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The Glass Ceiling: Female Artists' Gallery Representation in the New Millennium and a History of Imbalance

Caroline Currier  
Sotheby's Institute of Art

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The Glass Ceiling: Female Artists’ Gallery Representation in the New Millennium and a History of Imbalance

by

Caroline G. Currier

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the Master’s Degree in Art Business
Sotheby’s Institute of Art

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Abstract

The Glass Ceiling: Female Artists’ Gallery Representation in the New Millennium and a History of Imbalance

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Caroline G. Currier

The concept of the “glass ceiling” means that an acknowledged barrier to advancement in a profession exists. This paper discusses the state of gender inequality in contemporary New York galleries today, and how they have changed over the past 10 years as well as contextually, throughout history. Often, gender inequality in the art world is made visible by the lacking number of female artist museum shows or through comparing auction prices. Statistics regarding gallery representation is less common, in part due to the fact that artist representation is a fluid process and it is difficult to track these figures over time. Furthermore, this paper will consider the patriarchal hierarchies existent in the art market and the subsequent aspect of female artists being seen as the “other” or “exceptions to the rule”, making the road to commercial success significantly more difficult for a female artist. This paper will also discuss how the feminist art movement functioned as a catalyst for a more balanced industry, and how it has enabled women artists such as Cecily Brown and Kara Walker to be critically received at a similar level as male artists. By providing numbers and hard evidence through a historically analytical lens, feasibly, the issue will become more visible and harder to dismiss.
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Introduction

“Gee, Joan, if only you were French and male and dead,” art dealer Julius Carlebach told Abstract Expressionist painter Joan Mitchell in the 1950s. Mitchell, now considered a leading figure in the second-generation of Abstract Expressionists was generally overlooked in comparison to her male contemporaries like Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline. The landscape of gender equality in the art world has transformed greatly since the 1950s. Today, there is a general impression in the art world and consequently, the art market, that underrepresented and artists that were “written out of history” are becoming more visible and receiving more well-deserved attention. Just this past October at Sotheby’s London, Jenny Saville became the most expensive living female artist when her 1992 self-portrait, “Propped” sold for $12.4 million US dollars.\(^1\)

Until recent years, there was a time when feminist movement was even seen as outmoded and irrelevant—and Joan Mitchell is one of the most expensive female artists in history.

While Saville holds the record for a living female artist, the highest price paid at auction for a deceased female artist is Georgia O’Keefe’s “Jimson Weed/White Flower No. 1 (1932)” for $44.4 million USD at Sotheby’s in 2014. The highest price ever paid at auction for a deceased male artist was the record-shattering $450 million Leonardo da Vinci sale. Although, even if the remarkable “Salvator Mundi (c. 1500)” is considered an outlier, the highest price ever paid at public auction for a male artist’s work is $179.4 million USD in 2015 for Picasso’s “Les Femmes d’Alger (1955)”, over three times and 100 million dollars more than the highest achieving female.

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In addition to tremendous price discrepancies, female artists have famously been written out of the art historical canon; seldom studied, considered, or taken seriously at an academic level. The terms “art” and “artist” are neutral, yet art history has structurally and actively excluded women from participating, leaving the masculine gendering of art history as an ideological effect. Undoubtedly, the United States is in the midst of one of the most politically hostile climates given the backlash against the current administration. This mass disapproval has however, produced an atmosphere of progress and protest. Inequalities and injustices are being fought and opposed daily, and underrepresented groups and individuals are finally being recognized. The accounts of those who have been disqualified, dismissed and erased from history are actively attempting to revise their narrative.

In 1971 art scholar Linda Nochlin wrote and published Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?, in which she asserted that though the case is regrettable, there have been no great women artists and no amount of manipulating the historical or critical evidence will alter the situation. Nochlin credits this to a long history of the guilt women feel when achieving professional fulfillment, the finality of the white western male viewpoint and importantly, the limited access to learning specific skills necessary to art making, such as observing a nude model. Since this essay was published, amid the crux of the feminist art movement, the analysis of gender parity in the art world has become more serious and scrutiny has intensified. Women outnumber men in art schools at an undergraduate level and make up half of the students earning MFA’s in the arts— but

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rarely comprise more than 30% of the art shown at museums and galleries in the US\textsuperscript{4}. Only one out of the top 100 artists by auction revenue in 2017 was a female, Louise Bourgeois, and she came in at number 93\textsuperscript{5}. Women artists are starting to reach greater levels of commercial success.

Women artists are more popular today than they ever have been. Auction records are being broken, female artists are getting the museum retrospectives they never saw in their lifetime, and the globalization of contemporary art is allowing more female-made art to be exposed and acknowledged. Furthermore, Big data is becoming more popular in attempt to demystify the art market—to make not only prices more transparent, but also to expose demographics of gender, race, and class of the artists participating in the market. Undoubtedly, female artists were once neglected and now have a higher visibility in the mainstream market, making the problem seem less severe. However, the conversation is far from over and the imbalance persists. The numbers and percentages regarding gender discrepancies must be researched and revisited.

The origins of my thesis are rooted in the desire to explore and quantify female artists gallery representation. Galleries are often times the launching point of an artist’s career. The artist-dealer relationship is an important network, historically ingrained in the fine arts through centuries of stewardship and patronage. The gallery helps the artist advance their career incrementally, by exhibiting their art in group shows, then solo shows, placing their work in important collections, and eventually getting their work into

museums. Historically, galleries have never represented men and women equally on their rosters. As shown in Figure 1, even after the turn of the millennium, female artists only comprise a fraction of gallery shows. Much research on the topic of gender inequality in the arts has revolved around museum representation, understandably. Quantifying gender representation of artists in major museums is a more accessible task, because museum shows and acquisitions are made public. Gallery exhibitions are of course, open to the public, however, when galleries begin and end representing an artist is a figure or statistic that is harder to grasp because of the fluidity and prolonged nature of the gallery representation process. Additionally, museums are usually seen as more democratic entities, whereas galleries operate fundamentally as a business.

Authors of the book, *After the Revolution: Women Who Transformed Contemporary Art*, provide valuable graphs regarding number and percentage of solo exhibitions at galleries by gender. To obtain this overview, the authors, identified and surveyed twenty influential galleries in New York City, “chosen for their prominence in terms of sales and critical reputation, and a representative selection of museum contemporary art exhibition programs in the United States”. They acquired their data through gallery and museum publications, websites, and responses to telephone inquiries.6

The graphs in Figure 1 an Figure 2 illustrate the number of female solo shows versus male solo shows and total over four decades; the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and 2000-2010. Almost a decade has passed from the research that Heartney, Posner, Princenthal, and Scott conducted and minimal research on the subject has since been conducted.

Additionally, this data does not provide a distinction between the type or caliber of galleries they are considering. Given the current climate in the art market, as mega galleries expand and spread their influence, art fairs predominate and mid-sized galleries cannot be sustained, as art and technology entrepreneurs strive to make the art market more transparent, it is crucial to understand the dynamics of opportunity and equality in all aspects of the art world.

My thesis will present a current survey of the gender disparities New York contemporary art galleries. Furthermore, this paper will historically contextualize gender imbalance in the art world through social, economic, cultural, and institutional conditions, specifically the influence of the feminist art movement. Findings from gallery research will attempt to shed light on the glaring inequalities surrounding male and female representation, and subsequently investigate the question of why female artists are still undervalued. To understand the factors that advance and enhance a female artist’s career, I conducted case studies on two of the most distinguished, celebrated artists living today, Cecily Brown and Kara Walker. These studies are presented as examples of commercially successful female artists who have embraced their “otherness” as women in a male-dominated sphere and have been critically recognized among the great artists of this generation.

As the art world functions by both antiquated and unregulated standards, inequities seem to persist and critiques about the art market are disregarded. With the numbers identified and articulated to as recent as possible, I hope to contextualize the inequality that still plainly exists in the art market. Explaining these numbers and percentages is a
wider, more complicated issue but by providing the most recent data, I hope to make the issue visible and harder to dismiss.
1.1 A History of Underrepresentation

Gender inequality and discrimination is still prevalent in every facet of the art world. On ArtReview’s 2017 list of the 100 most powerful players in the art world, only 33 are women, and many of them are included with their gallery co-partner. Despite the inequality of representation in almost every level in the art world, women actually account for more MFA graduates than men. Since the early 1980s, Yale University School of Art has equal parts male and female MFA’s, but the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and UCLA typically graduate more women than men.

