



BREAKING BARRIERS | WOMEN & THEIR WORK

story **autumn rhea carpenter**
photography **atelier wong photography**

“Sexism is not some cultural disease created by men,” said Angela Fraleigh, an artist whose large-scale work will be displayed February 16 - March 25 at the contemporary art gallery, Women & Their Work. “Both genders create sexism every day through the reinforcement of expected gender roles and limiting stereotypical behavior. It is essential for women to embrace, change, or transform their way of thinking and acting if anything is to progress. Women & Their Work is an example of an organization doing exactly that.”

By awarding solo shows, providing financial and technical assistance, and promoting exhibits, Women & Their Work is making strides in helping artists call Austin home.

Fraleigh’s engagement with Women & Their Work is her first opportunity to be featured in a gallery of female-only artists. She explained the disparity that exists between the sexes when it comes to women gaining representation in solo shows.

“A gallery like Women & Their Work is important because it gives exposure to the underrepresented majority,” she said. “What is going on when the majority of college art programs are filled to the gills with girls, yet we only get 17 percent of the solo shows in New York galleries?”

The 2,000 square foot gallery, home of the 28 year old organization, is known for showcasing known and unknown artists in numerous mediums, including theatre, music, film, photography, visual art, and literature. The Austin mainstay strives to promote Texas women artists and emphasizes that Austin and Texas are important forces in the art community.

According to Chris Cowden, Women & Their Work’s executive director since 1986, the gallery hopes to make Austin a city that artists can call home. “We are one ingredient in the Austin art ecosystem,” she said. “We work with commercial galleries and other non-profits in the area to make Austin a place where artists can co-exist and pursue a career without having to move places like Los Angeles and New York. Of course, the cost of living is rising, and this is a constant struggle for artists.”

When entering work, artists are required to submit a resume, a one-page

facing page julia spann, executive director of safeplace in front of staff and 24 hour hotline

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artist statement, and ten slides or representative work. (16 slides, if they are submitting three-dimensional work.) “We utilize a blind jury system, devised of six to ten artists that represent the different regions of Texas, to review each submission equally,” said Cowden.

When attempting to explain contemporary art, Cowden defined it as ‘art of our time.’ Often people are intimidated by the art world because they may not trust their own responses to art and feel that they should have the vocabulary to express how it affects them,” she said. “I like to compare it to when I attend a football game with my husband. He knows the rules and anticipates the players’ moves. For me, the game is more about being outside, enjoying the camaraderie of it all. If I had a more sophisticated understanding of the game, I might have a richer experience, but I still appreciate it in my own way. A person doesn’t have to have a huge experience with art to enjoy it. It’s a visual experience.”

Another impressive endeavor that the

gallery successfully pursued was commissioning writers to pen 1500-word essays, describing the work in brochures that are available to visitors. “We have published 54 essays so far, which describe the significance of each show,” said Cowden. “We are able to distinguish ourselves from other galleries in that we pay our writers and artists, while artists are given the freedom to create work in the gallery’s space.”

Another important feature of Women & Their Work is that they offer artists technical and financial support. “We serve as a fiscal agent for the artist to help them earn grants,” said Cowden. “For example, there was an artist interested in filming a documentary about the rate of cesarean births occurring in Brazil and we served as a fiscal agent so that she could receive \$150,000 from a Hewlett-Packard foundation grant. At any given time, we are working to assist 20 different artists in securing grant money. We also help artists locate supplies and studio space.”

In addition to supporting the artist com-

munity, Women & Their Work has offered gallery workshops, guided gallery tours, in-school workshops to thousands of local students, and professional development to all Austin ISD teachers, since the mid 80s. They also provide services to recreation centers and home-schooled students.

“We have had an ongoing relationship with six target schools in East Austin for the past ten years, in an effort to expose elementary through high school students to important art concepts that their schools cannot provide due to budget constraints. Last year we worked were able to work with 11 schools.” said Cowden. “We once presented a workshop about printmaking and gave the students Styrofoam plates and pencils and had them poke holes in the plate and pour ink through the holes,” said Cowden. “The kids learned about using negative and positive space. We were able to show them that expensive materials are not prerequisites for making art.”

New Women & Their Work exhibits are open every five weeks and each show in-

cludes an educational component as well as a talk given by the artist. “We encourage the artist to share her perspective; there is usually a program developed around the show. For example, we teamed up with Book People to present author René Steinke, who wrote *Holy Skirts*. Steinke wrote about Baroness Elsa von Freytag, who was an integral part of the revolutionary Dada art movement. We encouraged audience members to dress as their favorite Dadaist or surrealist.”

Other artists who have been featured at Women & Their Work include Kate Breakey, Beverly Penn, Virginia Fleck, Liliana Wilson, Misty Keasler, Liz Ward, and Soody Sharifi.

Beginning in late February, six painting of Fraleigh’s will be displayed at Women & Their Work. Her art, sometimes defined as explosive, seductive, and full of tension, utilizes glossy layers of paint to convey a message of turbulence. “An exciting aspect of this gallery is that we showcase so many artists working in different medias,” said Cowden. “Fraleigh’s eight by six foot paintings reveal lushly drawn women but the paint is an important part of the subject. Her work is imaginative and people have strong reactions to it. I think that Fraleigh’s art is a loud aria, belted out on the canvas.”

Fraleigh added, “Gender politics play a role in creating my art. Every woman I know has a very scary, sad story. But these

women also have a story of survival; their stories tell of moments of transcendence and turning that fear into strength. I do not want to limit the work to gender. For me, and hopefully others, it represents any power struggle anywhere and the emotional impact of having to engage in it, losing or winning that struggle, and the consequences of either.” **AC**

Women & Their Work has issued a Call-for-Entries for Texas Women Artists, with a March 10 deadline. To learn more about Women & Their Work, visit www.womenandtheirwork.org or call (512) 477.1064.

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