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**WAH CENTER**



## **“Women Forward, Part 2: Innovative Women”**

### **Statement by Yuko Nii**

March is **“National Women's History Month,”** which highlights the contribution of women to both contemporary society and throughout history. There are quite a few celebratory events to honor women all over the city and the nation every March, including those in the art world. These events are encouraging and powerful.

I recall my own personal experiences that I had at an art school I was attending for one year after I completed my undergraduate studies in 1965. One of the art instructors asked me what I was going to do after finishing art school, and I told him that my plan was to go to a graduate school for further art training. The instructor said to me with a very serious face and scolding tone of voice, “Yuko, you should have babies, not pursue art.” This was the first time I was shocked to hear words like these in America, especially from an art instructor at a highly respected art institution. I had thought that a liberal open minded just society and free spirited atmosphere had finally been created in democratic America, one that would pervade the art community worldwide. I then went on to attend Pratt Institute for my MFA.

However, after my MFA degree from Pratt Institute, I tried to look for galleries by presenting my portfolio as we, the graduate students, were encouraged to do in order to pursue an artist's career. So, I brought my portfolio to a couple of galleries in Manhattan. When I went to pick it up I was quite surprised to hear the gallery directors' responses. One director thanked me for having brought my father's portfolio. And another gallery director said to me that my art was too philosophical, too deep and cerebral, and not considered to be “of women's interest.” I was so discouraged and upset that I stopped pursuing art galleries, although I continued painting on my own. I began to notice that the New York Art world was “a white male private club,” with only a few white female artists whose husbands were known figures in the art world, just to name a few: Lee Krasner married to Jackson Pollack, Helen Frankenthaler married to Robert Motherwell, Elaine de Kooning married to Willem de Kooning, etc. There were hardly any Asians, Latinos or African Americans in the group. It became clear that I, being a Japanese woman artist and whose art style didn't belong to any prevalent art movements, would not be accepted.

Even with the 1960s and 70's Women Movement making revolutionary waves throughout the USA, it still took many years for “Feminist Art” to be taken seriously. In 1979, toward the end of the heyday of the feminist movement, self-proclaimed feminist artist Judy Chicago had her

first one-person show," *The Dinner Party*," at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. This heralded a new era for women in the arts.

It further puzzled me that by 2006 while there were many women who started running galleries, writing for major art publications and being curatorial heads of museums, there were still few women artists in important collections. I read some startling statistics about women in major collections from a *New York Magazine* article "Where Are All the Women?" November 26, 2007: MoMA: 5-8% women, 92-96% men on view 2004 to present; the Whitney Museum: 15% women, 85% men in the permanent collection: the Frick Collection: 1% women, men, 99%, the 2007 Venice Biennale: 24% women, 76% men.

So, knowing how difficult it was for women artists to open that tightly closed men's art world door, when I opened the WAH Center in 1996, I wanted my art center to be where women artists were most welcome and they would be treated equally as men artists, and their artistic talents would be shared and appreciated by everybody. It took me some years for me to organize an important women's exhibition at the WAH Center. But finally in March, 2009 the WAH Center presented "Women Forward" show with a full catalogue, a special show celebrating women artists in the "National Women's History Month" when the entire nation bestows special attention and respect to recognize the significant contributions women give to our society. The "Women Forward" show was seminal and very successful, and the unique concept behind the show attracted public attention. I choose three "Special Guest Artists" from the three different cultural racial backgrounds: Judy Chicago (white American) Faith Ringgold (African America) and Toshiko Takaezu (Asian American). Those special women artists endlessly made efforts to let their voices be heard and let their art speak to the world. It was extraordinary. They spearheaded the change for the future advance of women's position in the art world. I felt we needed to thank these transformational women for what they had done to help younger generation women artists to enter the art world so that they could explore their talents easily and much more widely than ever before.

The other 30 artists in that show were divided into two groups: one section was those who were born before 1950 and who came of age during the Feminist Movement, and the other section were those who were born after 1950.

I asked the artists to write about their own personal experiences regarding prejudice in the catalogue, and how conscious they were about being a woman in expressing themselves in their art. I also asked about their involvement with women activist movements and how gender affected their careers. Finally, I asked what they thought the future holds for women in the arts. Some artists had ready answers, and some who were born after 1950 had never really considered the questions until I posed it to them. It was remarkable to have noticed the distinctively different experiences each group had expressed in their statements. The younger generation artists didn't even know the hardships the elder artists experienced in order to

expose their art to the public. We also had a vigorous stimulating panel discussion about women in the arts “Now” and “Future.” I strongly believed the insight would bring a great change, but understood that we must keep working hard until women can be treated as equal to men. To change long accepted human behavior and culture is the hardest thing in the world. As we are experiencing even today, the gender equality issue is a big challenge in every corner of the world

I am delighted to notice, however, that a great change has been taking place recently in the art world and that more women artists are showing their works everywhere and speaking their minds freely and opening their spirits to the world. And sometimes the number of women participating in art exhibits exceeds the number of men participants. However it is a different story when it comes to prominent commercial galleries and museums’ shows or collections. Women’s art is still shown far less than men’s. However, I am an optimist and my hope is that things will improve as we work together aiming at our ideal goal by proceeding surely step by step.

After the first “Women Forward” show 10 years ago this March, we are very happy to present **“Women Forward, Part 2: Innovative Women,”** a show with 21 outstanding women artists with diverse cultural backgrounds, heritages, and nationalities, whose works were exhibited at the WAH Center in the past that spoke to me with new visual language, which was very refreshing and inspiring. This exhibition showcases works that are extraordinary, eye opening, and inspiring.

Over the years, the WAH Center has shown a great number of women artists whose works are superbly executed in traditional mediums or manners in painting, drawing, printmaking, photography, sculpture, etc. Having trained technical skills, they have demonstrated a great sense of color and composition in their chosen subject matters.

**But this particular up-coming women’s show at the WAH Center is celebrating very special innovative women artists whose works express unique concepts, visions, and observations through non-conventional techniques, or manners, or new media. Or as saying goes, “one man's trash is another man's treasure,” so some are creating something totally unimaginable by utilizing found objects out of garbage. Or some are using the more familiar, conventional media, yet, they have a gift of opening the viewers’ eyes to an unseen mystery. They have a special ability to spot abstract shapes and forms in nature revealing a hidden message that most people do not see.**

Thus, every artist in this show opens a new window for us to see and enjoy her fresh unique vision or to share joy and amusement with us. It confirms to us that our human nature seeks to see what is beyond the horizon, constantly trying to reach the unreachable. There is no limit in human creativity as long as our curiosity lasts and as long as our desire and our curiosity meet each other at one point. And women are a

great force in expressing this through their art. Let us see what we can see and then..."Women Forward!"

**The 21 Participating Artists:**

**Rodriquez Calero, Gulsen Calik, Xiaowei Chen, Beatrice Coron, Sandra Forrest, Debra Friedkin, Sandra Giunta, Lannie Hart, Judith Eloise Hopper, Susan Jacobs, Sun Young Kang, Mieko Mitachi, Seren Morey, Irmari Nacht, Marianne Petit, Renee Radenberg, Laurie Russell, Cheryl Safren, SUPRINA, Akiha Yamakami, Kumi Yamashita**

**Show Dates: March 9 to April 7, 2019**

**Opening Reception: Saturday March 9, 4-6pm**