According to the study “The Gender Gap in Art Museum Directorships,” released in March of 2013 by the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) and the National Center for Arts Research, women hold leadership positions in just a quarter of US art museums with budgets over $15 million. Those leaders make just 71 cents for every $1 earned by men, the study says. The more profitable the museum, or those with higher operating budgets mean the largest pay gaps between men and women or in other words, relative female representation decreases as budget size increases. Three years later this study was revisited, and female museum directors were found to earn 75 cents for every dollar earned by a man, a slight improvement. At the highest level, for museums with budgets over $15 million dollars, however, we still see less women at the top. In fact, as

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7 Note that this list is constantly changing. This statistic was gathered on December 16th, 2018.
the AAMD notes, male directors run 12 of the 13 largest budget museums.\textsuperscript{10}

In 2017, a report by the University of Luxembourg found that works by women fetch on average 47.6\% less than works by men at auction\textsuperscript{11}. What is even more surprising are the cultural attitudes surrounding women artists as quantified through studies in the same report. In one survey, one thousand people were given an anonymous work of art and asked to guess the gender of the artist and rate the piece on a scale from 1 to 10. Women were consistently given a lower mark, displaying a biased attitude that exhibits less appreciation for art associated with female artists. In a second survey, two thousand participants were asked to rate paintings that were computer-generated and randomly assigned fictitious names of male and female artists. Again, works by artists that were given female names ranked lower\textsuperscript{12}.

According to my own studies, in the past ten years female artists accounted for less than ten percent of all auction lots at New York Post War and Contemporary Evening Sales at Christie’s and Sotheby’s. For Christie’s and Sotheby’s Post-War and Contemporary Evening Sales from 2008 to 2017, female artists comprised 9.5\% of all lots at auction. However, these lots only accounted for 4.97\% of all prices fetched at these auctions. For example, at Christie’s Post War and Contemporary Evening Sale in May 2014, there were 5 lots by female artists out of 69 lots total, accounting for 7.3\% of all lots. The sale of these lots added up to $22,570,000 total, only 3\% of the auctions


$744,944,000 total. This data, illustrated in Figure 3 and Figure 4, was gathered by hand from Christie’s and Sotheby’s online auction results including all lots sold and bought in. Furthermore, all of these evening auction lots came only from 37 female artists. In the past ten years, at the most visible and attention-gaining auction in the United States, known for selling the most outstanding works available, only 37 female artists’ work ever made it to the auction block.

The Whitney Biennial has long been celebrated for its inclusion of many women artists as well as its feminist contributions. Only one year, however, touted equal representation between male and female artists at the biennial—in 2010 as shown in Figure 5. Museums appear to be the slowest to adopt and accept a shifting paradigm. It was in 2009 at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, that for the first time a major museum dedicated a portion of its permanent collection space to a review of twentieth-century art exclusively by women artists. In addition to quantifiable underrepresentation, there is a “shadow effect” for female artists that prevails in the art world, in which female artists typically fail to be in the public view until they are in their 60’s and 70’s.

1.2 Research and Methodology Background

As previously stated in the introduction of this thesis, there is a lack of sufficient research on gender disparity in art galleries. Discussions of the market and its inherent issues are often considered taboo in historical and critical study of contemporary art. Although as the United States as a whole becomes more progressive and analytical of our transgressions and wrongdoings, the impacts permeate into other structures such as the art market. Because of this state of forward thinking, as well as the visual arts being

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regarded as a tolerant, liberal, and unprejudiced profession, many people think equality in the art world has already been achieved.

I began determining the scope of my research by narrowing in on the portion of the art market I wanted to investigate. Worldwide there are art market “hubs” where the art of the highest caliber is shown, sold, consigned, and traded. In the United States, New York is the capital of the art world, and Los Angeles is a close second. Due to the nature and limitations of a thesis, I could not extend my research internationally and therefore decided to gather my research on galleries located in New York City. Some of the galleries chosen have locations in other cities in the U.S. and internationally, however I only considered the artist’s being shown in each respective gallery’s New York location(s).

The galleries were divided into three categories based on their size and influence of establishment; ‘Mega galleries’, ‘Mid-sized galleries’, and ‘New and emerging galleries’. This systematic breakdown is already somewhat accepted in the art world, in journalism and discourse these terms are used frequently. The mega galleries are an accepted pre-existing group in the art world comprised of Gagosian Gallery, David Zwirner, Pace, and Hauser & Wirth. These galleries have many locations internationally and represent the most expensive artists and estates in the world and were established over 20 years ago. These galleries have booths at every major international art fair, are known for putting on museum-quality shows, and typically sell primary market works between $10,000 and anywhere to the tens of millions. Most of their artists are in the collections of major institutions. The galleries branded as ‘mid-size’ are the largest group of galleries. Some of these galleries are soon-to-be mega galleries, perhaps, or have
simply remained and steady and dominant force in the art market. These galleries have remained relevant and popular for over 10 years and are credited with identifying and representing some of the most popular emerging artists today. Among these galleries are Metro Pictures, Paula Cooper Gallery, and Petzel. These galleries don’t sell expensive works as regularly as the mega galleries. They might have a couple artists on their roster that are collected by major institutions. Their artists usually have multiple galleries who represent them, one in the United States and one or two internationally. Those identified as ‘new and emerging’ galleries are young galleries that have usually been in business for under 10 years. They typically don’t put on as many exhibitions per year as the mid-size or mega galleries, and there are fewer artists represented. Their artwork is sold at significantly lower prices, rarely ever exceeding a couple hundred thousand on the primary market. On the whole, the artists represented by new and emerging galleries are young and their gallery is credited with “discovering” them. This division of galleries was used to inform research in the case of trends or tendencies within each respective division.

When a gallery decides to represent an artist or an estate, it is a fluid process. Gallerists will visit the artist’s studio, maybe after being referred to this artist by another artist in their program, or by observing this artists practice over time. The artist will most likely be included in a group show in the gallery and then the gallery will decide and announce representation. This process could take years and often it is not publicized when an artist joins or leaves a gallery. Because of the fluid nature of this process, I determined I would gather my data based on the exhibition history of each gallery and how many female artists get solo or two person exhibitions over the past 10 years, 2008
through 2017. The exhibition history of a gallery is a reasonable and authentic representation of the artists they represent, or are considering representing. Even if exhibition history includes artists that are not on the respective gallery’s roster, the amount of female to male artists represented is still relevant data.

1.3 Data Gathering Process

To compile data, separate documents for each gallery were made with a chart divided into three columns; number of exhibition, name of artist(s), and gender of the artist. Only solo and two person exhibitions were included, and only if the two person exhibition was by either two females or two males. Two person exhibitions by one male artist and one female artist provided a superfluous and unnecessary data point in my research. I did not include the statistics in group shows because group shows usually always present both male and female artists. Although male artists are generally the predominant gender represented in group shows, this data would be inconsequential and cumbersome to arrange.

The data was found on the websites of each gallery studied. From the gallery exhibition archive a list was made from each solo and two person show for each year from 2008 through 2017, and the subsequent gender of the artist who was exhibiting. If I was not familiar with the gender of the artist, their name and practice was researched and the artists’ gender was determined from the pronouns used to describe them; he, she, him, her, and so on. After these ten years of data were recorded, the percentage of female solo or two person shows were calculated by a simple percentage formula: Y/X=P%.
1.4 Findings

Figure 6 presents an example of a year of exhibition history for David Zwirner in 2008. Including only solo or two person exhibitions in only David Zwirner’s New York Gallery location(s), there were 17 shows in total, five by female artists and 12 by male artists. This presents a year with 29% female shows. For each gallery considered, data was gathered in this technique for clarity, reference, and archival purposes.

