

Feminin/alism: women artists reinterpret Minimal Art in *Escape Attempts*

By Kathy Battista

Throughout the ages and until fairly recently, artists have grappled with the weight of tradition on their own artistic practice. The notion of originality, once highly esteemed in art practice, was superseded when artists began to question the classical genres of painting and sculpture to create alternative modes of production and distribution. From Pop Art that emerged in the late 1950s, to the Pictures Generation in the 1980s, artists have also borrowed imagery from popular culture to create new interpretations and forms of image-making. Minimal and conceptual artists attempted to remove traditional skills, narrative, and emotion from art by creating works that were devoid of subject matter, were predominately instruction based, as well as visually reductive. During this time, performance art matured and artists, such as Joan Jonas, Adrian Piper, Yvonne Rainer, Simone Forti, Bruce Nauman, Robert Rauschenberg, and Carolee Schneemann, avoided the pitfalls of the traditional male canon of art history by using these new forms of art-making, including live events, text, and improvisation, as tools to challenge the legacy of classical mediums. Notably, the human body became an important site for the creation of these new forms of art practices.

Today, a new generation of artists similarly mines the past with an approach to originality that has evolved; while not based on a single, predominant visual or technical innovation, these artists often layer complex webs of references and practices into their work. In this second decade of the new millennium, we inhabit a global society and have unprecedented access to information; thus, sampling and layers of references create a new ideation of originality. Today's emerging artists experiment even more freely with the language of appropriation and reference. For example, in the founding wave of art informed by the Women's Liberation Movement, borrowing from art historical imagery was considered questionable, unless for the purpose of being critiqued or dissected; today, however, many young artists steeped in gender issues look to the past for inspiration without being hindered by the notion of political compromise. A new generation, who matured while surfing the Internet and who live global and digital lives, embraces the legacy of art history as both necessary and effective. The notion of authenticity relies more on a personal authentication than an external one; the freedom to cut and paste from a variety of sources is now second nature.

The group exhibition *Escape Attempts* includes the work of seven artists: Carmen Argote, Susan Hefuna, Cindy Hinant, Alex McQuilkin, Sarah Meyohas, Virginia Overton, and Naama Tsabar. Their art practices in this context are read in terms of the legacy of both the second-wave feminism movement and Minimalist Art. The exhibition title is culled from a 1969 essay by writer, art critic, curator, and activist Lucy Lippard, in which she discussed the artists of her generation, who while steeped in conceptual and Minimal practice, were also creating art in a time of widespread protest related to civil rights unrest, antiwar movements, and gender equality wars. Lippard wrote of their struggle to escape the weight of past art historical legacy and create a new formal and ideological vocabulary.

Much like every younger generation, the artists in *Escape Attempts* inevitably reference aspects of their artistic predecessors, and in particular to Minimal Art, a movement traditionally associated with a male hegemony. Although some seminal Minimal artists were female, including Jo Baer, Agnes Martin, Rosemarie Castoro, and Eva Hesse, the predominant conception of Minimalism is that of a male-oriented movement, due in part to the use of heavy, industrially produced materials, hard edges, and repetitive, geometric forms. It would be an underestimation of both the current and the historical work to consider the contemporary examples as outright critiques, as in many cases they are created in homage to the work of their predecessors. It is more accurate to consider the work through the myriad and overlapping networks of our digital culture where it is impossible to define the level of influence or appropriation. It is more effective to note the calibration of art historical influence, the freedom to reference earlier modes of creation, and the innovative approach to the combination of materials, processes, and themes that these artists employ.

Shulamit Nazarian

Los Angeles

The seven artists in *Escape Attempts* reconfigure and interrogate forms and themes including the use of the cube and the monochrome, the repetition of forms, and the use of industrial or everyday materials. While associated with first wave Minimal Art, the artists, all female, intersect these themes with a gendered approach through the insertion of subjectivity, self-reflexivity, as well as personal history. Robert Morris wrote that, “Minimal works give viewers a greater degree of self-awareness in the presence of elemental forms since they have been shorn of distracting compositional or figurative incident.”¹ The artists in *Escape Attempts* employ what I call *feminin/alism* in their work: they riff on earlier forms of Minimal Art and at times Conceptual practice, while combining this with a female experience, in particular through memory, domesticity, color palette, or sensuous materials. They interrupt the homogenous formal vocabulary of Minimalism to inject the distracting incident that Morris eschewed, and in doing so create works that subtly challenge and provoke the viewer.

