

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

In praise of older women

By Jackie Wullschlager

Published: December 17 2010 17:35 | Last updated: December 17 2010 17:35



'Trees' (1990-1991) by Joan Mitchell

If the pram in the hall is the enemy of good art, what happens when the babies grow up and the pram is replaced by a Zimmer frame? Until recently, most women did not live long enough for us to find out. But now old age among female artists and writers is the new chic, as increased longevity trumps the time-worn complaint that after 50 a woman is socially and professionally invisible. In the 21st century, creative women in their eighties and nineties such as Louise Bourgeois (born 1911), Leonora Carrington (born 1917) and Diana Athill (born 1917) emerged from the tunnel of obscure middle-age to become glamorous if not household, at least drawing-room names.

In 2010 the prominence of such figures in the visual arts became inescapable. The National Gallery in London is currently showing 79-year-old Bridget Riley's engagement

with the Old Masters (to May 22). At Frankfurt's Städel Museum the furious neo-expressionist work of 91-year-old Austrian Maria Lassnig concludes a survey of paintings from the 14th to the 21st centuries (to June 26). In Paris, the most flamboyant installation in the Tuileries for this autumn's FIAC was the mirrored sculpture "Narcissus Garden" by Yayoi Kusama, who is 81 and lives in a Tokyo mental hospital. *Surreal Friends*, a British touring exhibition which closed last week, introduced 93-year-old English-Mexican artist Carrington's menacing surreal paintings to a wide new audience.

Also soaring are the reputations of recently dead artists belonging to this generation, particularly a trio of wayward Americans. *Artist Rooms* displays of the reclusive Canadian-American Agnes Martin (1912-2002) at London's Tate and Kettle's Yard in Cambridge were spectacular. Joan Mitchell (1925-1992), an abstract expressionist never forgiven for the twin sins of being a woman and leaving America, enjoyed a magnificent exhibition at the Edinburgh Festival; her late work is now showing at Gagosian Los Angeles (to December 21). And Alice Neel (1900-1984), who doggedly painted portraits through the mid-20th century when no one else was making them, had her first European retrospective at the Whitechapel this summer.

We are not talking the sort of outlandish, freewheeling late work concluding a distinguished career of major exhibitions and hefty sales that belongs to an elite of male artists: Cy Twombly, Howard Hodgkin, David Hockney. Older women artists are more likely to have the rage of those who only recently came in from the cold, having worked in isolation for decades, as Bourgeois (who died this spring aged 98) and Lassnig did, or to display the quiet conviction of Martin and Riley.

There are many reasons why such artists are basking in a new spotlight. The starting point is that art history is still catching up with feminist thought in exploring the slipways as well as the male-dominated highways of the last century. It is hard to exaggerate how sexist the art world was until the 1970s. The German-born abstract expressionist



'High Sky 2' (1992) by Bridget Riley

Hans Hofmann's comment on a work by Lee Krasner (a fellow abstract expressionist who married Jackson Pollock) – “This is so good you would not know it was painted by a woman” – encapsulates the prejudice of the postwar epoch. It was then that the generation born between 1900 and 1930 came of age. Some, such as 95-year-old Cuban geometric abstractionist Carmen Herrera, now on show at the Lisson Gallery (to January 29) in London, were overshadowed by male artists. Herrera, who has lived in New York since the 1950s, sold her first work at 89.

Others were acclaimed when they were young, beautiful and hit the moment, before sliding into comparative obscurity. Kusama's happenings and psychedelic polka-dot paintings, inspired by hallucinations she experienced as an abused child, and Riley's dazzling op-art canvases were both famous in 1960s New York; Riley was included in the seminal 1965 exhibition *The Responsive Eye* at the Museum of Modern Art. Boarding the plane home, she thought: “It will take at least 20 years before anyone looks at my paintings seriously again.” The 1980s, says her dealer Karsten Schubert, “was a very difficult period for her. Having gone from being a superstar to being forgotten and marginalised, she just retreated to her studio.” Kusama, too, returned to Japan to live quietly. But both re-emerged in the 1990s and 2000s as iconic names. In 2008 Riley's “Chant 2”, a series of vertical red and blue lines, sold for \$5.1m, and a Kusama “Infinity Net” painting became the most expensive work by a living female artist, fetching \$5.7m at Christie's.

Recovering a reputation, though, can take decades. The classic example is Joan Mitchell, as powerful an abstract expressionist as Pollock or Willem de Kooning, but different too: at ease with refined details, delicate strokes – not just because she was female but also as a result of living in France and engaging closely with impressionism. The Edinburgh and Gagosian shows confirm her as a colourist of the first rank, and a master of construction – the way she anchors the whirling, falling sulphur, amber and gold marks in the 1969 “Sunflower” painting, for instance. Nevertheless, 18 years after her death, she has not had a major European retrospective.



‘Down the Well II’ (2009)
by Paula Rego

Mitchell felt keenly her marginalised position. Yet many women artists have said loneliness helped preserve the distinctiveness of their creative projects. “I worked in peace for 40 years,” Bourgeois said in the 1990s. Where tough-living, tough-drinking Mitchell played a man’s game, Bourgeois and the 75-year-old London-based and Portuguese-born Paula Rego represent the other pole of female artistic endeavour: to try to formulate a visual language to translate women’s experiences into art.