The charts in Figure 7 represent my findings from each tier of gallery—mega, mid-size, and new and emerging, showing the gallery name, percentage of female artist shows, and the percentage of positive or negative growth over a ten year period. Many of the new and emerging galleries represented have not been in business for the past ten years, so their data sample was collected from the years available. The percentage of female artist shows, as detailed in the second column, was calculated by averaging all of the percentages per year per gallery. The third column, displaying the percentage of growth or negative growth was determined from the slope of their trendline when charted on a line graph. Trendlines indicate a general pattern in time series data, or data that illustrates information in a sequence over time. The slope represents the percentage increase or decrease of female artists shows at each gallery, per year. Figure 8 and Figure 9 illustrate two different galleries percentage of female artist shows over the ten year period, one with a positive slope and one with a negative slope. Figure 8 shows Metro Pictures Gallery, a gallery with positive growth. Its trendline shows that the percentage of female artist shows has risen 1.8485% a year on average. Figure 9 shows a gallery with a negative slope, Luhring Augustine Gallery. For this gallery, the percentage of female artists shows decreased by 1.45 percent each year.
As Figure 7 illustrates, there is not a very significant difference in the percentage of artists exhibited and represented between mega, mid-size, and new and emerging galleries. The average percentage of female artists shown at Mega galleries is about 23%, at mid-size galleries it is closer to 24% and at new and emerging galleries the percentage is surprisingly lower at 22%. The sector that shows the most improvement over the nearly ten year period, however, is the new and emerging galleries. New and emerging galleries show an average growth of 1.96%. Mid-size galleries show a lesser, but still positive, growth average of 0.54%. Mega galleries show negative improvement over the last ten years. The mega galleries have an average growth of -1.16%, symbolizing that these huge, influential galleries have actually started to show fewer and fewer female artists in recent years.

In an effort to contextualize and ground my research with real world experience and observations I interviewed Courtney Childress, an artist and gallerist with over ten years of experience in the New York contemporary gallery industry. She was a director at the Lower East Side gallery, On Stellar Rays, co-founded Yours, Mine & Ours Gallery, and now works for Ursula von Rydingsvard’s studio. Childress doesn’t think gallerists are doing the work it actually takes to get more women and people of color on their rosters. She explains, “Galleries do the easy thing where they say ‘Oh! This artist’s work is cool. Let’s show it.’ They aren’t thoughtful enough to say, ‘Oh wait, that’s another white male.’ But sometimes they’re trying to find the thing that sells and keeps them afloat.”
1.5 Why are Female Artists Still Undervalued?

Since the feminist art movement in the 1970s, subsequent to Linda Nochlin’s groundbreaking essay, *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?*, many aspects of the art world have changed and improved for artists who were previously underrepresented in the American art market. In the 70s and 80s, female artists were hardly visible in galleries. Collector Linda Lee Atler recalls often having to be taken to the back rooms in galleries to view women’s work. Along with female artists constituting a larger segment of the market in recent years, artists of color, primarily Black artists have now been able to reach the critical levels of success they deserve. White, male artists are no longer considered the only important figures or the only artists whose work is deemed “great” or “significant”. There has been a change in what really counts, as Nochlin describes, “from phallic ‘greatness’, to being innovative, making interesting, provocative work, making an impact, and making one’s voice heard.” There is less emphasis on the masterpiece, and more on the piece. Every year there are more galleries that open, willing to take on artists that are different than the world has seen before, propelling their careers into commercial success.

As Figure 1 shows, each decade from the 1970s onward until 2010 displayed an increase in the amount of female solo exhibitions in galleries in New York. This upward trajectory had stamina and vitality. So, why do we see a miniscule improvement in equal gender representation in the decade since this study? Most galleries have remained consistent in their dismal percentage of female versus male artists included on the roster.

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The past ten years barely show any improvement. In a liberal and creative sphere such as the fine arts, where there are more females than males graduating with a MFA, why can females not gain representation and why is a woman’s art valued so much less than a man’s?

There are various technical and deeply entrenched reasons why female-made artwork is valued less than its male counterparts, and consequently why they are underrepresented at galleries. Galleries want to represent artists that they believe in, that produce high quality work, and importantly, artists that can turn a profit. Because the art market so famously lacks transparency, it is difficult to determine the exact disparity between male and female artists prices on the primary market. It is possible, however, to determine that artists that have had significant, important museum shows generally are more expensive than those without. From 2007-2014, the percentage of female solo shows never rose above 30% at the Whitney, the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim, the Museum of Contemporary Arts Los Angeles, or the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Furthermore, females are sparse on the councils, boards, and committees of powerful, wealthy museums. Females are less likely to get museum shows, and by default galleries are less likely to represent those who have a slimmer shot at commercial success. With fewer females given the opportunity to show in museums, there are fewer opportunities for female artists to achieve high prices at auction. This

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means less attention, fewer headlines, scarce ads and reviews in *Artforum*, and fewer major museum acquisitions.

Artist and gallerist Courtney Childress used to be a director at On Stellar Rays, a gallery that represented artists Rochelle Feinstein and John Hock, among others. When On Stellar Rays first started exhibiting these artists, Childress recalls the disproportion in attention each artist received saying,

> We would show John Houck—and I love John’s work he’s brilliant and a lovely human being—and now he shows with Marianne Boesky and he’s off in another stratosphere. But whenever we would show his work, it was like we were beating people off with a stick. And the next show would be Rochelle Feinstein and she’s this amazing figure, this important New York painter, and we would be like, ‘Somebody buy one, please, anybody.’ It was awful. But we were still fighting the good fight.

In addition to the economic technicalities, there are institutionalized reasons why females still stand second to men in the visual arts. Linda Nochlin asserts that one of the major reasons why female artists have not achieved “greatness” is because women were not, until recently, able to access the nude figure. Women were rarely, if ever, allowed to practice in the academies of the 18th and 19th century and they were forbidden to paint or draw from live, nude models. Advancing in the arts does require learning specific skills, and without the possibility of learning these skills, women had a fundamental disadvantage. Furthermore, Nochlin also touches on the roles women are supposed to hold in Western society; the homemaker, the portrait of domesticity, with no desire for professional fulfillment. Choosing to be an artist as a female comes with the pre-existing struggles of an artistic career path, combined with “one thousand years of guilt, self-
doubt, and object hood”.

Nochlin’s ideas are certainly outdated, and women are no longer circumscribed to the tropes of the domestic housewife but the inequality persists.

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Chapter 2: The Feminist Art Movement and Beyond

2.1 The Feminist Art Movement

As feminist scholar Griselda Pollock explains, “feminism is not merely a minor incident in the history of Art History and art itself. It represents a major challenge to canonized notions of Western, masculine, white, heterosexual normativity, which had the effect of making any attempt to make visible the work of what this norm othered seem merely carping from the sidelines and requests for condescending tolerance.”\(^{19}\) To “rediscover” women in art is to acknowledge the narrow account in which art history is written. Art history organizes art into categories based on a stratified system of values, which lends itself to a hierarchy of art forms. Decorative arts, or arts and crafts—embroidery, needlepoint, weaving, patchwork, quilt making, to name a few—are domestic arts, art making that is historically done in the home. These types of artmaking are gendered, considered low art, and are at the bottom of the hierarchy of art forms. Though the current ideology around high and low art is different, and certainly more inclusive, the feminine position in art is historically the opposite of the masculine, and the masculine is seen as dominant. “Women artists are not outside the history or culture but occupy and speak from a different position and place within it.”\(^{20}\)

In the late 1960’s and 1970, the U.S. and the UK were experiencing “second wave feminism”, a widespread movement with the aim to increase equality and visibility for women as well as enhance women’s engagement in politics, economics and law. As existing hierarchies and histories were being questioned and challenged across the nation,

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 80.
artists and art historians followed suit. The feminist art movement of the 1970’s began to critically consider the inequality that female artists faced through four aspects; protest, pedagogy, networking and art practice\textsuperscript{21}. The Ad Hoc Women’s Committee, otherwise known as Ad Hoc, grew out of the broader activist group the Art Workers’ Coalition (AWC), via the sub-group Women Artists in Revolution (WAR). In 1970, Ad Hoc protested the Whitney every Sunday for four months demanding that 50% of the artists in the upcoming Whitney Biennial be women. Other groups, structured as protest and activist groups fighting for feminism in the art world emerged and organized protest and pickets throughout the 70s and 80s. In addition to protest, the feminist art movement raised consciousness to the fact that although a majority of art students were female, men primarily comprised the faculty members. Networking structures like journals, alternative exhibition spaces and other support systems helped connect women within the feminist art movement. Most importantly, the feminist ideologies sustained in the movement were reinforced in art making. Art created out of the movement reflected and analyzed a female gendered experience and explored female imagery, often with political undercurrents.

