Pandora's Box

Curated by Amanda Cachia

Laylah Ali
Ghada Amer
Shary Boyle
Chitra Ganesh
Annie Pootoogook
Wangechi Mutu
Leesa Streifler
Su-en Wong
Kara Walker
Amy Cutler

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Curated by Amanda Cachia

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Foreword
by Dr. Elizabeth McLuhan

Pandora’s Box is an ambitious project developed by the Dunlop Art Gallery’s Curator, Amanda Cachia, who has selected current work from among two generations of internationally influential women artists: Laylah Ali, Ghada Amer, Shary Boyle, Amy Cutler, Chitra Ganesh, Wangechi Mutu, Annie Pootoogook, Leesa Streifler, Kara Walker and Su-en Wong. Artists in Pandora’s Box draw on diverse cultural traditions to both re-invent and re-invest traditional myths and fairytales with new meanings in dynamic and often disturbing images/configurations. These artists all reference their diverse languages, ritual, myths, cultural production, domestic and social customs, story-telling and values (such as African-American, Egyptian, Inuit, Indian, Euro-North-American, and Singaporean). Many of the works in Pandora’s Box reveal an inescapable sense of immediacy and a fierce sexuality. Anne Carson’s observations on classical notions of female wildness are pertinent here in the archaic poetry of Archilochas “[who] summarizes the female threat in two iambic verses: ‘She came carrying water in one hand/the tricky minded female, and fire in the other’... sexuality in women [is] a fearsome thing,... united by a vital liquidity with the elemental world, woman is able to tap the inexhaustible reservoirs of nature’s procreative power.”1 Pandora’s Box documents and celebrates the contribution of women artists living and working in Canada and the United States to contemporary art making, and is a proclamation of the diversity of their accomplishments today. Women have too often been the object or “vehicle of attributed meaning.”2 In light of this struggle over gendered implications, the current blossoming of art produced by women about women is exciting. The progress and evolution of the current generation acknowledges the legacy of feminist art practice in North America and beyond: a legacy which has informed new fields of feminist art practice. This is the first examination of contemporary women’s art and feminist issues at the Dunlop Art Gallery, although a number of artists presented in solo exhibitions have touched on related issues (Leesa Straffier and Rebecca Belmore for instance). Overall, however, there has been a dearth of feminist content in galleries in Regina in recent years. An exhibition of thirteen Saskatchewan women, Remembering and Telling, curated by the noted art historian Lynne Bell from the University of Saskatchewan was presented at the Mackenzie Art Gallery in 1991. Although a watershed exhibition for its time, there was no follow up in subsequent exhibitions to the themes and issues it raised. Seventeen years later, Pandora’s Box seizes the torch and highlights the contribution of women’s art in North America through its selection of artists with perspectives that resonate globally. I would like to thank the participating artists and to commend the curatorial vision and tenacity of purpose of Amanda Cachia, the Curator. The Dunlop expresses its gratitude to Joan Borsa for her introduction to this catalogue, and her support for the project from the beginning. I would also like to acknowledge Joyce Clark, Curatorial Assistant for her work on this project.

Dr. Elizabeth McLuhan
the Director of the Dunlop Art Gallery

1  Anne Carson, “Dirt and Desires: Essay on the Phenomenology of Female Pollution in Antiquity,” in Bits in the Off Hours, (Canada: Vintage, 2010), 225.
We all return to memories and dreams like this, again and again; the story we tell of our own life is reshaped around them. But the point doesn’t lie there, back in the past, back in the lost time when they happened; the only point lies in interpretation.

— CAROLYN STEEDMAN, Landscapes for a Good Woman, 1986

Pandora’s Box is a timely exploration of the passions, innovations and diversity that characterize feminist art today. It projects forward, it scans the past, the present and our differences, and it points to new layers of creative and critical acumen. Since the 1970s women artists, curators, critics and art historians have actively engaged with and contributed to debates on representation, authorship, desire, power relations and identity politics. A great deal of this work has focused on strategies of representing the body and the heterogeneity of women’s cultural and social experience – an exploration that has moved from producing “images” of the body to creating more diversified representations of embodied subjectivity. Other components of this work have emphasized the need to analyze, deconstruct and intervene in the histories of art, and to affect change in the institutions, public spaces, and political processes that make up public culture. Much has been accomplished since second-wave feminism and formative (Western) feminist art projects such as Chicago’s Dinner Party, Mary Kelly’s Post-Partum Document, the Guerrilla Girls’ public actions and since Griselda Pollock and Rozika Parker’s book Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology existed on claiming a space in a hierarchical and male-dominated art world – but struggles for the right to be recognized as agents and subjects of history have often been met with resistance and growing pains. One of the significant lessons of this period of almost 40 years of feminist theorizing, art making and activism is that there is a great deal of structural difference among us. How to represent our differences as well as our shared experiences as gendered and socially constructed subjects has remained a central preoccupation (and a strength) of contemporary feminist practice and scholarship. Indeed, in the recent flourishing of notable feminist art exhibitions, substantial exhibition catalogues and comprehensive feminist art anthologies (particularly in the United States, but also in parts of Britain and Europe) a recurring theme is the concept of difference – differences among women, particularly across generational, national and cultural divides; but, just as relevant, differences in the social conditions under which women produce art, in the approaches, mediums and materials which are utilized, and in the political, cultural and critical perspectives which inform feminist work. For example, in curator Cornelia Butler’s introductory essay for the 2007 exhibition WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution, Butler proposes that unlike the ideological and stylistic cohesiveness of other influential art movements of the postwar period (Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism or Fluxus) Feminist Art’s impact is rooted in “an ideology of shifting criteria,” which has not only “sustained an unprecedented degree of internal critique” but “contained wildly divergent political ideologies and practices.” Similarly in a recent article art critic Lucy Lippard discusses the difficulty of pin-pointing the characteristics and achievements of such a diversified and constantly evolving movement as feminist art, a project, which she suggests “like Conceptual art was not based on style but on content.”

In my conversations with Amanda Cachia, curator of Pandora’s Box, and as I asked her about her relationship to feminism and the impetus behind this project it became apparent that many of the artists selected for this exhibition (and perhaps the curator herself) do not readily identify their practice as feminist. In some of the reviews and articles surrounding the recent resurgence of interest in feminist art production a similar reluctance is portrayed. How are we to interpret this skepticism within the context of what appears to be feminist art’s grand entrance on a coveted art world stage? Is this a re-examination of a movement, confirmation of a new wave, or the internalization of “post-feminist” press? Guerrilla Girl Kollwitz addressed the latter possibility commenting on why the term “feminist” might cause adverse reactions: “The media love to talk about how nobody wants to be identified with being a feminist.” “We have been working all these years
rehabilitate the word, because women and men who believe in the tenets of feminism don’t want to be associated with a term that has been demonized.4 Perhaps some of the anxiety associated with the term “feminist” is also indicative of a desire to set the terms of a resistance to dominant definitions and a plurality of conflicting responses to my relationship to feminism and the visual arts have always been intensely generational divide (third wave feminists often take the support of previous feminisms for granted). That is, on a superficial level, one could get the impression that institutional and societal change has occurred, irrevocably. It could also be a reflection of the impression that institutional and societal change has occurred, irrevocably. It could also be a reflection of the image problem tied to the backlash against feminism; but it might also be indicative of a generation who will allow alternative distancing from previous and current and at Columbia University’s School of Visual Arts suggests, students discover that openly identifying with feminism is a part of their formal educational experience many art academics remain cautious about how they name and frame their practices and feminist affiliations. As many academics remain cautious about how they name and frame their practices and feminist affiliations. As many there are signs of a healthy, and sexual “box.” As Cachia outlines in her essay, “In the context of this exhibition, Pandora is not a demonized figure, but like the artwork, comes to us bearing gifts.”8 In this interpretation of history, women artists start with a and加以 their own stories, memories and dreams. In this gesture they not only cover over (or defuse) the inequities, mythologies and blindspots that have plagued them, but give new meaning to Helene Cixous’ call, nearly four decades ago, for cultural from second-wave feminism and contemporary art practice became intimate, “antiessentialist.” They will sit through painful group crits in academia. They will be visited by critics who will yawn and stare at the floor if they talk about feminism – over and over and over, until they are disciplined through peer pressure into rejecting any feminist identification.6 Despite the many movements of forty years of feminist art activity and the remarkable exhibitions, panels and publications of recent years, there are many indications that women artists, curators, critics and academics remain cautious about how they name and frame their practices and feminist affiliations. 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And finally, although I am writing this introduction, Pandora’s Box is only indicative of a younger generation of feminist exhibitions of national and international significance. It is gratifying to see that this tradition continues. One can help but notice that many of the artists included in this exhibition. Thirdly, the works in this exhibition are in smaller Canadian public art galleries continue to display. Over the past two decades the Dunlop Art Gallery has played a particularly vital role in initiating ground-breaking exhibitions to surface in Canada in recent years. While a particular stylistic or ideological template, but because they mirror to each other the shedding of inhibitions needed to touch upon the depths of female knowledge. I am certain that something major cannot be far behind, anything that has already transpired.

