

Haddid, Natalie, "A 'Witch Hunt' in Pursuit of Intersectional Feminism", FRIEZE, 14 December, 2021.

# FRIEZE

## A 'Witch Hunt' in Pursuit of Intersectional Feminism

An ambitious exhibition in Los Angeles invites different interpretation of feminism to promote a collective resistance to systemic sexism.



Several years in the making, 'Witch Hunt' is ambitious in both size and scope. The exhibition, part of an initiative by the Feminist Art Coalition, spans two venues and brings together 16 mid-career women artists from 13 countries in an effort to use, as the catalogue states, 'feminist, queer and decolonial strategies to explore gender, power and the global impacts of systemic patriarchy'. While this broad description deliberately invites different interpretations of feminism, the show coheres in its collective resistance to systemic sexism and the normalization of misogyny and white nationalism under former US President Donald Trump.

These politics are clear in the emphasis co-curators Connie Butler and Anne Ellegood place on non-white and queer perspectives from a global roster of artists, each of whom receives an individual platform. The drawback to this approach is that it leads, in some cases, to juxtapositions that don't speak to each other: for instance, Leonor Antunes's textile installation paying homage to women omitted from design history (*Discrepancias con C.P. Leonor Antunes*, 2018) and Teresa Margolles's 2021 series of emotionally charged photographs of trans- and cisgender women in Juarez. Yet, the commonalities that do emerge illuminate the extent to which issues of erasure and exploitation are entrenched in diverse cultures and histories.

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Leonor Antunes, *Discrepancias con C.P.* Leonor Antunes, 2018, Museo Tamayo, Mexico City, mixed media, dimensions variable. Courtesy: © the artist and kurimanzutto Mexico City and New York

Erasure of women's labour threads through several works and, with it, the paradox of being seen (as a body) and unseen (as a subject), casting into relief the violence concomitant with the heightened visibility of the (particularly non-white) female body. To that end, Margolles produces one of the exhibition's most affecting statements. But the sentiment is echoed in works such as Laura Lima's *Alfaiataria* (Tailor Shop, 2014/2021) - a fabric workshop in the Hammer galleries that foregrounds the largely invisible labour of women - and Beverly Semmes's blow-ups of *Penthouse* magazine pin-ups, overpainted with abstract biomorphic forms ('Feminist Responsibility Project', 2011-ongoing). Acknowledging conflicting feminist ideologies, Semmes's paintings crystallize divergent perceptions among different generations of feminists as to whether pornography is exploitative or empowering.



Teresa Margolles, *Niña centroamericana en el albergue coordinado por mujeres transgénero 'Respetrans'*, Ciudad Juárez (Central American girl in 'Respetrans', a shelter run by transgender women, Ciudad Juárez, 2021). Courtesy: © the artist and James Cohan, New York

Candice Breitz's video installations centre the female body as a fraught battleground occupied by both men and women. In *TLDR* (2017), a chorus of sex workers from Cape Town responds to the white-saviour feminism of Hollywood celebrities. The question Breitz raises, of who can speak for whom, feels especially relevant in this regressive moment of US politics when lawmakers are systematically stripping away women's

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reproductive rights, and demonstrating how the cultural sector adopts activist discourses to re-inscribe racial and economic hierarchies.

Interspersed among these artworks are others that privilege collectivity among women: for instance, Yael Bartana's film *What if Women Ruled the World?* (2017), a gender-inverted take on Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), and Vaginal Davis's tender audio and painting tribute to the women who have influenced her.



Yael Bartana, *What if Women Ruled the World?*, 2017, performance view, Filmby Aarhus, European Capital of Culture Aarhus 2017, Denmark. Courtesy: © the artist; photograph: Brigit Kaulfuss

The strongest works are those that focus on the continuum between women's issues and broader social concerns. In some cases, as in suites of work by Otobong Nkanga and Minerva Cuevas, themes of capital and labour have little direct connection to feminism while several information-heavy works veer towards the didactic. Yet, overall, the show posits that what affects women affects everyone. This notion is poignantly realized in the film *One Big Bag* (2021) by Every Ocean Hughes, which looks at the work of 'death doulas'. If the film aligns with much of 'Witch Hunt' by de-instrumentalizing conventional gender roles, it is also the show's most elemental work - one in which life and death are ushered in by the same figure. Against a global tidal wave of misogyny, 'Witch Hunt' proposes solidarity and inclusivity among female-identifying people. *One Big Bag* reminds that death equalizes us all without relinquishing its stake in feminism.

*'Witch Hunt'* is on display at the Hammer Museum and Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, until 9 January 2022.