Review/Art

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A Raucous Caucus Of Feminists Being Bad

By ROBERTA SMITH

If you approach "Bad Girls," the raucous exhibition of feminist art at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in SoHo, as a smorgasbord of feminist expression from various sectors of contemporary culture, you will have a good time. The show includes drawings for feminist cartoons like Lynda Barry's "God's Gift" and Jennifer Camper's "If Men Got Pregnant." It has a reading area with books like "The Four Elements," by Roz Chast, "Bad Girls Do It: An Encyclopedia of Female Murderers," by Michael Newton, and the comic book anthology "Twisted Sisters: A Collection of Bad Girl Art."

Visitors can sit on chairs designed by the artist Nancy Dwyer, don earphones and listen to an eclectic mix of blues, rock, rap, folk and opera music — often parodistic and always full of sexual innuendo and feminist subversiveness — that starts with Bessie Smith's "I Ain't Gonna Play No Second Fiddle" of 1925. At the show's entrance, "Mange on the Lam," a Thelma-and-Louise type segment from Matt Groening's popular television show "The Simpsons," plays nonstop on a monitor. In the final gallery, a selection of generally entertaining videotapes, organized by Cheryl Dunye, treats such subjects as sexual harassment, lesbianism, the Beatles and even cheerleading with wit and ingenuity. Viewers may also read wall texts printed with jokes that a stand-up female comic, albeit a not-too-talented one, might use. (Sample: "You're too apt to be a bad girl if... you think wrist corsages are O.K.") A sprinkling of work by male artists demonstrates how feminism has infiltrated the art activities of the opposite sex. And there are even drawings by real girls — fifth-graders — to show how bad-girlness looks from the elementary-school level.

Building on the attitudes of photo-appropriation artists of the 80's.

But disappointment awaits anyone who approaches "Bad Girls" for a reasonably accurate view of the new, angrily ironic feminist art — made by women, not children or men — that has been percolating up through the galleries and alternative spaces in the last few years. Constituting the third, possibly the fourth generation of feminist artists to emerge since the early 1970's, these artists have built on the attitudes of the photo-appropriation feminists of the 1980's (Barbara Kruger, for example), confidently branching out into painting and sculpture and installation art. It's a good time to assess their efforts and reconsider the issues they raise.

But that's not what happens at the New Museum, even if one ignores the demeaning, authority-invoking title. ("Angry Women," while not as catchy, would have been more accurate or maybe "Wild Women.") Although the second part of this exhibition, which opens on March 5, may show some improvement, the New Museum seems to have once again fudged a timely idea. In this case it was one that no other museum has yet had the courage to touch, one that seemed tailor-made for this institution, which prides itself on going against the grain of the New York art world.

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Marcia Tucker, the museum's founding director and the organizer of the exhibition, seems to have gone out of her way to avoid validating art that has already been seen in art galleries. (Sue Williams, represented by one small painting here, is the exception.) Instead she has concentrated on lesser-known or younger artists who have, in several cases, followed in the footsteps of the artists not here.

Many of contemporary art's most prevalent issues and visual themes are relentlessly apparent: the body, genitalia, gender identity, role reversal, sexual stereotyping, endless jokes and double-entendres. But too much of the work rarely gets beyond the level of the derivative, the jokey one-liner or political agitprop. The political may be personal, but it takes more than believing a catchy slogan to convert the political into a personal, resonant art that transcends editorializing or militating naughtiness.

From Elizabeth Berdaan comes "The Topless Hall of Fame," which juxtaposes small bullfight-shaped paintings of enormous female breasts with the slang expressions for same. From Elaine Tin Nyo, a series of photocorrects of daikon and carrots suggests entangled bodies, a worn-out Surrealist idea. From Amy Hill, cans and bottles of food whose labels have been reworked in daily obvious ways: "Pop Gefilte Fish," for example. From Beverly Semmes, "Hum," a wall installation consisting of three outsized lavender velvet dresses that lacks almost any suggestion of the monstrous female cloak that, in fact, is this artist's best work. From Maxine Hayt, a big pink sculpture made of polyurethane foam bound in rope that suggests an abstract chunk of flesh, seriously pre-anus and probably female. It's not nearly as good as Ms. Hayt's "Image Bank," a wall in the show's final gallery covered with postcards of animal and human subjects proceeding from the sublime to the grotesque.

Granted, a number of the artists whose presence might have improved this show — including Nicole Eisenman, Sylvie Fleury, Deborah Kass, Rachel Lachowitz, Kaibe Burkhart and Marlene McCarty — will be seen in a sister exhibition, "Bad Girls West," which has been organized by Marcia Tucker, an independent curator and opens next week at the Wight Art Gallery at the University of California in Los Angeles. (The shows will have a joint catalogue.) But the question is, why aren't some of these artists here? It's not as if New York has been saturated with their efforts for the last three seasons.

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The art that is here and that holds the viewer's attention for more than about 20 seconds forms a short list. Hard to miss, because it's in the museum's front window, is Xenobia Bailey's "Sistah Paradise's Revival Tent," a tent of bright, resolutely patterned knitted wool that is part shelter, part headdress, part woman's head. Renee Cox's larger-than-life photograph "Mother and Child," a nude self-portrait of the artist holding her son, provides one of the show's few moments of quiet, unposey dignity. The same can be said for Jacqueline Hayden's imposing images of heavyset elderly women in the nude, which point up the obsession with beauty and youth.

Margaret Curtis's paintings, while clearly influenced by Sue Williams, are exceptional for the decorative, ironically feminine pizazz they bring to issues of gender and sexuality. Millie Wilson contributes a grandiose merkin, or public wig, whose elaborate configuration suggests an ancient stone goddess. And one of the show's few truly mesmerizing moments is Portia Munson's "Pink Project," a big table laden with an orderly, densely packed array of things pink — from combs, brushes and barrettes to children's toys, dildos and a garbage can — in all, 2,000 instances of femininity reinforced.

Like a number of recent New Museum exhibitions, this one has a strong element of the carnivalesque, a concept that Ms. Tucker discusses in her catalogue essay. She describes the carnival as an event in which everyday identities and inhibitions are temporarily dropped, where transgressive and taboo behavior is accepted and liberation can be found. And there is something liberating about this show, if you don't look too carefully at the art. But ultimately too much of its energy, anger and insight comes from the accomplished popular artists who have been anointed "bad girls."

The popular art, while part of the enjoyment here, also becomes part of the problem. Smart and accessible, it often ends up stealing the show, and indicates Ms. Tucker may simply have mixed too many disparate elements together. (Why not just give feminist cartoonists their own exhibition?)

Perhaps if Ms. Tucker had applied her concept of carnival a little more thoroughly, she would have allowed the New Museum to drop its usual identity as the maverick of New York museums, include a greater percentage of better-known artists and actually help define an important, possibly "hot" trend. Instead, she prematurely blends it with the surrounding culture, almost as if she were afraid that art by women could not stand alone.