Within an aesthetic language that approaches collage or visual intertextuality, the works carry signs of the mind’s propensity to layer, sort, juxtapose, consider and process the details and fragments we call memory, desire and reality. In these new arrangements or “life” studies, a type of peeling apart and rebuilding seems to be at work – something is being made out of the struggles and stories they have accumulated. As I follow the specificity of each artist’s cultural, racial and generational context, and absorb the meticulous gestures, wit and provocation that artist’s cultural, racial and generational context, and assemble a diverse group of artists that women discover the source of their own pleasure. I see how they are interrogating, re-interpreting and taking something that artists’ cultural, racial and generational context, and assemble a diverse group of artists that women discover the source of their own pleasure. I see how they are interrogating, re-interpreting and taking something that women discover the source of their own pleasure.

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**Jean Borsa** is an Independent Curator and Associate Professor Women’s and Gender Studies.


3. As quoted in *Promethea*, *We’re Finally Infiltrating,* *Artnews* 106, no.2 (February, 2007) 118.


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Bearing Gifts: The Myth of Pandora
by Amanda Cachia

"...the erotic offers a well of replenishing and provocative source to the woman who does not fear its revelation, nor succumb to the belief that sensation is enough." 1

"I urge each one of us to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there." – audre lorde 2

Pandora's Box offers a new twist on the myth of Pandora, the first woman in Greek mythology. Women have simultaneously been beneficiaries and victims of mythological traditions. "In myth, woman's bodies are pliant, porous, mutable. Deformation attends her. She swells, she shrinks, she leaks, she is penetrated, she suffers metamorphoses. The women in mythology regularly lose their form in monstrosity." 3 It comes as no surprise then, that Pandora has been described as either a great goddess, beautiful and innocent, responsible for bearing gifts from the universe to humankind, or a mortal woman, blamed for unleashing all of the world's evil by opening up her magical box. 4 Pandora is consequently a subtle, complex and revealing symbol of the feminine 5 and has much in common with the Christian figure of Eve. In a similarly demonising account, it is Eve who first succumbed to temptation by eating the apple in the Garden of Eden, allowing sin to enter the world. 5

In the context of this exhibition, Pandora is not a demonised figure, but like the artwork, comes to us bearing gifts, as indicated by the meaning of her name. 6 Here, the myth of Pandora and the opening of her miraculous box is a hopeful return of the repressed feminine. Today, a radical transformation is taking place regarding previously entrenched assumptions about gender, the body, sexuality and spirituality. 7 This exhibition is "no longer about what is hidden inside of the box, never to be revealed, but what is metaphorically reflected in it of the outside." 8 Like the splash of genital fluid at the conclusion of Testimony by Kara Walker, there is among these works, a release of pent-up desires, anxieties and frustrations, a fountain of knowledge and wit springs forth. The phrase 'Pandora's box' has acquired highly erotic connotations. Its opening is equated with the symbolic charge of surrendered virginity, as well as devaluation of the sacred feminine. "Like Pandora's famous 'box' woman's sexuality was once again blamed for all men's ills." 9 Amelia Jones notes that male philosophers from Nietzsche to Baudrillard have argued that seduction, sexuality and corporeality are connected to the threateningly sexualised feminine body. 10 A woman's body, her sex, is treated in these androcentric constructions as a dual site for both the pleasure and downfall of man, conveying an obvious unease with female sexuality. Wangechi Mutu observes: "Females carry the marks, language and nuances of their culture more than the male. Anything that is desired or despised is always placed on the female body." 11 The idea that women's sexuality might be about and for women seems to elude those who subscribe to this phallocentric notion. "The unfailing moisture and sexual drive of woman, then, is part of a larger conceptual schema, whereby the female is assimilated to the world of raw nature and femininity existently identified with the wild." 12 If putting the lid on female purity was the chief concern of mythological rituals, then the artists in Pandora's Box shift the focus from the male perspective in order to explore their own bodies as repositories of sensuality and lift the oppressive lid on the erotic. The "box" has become a slang word for womb and/or vagina. A woman's box or cunt is located at her physical core, a gravitational centre that is deeply engorged in the artists' work in this exhibition. While it has been used in derogatory ways, Ophira Edut suggests that "Cunt is a metaphor for unconditional self-love, a gentle call for women to embrace all things sacred and essentially female." 13 It is a word that all women potentially share, in resistance to its denigrations and in celebration of its juicy possibilities. Women have too often been divided a great deal by this anatomical jaw\footnote{9}, by cultural practices which, as Luce Irigaray has argued, deny the ways that a woman's geography of pleasure is diversified, "...more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is imagined." 14 The imagery of Pandora's Box first and foremost seduces us. It may also offend, terrorise, delight and shock, engaging the full human experience. Viewers are invited to act not only as voyeurs into the self-pleasuring of these artists, but to permit the touch of the feminine imaginary to reshape their relationships with themselves,
Ten international female artists are represented in Pandora’s Box, including Laylah Ali from Massachusetts, Ghada Amer, born and raised in Egypt and the south of France, currently living and working in New York, Shary Boyle from Toronto, Amy Cutler and Chitra Ganesh, both from Brooklyn, Wangechi Mutu, Annie Pootoogook from Cape Dorset, Nunavut, to New York, and now living and working in New York. Inside Pandora’s Box, viewers will encounter a phantasmagoria of myths, folktales, stereotypes and ambiguities. The artists challenge, appropriate and critique patriarchal myths, archetypes that claim universality, and various fairytales, to make them a more accurate mirror of female experience across a range of socio-historical contexts.16 The artists unpack symbolic constructions of female as vice and as burgeon, affirming the particularities of the experiences against which they test representational projects. Finding the ‘goddess within’ is a source of empowerment. Indian writer and theorist Geeta Kapur coined the term ‘remythologizing,’ while Audre Lorde has defined ‘automythography,’ both affirming processes of creating new and often idiosyncratic symbologies that convey female erotic and psychic lexicons. Helene Shulman Lorenz says, “In fragments of oral history, in received spiritual traditions, in symbols surviving from other eras, a practice of autoethnography begins to sift through sediments, recreating in discourse the kind of lived ecological diversity that surrounds us in our communities.”19 The artists’ works illuminate these conceptual practices in Pandora’s Box.