Throughout the feminist art movement, sexuality, class and race were reconciled through women’s art in attempt to understand and determine what it means to be female. American sculptor, Hannah Wilke said, “People are frightened by female organs because they don’t know what they look like.”\textsuperscript{22} The female body began to be depicted in an


effort to change the interpretation from an idealized object of a man’s desire to a site of a woman’s lived experience. Feminist art champions like Wilke, Ana Mendieta, Carolee Schneeman, Judy Chicago and Lynda Benglis played a significant role in transforming patriarchal models of femininity in art by positioning women’s bodies in art to reject inferiority and be celebrated. Past the late 1970s, broad strokes occurred in feminist theory across America and the UK. There was a shift from an emphasis on protest, activism and notions of feminist art as an articulation of female experience, toward “the examination of femininity as constructed through representations, many of them derived from mass media and popular culture sources.”

Throughout the 70s and 80s, artwork and gallery exhibitions that refused the image of woman as a symbol within the patriarchal order became more prominent. In 1984, an exhibition at the New Museum titled “Difference: On Representation and Sexuality” combined the work of numerous British and American artists including Ray Barrie, Hans Haacke, Barbara Kruger and Sherrie Levine, among others, presenting work that examines the intersection of gender and representation. In the catalogue for the exhibition, art critic Kate Linker wrote,

In literature, the visual arts, criticism, and ideological analysis, attention has focused on sexuality as a cultural construction, opposing a perspective based on a natural or ‘biological’ truth. This exhibition charts this territory in the visual arts….Its thesis—the continuous production of sexual difference—offers possibilities for change, for it suggests that this need not entail reproduction, but rather a revision of our conventional categories of opposition.

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Furthermore, during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and as social debates over reproductive rights and censorship were magnified, artists and critics led the charge for more explicit demonstrations of male, female, heterosexual, gay and lesbian in art. Confrontational representations of sexuality, violence and body politics intensified in women’s art and some of the most important female artists emerged; Louise Bourgeois, Nancy Spero and Kiki Smith, among many others.

As feminist movements before it, the feminist art movement was met with criticism for reducing female identity to one universal category that was straight, white and existed within the institutions of high art. Visual theorist and feminist scholar Griselda Pollock has argued for the inclusivity and validity of the movement stating, “feminism signifies a set of positions, not an essence; a critical practice, not a dogma; a dynamic and self-critical response and intervention, not a platform. It is the precarious product of a paradox. Seeming to speak in the name of women, feminist analysis perpetually deconstructs the very term around which it is organized.”

Though the feminist art movement gave way to a more approachable and open art market for female artists, there were countless female artists who chose not to take an active part in the feminist art movement. These women artists who were less vocal about the cause were outshone by the female artists who were outspoken and in turn, created art that was explicitly feminist. Though it is doubtful that a female artist really exists within the contemporary art canon, the feminist art movement as a broader development in the course of art history, gave a group of female artists a place in the modern narrative of art.

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Through their efforts for equality the women of the feminist art movement created an art historical movement that women were finally admitted to.

2.2 Female Artists as the “Other”

Larger and more theoretical possibilities present themselves as to why women are still so vastly underrepresented in the art world. Many feminist art texts consider feminism as a whole and contextualize a female artists’ role as it relates to women’s functions and duties in general. John Berger writes in *Ways of Seeing*,

> There is nothing she can do which does not contribute to her presence. Presence for a woman is so intrinsic to her person that men tend to think of it as an almost physical emanation, a kind of heat smell or aura...to be born a woman has been born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men.\(^{26}\)

Through recurring patterns of rhetoric and practices, women have been separated out from the domain of art, qualified by an adjective, “woman artist” or “female artist”, and effectively becoming partial or less-than\(^{27}\). Women are unable to be simply added to the discourse and history of art because “a place for them—but only as secondary and derivative—is already structural to its formation.”\(^{28}\)

Anything and everything can be expressed through visual art, yet one of the most prevailing themes is and continues to be, identity. Women artists have long explored themes of identity in their art, through femininity, womanhood, sexuality, and femaleness. Women have not been able to fully and entirely enter the art market sphere,

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\(^{28}\) Ibid., 138.
because they are still seen as exceptions to the rule. Women continue to be seen as “exceptions to greatness” in the visual arts because their art is easily separated from the white, male voice of art history. Female artists have been considered aberrations in the art world, or exceptions to the rule for various reasons over an extended period of time through many years of art history. The notion of women as “the other” was the underlying basis of the efforts and assertions of the feminist art movement.

Women artists being seen as “the other” predominates through most artistic styles and movements, Griselda Pollock notes a particularly interesting case in Surrealism. In *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, she writes,

> Although the Surrealists identified masculinity and patriarchy as the repressive order, they intended to subvert it by appropriating the feminine. That which was defined as the ‘other’ was to be taken over by men to fulfil their desire for their total humanity; women it is presumed could not conversely desire to appropriate all that was disparaged as masculine to complete themselves.29

As long as patriarchal hierarchies have been prevalent in western society, women artists have many times only been celebrated when they serve as the counterpart of a more dominant male artistic personality. In the 18th and 19th century, female artists who had artist fathers and brothers were more likely to become distinguished themselves, in part to the exposure and training they were able to be so near to. Lee Krasner, Georgia O’Keefe, Frida Kahlo, Elaine de Kooning, Cady Noland—many of these women are outliers in their success. It could be argued that they achieved recognition with partial thanks to their husbands or fathers. From this historical and systematic concurrence of female artists becoming distinguished due to their status as muse or counterpart affirms

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the position of women as “less than”. Art historian Kristen Frederickson illustrates the point,

The insistence on describing women artists in terms of linkages to the male artists who were their teachers or who influenced them in other ways undermines any vision of the female artist as independent. What Linda Nochlin has referred to as the ‘art historical apparatus’ has placed the work of women artists in a linguistically and sociologically gendered space, separate (if only implicitly so) from that occupied by their male counterparts. It is this implicit separation that Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock refer to in their statement that “the phrase ‘woman artist’ does not describe an artist of the female sex, but a kind of artist that is distinct and clearly different from the great artist. The term ‘woman’, superficially a label for one of the two sexes, becomes synonymous with the social and psychological structures of femininity.”

Like many and most professions in our nation's history, the visual arts is male dominated at a commercially successful level. Since the feminist art movement in the 1970’s, research and explorations of gender parity in the art market has been analyzed through economic and theory-driven terms. It is also significant, however, to consider the quality, subject and content of female artists work and how it could affect their market.

To a degree, quality of art is subjective, and the individual judgement or a work of art is based on emotions it evokes and associations it draws for the viewer. The inference I am trying to make is not based on the distinctions in quality between female and male artwork, but between a dominant theme in women’s art, and how it has disqualified women from attaining the same level of commercial success that men have. By creating art that concerns overt themes of femininity and femaleness, women artists have been separated into a domain of their own, divided from the wider, major sphere or the art market.

The biggest female players on the art market are those that have achieved high prices at auction, gained critical attention as well as mass appeal, and continue to excite collectors, gallerists, and museums. Furthermore, most of these distinguished artists’ oeuvres revolve around femininity, sexuality, and other tropes that subscribe to the act of being a female. As Nochlin notes,

As it is so often the case, women painters sometimes found ways of gaining fame, or more precisely, notoriety, by being exceptions, by forcing public attention. There were a rare number of women painters who, for a variety of reasons, achieved fame and fortune on a major level at least in part because they were women rather than in spite of their sex.31

In the cases of Cecily Brown and Kara Walker, artists that will be discussed more extensively in the latter portion of this paper, being a female has impacted their road to success. Brown’s and Walker’s gender impacts the content of their work in the sense that it informs the translation between artist and viewer. Brown confronts explicitly sexual subject matter through a historically masculine technique, abstract expressionism and Walker depicts the violence and oppression surrounding Black women.

