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## This Organization Has Added Legions of Women to Art History, and Now There's a Show to Prove it



BY ALEX GREENBERGER  April 3, 2025 2:26pm



At New York University's Grey Art Museum, the head of artist Rona Pondick—a cast of it, anyway—can be seen emerging from a pedestal in the center of one gallery. Her skin is pink, her ear is translucent, her head is bald, and her eyes are closed. It is hard to look away from her as she pushes through a bed of unnaturally yellow resin, emerging from a surface that has concealed her for so long.

Pondick's sculpture, titled *Magenta Swimming in Yellow* (2015–17), acts as a worthy icon for the Grey's current exhibition, "Anonymous Was A Woman: The First 25 Years." Pondick is one of the more than 300 women-identifying artists who've received an award from the organization Anonymous Was A Woman since its founding 29 years ago. This exhibition, organized by critic Nancy Princenthal and curator Vesela Sretenović, features around a fifth of them.

The show isn't comprehensive, which is partly a consequence of the modest size of the Grey, a smallish museum that regularly puts on mighty shows. (Disclosure: I interned there as an undergraduate student over a decade ago.) But even in its partial form, the exhibition persuasively suggests that Anonymous Was A Woman has transformed the US art scene for the better, keeping alive many women's practices when many institutions wouldn't. More than simply acting as a boosterish celebration of this beloved organization, the exhibition also spotlights the hard-won struggle for visibility and the perseverance required to weather it.

Many of the works here are somber and striking. There's Laura Aguilar's *Stillness #25*, a 1999 photograph in which the nude artist lies curled up in the Californian desert, her face turned away from her viewer. Yet unlike a fabric blowing above Aguilar, the artist remains there, planted stoically to the ground. Nearby, there's Janet Biggs's 2007 video *Airs Above the Ground*, in which a swimmer writhes around in a pool. This swimmer resists gravity to remain underwater for a prolonged period of time—something that requires training and physical endurance. It's tough to keep up that kind of work, and tougher still do it when no one is watching.

These two pieces, like many of the others in the show, were made roughly around the same time the artists won their grants from Anonymous Was A Woman, an organization whose name is sometimes affectionally abbreviated as AWAW. Aguilar had not received a major survey at the time (and wouldn't until 2017, the year the Vincent Prince Art Museum filled that void); Biggs still has not had a retrospective.

AWAW, which now awards 15 grants annually, has recognized plenty of artists with more established institutional bona fides. Jennie C. Jones, a sculptor set to do a commission for the

Metropolitan Museum of Art's rooftop this summer, got one in 2017; her class of grantees also included Amy Sherald, whose paintings are now being surveyed by the Whitney Museum. Andrea Fraser was well-known as a leading institutional critique artist by the time she got her AWAW award in 2012, and photographer Louise Lawler was considered a core member of the Pictures Generation long before she got hers in 2010.

A range of other acclaimed artists have also received AWAW awards: Joan Jonas, Senga Nengudi, Carolee Schneemann, Betye Saar, Cecilia Vicuña, Yvonne Rainer, Lorraine O'Grady, Simone Leigh, and Tania Bruguera, to name but a few. A sizable portion of AWAW's alums could hardly be considered anonymous, since many of them have a good deal of name recognition now.

It wasn't always that way, of course. Not so long ago, there was a sharp gender imbalance in US museums. (The trend continues today, according to recent reporting by journalists Julia Halperin and Charlotte Burns.) And so, in 1996, photographer Susan Unterberg formed AWAW with plans to remedy the problem, borrowing her organization's name from Virginia Woolf's proto-feminist treatise *A Room of One's Own* (1929).

Until 2018, the year that Unterberg publicly named herself as the organization's founder in a splashy *New York Times* profile, AWAW was something of an open secret within the art world, with many fans in the know but little public awareness. Artists and art world literati muttered about the organization in private, even though the press was slower to take note. But now, AWAW's cohort has grown so large that no one can ignore it, and the organization's grants, currently valued at \$50,000, are as closely watched as some of the nation's biggest art prizes.

The Grey show is another rare public-facing moment for this unostentatious organization, so Princenthal and Sretenović, the show's curators, have wisely used the occasion to shine a light on AWAW winners that have yet to receive due recognition. By my calculations, just one artist here—the photographer An-My Lê—has ever received a New York survey.

There is no singular aesthetic on display, though naturally, there is no small amount of feminist critique to go around. In one four-part 2018 painting by Dotty Attie, an A.I.R. gallery founder direly in need of a retrospective, there's a shadowy shot of the actor Orson Welles re-presented in oil alongside text reading "WHO KNOWS WHAT EVIL LURKS IN THE HEART OF MAN?" An answer arrives in the adjacent canvas, featuring a smiling nude woman fiddling with an old radio. Beverly Semmes's *RC* (2014) takes the form of a long flow of velvet pinned to a wall; it looks like a queen's robe, but its title refers to "Rough Censor," Semmes's series about female porn stars. The late Ida Appelbroog is represented here by *Monalisa* (2009), her piquant take on the female nude, in which a distended figure with lumpy skin vacantly stares back at her viewers.

Many works deal with centuries of misogyny in more implicit ways. The show includes a spread of artists who take up the male-dominated genre of abstraction, from Polly Apfelbaum, who here shows her rolled-up paintings on the floor, to Carrie Yamaoka, who imaginatively uses bubble wrap to create her splotchy surfaces. There are also works that slyly undermine machismo, including a tire sculpture by Chakaia Booker that takes a symbol of bad-boy car culture and turns it slinky and playful. The shredded rubber wheels she's exhibiting here are arranged to look more like a mother nursing a child, a notion obliquely suggested by her sculpture's name, *Reclining Torso Breastfeeding Herself* (2000).

Sculptures, paintings, and fiber artworks are abundant here, but works of performance art and video art are not, a near-omission likely owed to the limited resources on hand at the Grey. Less forgivable is the total absence of trans artists. Presumably in recognition of this

lacuna, AWAW changed the language in its grant guidelines in 2018, with “women-identifying” now appearing in place of “women,” but there had never been a trans AWAW grantee until 2022, the year that micha cardénas was named a winner. (Since the Grey show ends in 2020, cardénas is not included.) Change has come too slowly to this organization, and to remain relevant for 29 more years, AWAW has some slack to pick up.

Quibbles with AWAW’s history aside, there can be no doubt that this organization has reached its audience. The lengthy line of visitors that formed on opening night at the Grey is proof, and so are the offerings on view at the museum, which testify to a thrumming community that is only expanding.

No surprise, then, that some artists in the Grey show visualize networks of women. One of them is Valeska Soares, whose 2017 piece *For To (X)* collages together the excised dedication pages of dozens of books. Nearly all the dedicatees go unnamed by the books’ respective authors, with males getting the same treatment as females. (“We dedicate this book to all the men in our lives,” reads one of Soares’s appropriated pages.) But it is striking just how often terms like “wife” and “mother” recur here, for as Soares’s piece demonstrates, anonymity disproportionately impacts women. Here’s to the future of AWAW, an organization that is making sure this no longer remains the case in the art world.