Taken together, the artists in this exhibition support the social, economic, and political processes for social justice, access and opportunity that ground the feminist movement. They share reflections on their lives, liminal desires, personal fictions and autobiographies, multiple cultural identities, racialisation and psychological manifestations of longings and vexations, through various journeys. Their artwork seamlessly blends aesthetics, emotions and feminist concerns. Nevertheless, this work is collectively cautious about claiming any political stripe, label or tag. Some artists express anxiety, resistance and soul-searching about defining themselves as feminists, while others reclaim the title proudly; depending on their age, several ignore or remain apparently unaware of the stigma of the male gaze, creative forces unto themselves, and woman-centered, by any name. Viewers are invited to reflect on larger human issues within an imaginary that is deeply female, exploring birth, death, parenthood, relationships, rites of passage, (particularly childhood to womanhood), and multiple identities, through an engagement with otherworldly creatures and everyday environments. They offer a rich platform for the visitor to this exhibition, a scrumptious witches’ brew that casts a spell of warning and wonder. The artists add diverse, poignant, independent and intersubjective voices to an evolving polylogue of what it means to be female.
Feminisms, an influential exhibition that spanned the pioneering Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art in the Brooklyn Museum, the only exhibition space in the United States dedicated to work by women that bears the name feminist. Curated by Maura Reilly, Global Feminisms formed a key component of a blossoming recognition of feminist-based art in 2007. The thesis of this extraordinary exhibition used, as its backbone, “common differences” between women from various cultures, nations, religions, ethnicities, and sexualities.20 In her essay for the Global Feminisms catalogue, Reilly acknowledged that the exhibition was focused on the work of younger women, completed since 1990, as an attempt to address present and future, moving forward from the past. Further, this exhibition was crucial to the thesis of Pandora’s Box in that it acknowledged feminisms in the plural: there is no single definition of feminism; multiple constructions of womanhood, replete with their own predicaments and situations, make up the tenants of feminist projects. Global Feminisms highlighted the differences among women and did not assume privileged cultures as a necessary referent. Audre Lorde pronounced that differences reflecting cultures, races, ethnicities and classes are all worthy of attention and validity, in woman-centered work. The themes of Global Feminisms are reflected and recontextualised in Pandora’s Box, and are as relevant to Regina as they are to other communities. Because contemporary art engages hybridised forms, with geopolitical referents that are prominent across environments, whether the artist comes from Toronto, Cape Dorset, Regina, Egypt, New York, Kenya or Singapore, woman’s struggles for expression and to flourish in meaningful lives resonate across continents and close to home. Female artists in the “centre” are just as strong, intelligent and capable as they are in the so-called “periphery.” There is a bi-fold apparatus in place in Pandora’s Box: these artists search for solidarity as women, while validating localised conditions of personal and political emergence. Pandora’s Box celebrates the current generation for its multifarious interpretations of ‘feminisms’ and woman-centered potentials and imaginaries. As Maura Reilly infers, perhaps the audience engaging in this generation of work has the capability of producing change and transformation in the world, even more so than before, because it has become more possible for women to communicate across what Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan have termed “scattered hegemonies.”21

Challenging Good versus Evil

Dualities: good and evil, heaven and hell, sin and atonement, right and wrong, and the tension of opposites, love-hate, death-life, are believed to be part of human nature. However, Helene Cixous suggests that these binaries are hierarchical and through the inherent assumption of superior/inferior that attaches to them, have been used to sustain male privilege. “Traditionally, the question”
of sexual difference is treated by coupling it with the opposition: activity/passivity.”22 The woman is usually seen as the passive figure in these dualities. Cixous believes the stories from history are there to retell differently, and in light of such alternative retellings “…the future would be incalculable; the historic forces would and will change hands and change body – another thought which is yet unthink-able – will transform the functioning of all society.”23

The artists in Pandora’s Box seek to engage with and challenge hierarchical dualities, and break out of binary oppositions altogether. Ghada Amer employs sexual imagery, fairy tale and pornography to confound polarised constructions, such as male versus female, East versus West and the difference between fine art and craft. Shary Boyle uses androgyny to blur the lines of expectation and boundaries between human/ non-human, animal and plant.24 She states: “…it seems like there is no one thing, that everything has its counter. We’re all drawn to the concepts of “pair” or “team” and then we’re also repelled by it, so there’s this constant pushing and pulling…tensions, dualities and polarities occur within each individual’s psyche.”25 Wangechi Mutu’s work is a portrait of contrasts: beautiful and alluring female figures are also grotesque, mutilated, wild and sublime. Laylah Ali explodes binary categorisations of identity: human/alien, male/female, good/evil, black/white, while Annie Pootoogook uncovers the structural complexities emerging between the Inuit Arctic and white Western Canadian life of the South: pop culture/ community, family/individual, natural world/machines.26

Amy Cutler’s figures are at once ubiquitous and specific, obscure yet full of hope, ordinary and impossible. In order for women to achieve recognition separate from men – outside of binary constructs – Luce Irigaray developed a body of theory and writing proposing mimesis, masquerade, hysteria, the mirror, speculum and gestural acts as methods for negotiating new terrains of meaning. Mimesis involves imitation, appropriation and reproduction, in processes deployed by the artists here to reinterpret binary constructions. Hysteria unearths repressed forms such as suffering or paralysis of desire. The masquerade is a concept of femininity as drag; behind the mask is a projected lack. “The masquerade is woman’s playing [and acting out] of the script of femininity provided by man.”27 Irigaray encourages women to break down the two-dimensionality of the mirror and break through received representations of the feminine, in order to find a more appropriate mirror to reflect ourselves. She proposes the speculum as a metaphor for finding ways to recognise the female soul, by demanding an imaginary based on the multiple, unfolding vulva, not bound to the phallic of psychoanalytic theory. She celebrates gestural processes that find expression in movement, crucial to the physical ‘making and doing’ relationship a woman has with her art-making in the studio. The artists in Pandora’s Box make clever use of the devices proposed by Irigaray, visually articulated in the themes that inform
this exhibition: Libidinal Use of Media; Sexuality, Pleasure and Erotica; Undoing Race and Gender Constructs; The Carnivalesque and the Grotesque; Surrealist Influences, Dreams, Autobiography and Self-portraiture.

Libidinal Use of Media

Dancing, cavorting, flying, floating, leaping, jumping, running, falling. Quickening heart-beat. Shortening breath. Exhilaration. The artists free their own and represented bodies through their use of media in Pandora’s Box. With wind-swept tendrils and out-flung limbs, Shary Boyle’s frozen-in-falling-flight female silhouette on the cover of this catalogue gives us a stained-glass lens of colour and metaphor, through which to enter the gallery space. Liberated from convention, effervescent and sinister, this gestural female body illuminates the language of physical and psychic experience; because the glass is stained and variegated, our perspectives are multiplied.28

