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Sublime and subversive: Female artists take on mother nature

Thought to lack the imagination and intellectual gravitas for serious art, women were historically encouraged to stick with still lifes and natural scenes, says Deborah Gaston, education director for the National Museum of Women in the Arts. Even modern critics sometimes claim that female artists are particularly drawn to the beauty of nature, says Kathryn Wat, chief curator for the museum. Two new exhibits, “Super Natural” and “Organic Matters: Women to Watch 2015” (through Sept. 13) stomp out these stereotypes. “Super Natural” showcases nature-centric work by established female artists from the Renaissance to today, and “Organic Matters” focuses on pieces made by emerging and mid-career female artists within the last decade.

“Deb and I are both deeply annoyed by this conventional idea that women artists who chose to depict nature do so because they are drawn to beauty or because it is something they are better at,” Wat says. “Since the Renaissance, women have depicted nature for many reasons, and a lot of them didn’t have to do with beauty. A lot of it had to do with their scientific interests or frankly their interest in the strangeness and weirdness of nature.”

Even traditional still lifes by female artists often have subversive undertones, Wat says. For instance, 17th-century Italian painter Giovanna Garzoni sneaks a few lumpy quinces and a bruised pear into “Still Life with Basket of Fruit, a Vase with Carnations and Shells on a Table.”

“She is showing the life cycle of pristine young fruit to something that is now aging,” Wat says.

On the adjacent wall is “Still Life,” a time-lapse video by contemporary artist/“Fifty Shades of Grey” director Sam Taylor-Johnson. In a few minutes, a bowl of fruit goes from ripe to rotten.

“Taylor-Johnson takes what Garzoni was doing with the overripe fruit signaling the fleetingness of life, and brings it to its obvious conclusion,” Gaston says.

Another reason women were encouraged to paint still lifes is that, as an indoor pursuit, it kept them from venturing into the dangerous world. German-born painter Maria Sibylla Merian flouted that expectation when, in 1699, at age 52, she set sail for the Dutch colony of Suriname. She spent two years there studying plants and insects and making detailed drawings of them.

“She was fascinated by the life cycle of caterpillars and their metamorphosis into butterflies,” Gaston says. “At the time many people didn’t understand that it was one animal, so she was really a pioneering entomologist as well as an artist.”

Merian's accomplishments were unappreciated by her peers. Men criticized her for depicting "impossible" things that turned out to be accurate, like a hairy spider devouring a little bird.

Contemporary female artists find inspiration in Merian's bold spirit of exploration, Wat says.

"Like Merian, we're seeing women artists striking out into nature alone," Wat says. "But women today aren't content to reflect and interpret nature, they are inserting themselves or their creations into it."

Perhaps none so dramatically as German-Brazilian artist Janaina Tschape, who spent several years traveling the world to produce "100 Little Deaths," a series of photos where she lies face-down in fields and other places. Fifteen of her morbid selfies are on display in "Super Natural."

"This series is about how, when you travel, a little part of you dies and stays there," Wat says.

Tschape's series, as well as many of the exhibits' works, serve as a reminder of humanity's ultimate relationship with nature. We may see ourselves as separate from the natural world, but in the end, it always takes us back.