5 In Barbara Hepworth's "Nesting Stones" of 1937, we see not only a repeat of the pregnant rock form used by O'Keeffe in her "Black Rock with Blue 3" but also an unmistakable mother and child nesting image and a centralized hollow, which reveals Hepworth's stated belief in a female sensibility in art.
- 6 In "Ox" 1969 by Miriam Schapiro, central imagery and the nature of female identity appear in their clearest forms. Body form which can be penetrated in its soft flesh center becomes an insignia for the assertion of self that all female artists search for, a female counterpart to Vetrivial Man. The image, which seems to be a mechanical, formalized structure, houses a soft and inviting tunnel.
- 7 Nevelson's boxes become the containers, the voids, the empty spaces of self and of life which must be filled, replenished and satisfied. Again, Nevelson is the artist who reveals a woman's need to fill and be filled, and in so doing attests to the simultaneity of giving and being given to.
- 8 In "Desert Fan" 1971, by Judy Chicago, the central core image reveals the merging of flesh and landscape. The surrounding forms echo and repeat the assertion of the central core which invites penetrability and implies self-expansion. The softness of the color

enhances the delicate vulnerable depth of the interior space, which is shown to be vibrant and beautiful.

The visual symbology that we have been describing must not be seen in a simplistic sense as "vaginal or womb art". Rather, we are suggesting that women artists have used the central cavity which defines them as women as the framework for an imagery which allows for the complete reversal of the way in which women are seen by the culture. That is, to be a woman is to be an object of contempt, and the vagina, stamp of femaleness, is devalued. The woman artist, seeing herself as loathed, takes that very mark of her otherness and by asserting it as the hallmark of her iconography, establishes a vehicle by which to state the truth and beauty of her identity.

One of the reasons that this work by women has been either misunderstood or ignored is that it asserts a set of values that differ from the mainstream of culture. It seems obvious that a woman artist who goes into her studio every day and sees the clear evidence of her abilities will see that the values of the society which define her as passive and inferior, cannot be right. If she challenges those values, she will inevitably challenge others as she discovers in her creative journey that most of what she has been taught to believe about herself is inaccurate and distorted. It is with this differing self perception that the woman artist moves into the world and begins to define all aspects of experience through her own modes of perception which, at their very base, differ from the society's, inasmuch as her self-definition is in direct conflict with the definition of woman held by the society at large.

Perhaps the paradoxes of life which define the human condition have another dimension. If women are not what we have assumed them to be, what about other assumptions we have made? If to be female is, in Bontecou's metaphorical structures, active as well as passive, what is it to be male? Does that alter the definition of the male as well? If vulnerability is asserted as something to accept, as in Chicago's open, exposed imagery, does that suggest that we might question our fear of our own softness? If Nevelson reveals to us the simultaneous, yet seemingly contradictory, essence of self, as giver and as receiver, does that mean that men, as well as women can nurture and be nurtured, fill, and be filled? O'Keeffe's flower houses both life and death, and Remington's egg is both portal and protuberance. In Schapiro's "Ox", femaleness turns out to be the other side of maleness, with a hard outside and a soft inside. The central image assumes universality in these works because it is used to define first, the nature of female identity and then, the nature of human identity and the human dilemma. The sense of double identity, both male and female, has allowed these artists to reveal all of the contradictions of life, unified within the image of female self which becomes the house of life. These women, who have made art in solitude and in anguish, rather than being honoured for their unique vision of reality, have seen their imagery lost in the plethora of culture. It is our hope that female perception of reality, as it is beginning to be described, will enrich our language, expand our perceptions and enlarge our humanity.