The artworks represented in Pandora’s Box are an expression by a new species of artists who are having a splendid love affair with the sensuous, revitalising quality of the media they are attempting to master: a delectable mix of ink on paper, collage, comics, stitched embroidery and acrylic on canvas, coloured pencil and watercolour, a collaborative musical and projection performance, a shadow puppet animation and much more. These works are violent, shocking, beautiful, decadent and seductive. Some of the works are bold, using silhouettes or graphics, while others offer intricate portraits and diminutive windows, where the viewer is invited to come up close. Once near enough to examine the detail, viewers may experience the effects of the velvet glove or a Venus Flytrap, a sting, punch or element of surprise. Annie Pootoogook uses ink, pen and pencil crayon, media that is reminiscent of a child’s first contact with the world of art-making. Her series of eight drawings from 2003-2007 “compose” the various elements of her life together into a series that exemplifies core personal experiences as an Inuit woman. Chitra Ganesh has pushed her work outside the frame, literally; her goddess has Rapunzel braids of artificial hair that flow around the corner of the wall. She breathes from a vaginal hookah. Ghada’s use of live and energetic embroidered veiling/unveiling display women with their heads tossed back in states of ecstasy, undressing or kissing that, combined with painting, treats the ‘traditional female’ craft of sewing as a woman’s political medium. Laylah Ali works obsessively with detailed use of pencil and ink on paper in labour-intensive and time-consuming work, yielding hieroglyphs that present meticulous minimalist intricacies for maximum impact. Kara Walker and Shary Boyle play with the rich, metaphorical associations of shadow and light, in ways that recall Irigaray’s conceptual tools for detecting non-dominating ways of looking. Boyle’s interdisciplinary practice of working with performance accompanied by music (Shadow Songs with Christine

Chitra Ganesh
Inside Pandora #2, 2008, site-specific mural installation, Dunlop Art Gallery
Photography: Trevor Hopkin
Fellow), is ambitious, heartfelt, honest, a sensuous play across sight and sound. Wangechi Mutu creates cancerous, organic tissue, collage constructions exposing the distortions of Western fashion journals, Playboy and motorcycle magazines. Leesa Stroffler deconstructs formal photographic portraits, by layering an “innocent” girl tableau with a web of written internal psychological thought processes using ink and markers, expressing the hurt, awkwardness and betrayal that characterise the messages with which baby boomers were raised. The text mirrors back to us: “Don’t criticize her”, “How much control?” “Stop it Now” and “Dad don’t leave me”. A crown rests on top of the “sweet” child and the “hopeful” adolescent, invoking a desired if unrealised status among those she loves, or reflecting ego-based little-girl princess dreams. Stroffler’s Self-Conscious Romantic, 2008, a portrait of a woman with dark brown-rimmed glasses and an awkward smile, uses expressionistic strokes of pink paint to suggest the amorous. This romance however, leaps out of the background, and intrudes on a face that is bruised or stained by indecipherable brown marks. Through the ebullient grasp of these media, – we gain a sense of this generation of artists, their visions and liberatory politics. They show us that there is enjoyment and pleasure, pain and power, in the creative capacities of women who, by virtue of the specificities of their visions, reveal as more mysterious than we know, the feminine dance of public and private imagination and cunning.

Sexuality, Pleasure and Erotica

Pornography has become a terrain that female artists have begun to occupy in empowered ways. With Annie Sprinkle leading the crusade, women are claiming the right to express pleasure in their own terms. Thus, they rewrite the scripts of porn, removing it from its functions, purely for the male gaze or male titillation. Ghada Amer has talked about a ‘double submission’ and famously said “I don’t see it [porn] in a harsh light, in terms of exploitation or critique…rather I see it as something beautiful and warm, a source of pleasure. Feminism can be empowered by seduction.”

Sexual imagery is salient throughout this exhibition. Viewers greet a large nude goddess figure, the protagonist of the exhibition perhaps, upon entry into the centre of the exhibition space. Chitra Ganesh has created this goddess with three eyes, long braids, pert breasts, and an umbilical hookah connecting vagina, hand, and breath, in an intoxicating creative sweep. In two of Laylah Ali’s untitled drawings, a woman tongue-probes another woman, Judith Butler’s female phallic reaching across head-dressed and costumed armours of power and fear. In The Delicate Perversity of Obscene Excess, 2005 by Shary Boyle, a Sleeping Beauty figure astride a horse bears a large birthday cake on her belly lit up by licking flames that suggest the project of a head-first horny man.
mounting from behind in a surreal and twisted enchanted forest. Wangechi Mutu produces a series of cartographical medical illustrations of female anatomy, juxtaposed and collaged with women’s body parts, clipped from Western fashion magazines, crudely forming genitalia portraits that are violent and grotesque. An African slavegirl subverts power by killing her master and completes the necrophilic act of fellatio while he is noosed up by rope and hanging from a tree in Testimony: Narrative of a Negress Burdened by Good Intentions, 2004 by Kara Walker. She is consistent; She nurtures; She’s maternal; He thrives, 2007, by Leesa Streifler, displays ‘silhouette negatives’ of a boy baby sucking and slurping the squirting milk from a woman’s large nipple. This ‘menu’ of sexuality is evocative of Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party, 1974-79, on permanent view at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art. In a collaborative project with multiple women contributors, the artist fashioned dinner plates in the style of fleshy female labia, clitoris and vulvae, on a triangular-shaped dinner table, in homage to ground-breaking women the world over. This installation challenged the repression of nearly all feminine achievements, which obscured their histories from public memory. 33 Ghada Amer’s paintings raise questions about the position of women in the West in relation to Islamic fundamentalism. Radical feminism’s attempts to police desire remind her, in their restrictiveness, of the Islamic prohibitions of her Egyptian childhood, so the pornography she freely uses becomes a rebellion. She explores the themes of feminine cliché and ars ticca, yet her paintings have often been described as entering a woman’s boudoir of pleasure, with submerged undertones of captivity and repression and the desire to lift the veil or hijab. Sometimes Amer incorporates text and calligraphy from numerous languages into her works, drawing from the Quran. The artist also creates sculpture and installation, and recently has begun to make antiwar statements in her work.

Like the feminist activist art group the Guerrilla Girls, who formulate revised versions of the history of western art, Amer remaps art history in new erotic and provocative terms in order to capture painting as a space of desire for the female. She does this by appropriating devices from movements that have characterised the male artistic canon, using her embroidered and acrylic strokes in an abstract expressionistic style and alluding to a minimalist grid through her pattern of repeating embroidered motifs. In French Kiss, 2003, the emblematic profile of an embrace is rendered in rhythmic linear and spatial repetition across an embroidered canvas, veiled in a shower of threads and acrylic blocks. The faces are difficult to see at first. What appear to be paint drips are actually thread ends that would normally be concealed in a traditional needlework, 34 a rendering of the inside, outside. Su-en Wong’s paintings are dominated by multiple nude pre-pubescent self-portraits half child-like and innocent, yet knowing and adult-like in their seductive Lolita poses, a disturbing engagement with the Asian
schoolgirl stereotype and the Western voyeur. In Lovers Knot, 2006, nude Asian schoolgirls are juxtaposed with a red jungle gym, set up against a pink, colour-field playground. The figures and this gema knot together like lovers’ tongues, an allusion to the phallic, blue, slippery slide, a common childhood [sex] toy. Like Ghada Amer, Wong’s work signals a shift in perspective that under-mines objectification by empowering the nude female body, particularly through performance of sexual desire. Like Ghada Amer, Wong’s work signals a shift in perspective that under-mines objectification by empowering the nude female body, particularly through performance of sexual desire. Chitra Ganesh has created an erotic retelling – in the comic-book tradition – of Hindu myths. In her digital c-print series, Tales of Amnesia, she explores a new kind of sexuality that exceeds the confines of the traditional Indian virgin and/or bride, drawing from Amor Chitra Katha comics. The imagery of the comics was so interesting because it’s so much about the women being pure or noble or maternal or supportive of their husbands, or quiet or passive – all of these conventional models of femininity but then, at the same time, they dress like I Dream of Jeannie, very Barbie with tits and ass. I wanted to use some of the existing imagery to insert a different perspective into how these myths are told. I wanted to go beyond the suggestive ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ quality of Indian culture. Laylah Ali, Wangechi Mutu and Kara Walker use recon-textualised stereotypes to blast new meaning into race and gender constructs. Predecessors and peers on this path include Faith Ringgold, Adrian Piper, Carrie Mae Weems, and Renee Cox from the United States, Tracey Moffatt from Australia, and Tracey Rose from South Africa. Important critical thinkers including bell hooks and Audre Lorde inform the politics behind these engagements with prejudice and damaging social constructions. By placing sexual taboos, racialised stereotypes and the inherent violence of oppressive sexualisations into the public space of the art museum, they invite us to look, to categorize, to turn the tables of objectification and disturb the pathways of prejudice that condition the contemporary moment’s emergence out of the past.