The most expensive modern female artists include Georgia O’Keeffe, Louise Bourgeois, Cady Noland, Frida Kahlo, Joan Mitchell, Agnes Martin, Yayoi Kusama, Cecily Brown, Jenny Saville, and Cindy Sherman. Certainly, not every aforementioned artist’s work deals primarily with femininity and womanhood, and there is a great number of commercially successful female artists who do not consider these topics at all. It is important to point out, nonetheless, that most popular female artists do address these female-centric themes in their work. While this might seem like a trivial observation to make, one should note that there is not a singular theme that could be deduced from all of

the popular, commercially successful man-made art. The market for male artists work knows no bounds. The thematic elements, subject matter and styles are diverse and plentiful.

The peculiar phenomenon that women artists who have become commercially successful in the modern art market, primarily create work concerned with female-centric themes presents an interesting condition. The market—connoisseurs, dealers, collectors, historians and critics have picked a handful of women artists to champion. In doing so, many of these female artists were birthed out of the feminist art movement and subsequently consider feminist themes in their art. The other top-tier, celebrated women artists have become commercially successful because their art, that examines femininity, woman-hood and female sexuality, demonstrates their “other”ness.

I am not asserting that there is a “feminine sensibility” in female-made art that categorically separates it from male-made art. Women’s art is no more alike than man’s art and I am referring to, instead, as Linda Nochlin suggests “of female styles, always in the plural”32. Additionally, when a woman artist addresses femininity, female-ness and sexuality in her art, she does not necessarily also convey a sense of political or social critique. Feminine themes in art and feminist art are not mutually inclusive or exclusive.

The feminist art movement and feminist art practice has had, and continues to have a profound and deep-seated influence on the course of the art world and art market since the 1970s. Both feminine and feminist art is not a rejection of all prior art that did not include these themes. Much female-made art, however, is interpreted through the impacts of the feminist art movement. Cindy Sherman’s photographic series’ become

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meaningful “within a social context, a psychoanalytic field that feminism has infiltrated”\textsuperscript{33}.

The socially constructed entity, woman, as Nochlin explains, if she is an artist, faces a different world of experience and challenge than a male artists does. The rate of accepting female artists into more galleries, museums, and art publications was certainly stimulated by the feminist art movement of the 70s. The feminist art movement also in some ways, legitimized and championed feminist and feminine artwork, propelling figures like Judy Chicago and Carolee Schneemann into the public eye. Since this development in women's art history, the insertion of female artists in to the world art canon is slowly being considered. Due to the feminist art movement, the art that has been championed by women is female-centric and nature and deals with feminine and feminist themes. This circumstance has added to the current landscape in which female artists are separated from the larger art sphere, underrepresented at galleries, and undervalued on the market.

The role of the art collector is one of the most influential factors in the advancement of an artist’s career. As long as there has been art, there have been collectors of art. Of course both men and women collect art but historically, the largest and most prominent collections echo the names of powerful, wealthy men—JP Morgan, David Geffen, Steve Cohen, and so on. Men outnumber women in the field of art collecting however, the U.S. Trust’s National Arts Services reported that women

represent 36% of art collectors, a large jump from its 2017 figure, where women only accounted for 16% of collectors.\(^3\)

I interviewed Sara Kay to understand her take on gender inequality in the art world. Sara Kay is an art industry specialist, gallerist, a champion of female artists and female professionals in the arts sector, as well as the founder of Professional Organization of Women in the Arts, commonly known as POW Arts. Kay mentioned an important distinction in the type of collecting happening noting that the idea of the collector and the investor are separate entities. Kay states, “This idea of the art investor, grows all the time and has significantly grown in the last 10 years and I think the majority of investors are probably men. I think that this contributes to the gap [between male and female collectors]. I think that if there were more women collecting and investing and impacting other collectors you would see a shift.”

2.3 The “Squeezing” Out of Mid-Market Galleries

The secondary market sheds lights on the disparities in gender representation in a more tangible way. As stated earlier, in the past ten years at Post-War and Contemporary Evening Sales at Sotheby’s and Christie’s New York, only 37 women artists have appeared on the auction block. It is significant to note the importance of the gallery’s role in aiding these female artists appearing on the secondary market at all. Figure 10 shows every female artist to appear at Sotheby’s or Christie’s New York Post-War & Contemporary Evening Sale in the past 10 years and the gallery that now represents

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them. While many of these artists are represented by mega galleries, notably David Zwirner, a large portion are represented by galleries that constitute a mid-market gallery. In recent years a phenomenon has occurred in the art market referred to as the “squeezing” out of mid-market galleries. In an evolving art market, more and more hopeful gallerists have seen opportunities to open spaces and show artists of their choosing. At the same time, the tremendously well-established gallery “empires” climb higher and higher to dominant market positions, acquiring more real estate for larger exhibitions, expanding their staff to implement book stores and more sophisticated digital platforms, and plucking talented artists from smaller galleries, promising a more prosperous career. In New York, 310 galleries have closed in a period from 2011-2015, 22 of which were Chelsea galleries. Costs of operations are rising for the mid-market and emerging galleries, while the “rich get richer” in the higher end of the gallery system. These mid-market and smaller galleries are crucial for the advancement of women in the arts. Newer galleries are launching with explicit objectives of representing historically marginalized artists, such as Mrs. in Queens, a gallery that opened in 2016 with a mission of focusing on underrepresented mid-career artists.

The “squeezing” out effect of gallery closures poses a potential threat to the ever so slightly growing percentages of females in galleries. Younger galleries are more inclined to represent more females, and with an increasing amount of younger galleries closing, the possibility of more females making it to the secondary market shrinks. Fewer female artists on the secondary market will enhance the already existent polarized

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markets for male and female artwork. In addition to the near absence of female artists at Post-War and Contemporary Auctions as stated earlier, works by women typically sell for 47.6% less than works by men at auction, as stated earlier. When prompted to discuss the price discrepancies between male and female artists, Courtney Childress explains that female and male artists have different markets,

“That’s just it...there is a big, giant price discrepancy. And it’s based on museum shows, and the collectors buying, and the sort of exposure that comes along with it. The male artists get more access to all of those things. So they sell more, that means their exposure is greater, they then sell more, and it’s this loop that feeds itself. So they’re just always going to draw a higher price than their female counterparts and it’s just because there’s a market. They’re in a different kind of market. Females don’t have as high as a demand as the men so they can’t raise their prices to as high as the men in the field.”

Childress explains how she has seen it happen across generations, and uses the example of Rochelle Feinstein, adding,

“She just had her first solo museum show and she’s in her late 60s. And she’s been making and showing her work in New York since the 1970s in good galleries. All the men that were around her, like Peter Halley, that was one of her counterparts—he is a machine....he is a money making machine! And she’s just getting her first solo museum show now.”
Chapter 3: Case Studies

To further contextualize the place of a contemporary female artist in the landscape of today’s art market, I examined the careers of two commercially successful artists, Cecily Brown and Kara Walker. These artists are internationally recognized, critically respected, have commercially successful primary and secondary markets, and rose to prominence around the same time, as both of these artists are forty nine years old and were recognized early in their careers.

3.1 Cecily Brown

Cecily Brown is one of the youngest female artists who has achieved remarkable levels of commercial success within her lifetime. Born in 1969 in London, the Brown is only 49 years old and already is considered one of the most influential painters of her generation. Brown held the top two spots for art at auction by a living female artist in the 2018 auction year until just recently when Jenny Saville’s Propped sold for $12.4 million US dollars at Sotheby’s London, breaking the record for most expensive painting ever sold at auction for a living female artist. It is a small victory for artists like Saville and Brown, whose auction records demonstrate the appreciation and recognition of the quality of their female-made work. The record for a living male artist at auction, however, is more than seven times that of a females. David Hockney’s Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures) fetched close to $90.3 million at auction this November. The aforementioned statistics bring forth a collection of questions and considerations regarding both the achievements of Brown as a commercially successful female artist and the landscape she faced getting there.
Brown was born in London in 1969, and had a self-described “bohemian” upbringing. She remembers the lush Surrey countryside as a child, before abandoning traditional academic schooling at the age of sixteen. At this time, she enrolled herself in the Epsom School of Art and Design and at age twenty she was accepted to the Slade School of Fine Art at University College London. It was also around this time in Brown’s life she learned her father was David Sylvester, influential art critic noted for his advocacy of the artist Francis Bacon. Growing up, Brown had been fascinated by the adult, taboo themes of Bacon’s work—her mother had his work around the house as she also worked editing interviews and videos of Bacon. When she discovered her father’s involvement with Bacon’s painting career, the influence of the artist was undeniable.

