

## Rebellious Women

Alberta show celebrates contributions by female artists in the 1980s.

by Melinda Pinfeld

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Teresa Posyniak, "Salvage: Remnants of Hope and Despair," 1983-2019, wooden doweling, handmade felt with embedded raw silk, cast handmade paper, handspun yarn, dental floss, lace doilies, lace, crocheted materials, encaustic, oil and cold wax, steel attachments, steel strapping and other hardware, cast reinforced concrete and sonotubes (courtesy of the artist; installation view of "Rebellious: Alberta Women Artists in the 1980s," Art Gallery of Alberta; photo by Charles Cousins, AGA)

Against the political backdrop and moral outrage of groundswell movements such as #MeToo, comes *Rebellious: Alberta Women Artists in the 1980s*, on view at the Art Gallery of Alberta in Edmonton until Feb. 17.

Curator Lindsey Sharman's debut collection exhibition continues the gendered path of critical curatorial redress initiated around 2012 by the gallery's executive director and chief curator, Catherine Crowston.

During the 1980s, Canada experienced the fallout of a worldwide recession. Alberta, in particular, struggled with a rapid drop in oil prices, high unemployment and labour unrest, which made the job of being an artist even more financially challenging than usual.

Dominant vernaculars in Alberta's visual arts at the time included the massive muscularity of sculptural works in steel, which reflected the implements of heavy industry, and a hyper-rational formalist ethos in painting that embraced, to a large degree, the gospel according to American critic Clement Greenberg.

Many female artists, by way of contrast or complement, inserted content into their works and reasserted a formal complexity. In some cases, the idiosyncrasy inherent in traditional crafts – read women’s work – was reinterpreted, more properly, as fine art that was gallery-worthy in its quality and content.



Joane Cardinal-Schubert, "Drying Rack," 1984, oil on canvas and lodgepole (collection of the Cardinal-Schubert family) and Joane Cardinal-Schubert, "This is the Land," 1988, oil on Masonite (collection of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts) installation view of "Rebellious: Alberta Women Artists in the 1980s," Art Gallery of Alberta; photo by Charles Cousins, AGA)

In a large, varied group show like *Rebellious*, the skill of the curator is paramount. Sharman does not falter. The choice of artists was not easy, but the selection is a balanced sampling. Diversity was a curatorial consideration, and Alberta’s Indigenous talent is evident, with works by Joane Cardinal Schubert, Faye Heavyshield and Jane Ash Poitras.

Rita McKeough poses with her work, "Feminist Reconstruction of Space," a text excerpt from a document published in 2000, at "Rebellious: Alberta Women Artists in the 1980s" at the Art Gallery of Alberta (courtesy of the artist; photo by Leroy Schulz)

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The added value of Sharman's curating comes with the non-verbal dialogues she sets up – either intuitively or by design – between and amongst the works. For instance, the show includes photographs documenting Calgary artist Rita McKeough's performance, *Feminist Reconstruction of Space*. McKeough brandishes an axe, demolishing houses – her response to rapacious corporate destruction of the urban fabric of residential neighborhoods in Calgary.

Catherine Burgess, "Portrait VI," 1988, welded steel sculpture (collection of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts; photo by Charles Cousins, Art Gallery of Alberta)

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Nearby, the sharp-edged guillotine-like internal structure of *Portrait VI*, 1989, by Edmonton sculptor Catherine Burgess, alludes to the traditional form of the portrait, often, a depiction of the head of a sitter, *sans* body – in effect, a decapitation. In psychoanalytic terms, decapitation is displaced castration, and castration is visceral disempowerment. In abutting these works by Burgess and McKeough, a dialogue is opened around psychological concepts like empowerment and personal agency.

Katie Ohe, "Night Watch," 1988-1989, cast aluminium and lacquer (foreground, collection of the artist); Lylian Klimek, "Atuan," 1986, wood and shredded rubber (rear right, collection of the artist); Vera Gartley, "More.For.Less," 1989 and "There's Meat in This Offer," 1988, painted steel, coloured plastic sheet, vinyl lettering and electrical component (Art Gallery of Alberta Collection); Vera Gartley, "VROOOOOM," 1988 and "REVVED UP STYLE," 1988, aluminum, formed plastic and electrical component (Art Gallery of Alberta Collection); installation view of "Rebellious: Alberta Women Artists in the 1980s," Art Gallery of Alberta (photo by Charles Cousins, AGA)

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Calgary artist Katie Ohe's interactive sculpture *Night Watch*, 1988-1989, composed of meticulously engineered metal totems, stands in mute formation. There's a friendly sense of R2-D2 about them, though they seem braced in place by pipe-like lengths of metal. Once activated by a gentle push on the "head," they engage in rhythmic, reciprocal thrusts. The sexual connotations are obvious.

Ohe's creatures seem to guard the crisply illuminated absurdist slogans on an adjacent wall, a stark consumerist critique by fellow Calgary artist Vera Gartley, as well as the darkly monolithic and scruffy structure of reclaimed and shredded wood and rubber, from *Atuan*, 1986, by another Calgarian, Lylian Klimek.

Teresa Posyniak, "Salvage: Remnants of Hope and Despair," 1983-2019, wooden doweling, handmade felt with embedded raw silk, cast handmade paper, handspun yarn, dental floss, lace doilies, lace, crocheted materials, encaustic, oil and cold wax, steel attachments, steel strapping and other hardware, cast reinforced concrete and sonotubes (courtesy of the artist; installation view of "Rebellious: Alberta Women Artists in the 1980s," Art Gallery of Alberta; photo by Charles Cousins, AGA)

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The show also includes Calgary artist Teresa Posyniak's 1983-2019 installation, *Salvage: Remnants of Hope and Despair*, human-scale sculptural works that are accretions of time, experience and memory, and Edmonton multidisciplinary artist Sandra Bromley's monolithic and roughly hewn *Colossi: Elder I, II, III, IV*, 1989-1993, which stand like guardians at the entrance.

Other artists include Isla Burns, Alexandra Haeseker, Joice M. Hall, Liz Ingram, Mary Joyce, Toyo Kawamura, Jane Kidd, Pauline McGeorge, Lyndal Osborne, Mary Scott, Arlene Stamp, Leila Sujir, Carroll Taylor-Lindoe and Wendy Toogood.

*Rebellious* is a jewel of an exhibition. The works are vibrant and varied. The curating is impeccable. The wealth of female talent is undeniable. The most rebellious thing we can do, the show suggests, is to buck a dominant vernacular, stick with our convictions and honour our visions. ■

***Rebellious: Alberta Women Artists in the 1980s* is on view from Nov. 9, 2019 to Feb. 17, 2020, at the Art Gallery of Alberta in Edmonton.**

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