Walker is an African American artist of high profile and prolific output, whose controversial and confrontational use of black sexual stereotypes illuminates the traumatic abuse of the American slave trade, particularly within the Antebellum South. Walker’s work is a complex blend of fiction, the romance novel, history, autobiography and popular culture. Her large installations, countless drawings, prints and puppet animations are made up of black paper Rorschach-style typologies appropriated from the eighteenth century silhouette portraiture tradition.
Her nightmarish narratives are replete with obscene violence, lewd sexual acts, fornication, objects in orifices, defecation and a reversal of power relationships between master and slave. Walker explores the duplicitous constructs of Madonna/Whore and black subject as noble savage/violent avenger. Her work simultaneously seduces and implicates the viewer.

Pandora's Box exhibits Kara Walker's first film, *Testimony: Narrative of a Negress Burdened by Good Intentions*, from 2004. It is a black-and-white silent puppet animation housed inside the dominant video box structure in the centre of the Dunlop Art Gallery exhibition space, the quintessential physical symbol of the exhibition's adopted myth. Like Pandora's, this video box unleashes secrets within a dimmed space designed for viewing and reflection. *Testimony* tells, in eight-minutes, the tragicomic fable of a 'revised' relationship between slave and master, lynched by his slave lover, a Cinderella who revolts against this despotic “prince.” For this piece, Walker created small-scale renditions of her most famous characters: the Auntie, the master, the master’s son, and the Negress mistress. We can see the shadows of the artist’s hands and arms in the background as she operates her puppets with string. The story takes place on a cotton plantation and is narrated through a series of intertitles that tell how the white men, in their “longing for fulfillment,” temporarily relinquish their bodies to the slave women. 41 Trained as both a sculptor and an anthropologist, Wangechi Mutu began her work with an exploration of the way in which people, especially black women, are identified, classified, judged and exploited based on their physical attributes. Her collages delve into the split nature of cultural identity, referencing colonial history, fashion and contemporary African politics. She describes her practice in the catalogue for the 2007 group exhibition *Collage: The Unmonumental Picture*, at the New Museum in New York: “When images in my work merge, they participate in a raucous mating dance producing a stinky, sinister, gorgeous, little transgender fruit.” 42 In Histology of the Different Classes of Uterine Tumors, a series of twelve collages created in 2006, Mutu uses nineteenth century medical diagrams as a basis for invented portraiture. Symbolic of colonial power, the original illustrations suggest a wide range of cultural pre-conceptions from the ‘superiority’ of European ‘knowledge’ to the classification of gender and race into genealogical hierarchies. Drawing from the aesthetics of traditional African crafts and goddess-like figures, Mutu engages in her own form of storytelling, as influenced by the Kenyan stories passed on by her grandmother; her works document the contemporary myth-making of an embattled cultural heritage. 43 Mutu’s perverse, incongruous amalgamations of physical and cultural hyper-elaborated ‘ideals’ consist of painted surfaces, found materials and mismatched body parts and prosthetics clipped from misogynistic porn and fashion magazines, each an isolated feature of epitomized beauty: chiseled cheekbones, kiss-me-lips, petite ears, and smoldering eyes. Together, they become a grotesque mask of racial parody, like Ellen Gallagher’s minstrels. Centred over these medical...
diagrams, her composites of physical ‘perfection’ become models of contamination and cancerous disease. Laylah Ali has said: “...we all understand the immediately revealed, usually derogatory, narrative contained within a stereotype. In my drawings I am to fuse recognizable types with question marks, fuse known narratives with things that are not as easily articulated.” In *Pandora’s Box*, six of Ali’s drawings from her uncanny Typology series, 2005-2007, include portraits, couples entwined, or a twosome with child. The figures are endowed with loaded cultural signs and symbols: hoods, robes, masks and uniforms from the military. Her other works also incorporate everyday items: band-aids, a dodge ball, sneakers. Power struggles, racial subjugation, oppression and political abuse are major issues explored in her work. The comics are at once childish and playful, ominous and nausieus. Exploring a terrain reminiscent of Mutu’s “transgender fruit” collages, Laylah Ali and Shary Boyle work with androgynous figures. In their re-interpretations of historical ethnography and identity classifications, both Mutu and Ali are “making room for [delicious new gender communities] in a crowded world.” The gender-ambiguous individual today has a “flexibility [that] has become a powerful commodity... the transgender body has emerged as futurity itself, a kind of heroic fulfillment of postmodern promises of gender flexibility.” Mutu and Ali tease viewers with this ‘jumbled’ gender mis-recognition to imagine discontinuous selves that question identities based on gender stereotypes and bodily signifiers.

The Carnivalesque and the Grotesque

According to Mikhail Bakhin, the carnivalesque, drawn from a popular folk tradition in which people disguised, cross-dressed and performed in the streets, provided an opportunity to blaspheme and mock dominant structures of authority, including family roles. The tragicomic carnival offers an alternative expressive space that symbolises potentials for freedom, release and renewal. On this ad hoc stage (such as Kara Walker’s puppet stage), the body could be re-invented through processes of inversion, subversion and appropriation while at the same time assimilating into and exploding existing social and cultural structures. Many of the artists in *Pandora’s Box* convey this process of embodied and interiorised reinvention and subversion in their own work. Laylah Ali and Wangechi Mutu’s art project an ambiguous “anthropology run amok.” Both artists use costume and the grotesque to convey traditions of iden-
tification and classification based on observable physical traits. Power, oppression, violence, gender and racial identity all become important themes. The figures in their drawings become hybridised, with characteristics derived from multiple cultural sources. Wangechi Mutu remarks, “Camouflage and mutation are big themes in my work, but the idea I’m most enamoured with is the notion that transformation can help us to transcend our predicament.
We all wear costumes when we set out for battle. The language of body alteration is a powerful inspiration.” Ali also forces viewers to re-examine identity constructs. Of her characters, she remarks: “The head-dresses have been inspired by an amalgamation of hair, feather head-dresses and the headgear of the Catholic hierarchy...” The details of the clothing hint at affiliations, status, aspirations.” The incongruous acts of these figureheads suggest interiorities that do not match the status drag. Leesa Streifler’s work has long been associated with the carnival and the grotesque. Streifler has used her own body as the source of her critical reevaluation of the woman’s perfect body ideal, and how the role of women in different capacities can affect their overall identity in stereotypical ways. “My drawing and textual interventions reflect on the role of women in domestic life, giving voice to repressed and unspoken desires and emotions too confrontational, risqué and taboo to have ever been mentioned.” The artist has been interested in exploring the female body in all its stages and glory: the pregnant body, the aging body, the domesticated body, the irregular body, using dressing up (and cross-dressing) in various guises and costumes. In this exhibition, Streifler returns to the Dunlop Art Gallery, a decade after her solo exhibition of self-portraits, Normal, was curated here by Vera Lemecha. It is time for Streifler’s work to engage with her transnational peers on home turf! As Shary Boyle eloquently stated in an email discussion group with some of the participating artists, “This exhibition is interesting and unusual for a regional public gallery in Canada – to include such high profile artists from outside the country, and focus on the excellent work of women,” many of whom are at the forefront of critical attention around the world. Streifler represents a local force within the international company of artists represented in Pandora’s Box. It is a rare and special opportunity that the Dunlop Art Gallery audience in Regina can explore some of the most witty, candid, intimate, bewitching, powerful, and complex work created by women in recent years, and view “one of their own” amongst such esteemed international guests. It is time for Streifler’s work to engage with her transnational peers on home turf! As Shary Boyle eloquently stated in an email discussion group with some of the participating artists, “This exhibition is interesting and unusual for a regional public gallery in Canada – to include such high profile artists from outside the country, and focus on the excellent work of women,” many of whom are at the forefront of critical attention around the world. Leesa Streifler Parenting Revisited: portrait at 5 and 15 years, 2008. Photography: Lee Henderson.
Her method is a key antecedent to the practices of self-portraiture and signification that inform the work of young artists Shary Boyle, Amy Cutler and Annie Pootoogook. They also draw on symbolism and hybridity, a morph of animal and human – and bizarre, complex, dreamlike scenarios, qualities or characteristics in conversation with the formal Surrealist movement.