In 1994, Brown left London for New York City to escape the Young British Art scene as she decided her “circumstances” were decidedly different from the tastes for popular culture artists such as Damien Hirst held. In the early years of her painting career, Brown began painting bunnies “engaged in various sexual maneuvers- as surrogates- for humans.” As her craft progressed and evolved, she departed from bunnies and animals to incorporate more abstraction, creating works reminiscent of the male-dominated abstract expressionist movement. She experimented with traditional genres in the history of painting such as landscapes and interiors, and ultimately developed her signature style; a combination of figurative and abstract painting. Her paintings continuously suggest organic forms, human bodies and human presences, but distilled in their sensibilities, they are merely alluded to. If her work doesn’t have a

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37 Ibid., 12.
figural element, she gets lost in the abstraction which she deems as “decoration”38. Brown is an artist enchanted with the illusive quality in painting. She states of painting as a kind of alchemy, “I want to catch something in the act of becoming something else”39.

In 1997, just four years after moving to the states, Brown landed at show at Deitch Projects and she was the first painter to have a solo exhibition at the gallery. In 2000, the artist was included in PS1 Contemporary Art Center’s first iteration of its, now landmark exhibition series, Greater New York and in 2006 Brown already had a mid-career retrospective at the Museum of Fine Art in Boston. Brown’s career was continuing to take off as she joined Gagosian Gallery in 1999. Throughout her early career, Brown was publicized in photographs of her posing next to her paintings in spreads in publications such as Vanity Fair, Interview, and The New Yorker. Clad in a bikini top or a tight pink skirt next to her sexually suggestive paintings, Brown makes a powerful statement and an ode to the pleasure of painting. Brown embraces an outward appreciation for sexuality, which has been used in the marketing of her as an artist. Furthermore, these photos as well as some of the rhetoric and attention around her work were seen by some as undermining her success. The use of sex-laden language in reviews of Brown’s work often diminished the critical formality she warranted. Roberta Smith of The New York Times famously reviewed Brown’s first show at Gagosian in 2000, deeming it “lackluster”. Fifteen years later Smith applauded Brown for the “best paintings of her career” at a solo show at Maccarone Gallery.

In terms of influences, the presence of art historical references and nods to Western painting traditions are glaringly evident in Brown’s work. She is a devoted connoisseur of art history and is always forthcoming about the influences of other artists in her practice. Museum director Suzanne Cotter writes of her work,

A brief glance at her largely figurative works summon forth memories of some of the twentieth century’s heaviest hitters- an essentially all male cast that includes Arshile Dorky, Willem de Kooning, Francis Bacon, and Philip Guston. More recent works by brown tips more than a cursory wink at Poussin, Tintoretto, Rubens, Goya and Hogarth, along with the turn of the century popular imagery and comic book caricatures which enter the mix of visual references colliding across her densely packed canvases.\footnote{Brown, Cecily, Suzanne Cotter, and Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith. \textit{Cecily Brown: Paintings}. Oxford: Modern Art Oxford, 2005, 37.}

Gorky and de Kooning have largely impacted Brown’s work because she never saw them as fully abstract painters. Brown always saw their paintings as objects and was interested in their earlier stylistic tendencies. The aforementioned classical and Renaissance artists that have influenced Brown’s oeuvre play a more compositional and subject matter-oriented role. Brown borrows figures and compositions from paintings she admires, and summons them into her own style.

In addition to the theme of art historical influences, another theme heavily present in Brown’s work are sexually suggestive themes. Brown began her artistic exploration with a series of bunny paintings, in which erotic human tendencies were manifested in the form of these furry creatures. In these early works, she mimics sexual anxieties and inhibitions in playful subverted way. Sensuality and sexuality have remained present in Brown’s work throughout her career. In Figure 11, \textit{Puce Moment} from 1997, Brown’s famed phrase regarding her style rings true; she prefers “abject ideas about the body,
cheap and nasty”\textsuperscript{41}. Partially abstracted depictions of genitals, breasts, and limbs permeate the canvas. The result is a fleshy, chaotic, sexually charged composition where human sexuality is embodied in a grotesque manner.

In her 2003 paintings, \textit{Couple} and \textit{Teenage Wildlife}, shown in Figure 12 and Figure 13 respectively, Brown ambiguously depicts sparsely clad couples intertwined in a swirling of lush foliage. The handling of the paint and subject matter alike are luscious and sensuous. Thick pigments and exuberant brush strokes bring attention to the stories happening in the paintings, sexual and intimate human contact. More currently, Brown is still creating work of a sexually suggestive nature. In \textit{Raspberry Beret} (2015-16) seen in Figure 14, the artist paints a large male nude reclining delicately across the composition.

Linda Nochlin writes of Brown’s paintings,

For Cecily Brown, it is as though the swirling, violently animated surface existed before the piecemeal figuration- a breast here, a penis there- that emerges from the welter of the pigment. \textit{Performance} is a completely readable but highly agitated scene of erotic action, a virtual orgy evoked by swirls of pink, cream, blue, green, or pinkish flesh color. Brown’s work makes constant reference in both its iconography and its formal language to the connection between the act of fucking and the act of painting, a trope previously reserved for male artists but rarely so explicitly articulated in the material fracture of the imagery itself.\textsuperscript{42}

Cecily Brown’s uncompromising and laissez-faire attitude towards her overt use of sexual imagery in an abstract expressionist style is perhaps one of the reasons she became a dominant female force on the art market. Brown made it possible for critics and viewers of her work to address sex in relation to a modern female artist. She contextualizes human sexuality within the “machismo” of abstract expressionism,

asserting her merit as a prominent painter with a deep awareness of Western painting tradition. By combining an undisguised use of abstract expressionism, with the figurative in the form of the traditional nude, Brown confronts the gendered aspects of painting head-on.

Cecily Brown has a powerful presence in the contemporary art market, both as one of the most expensive living female artists and as an unwavering and unapologetic force in her position in art history. Cotter notes of Brown’s work, “Sex has often been used as a metaphor for painting and it has been suggested that these uncompromising works were a post-feminist strut in the direction of the machismo of Abstract Expressionism”\textsuperscript{43}. At just 49 years old, she is one of the most accomplished female artists alive today. Her work is included in the collections of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; Tate Gallery, London; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC and The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington DC, among others. In an art market where commercial success of Brown’s caliber is only granted to a handful of female artists, one begs the question, “how did she do it?” What has propelled Cecily Brown into notoriety beyond her contemporaries like Lisa Yuskavage, Dana Schutz, Ghada and Amer?

Cecily Brown perhaps represents the “perfect storm” manifested in a female artist, apt and predisposed to success. She is white, a factor that automatically advances her status, statistically speaking. She is the daughter of an acclaimed art critic, holds a “personal connection with a stronger or more dominant male artistic personality”, a factor

that Linda Nochlin asserts most prominent female artists have in *Why Have There Been No Great Female Artists?* Additionally, Brown’s work is visibly and self-admittedly influenced by important and celebrated male artists, most notably Francis Bacon and Willem de Kooning. Brown gained gallery representation by Gagosian Gallery in 1999, where she remained on the roster for 15 years before moving to Paula Cooper Gallery. The significance of Gagosian, which is more of an empire than a gallery, certainly propelled Brown’s career more than any other circumstance. In an excerpt from an interview with the Financial Times, Brown asserts the power of the gallery;

’I’m so lucky’, Brown continues, ‘Despite the vileness of the market, I’ve benefited from it a lot. I can’t complain, I can be proud that I am one of the few women — Marlene Dumas, Jenny Saville, Cindy Sherman, Lisa Yuskavage, Elizabeth Peyton — commanding high prices.’ I wonder if these artists have anything in common. ’Larry Gagosian!’ Brown jokes without missing a beat. (Gagosian represents Saville, Sherman and Peyton; Dumas and Yuskavage are with his global rival David Zwirner.) She adds quickly: ‘I love Larry, he raised the bar, no one can complain about his museum-quality shows around the world.’

Through the arc of art history, Cecily Brown falls in a sweet spot. She is close enough to the mid-20th century modern painters to absorb their influence, yet she is still young enough to not be associated with the feminist art movement. Her significance suggests she is in a league of her own, and although she remains one of the most expensive living female artists, her gender still binds her to a category of “otherness”. She will most likely never be one of the most expensive living artists and has never even been in the top 100.

