

# Museum exhibit traces art as a vehicle for women's rights

By Patricia Robert Sep 25, 2020 Updated Sep 26, 2020 0



"Caribbean Thoughts Mashup" by Julia Santos Solomon

"Women to the Fore," the new exhibition at the Hudson River Museum, features the work of more than 40 female-identifying artists, spanning three centuries, in honor of the 100th anniversary of the passage of the 19th Amendment. The exhibit will be on view until Jan. 3, 2021.

In its introduction to the exhibit, HRM recognizes that women continue to fight for full equality, and art is a powerful tool in that fight. As the exhibit demonstrates, past and present female-identifying artists created great art within a male-dominated society, in part by rebelling against that inequity.

“Women to the Fore” includes works from HRM’s permanent collection as well as those on loan from galleries, private collectors, and regional artists. It features a variety of artworks — paintings, drawings, prints, photographs, collage, and sculpture — made from assorted materials, ranging from oil, watercolor, and acrylic, to resin, graphite, plaster of Paris, paper mache, cotton, rope, and false teeth.

“Certainly the timing was a factor, as this is the year of the woman and we are celebrating a milestone that still had many flaws,” exhibition curator Laura Vookles said. “And Masha [Turchinsky] thought an exhibition with this theme, ‘Women to the Fore,’ would provide a great opportunity to have conversations with contemporary artists in the broader community.”

Turchinsky is the director and CEO of the museum. Vookles has been with the museum since 1985, and a curator there since 1990.

“The museum was closed due to the pandemic, and we had the time to take stock of our own inventory and to search the database for artists whose work would supplement what we had,” Vookles continued. “As we went on with our thinking and our conversations about the theme, we saw that we could mount an exhibit that would mix up the chronology, juxtaposing artists through several generations.”

To that end, “Women to the Fore” includes works by Mary Cassatt (“The Bath,” 1890-91), Georgia O’Keeffe (“Banana Blossom,” 1934), Louise Nevelson (“Sky Enclosure,” 1973) alongside such contemporary artists as Ola Rondiak, whose sculptures “Truth Montanka” are inspired by Ukrainian rag dolls; the acrylic on canvas “Sunday Evening” by Jessica Spence, a Jamaican-American artist; and “Free Our Siblings///Free Ourselves,” a watercolor on paper, collage on board by Tuesday Smillie, an artist whose work focuses on trans-feminist politics and the aesthetics of protest.

HRM also commissioned a collaborative mural by Yonkers residents Nancy Mendez, Patricia Santos, and Katori Walker, who are known for their street murals. Entitled “The Garden of the Divine Feminine,” the work, which measures approximately 11 feet by 15 feet, is primarily done in acrylic and spray paint. In addition to vibrant, lush colors, the mural has faux flowers, gems, and mirror appliqués. It was inspired by the artists’ own expression of identity. For Mendez, who made the original sketch, this includes the trauma many women experience when they don’t do what is expected of them — namely to marry and bear children.

“I had a hard journey in trying to be a mother, having injections and all that,” she said. “Society places a timeline for women and this destroyed me emotionally. I focused on my art and this saved me. Through the healing process I realized that my journey as of now is not to be a mother yet, and art is my baby. In ‘The Garden of the Divine Feminine’ I show the vagina as being a creative force, but with ideas, and these ideas are carried out in the story the mural tells. Women are amazing.”

Vookles called attention to the importance of the labels adjacent to each work. Whenever possible words from the artists were used.

“We were able to get quotes for every living artists whose work is on display,” she said. “So we spent considerable time researching the papers of those that are deceased. In some cases, we had access to their diaries and papers through the internet. There were others whose papers might be saved, but not yet digitized and, due to the pandemic, no research trips were possible, so we selected quotes that were appropriate. Each label has a portrait of the artist.”

“The experience of putting this exhibit together was joyful,” Vookles added. “It was something that was transformative and it blossomed as we went on. And these women, these artists, had their say, to each other, and to us. ”

For more information, visit [www.hrm.org](http://www.hrm.org). The museum, 511 Warburton Ave., Yonkers, is open Thursday to Sunday from 12–5 p.m. Capacity is limited to 40 visitors at a time. Visitors must wear face masks, adhere to social-distancing guidelines, and follow a set, one-way route. Admission costs \$8 for adults; \$4 for youth (3–18); \$5 for seniors (62+), for students (with valid ID), and for veterans; free for children under 3 and for members.