In the 2004 Whitney Biennial catalogue, co-curator Shamim Momin argues that the strong appeal of transmogrification and the fantastic for young artists today rests in the response to a "pervasive internal anxiety and uncertainty about the world, existing in concert with a renewed desire for passionate engagement and re-enchantment." The surreal chaos of our everyday lives is incorporated into the zones of alterity they create.

Josée Drouin-Brisebois, Curator of Contemporary Art at the National Gallery of Canada believes that "Fantasy becomes a strategic escape, a refuge from all that is wrong in the world." Fables, myths and fantasies are plastic enough to be reworked.

In her selection of ten watercolour and ink drawings on paper for Pandora’s Box, developed between 2003-2007, self-confessed "outsider" artist Shary Boyle paints fantastical scenes, featuring one to two central characters. The titles are often a clue to their predicaments. Boyle's international experiences influence the content of her work created in that location, whether she is in London, Finland, Scotland or Germany. Some of these drawings are a response to poems written by Boyle’s friend and fellow artist Emily Vey Duke. Boyle presents worlds in which life is ambiguous and uncertain. She is interested in exploring issues that may be anxiety-causing, such as sickness, death and failed relationships. The vulnerability and dysfunction evident in her characters is palpable – we wrench with uncomfortable familiarity. Images range from the demonised witch reminiscent from stories like Hansel and Gretel or Snow White, to a bloodthirsty vampire girl in a scotch-patterned dress devouring a green marine snail with wings, to lost souls marching across a galaxy atmosphere towards a large conch shell, lit up by lava-like hell fire or coagulating purgatory. "My work explores personal alienation, longing and the female imagination. The characters and situations I create compel an examination of nature, childhood wonder, mortality, sexuality, gender and the supernatural...I honour the body in all its isolation, suffering and joy." Her archetypal characters can be lonely, mischievous or angry. She offers unsettling views that are repressed by society's standards of what is deemed "acceptable" and hits nerves as her work offers scenarios of the inexplicable, frightening and puzzling.

Since 2005, Shary Boyle has joined artistic forces with Winnipeg-based musician and song-writer Christine Fellows. Their intimate collaboration uses the simplest of tools: overhead projector, piano and voice. They were drawn to each other by virtue of their shared "folk art" aesthetics and styles. Boyle illustrates the lyrics of songs composed by Fellows, which tell spell-binding, luminous tales of small towns, emergency wards and endless road trips. Boyle's invented child-like silhouettes are projected overhead onto walls, enlivened by light, colour, movement.
and sound. Described as something of a Victorian light show, Boyle also uses colour theatre gels, sands, string and mirrors. The emotionally-charged performances become magical, poetic outpourings of both artists’ psychological investigations into issues of power, alienation, longing and libidinal imagination. This practice links Boyle’s work to Kara Walker’s projection installations and puppet animations, also featured in Pandora’s Box. Staged at the Dunlop Art Gallery to mark the occasion of the Pandora’s Box opening, Shadow Songs was composed of Migrations, a haunting tune about change, told in three little stories, nested among several other melodies, all within a captivating twenty minute performance. Fellow sings about the girl on the catalogue cover, from Migrations: “Would you pick me up? I’m light as a feather, Though I’m not afraid, I am not brave enough to offer.”

Like Shary Boyle, Amy Cutler’s work creates unique hybrids. This artist uses narratives that incorporate elements of fairy tales, phobias, cryptic personal symbolism and the tradition of Surrealism. Often her dream-like tableaux evoke both child-like wonder and a sinister psychological underside. Like the women in mythology, metamorphoses in Cutler’s world are common; her main protagonists are usually women in recognisable settings or relationships, wearing intricately patterned, textured dresses and folk costumes, ranging from old-maid housecoats, tent frocks and hoop skirts to hip, bohemian garb indicative of notable periods in fashion history. Her female characters may grow broom-stick arms, teapot heads or horse hunch-backs. Enchanting and enigmatic, her skilfully executed and meticulous topos-topsy drawings are reminiscent of children’s book illustrations by Victorian and Edwardian artists. Dutch genre paintings, paper folk dolls, Japanese ukiyo-e woodblock prints and nineteenth century fashion plates also spring to mind.61 “Quirky and fanciful though they are, Cutler’s vignettes resonate with age-old struggles (old wives tales) that remain burning issues in our time.”62

In Accommodation, 2001, a large flock of robins with red chests swoop and spiral above a young lady who floats in a large expanse of white space. A purple blue bird martin house (with room for nine) replaces the woman’s head, tilted back flat, as if bending over backwards to accommodate the birds who will enter and rest in her compartmentalised and vacant “bird brain”, which projects an attitude that is considerate, cooperative, helpful, hospitable, kind, neighborly, obliging, polite, and unselfish, all signifiers of femininity. In her hands she holds a saucepan of water. Household chores are a recurring theme in Cutler’s works on paper. The style of the woman’s dress (c. 1940s) and the pointy-roofed bird-house invoke periods when a woman’s role was very clearly defined and delineated towards the tyranny of drudgery. Birdhouses are a recurring motif in Cutler’s works, her birds often metaphors for thoughts. The theme of birds and ‘flying’ or ‘floating’ gather momentum in this exhibition, bursting forth from Pandora’s box in delightful and scandalous array.
boy appear in the Fellows/Boyle Shofus Songs perfor-
marance, streaming across the gallery walls. Everywhere is
falling and flight. Helene Cixous theorises that “Flying is a
woman’s gesture – flying in language and making it fly. We
have all learned the art of flying and its numerous tech-
niques; for centuries we’ve been able to possess anything
only by flying; we’ve lived in flight, stealing away, finding,
when desired, narrow passageways, hidden crosswars….
What woman hasn’t flown/stolen? Who hasn’t felt, dreamt,
performed the gesture that jams sociality? Who hasn’t
cribbled, held up to ridicule, the bar of separation? Who
hasn’t inscribed with her body the differential, punctured
the system of couples and opposition? Who, by some
act of transgression, hasn’t overthrown successiveness,
connection, the wall of circumfusion?” Who could resist?
Wangechi Mutu uses animals in her collages, too, in
order to create female hybrid humanoid and metaphoric
creatures. Lauri Firstenberg cites Strange Beauty, 1929,
in Hannah Höch’s series “From an Ethnographic Museum”
as a point of departure for Mutu’s work, and for her fasci-
nation with the absurd and the abject. Höch was one
of the only females in the German Dada group of artists
from the 1920s and 1930s. Like Höch, Mutu has remarked
that she is trying to slowly and thoughtfully “vandalize and
eradicate that profane notion that beauty is singular
or objective.” Who could resist?