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44 Nochlin, Linda. ”Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays*:145-78.
3.2 Kara Walker

Kara Walker, born in 1969, is an American artist best known for her black cut-paper silhouette works, reminiscent of folklore, that illustrate scenes depicting the brutality and violence of slavery and American histories. Her work is difficult and provocative, deeply entrenched with references to art history, stereotypes and psychological violence. Her work isn’t provocative for the sake of being provocative, but to provide a new context for taboo subjects. Today, Walker is a beloved fixture in the art world.

Since a young age, Walker knew she wanted to be an artist. She experimented with different types of art making, always aiming to tell a story or make a statement through her work. In the midst of her creative development, Walker relocated from Stockton, California to Atlanta, Georgia, where she later attended the Atlanta College of Art and earned her BFA in painting and printmaking. The move from California to Georgia impacted Walker’s life and artistic practice. The artist has commented on growing up so close to Stone Mountain, Georgia, where one of the largest memorials celebrating the heroes of the Confederacy stands. Walker has once stated that the monument was the largest influence of her work.\(^{46}\) Stone Mountain still held Ku Klux Klan rallies at the time, and Walker faced bullying and harassment in her middle and high school years. Feeling isolated, Walker turned to books, educating herself by reading the southern histories surrounding discrimination at its roots. In 1994 Walker received a Master of Fine Arts in painting and printmaking from the Rhode Island School of Design.

While she studied painting in Atlanta in her young adult years, she told herself, “You have to stop painting. You cannot paint”, as the artist felt painting as a medium had long been “owned” by white males. She adopted paper cutting as her medium of choice\(^7\).

Directly after graduation from RISD, Walker participated in a number of group shows that put her on the map, establishing her place in the international art world. In 1994, the Drawing Center in New York City had its seasonal show, “Selections from Fall 1994”. Here, Walker’s 50-foot long wall installation was exhibited, her first silhouette work that includes references to *Gone with the Wind*, titled *Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as it Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart*. Walker quickly gained critical attention and newfound emerging artist fame. She soon found gallery representation with Wooster Gardens, now Sikkema Jenkins Gallery. Three short years later, her work was included in the high profile 1997 Whitney Biennial. Walker’s work produced an example as well as reflected the politicized art world landscape in the 1990s. As the digital age developed and dominated, further globalization of ideas and culture disseminated into the world. As financial strain plagued the economy and attitudes around minority cultures was shifting, artists began to explore social and political belonging through their art, considering themes of lived experience and identity. Walker was among these artists that encouraged the destabilization of their viewers to create a difficult, but meaningful interpretation of their work.

Kara Walker’s work can be characterized best by her large-scale, black cut paper collaged silhouettes depicting scenes from the antebellum south. Historically associated

with the kinds of genteel arts young women participated in, cut paper silhouettes are gendered in their medium. Walker’s work refuses to be shameful when covering the harrowing subjects of race, sexuality, desire, and the violence in the context of America’s slave-ridden history. She ignores the historical shame associated with slavery and the societal shame surrounding stereotypes and sexuality. Instead of attempting to control or subdue the negative representations of Black people that have been perpetuated by white artists for centuries, Walker “intensifies them, accelerates them, inflates them, and runs with them to narrate uncanny pictorial stories in which pleasure and pain meet.”

Through mural-like installations in which her cut-outs are directly pasted on gallery and museum walls, the artist creates a landscape that forces the viewer to participate in the image. The main theme manifested in Walker’s work is race, yet her representations equally depend on the issues of gender entwined in the racial ones—the white male, sexual domination over Black women, gender exploitation. Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw, an art historian who has written extensive literature on Walker, describes her work as, “able to tap both the latent and the virulent racist icons of the visual and textual past in order to make her audience ‘see the unspeakable’”.

Though Walker’s work is celebrated and regarded highly today, as an artist she was subjected to endless criticism and backlash in the earlier days of her artistic career, particularly after she was awarded the MacArthur Foundation Grant in 1997. With the increased exposure she received from the grant, came a vocal and angry Black audience concerned not with just the nature of the work itself, but the critical validation it received

from the art world, a world deemed entrenched in a white power structure. Walker was awarded the MacArthur Foundation Grant in 1997, just a mere 30 to 40 years after the height of the Civil Rights Movement, in which African Americans, and Black women, in particular battled for their equality against demeaning stereotypes that had been constructed. Black women who had grown up in this era were particularly critical of Walker’s work. Her work challenged the optimism they had worked so hard to achieve, and her work expressed the twisted horrors of slavery and “they worried that the white establishment had adopted her to serve their racist ends.” Walker has also been criticized for her absent responses to analysis of her work, she is allegedly “tired of standing up” and that she is expected to provide meaning to her work. Many defended Walker, however, and celebrated her boldness. Conceptual artist Barbara Kruger applauded her use of stereotypes to, "turn them upside down, spread-eagle and inside out". Walker is one of the, if not the, most highly celebrated Black female artists of all time. Her work presents an obvious, yet highly nuanced provocation of race relations in the United States. Because Walker confronts racism and stereotypes so directly, her work has in some ways, served as a tool for the art-viewing public to have conversations about race in the art world, ultimately aiding Walker’s success.

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Kara Walker faces another common criticism, and one of female artists in general when they achieve such prominent levels of popularity in the art world. A criticism not aimed at Walker as an artist, but at her surrounding markets and the institutions that support her. As Walker quickly rose to celebrity status and her work was being exhibited widely, audiences began to critique the institutions that featured her art, but historically, rarely ever exhibited work by Black female artists. Showing Walker’s work, particularly as it is politically charged and provocative in content, relieved museums duties of presenting any other Black female artists. Furthermore, even though Walker is a contemporary artist working in the modern century, much criticism surrounding Walker has resorted to conventional gendered narratives about her personal life, such as her marriage to a German-born, white man. In these ways, Kara Walker’s gender has contributed to the critical attention she has received, both negative and positive. Her work is about women’s issues just as vehemently as it regards race-related issues. She is “the ‘mad woman in the attic’ whose voice will not be silenced”\(^54\).

Walker’s work has had a thriving market ever since she left RISD with her MFA. Her work was included in a group show just three months after she graduated, and Holland Cotter reviewed her work in the *New York Times* the next year\(^55\). Three years later in 1997, Walker’s work had been acquired by the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Walker Art Center for their permanent collections after she participated in


that year’s Whitney Biennial. Her work was being sold between $30,000 and $80,000 to

A work by Walker has appeared once at a Post War and Contemporary Art
Evening Sale at Christies and Sotheby’s New York in the past 10 years. The most
common medium of Walker’s work that appears at auction are the artists prints and
multiples. Her prints range from editions of thirty to seventy of various techniques;
etchings, aquatints, screenprints, linocuts, lithographs, and intaglio prints. These works
usually achieve fairly modest prices at auction given the critical acclaim surrounding
Walker. The highest price paid at public auction was $125,000 in 2013, for The
Emancipation Approximation Portfolio (1999-2000), which was actually a set of 26
screenprints. Walker’s oeuvre is diverse, as she also creates sculptures, drawings, and
watercolors. Her most well-known silhouette works fetch prices from $50,000 to
Kara Walker’s success as an artist, however, is not
best reflected in the prices her art sells for. An average collector might consider Walker’s
work important and valuable to collect, yet difficult to live with given the subject matter.
Artist Thom Shaw stated of her work, “[Walker’s] works are obviously targeted at
whites. It’s ironic that they buy it. I do have a problem with curators. One can make a
substantial argument that they’re only showing the stereotypes. We’re still looked at as
Walker’s success is emblematic of one artist becoming the representative for a whole group—in this case, African American women. By bolstering one woman, Walker, to near stardom, the public views her success as an improvement in equality. One Black female’s creative expression does not equate to all Black females creative expression, and the commercial art market championing Walker’s work does not relieve “them”—the curators, critics and dealers—of the responsibility to treat all artists objectively. “In the role of the disenfranchised “other”, Walker has been allowed to critique the dominant culture virtually unfettered by its proponents, in part because she does not spare her own community in the exercise.” Shaw argues that it’s because of her shameless “other” identity, she has been allowed into the center. Shaw writes, “However, from her insider position Walker is allowed to say not only what those in the center cannot say, but also what those who remain at the margins have repressed.” In instances, Walker’s work has been censored or removed from exhibitions because of the extreme and controversial nature of the content. The censorship rather than confrontation, Shaw argues, is reflective of the white male dominated art world.

