

REVIEWS WARSAW

“The Woman Question 1550–2025”

Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw | Museum on Marszałkowska

By Marzena Jarczak

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Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1610, oil on canvas, 66 7/8 × 47 5/8". From “The Woman Question 1550–2025.”

The exhibition “The Woman Question 1550–2025” feels timely, coming after the right-wing rule in Poland between 2015 and 2023 and at a moment when women are still fighting for access to abortion. Dispensing with chronology, curator Alison M. Gingeras brings together nearly 200 works by almost 150 artists, maintaining a balance between Polish and international practitioners. Focused primarily on modern and contemporary art, supplemented by Renaissance, Baroque, and nineteenth-century works, the exhibition is structured through nine thematic sections. Using iconography as the primary tool for exploring women artists’ agency allows Gingeras to make visible some of the codes through which women have been represented and have represented themselves.

The opening section juxtaposes, among others, Artemisia Gentileschi’s *Susanna and the Elders*, 1610, in which a young, unclothed woman attempts to shield herself from the leering gazes and gestures of the two men observing her, and Miriam Cahn’s *Must Strike Back*, 2024, where a naked mature woman thrusts one clenched fist toward a body whose masculinity is signaled by an erect phallus, while driving the other into her own genitals. Meanwhile, one hears the visceral cry of Gina Birch’s sound piece *3 Minute Scream*, 1977. All of this explicitly lays out women’s relegation to an inferior position from which they continually strive to break free.

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This comparative approach displays the persistence of certain preoccupations across contexts shaped by different social conditions, historical periods, and geographic settings. Mary Kelly’s *Antepartum*, 1973, and Anna Sacha’s *Pregnant Woman Pulling a Spiked Iron Harrow in the Fields*, 1978, were created just five years apart, and both address the experience of pregnancy. Beyond that, they share almost nothing. Kelly, an American Conceptual artist, in her nearly hour-long video, conveys anticipation, uncertainty, and the slow formation of new lives, roles, and relationships. Sacha, a Polish folk artist, painting a pregnant woman laboring in the fields, depicts a life fixed within a predetermined role. The exhibition’s architecture brings into focus some of the historical forces that have shaped women’s artistic practices, with particular emphasis on their lack of or limited access to formal art education, as well as the strategies artists developed in response. While the juxtaposition of a Conceptualist with a folk artist suggests a broad stylistic spectrum, the pairing ultimately illustrates the curator’s presupposition that body-oriented feminist art is equivalent to, or stands in for, art made by women as such.

Within a narrative rendered mostly in painting and sculpture and relying heavily on self-portraits—which appear throughout the exhibition, not only in the section dedicated to that genre, going as far back as Sofonisba Anguissola’s *Self-Portrait (The Ashburnham Medallion)*, 1556 or 1558, and Lavinia Fontana’s *Self-Portrait at the Spinet*, 1577—there are pieces that mark notable side themes. Jordan Casteel’s painting *Aaron*, 2013, introduces a female gaze directed at the male nude. Malga Kubiak’s compilation of photography, collage, Xerox, drawing, and poetry, *The Ego Trip of Miss Mess*, 1975–2025, touches on the use of pornographic imagery and the position of women artists within counterculture. Marie Tekla Bittnerová’s embroidery *The Four Lands of the Holy Roman Empire and the Franciscan Order Pay Homage to the Holy Family*, 1710–30, serves as a reminder that, even when excluded from formal art academies, women found ways to influence visual culture, asserting their creativity through media traditionally associated with the domestic sphere. The insights these works offer, however, risk receding into the background amid the abundance of material. Given its scale, the exhibition has the potential to provide a more nuanced understanding of the multiple threads it seeks to explore. And here is where the pitfall of an iconographic approach reveals itself most clearly: A focus on images of women’s bodies—even in contrasting registers, from erotic fantasies to depictions of war—inevitably bypasses certain dimensions of the proliferation of women’s artistic activity, such as their work with abstract vocabularies and in the applied arts. As a consequence, this exhibition’s argument risks diluting the very evidence of women’s complex, multifaceted, and, above all, indisputable presence in art history.

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Carol Bove, *Hylomorph I*, 2016, found steel, steel, urethane paint, 71 1/2 × 42 × 51". Photo: Dan Bradica.

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