Strongly relying on personal, symbolic and autobio-
graphical components, Annie Pootoogook is an Inuit
artist who often inserts icons from contemporary Inuit
life into her drawings, including clocks, polar bears,
ski-dos, sexual fantasies, television, family meals and
houses. Her peers include Kavavav Mannonnes, Nick
Sikkukuar and Annie’s cousin Shuvina Aschoona, who has
a strong interest in terror, fantasy and surrealism. All
of these artists deal with the precarious nature of life in
the North, gaining inspiration from romantic and Inuit
mythologies. Annie’s drawings have also highlighted
the community’s ongoing struggles with mental health,
alcoholism, suicide, domestic violence and drug addiction
as enduring scars of colonialism. Here are more healing
scenes of her parents undergoing everyday activities and
a mother, taking care of her young child. The relationship
between parent and child is clearly paramount in Inuit life.
Like some of Pootoogook’s maternalist drawings, one of
Laylah Ali’s masked figures with bulbous headpiece has
a baby strapped to her body. Leesa Strifler also takes
up themes of motherhood and autobiography in her new
work. She is consistent. She nurtures. She’s motivated. He
thrives, 2007, influenced by the relationship with her son.
In Strifler’s series of new portraits, entitled Parenting
Revisited, 2008, we see the artist’s critique of posed images
taken by her uncle, a Winnipeg portrait photographer,
when the artist was one and five years old respectively.
The fifteen year old shot was Strifler’s high school year-
socialisation of the 60’s critically from both a feminist
and humanitarian perspective. I am expressing feelings
of anger, regret and sadness over unintentional, yet
identity transforming messages I experienced as a
child.” The photographs represent a history of the

Wangechi Mutu

Fainting Dancer

Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger, Jr. Collection of
the Photographs of Wangechi Mutu

Wangechi Mutu

Histology of the
Different Classes of
Uterine Tumors

Series of 12 works
Courtesy of Sikkema
Jenkins & Co.
artist’s evolving consciousness over a ten year period. Streifler has found that the naïve quality of those early years of her life has provided her with fertile ground for mature reflection on her childhood, particularly from her adult perspective as a mother. In Life Force in Two Realms (the social and the spiritual), 2008, the artist depicts a hovering, floating, partially human figure, almost spiritual in its offering. Her large hands are not powerful – they are numb – taken from the artist’s suffering with carpal tunnel. The figure is at once social and spiritual – a conflation that the artist observes repeatedly in her life. 

Su-en Wong delicately renders with coloured pencils a multiplicity of small photo-realistic self-portraits in her acrylic diptych and singular paintings, each alluding to different strands of the artist’s ego. Wong provides the theatrical archetype, in both leading and supporting roles. These young women are based on Wong’s memories of growing up in an all-girls Chinese Catholic school in Singapore, and her struggles to assimilate into American culture. The objects that the girls encounter and interact with are often metaphors for states of mind. These pubescent, erotically-charged girls are typically placed within a large colour-field, flat-plane painting. The titles of Wong’s paintings usually recall the commercial paint chips that she uses for her monochrome backgrounds; thus she alludes to narratives that these titles evoke and demonstrates how colour can capture intangible cultural assumptions that elicit emotional response. In Lovers Knot, 2006, multiple copies of the artist surround and perch on top of a schoolground play-house or labyrinth, with blue slide. The girls are engaged in “good” and “bad” adolescent behaviour, ranging from benign games, tantalising charm and sexual curiosity, to outright rebellious, aggressive, jealous, bullying and competitive acts. We also witness the influence of peer pressure and the dynamics between individual and group. 

Chitra Ganesh provides a surreal stage in her comic series, depicting idyllic landscapes, classic motifs, Homeric-like panoramas, nude, three-headed women and winged scalps. The artist is interested in providing new views of the sacred in everyday life, drawing particularly on sacred Hindu myths and morality, as well as very personal expressions of her sexual identity, desire and fantasy. Like Shazia Sikander, Ganesh questions the role of Eastern tradition and history in relation to her diasporic identity as a South Asian American woman. “I intertwave and fuse personalized iconography and contemporary expressions of femininity with traditional popular mythologies of the South Asian subcontinent, including Hindu, Buddhist, and Bollywood content and popular tales to create mythological hybrid tableaux. Much of my work engages the term ‘jungle’ (meaning savage or literally of the jungle), an old colonial Indian idiom used to describe women who were perceived as defiant or transgressing social norms.” In Dazzle, 2006, the artist has developed a digital e-print narrative full of dismembered characters immersed in an ambiguous love triangle, rich with symbols and metaphors. The title of the work alludes to the dazzling yellow light surrounding a raised clenched
Speech bubbles are filled with Chitra’s own prose, except for an excerpted lyric, “Like the trembling heart of a captive bird etc,” from Ewan MacColl’s (1957) tune, The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face. Written for his wife, Peggy Seeger, the song declares undying love. Eventually cast as overture for the film Play Misty For Me, 1971, (the original Fatal Attraction), and performed by Roberta Flack, this now famous title track became associated with an obsessive female stalker, a reversal of the usual gendered power dynamic. The musical reference thus recalls Walker’s inversion of power relations in Testimony. Dazzle’s characters include a decorated South Asian woman with a visionary third eye and a pair of legs with exposed vagina and pubic hair, who emerges upside-down from the lips of a luscious red lotus reminiscent of Botticelli’s Birth of Venus (c. 1482-1486), an influential and iconic feminine form. The artist also references transformation and the influence of archetypes from Alice in Wonderland, Hercules and Hydra, and stories from the Brothers Grimm. Like Kara Walker, Ganesh cleverly appropriates from a plethora of received fables, in order to deflate any claims to a pristine feminine, through the use of arbitrary irony, wit and sarcasm. Viewers are left to unravel exactly what the characters in her stories are dazzled by, and what they repel from.

Ganesh creates large-scale 3D collage and drawing murals, which often depict floating ethereal female forms, comfortably juggling objects and identities within and beyond ancient myths. Inside Pandora #2, 2008, is a site-specific mural installation developed especially for the Dunlop Art Gallery, completed by the artist over three days, that depicts the artist’s visionary heroine. 76 The imagery refers to an old Bollywood love story, in which attraction and loss are core themes, merged with mysterious and sacred elements, some of which may not be socially appropriate (hence the reference to the Pandora myth in her title). One text reads “behind her thousand moons”, which refers to a rite of passage that is celebrated in India when a person has seen 1000 moons by the time they reach their 83rd birthday. Taken from a Bollywood song performed by Geeta Dutt, the other text is in Urdu and must be read from right to left. “Waqt ne Kiya, Kya Haseen Sitam” translates to “What a tyranny the passage of time, what time has done.” The passage of time that is encapsulated by Pandora’s Box invokes a generation of women artists whose time has come. Their inward focus breaches surfaces that deny, disguise, eroticise and reveal. Ultimately the way that we interpret the work in Pandora’s Box has much to do with our own obsessions, existential dilemmas, anxieties, and inner conflicts. 77 This is one of the many gifts that Pandora’s Box offers us.

Amanda Cachia is Curator, Dunlop Art Gallery.

