

Woman as Artist

Interview

Fifth Estate Collective

1971

Fifth Estate: Jackie, what were some of the main obstacles that confronted you while growing up?

Jackie: Well, first of all as a child I really didn't consider any profession that influences society as being for women. Every profession that influences rather than servicing people is male.

When I was very young, 8 or 9, I had a diary. I was very interested in art, particularly literature because that's all I was exposed to, but I automatically assumed that it was impossible for me to be an artist. I could appreciate art, but that was it. I got into a very defensive idea about appreciating art because I didn't think I could actually do it. At a very early age I had already got that idea fixed in my head. There are very few women artists for a young girl to identify with, and in my neighborhood and family, women were wives and mothers, certainly not artists.

FE: There have been great women artists, like Kathe Kollwitz, who haven't gotten recognition. Why do you think women haven't gotten recognized as artists?

Jackie: Our value system does not include women as great at anything which influences society as a whole. For example, Helen Frankenthal developed a technique of staining unprinted canvas which has become very popular, and she is not really known or appreciated for this innovation—I do have the feeling that if she were a man more would be made of it.

FE: Do you think our society is encouraging to young male artists?

Jackie: Our society does not place much importance on art period. I would say that advertising gets the emphasis (money) that say the cathedrals got in medieval Europe. Now the money that does go to art is controlled primarily by white middle to upper class males and of course they help support each other in the museums, galleries, and as upcoming artists.

FE: Are there any characteristics that are necessary to "make it" as an artist?

Jackie: If you mean by "make it" to become a good artist, honest, expressive and an intelligent one, then drive, and persistence in the sense of the ability to take yourself seriously is very important. Obviously these are characteristics that men are encouraged to develop and women aren't. If you mean "make it" to make money or become well known then you need to be aggressively sure of yourself because it generally requires a lot of politicking/socializing with the right people. Part of the problem is with this society's definition of a "great artist," which is a white male who has been touched by the hand of God (also male) and therefore has genius thus has the ability to perceive and express himself and his society. Meanwhile, the fact that he is given the time to develop these qualities while women and other oppressed groups are not is seldom considered.

Thus the concept of a "great artist" is elitist in that it excludes people before giving them a chance. I do think that some people have more talent visually than others but that is only meaningful among people who have equal opportunity.

FE: Can you talk about some personal difficulties you feel in doing your work?

Jackie: Well, the role that women are programmed into of being supportive, passive, and submissive really makes it difficult as an artist because most male artists are very aggressive and egotistical. Thus I find that I feel

unsure of myself and have difficulty asserting myself in competitive situations with other artists (most of whom are men). Sometimes I lose my nerve and I think my ideals are no good and their ideas are the significant ones. To be an artist takes an incredible amount of dedication. The system is set up so that if you are not aggressive it is difficult to work, to push against your limits.

FE: Why do you think women tend not to do that?

Jackie: I think it's because of a sense of futility. You know: "What if I do, I still won't be recognized". You know men are competitive with each other but it's nothing like their feelings about women. They are really threatened. They're competitive, but they do encourage each others' egos, at least in the presence of women.

FE: What has been your experience in school?

Jackie: I didn't get much encouragement from any of my first 5 art classes taught by men and then I took a class from Pat Quinlan in life drawing. She gave me a feeling that I could do it in a way that none of the men teachers I had ever taken classes from until very recently. It does upset me that there are so few women in the WSU art department. There are four now in the traditionally female areas—ceramics, two in water color and one in life drawing. Women aren't in the serious arts—painting and sculpture.

FE: The question of what makes an undertaking "serious" has been dealt with by a number of anthropologists, Margaret Mead and Evelyn Reed for example. They point out that in any society what is done by men is considered the most important and most serious work.

Jackie: There is an incredible amount of discrimination against the two women in the department. They are the scapegoats. Everybody complains about having to take a course from them. It's true that they have not developed as artists. But what I began to see is that there are a lot of reasons why they didn't develop and I have become very defensive and sympathetic by understanding the struggles they have gone through—I am determined to not let similar problems keep one from developing—letting men define what ideas, subjects, and attitudes are important in art—I am developing in paintings a symbolism of the emerging creativity of women. The power and beauty of the feminine—no longer weak and insipid butterflies, flowers and stars and hearts—these symbols can take on power and presence, and throw off their old meanings.



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