

# HYPERALLERGIC

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## The Unseen Labor of Women in Art

Sara VanDerBeek's new print series, *Women & Museums*, interrogates how women occupy institutional spaces, particularly through the prominence of traditionally craft media like ceramics and textiles.



Megan N. Liberty September 28, 2019

In 1989, when asked to produce a billboard for Public Art Fund, the activist feminist art collective Guerrilla Girls produced their now-famous poster asking, "Do women have to be naked to get into the Met Museum?" At the time, this question pointed to the disparity between the number of works by women artists in the Met's collection and the number that portrayed (and objectified) women's nude bodies.

The problem of women's representation in historical institutions persists, as evidenced by the Guerrilla Girls' continued return to this question, updating it every so often with still-troubling statics. Conceptual photographer Sara VanDerBeek's new series of large-scale dye sublimation prints, *Women & Museums*, also interrogates how women occupy institutional spaces, particularly through the prominence of traditionally craft media like ceramics and textiles — materials that rarely receive as much attention as other parts of museum collections more dominated by male artists. The works are characteristic of VanDerBeek's practice, in which she probes the prevalence of the image/screen by creating sculptural photographs. Her previous projects have explored photography's role in documenting and presenting sculpture; they consider the fact that for many people, including art historians, photography is the first, and sometimes only way we encounter sculpture, whether it be in a textbook or on a website.

VanDerBeek's *Women & Museums* prints flatten the image field and the objects presented, layering photos of ancient busts against ceramic bowls and vases against textile works. This

collaging certainly references our digital tendency to have multiple windows open, always looking at several things at once. But it also creates a specific sense of space and time — placing objects together from different contexts, compressing them to create a link between moments. In an interview with curator Roxana Marcoci for her 2016 Hatje Cantz catalogue, VanDerBeek cites her interest in simultaneity, the “layering of multiple images in a single frame.” “I was thinking about the simultaneity of contemporary culture as advanced by Sonia Delaunay-Terk,” she explains, “this accumulation of experiences results in a dynamic whole that at times is formed like a film — a sequence of specific moments that are layered over and amongst one another.”

“Women & Museums II” (all works 2019) is especially filmic in this way. The color palette is her characteristic CMYK; soft pinks, purples, and blues tint each photograph of the objects (this palette is consistent across all six works in the show). A pink rectangular image of a round ceramic vase is in the top left, photographed in the style of a studio portrait against a plain backdrop with a dark drop shadow. This is superimposed over an expansive dark purple space above what resembles the chest of a supine woman, but is more likely folded fabric, or the edge of a statue. Dramatic lighting and color contrast, coupled with the unfamiliar object in the lower half of the image, create an eerie quality and a heightened sense of duration between the two images.

“Women & Museums V” involves a similar method of abstraction: a photograph of a patterned vase is layered atop one of a marble surface. According to the press release, the background image shows a detail of a Japanese Meisen kimono and the vase is from the late 1960s by New Mexico-based artist Lucy M. Lewis, a mother of nine whose practice recreated ancient patterns on ceramics. The abstraction created by the layered images dislocates each object from its place in history, while simultaneously giving them an unusual amount of physical space and attention, demanding we view them as artistic objects with aesthetic properties beyond their use-value or craft status. Even without the knowledge that one of the works was created by a mother, textiles, ceramics, and other domestic arts are often made by

women at home whose additional jobs include taking care of children and elders, labor that is not highly valued in our culture, and many others.

The series is displayed in a small room and is comprised of only six works, each nearly eight feet tall. They tower over viewers, with objects enlarged far beyond actual size. This magnification also heightens the viewer's aesthetic experience of both the works photographed and VanDerBeek's compositions, and brings the scale closer to that of the body, recalling the physicality of sculpture. Up close, the images are slightly grainy, giving them a tactile quality in addition to the glossiness bestowed by the artificial coloring. But the objects retain something of their status as historical markers and archeological relics. "Women & Museums VI" shows the head of an ancient statue of a woman rotated sideways, eyes and lips tinted with traces of paint. In this work, the photograph of the head overlays and partially covers the same image, like a looped film strip; the figure gazes upward into the distance. The paint remnants are a reminder of the statue's age and wear.

With the guidance of the series title, we see anew the work of women that is so often overlooked — in museum collections and in our homes. In light of recent controversies surrounding the ethics of funding and curatorial responsibility, VanDerBeek's conceptual images have added weight. Her thoughtful juxtapositions and re-contextualizing asks, What responsibility do museums have to display their collections in ways that eliminate gender inequality and to offer displays with more information about the artists and objects? As the Guerilla Girls' posters proclaim, there is a responsibility to collect across gender (and race) lines. But what is the responsibility of the artist to push back against the stories museums tell? VanDerBeek takes this challenge head on, reframing museum collections to illuminate women's unseen labor, both artistic and otherwise.

Sara VanDerBeek: Women & Museums continues at Metro Pictures (519 West 24th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through October 19.