Chitra Ganesh Dazzle, 2006
Courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery
Annie Pootoogook
Face Transformation, Cape Dorset, 2001/02
Photography: Don Hall

Chitra Ganesh
installing a mural for 739 Red Avenue (M.A.T.), Gwangju Contemporary Art Museum, Gwangju, Korea, 2005

Courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery
Leesa Streifler
She's consistent. She nurtures. She's maternal.
He thrives, 2007
Photography: Lee Henderson

Annie Pootoogook
Composition (Mother & Child in Amautik), Cape Dorset, 2006/07
Photography: Don Hall
Combination of Greek Form and Materials: The Allegory of the Female Monuments and Mirrors


Coulter, Dictionary of Ancient Deities


"Ghada Amer defines 'double subject' as the act of taking images explicitly related to the male gaze and re-presenting them as objects for the subject of the gaze, rather than the viewer." Marie-Claude Oliva, Perspectives 148: Su-en Wong: The Strange and Fascinating World of Women’s Art (Cleis Press, 1994), 38.

"Ghada Amer defers double subjectivity by using images exclusively related to the male gaze and re-presenting them as objects for the subject of the gaze, rather than the viewer." Marie-Claude Oliva, Perspectives 148: Su-en Wong: The Strange and Fascinating World of Women’s Art (Cleis Press, 1994), 38.

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Vanie Callow Oliver, Perspectives: Jn-En Wong: The Strange and Fascinating World of Su-en Wong (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum, 2007).

This series is one of India’s largest illustrated publications, a notable achievement by an artist who grew up with the postal service and the folk tradition of distributing drawings in the streets.


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American Art

The artist published a 40-page book of her work for Projects 75 at the university in St. Louis, Missouri. She opened a solo exhibition at the Contemporary Art Gallery in 2001. Prizes from the Foundacion Sandretto Re Rebaudengo per l’arte in 2001. Laylah Ali has been included in the Whitney Biennial of American Art in Philadelphia. Her paintings, drawings, and sculptures have been recently acquired by The Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, UK; the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, California; and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston. Streifler’s work has received reviews in The New York Times and The Arts Weekly. Annie Pootoogook was born in Nain, Nunavut, in 1963; when she was eleven, her family moved to the south of Canada. In 1996, she received a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1994. The Arts Weekly. Annie’s childhood, lovingly recording the particulars of settlement life in Nunavut. Streifler became known for her work in body image and indigenous identity and she has since given numerous workshops on these issues. Recent solo exhibitions include Open Studio, Toronto, 2010; Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects, Toronto, 2003; and the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, 2001. A solo exhibition of Annie’s work, curated by Jane Hamilton, will be held at the Studio Museum in Harlem from June 25 to October 2008. An exhibition to commemorate her life and work will be held at the Native American Art Center, Regina, 2008. Streifler’s work has shown in the 1990s to study anthropology and art history. In 2003, Annie’s first print was released: an etching in的问题。
Jean Bera is an independent curator at Art 26 and Associate Professor in the Department of Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Saskatchewan. She has contributed to numerous public and academic forums and conferences, including Public Shift, New Art Performance (Montreal, 2001), Sydney Museum (NSW, 2003), and the Second International Conference on Gender and the Museum, (Toronto, 2003-2004). Her curatorial practice has included exhibitions such as Diez Bord: Mixed Creatives, Agnieszka Sycz and Period Studio, Sukita Lee, Swed Allan, Randel Blenhammer and Tonyio Saito. She has written extensively in various magazines, journals, exhibition catalogues and anthologies including, Moster Stad, a periodical. Virginio Cañada: An Introduction with: Andrea Mediavilla and Blanca Ortega (Museo de Bellas Artes, 2006). Her curatorial practice revolves around themes of social justice.

Amanda Cucha was born in Wellington, New Zealand. She received her MA/CA from the University of Wellington (1998), and an MA in Curatorial Studies from Goldsmiths College, London (2002). She was followed by internships at the Museum of Modern Art and the Art for the Arts Centre for the Arts (2003). Other internships include Tate Modern, London; National Gallery of Australia and Museum (NSW, 2004). In 2004 she immigrated to New York City from Auckland as Assistant Curator at Cynthia Brown Gallery in Manhattan and Program Manager at Aljra, a Center for Contemporary in New York. New Zealand and Australia. Prior to that, previous positions included Curator of the New England Regional Art Museum in Armidale, NSW, Australia (2003-2004). Amanda’s curatorial practice revolves around themes of social justice.
Laylah Ali
Untitled 2005
ink and pencil on paper
30.5 x 37.0
Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York

Shary Boyle
Under the Water, Guarded by Women 2005
watercolor, ink on paper
21.5 x 23.5
Courtesy of Jessica Bradley

Ghada Amer
French Kiss 2006
vinyl and embroidery on canvas
175.0 x 175.0
acrylic and embroidery on canvas

Chitra Ganesh
Decade 2010
digital print
61.0 x 113.5
Courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery, New York

Annie Pootoogook
Face Transformation Cape Dorset 2000/01
ink, pencil, pencil crayon
42.5 x 53.5
Courtesy of Cape Dorset Fine Arts, Toronto

Wangechi Mutu
Mistress of the Different Classes of Urban Tumors 2001
digital prints and mixed media collage
12 works, 51.5 x 45.5 each
Courtesy of the Artist and Silberman Jenkins & Co., New York

Amy Cutler
Accommodation 2001
gouache on paper
197.0 x 155.0

Kara Walker
Testimony: Narrative of a Negress Burdened by Good Intentions 2003
dvd, black and white, silent; 8:49 min.
Collection of the Artist

Su-en Wong
Lovers Knot 2005
colored pencil and acrylic on panel
115.0 x 200.5
Courtesy of the Artist and Danese Gallery, New York
Pandora’s Box has been an incredibly enriching, serendipitous journey of ‘mythic’ proportions, a labour of love that I have enjoyed to every last detail. For this reason, it is the most important and ambitious exhibition of my career to date, closely aligned to my personal conceptual and aesthetic interests. There have been many wonderful people that I have met during my research who have shared with me their insights, their opinions and their pearls of wisdom.

My praise and eternal gratefulness are extended to Marie Lovrod. I am very fortunate to have worked not only with an astute editorial advisor, but a knowledgeable and energetic collaborator of the best kind: she completely understood my expectations and gave me hope when times were tough and deadlines drew near. Thanks to those who facilitated my residency and shared interest in the project, particularly Suzanne Steele.

To the artists that I did not meet, but through whose work (and some email discussions), I have had the opportunity to experience a new education on art and life. Joyce Yamzon from the University suggested I read Joseph Campbell’s The Power of Myth. Helena Reilly’s publication of this catalogue, and her most generous praise and appreciation. The gallery dealers have served as excellent contacts between myself and the artists, but more importantly, served as lenders to the exhibition: Jessica Bradley at PROJECTS, Toronto; Roberta Madsen at Feheley Fine Arts, Toronto; Michelle Michiko and ELLEN BRONSON at Sikkema Jenkins, NYC; Tonkonow Gallery, NYC; Simon Montemurro at 303 Gallery, NYC; Carol Corey at Danese Gallery, NYC and Daniel Longhorn at Thomas Erben Gallery, NYC.

To the other lenders of work in the exhibition, my sincere thanks: The JPMorgan Chase Art Collection, The J. Paul Getty Trust, with Chitra Ganesh. I would also like to thank The Power Plant suggested by Sigrid Dahle of the Dunlop Art Gallery, and the artists, but more importantly, the gallery dealers have served as excellent contacts between myself and the artists, but more importantly, served as lenders to the exhibition: Jessica Bradley at PROJECTS, Toronto; Roberta Madsen at Feheley Fine Arts, Toronto; Michelle Michiko and ELLEN BRONSON at Sikkema Jenkins, NYC; Tonkonow Gallery, NYC; Simon Montemurro at 303 Gallery, NYC; Carol Corey at Danese Gallery, NYC and Daniel Longhorn at Thomas Erben Gallery, NYC.

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Leesa Streifler
*Out of the Box*, 2008
Courtesy of the artist