Rego did so by injecting storytelling into painting and sculpture; from the 1970s she began making graphic transformations of fairy tales and theatrical tableaux such as “Oratorio”, exhibited at London’s Foundling Museum in the spring. Such narrative art was once widely dismissed; Rego only gained acknowledgment in the 1990s. She became a Dame Commander this year: “a great recognition”, she said when receiving the award at Buckingham Palace in the summer, “but it’s also good to be able to sell your works – it took me so many years before I could.”

Bourgeois, who trained with Fernand Léger in the 1930s, worked unseen on the roof of her Manhattan apartment while rearing a family. Ignored during the heydays of

abstraction and minimalism, she showed little until a MoMA retrospective in 1982 drew international attention. Success liberated her to develop at monumental scale; in her eighties she began her giant spider sculptures, her most significant legacy. The final show with which she was involved, *The Fabric Works* (closes Saturday), inaugurated Hauser & Wirth's new Mayfair space and turned on her radical use of feminine materials – lace, fur – to convey menace and violence.

Bourgeois is an autobiographical artist, returning in her subjects to her childhood in her parents' tapestry workshop and her father's betrayal through an affair with her governess. It is impossible not to be moved by her struggle with her psychic dramas, and her inventiveness in transforming them – the spider, for example, represents her mother, weaver and emotional restorer, but also the monstrous, controlling aspects of motherhood.

But Louise Bourgeois' mother died in 1932: can memories from 80 years ago still have been a potent force? How do anger, resentment, forgiveness, desire, operate in old age? That is the near-taboo subject confronted by Bourgeois, Rego and their contemporaries. What does old age feel, or even look, like? As life expectancy rises, it is something we all fear but want to know.

The most arresting piece in Alice Neel's Whitechapel exhibition was her nude self-portrait, painted aged 80: a merciless study of sagging breasts, prolapsed belly, crude patches of colour to describe blotchy, wrinkled skin, made bold and striking by Neel's steady, unself-pitying gaze as she defiantly holds a paintbrush and sports a large pair of spectacles – the better to face the truth. Her only rival here is Maria Lassnig, whose full-frontal naked self-portrait with bald head and pubic area "You or Me", painted aged 86, shocked visitors at her Serpentine Gallery retrospective



'Guidepost to the New Space' (2004) by Yayoi Kusama

in 2008. Lassnig depicted herself holding two guns, one pointing at her head, the other at the viewer – the uncompromising stare challenging us to underestimate the emotional life of old age. The crouching crimson “Self-portrait with Dragon” and skull-like “Doubts” are further recent nude self-depictions fraught with the realisation that, as Lassnig says, “The only true reality is my feelings, played out within the confines of my body.”

Such self-portraits are unprecedented in art history, belonging to our reality TV culture of personal revelation, yet take enormous daring on canvas. They are survivors’ paintings – which takes us to the heart of the current surge of interest in older women artists. Even today, and more so when they began, it is braver, harder and crazier to pursue an artistic career as a woman than as a man. The heroic egoism demanded by art sits uncomfortably with the emotional claims of motherhood and family life. Yet for a serious artist, not to make art is unendurable. “Art is a guarantee of sanity,” is the title of a Bourgeois text piece from 2000. “If it were not for art, I would have killed myself a long time ago,” Kusama says.

Psychological instability seems to come with the territory more often for female artists than it does for male. How it plays out through art made over long lifetimes is being told more or less for the first time now, as few pre-20th century women artists had oeuvres which extended so far. The story is clear in work like Neel’s, where every portrait is really a self-portrait of her battles with depression (she was hospitalised in her thirties in suicide wards). Or in that of Agnes Martin, who fled success in New York in 1967, gave away paints, built an adobe house in Mexico with her own hands and, stricken by depression, did not paint for seven years. Then, in 1974, she discovered the grid underpinning her ascetic, airy, radiant abstractions: a pattern to impose order on inner chaos. Martin lived alone, and when she died in 2004, aged 92, had not read a newspaper in 50 years.



‘Hartley on the Motorcycle’ (1966) by Alice Neel

It is difficult to imagine such splendid monasticism today. Some of the best women artists in their fifties, though, work away from the media glare and conceptual buzz. Stone-carver Emily Young, who inspired the Pink Floyd song "See Emily Play", and painter Lucy Jones, who sold to New York's Metropolitan Museum in her twenties, are middle-aged female artists at the top of their game who achieved early recognition but now work in seclusion and have never had the public retrospectives they deserve. One of my favourite shows of 2010 was of Emily Patrick's *intimiste* still-lives. Patrick has no dealer, organises a small show every three years, and lives reclusively in south London, protecting her vision of art's everyday transcendence.

Will these be the grandes dames of mid-21st century art? The belated triumphs of Bourgeois, Rego and Kusama show that the tortoise is as likely to win as the hare. It is certain that as women enjoy ever-longer careers, their role in art history will, thrillingly, be rewritten again and again.