Walker’s work has been exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. A 1997 recipient of the MacArthur Fellowship, Walker was the United States representative to the 2002 Bienal de São Paulo. Walker currently lives in New York, where she is on the faculty of the MFA program at

60 Ibid., 108.
Columbia University. Her work continues to fascinate, provoke, and challenge its viewers as it has earned its place in contemporary art history.

Both Cecily Brown and Kara Walker embrace and appropriate their “otherness” as female artists to cultivate greatness and diversify the understanding of the human experience in the contemporary world. Both of these women are acutely aware of the ways in which commercial visual culture and art historical tropes affect the perception of their art.
Conclusion

The concept of the “glass ceiling” means that an acknowledged barrier to advancement in a profession exists. The topics explored in this paper demonstrate that the glass ceiling for female artists transcends the mere fact that they only account for 23% of artists represented by contemporary New York galleries. Through a history of being stiffed by the patriarchal hierarchies in the art market and the subsequent aspect of female artists seen as the “other” and “exceptions to the rule”, the road to commercial success is significantly harder for a woman artist. The feminist art movement, however, has helped cultivate a more balanced industry, and has enabled women artists such as Cecily Brown and Kara Walker to be critically received at the same level as male artists.

There is hope for improvement in the art world, as seen in the increased number of female art collectors simply in the past year. Wealth no longer only belongs to heirs of old money, financiers or real estate moguls. The modern era holds an entrepreneurial spirit, and more women than ever before are launching their own professional empires, stimulating the economy while creating wealth for themselves. As opportunity equalizes in a broader, cultural sense, the art market will, in turn, follow suit.

Female artists shouldn’t merely be seen as “the bargains of our time”, as art dealer Iwan Wirth puts it. The further analysis of women in the art world presented suggest an important link between the influence of mid-market galleries as well as the feminist art movement and the struggle to gain recognition in the existing male-dominated field of art. Although the gender inequality in the art world is seen as more shocking given the

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liberal nature of the arts, the problem is obviously not art world specific. When asked about her first-hand experience of gender inequality as a professional in the art world, gallerist and activist, Sara Kay says, “I’ve certainly had personal experience [regarding gender discrimination] and I don’t think there’s a single female in the field that has not. I think that my personal experience has been fortunate, with a few exceptions and not unusual ones. I think it’s just a general feel and for me it’s not art world specific—it’s a global feel. And yes, I’m in the art world, I live it daily but I don’t see it as an art world specific problem.” The art market reflects biases that exist in the world, beyond any economy, institution, or professional network. A widespread improvement for gender equality is necessary to shatter the glass ceiling of the art world.
Illustrations

Figure 1

Figure 2
Christie's Post War and Contemporary Evening Sale Year vs. % of Sales and % of Female Artist Works

Sotheby's Post War and Contemporary Evening Sale Year vs. % of Sales and % of Female Artist Works
### 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># of Exhibition</th>
<th>Artist(s)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Jason Rhoades</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Al Taylor</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Diana Thater</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Luc Tuymans</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Christopher Williams</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Marcel Dzama</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Dan Flavin</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Daniel Richter</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>James Welling</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Neo Rauch</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Katy Schimert</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>John McCracken</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Sue Williams</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Michael Riedel</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Mary Heilmann</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stan Douglas</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Tomma Abst</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 6**

### Mega Galleries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gallery</th>
<th>% of Female Artist Shows (2008-2017)</th>
<th>% Growth or Negative Growth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>David Zwirner</td>
<td>23.3%</td>
<td>0.5394</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pace</td>
<td>13.2%</td>
<td>-0.0606</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gagosian</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>-0.1333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hauser &amp; Wirth</td>
<td>44% (2009-2017)</td>
<td>-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Average: 22.875%</td>
<td>Average Growth: -1.1636%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Mid-Size Galleries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gallery</th>
<th>% of Female Artist Shows (2008-2017)</th>
<th>% Growth or Negative Growth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paula Cooper</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
<td>0.4727</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metro Pictures</td>
<td>22.7%</td>
<td>1.8485</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Cohan</td>
<td>25.9%</td>
<td>0.903</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul Kasmin</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
<td>-0.0667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew Marks</td>
<td>14.4%</td>
<td>1.2242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheim &amp; Read</td>
<td>40.9%</td>
<td>-0.3333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luhring Augustine</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
<td>-1.4485</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maccarone</td>
<td>28.1%</td>
<td>0.4182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marianne Boesky</td>
<td>25.8%</td>
<td>-0.2424</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack Shainman</td>
<td>24.7%</td>
<td>1.3152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postmasters</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>-0.2303</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greene Naftali</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>3.4364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gallery</td>
<td>% of female artist shows</td>
<td>% Growth or Negative Growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simone Subal</td>
<td>37.6% (2011-2017)</td>
<td>2.7143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Hole</td>
<td>19.7% (2011-2017)</td>
<td>1.6071</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenspon</td>
<td>22.5% (2010-2017)</td>
<td>5.7619</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karma</td>
<td>15.1% (2011-2017)</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morgan Lehman</td>
<td>38.6% (2010-2017)</td>
<td>3.1548</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JTT</td>
<td>40.17% (2012-2017)</td>
<td>0.6571</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pierogi</td>
<td>29.7% (2008-2017)</td>
<td>-0.6242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venus over Manhattan</td>
<td>8.3% (2012-2017)</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marc Straus</td>
<td>12.7% (2011-2017)</td>
<td>2.7143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luxembourg and Dayan</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Average: 22.437%  
Average Growth: 1.96353%

Figure 7
Figure 8

Figure 9
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artist</th>
<th># of Lots and Gallery</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joan Mitchell</td>
<td>44 (David Zwirner, Cheim &amp; Read)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agnes Martin</td>
<td>37 (Pace)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louise Bourgeois</td>
<td>24 (Cheim &amp; Read)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cindy Sherman</td>
<td>22 (Metro Pictures)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yayoi Kusama</td>
<td>14 (David Zwirner)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marlene Dumas</td>
<td>6 (David Zwirner)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cady Noland</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cecily Brown</td>
<td>5 (Paula Cooper)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee Krasner</td>
<td>5 (Paul Kasmin)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie Mehretu</td>
<td>5 (Marian Goodman)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vija Celmins</td>
<td>5 (Matthew Marks)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva Hesse</td>
<td>4 (Hauser &amp; Wirth)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee Bontecou</td>
<td>4 (Represented by her agent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen Frankenthaler</td>
<td>4 (Gagosian)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Njideka Akunyili Crosby</td>
<td>3 (David Zwirner)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sherrie Levine</td>
<td>2 (David Zwirner)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kara Walker</td>
<td>2 (Sikkema Jenkins)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth Peyton</td>
<td>2 (Gladstone)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sturtevant</td>
<td>2 (Thaddaeus Ropac)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosemarie Trockel</td>
<td>2 (Gladstone)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wangechi Mutu</td>
<td>1 (Gladstone)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura Owens</td>
<td>1 (Gavin Brown)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice Neel</td>
<td>1 (David Zwirner)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lynette Yiadom-Boayke</td>
<td>1 (Jack Shainman)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane Arbus</td>
<td>1 (David Zwirner)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louise Lawler</td>
<td>1 (Metro Pictures)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louise Nevelson</td>
<td>1 (Pace)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel Whiteread</td>
<td>1 (Gagosian)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa Yuskavage</td>
<td>1 (David Zwirner)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan Rothenberg</td>
<td>1 (Sperone Westwater)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marisol Escobar</td>
<td>1 (Albright Knox)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nan Goldin</td>
<td>1 (Matthew Marks)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artist</td>
<td>Institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth Asawa</td>
<td>1 (David Zwirner)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beatriz Milhazes</td>
<td>1 (James Cohan)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isa Genzken</td>
<td>1 (David Zwirner)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah Lucas</td>
<td>1 (Gladstone)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mira Schendel</td>
<td>1 (Hauser and Wirth)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 10

![Image of a painting](image-url)

Figure 11
References