Of all the pieces in *Escape Attempts*, Naama Tsabar’s work has the most typical appearance of Minimal Art in terms of simplicity of form, materials, and scale. She conflates notions of gender with a reduction of formal vocabulary in her practice. Tsabar investigates the coded associations of both gender and music at various intersections, particularly in reference to the culture of nightlife and the freedom of that liminal space and time. Tsabar’s sculptures, installations, and performances oscillate between discrete objects and sites for live events with herself and other collaborators. They also present the possibility for viewer interaction, which defies the sanctity of the Minimal Art object as well as most other art historical precedents.

Tsabar’s wall based *Work on Felt (Variations 9 & 10) Bordeaux and Black (Diptych)*, 2016 is part of the larger series *Work on Felt and Paper*. A large, seemingly pared down diptych reminds one of the late 1960s “anti-form” felt pieces of Robert Morris. Two rectangular felt forms, vertically oriented, are lifted on one corner by a thin piano string attached by a guitar-tuning peg. Appearing weightless, the sculpture is actually formed around a carbon fiber core, which lends it solidity. In addition, the work is wired to a speaker, thus giving it a charged potential as a musical instrument. Tightening or loosening the string affects the sound that the sculpture emits. Tsabar creates performances with this and other sculptures in the series, which are played by the artist and her long-term collaborators, in particular the musician Fielded. The work then exists in two forms: as an integral object, and as a sensual experience for a viewer and/or performer. The sculpture’s potential for interaction harks back to earlier works by Dan Graham (for example *Performer/Audience/Mirror*, 1975 and *Public Space/Two Audiences*, 1976) in which both the artist and the audience become active participants in the sculpture. As in Graham’s works, in order to fully experience Tsabar’s work properly, a viewer must implicate themselves within the piece, either as a player or an observer.

Also on view from Tsabar is *Closer*, 2014, a freestanding sculpture that resembles the architectural element of a room corner, in which the interior chamber of the sculpture doubles as a musical instrument. In order to play the instrument the artist or participant has to literally embrace the corner by wrapping their arms around the sculpture to touch the strings and knobs. This intervention by the body of the artist or viewer is central to the conceptual potential of the work. Rather than a freestanding, monolithic form, *Closer* is an invocation of intimacy on the artist’s part, allowing the sculpture to exist on various planes: as an integral architectural object, as a charged artifact from the artist’s performances, or still as potential spheres of intervention on the part of the viewer. Here Tsabar’s body, or that of the performer or viewer, creates the “figurative incident” that Morris decried.

Carmen Argote’s work explores memory and architecture from a personal and political perspective. Argote has created a new series, *Folding Structures*, 2016—monochromatic floor sculptures that echo the formal qualities found in both architectural plans and domestic structures used for folding laundry. These sculptures sit directly on the floor of the gallery and can be folded into various shapes and forms. The serial nature of the work and its relationship to architecture calls to mind the work of Argote’s predecessors

¹ Robert Morris quoted in Anne Rorimer, *New Art in the 60s and 70s Redefining Reality*, London: Thames and Hudson, 2001, p 197.

Shulamit Nazarian

Los Angeles

including Carl Andre, Donald Judd, and Sol Lewitt, which do not rest on a plinth and are based on architectural plans or mathematical algorithms.

In Argote's *Folding Structures*, 2016, however, a personal narrative is added to the work. Each structure includes painted muslin, which the artist sees as a reference to the skin of a body. The muslin is also metonymic of class strata as *manta* is used to make clothes that transcend a status system: from worker's clothes to the lining of fine garments worn by the aristocracy. The colors of *Folding Structure (lawn)* and *Folding Structure (pool)* have personal significance, referencing pools and landscapes of her father's architectural drawings, which are the relics of an immigrant's journey. Although Argote's father studied architecture in 1970s Mexico, he had to work as a delivery driver when he emigrated to the United States. While he designed many buildings for his native Guadalajara, only one ever came to fruition.

Argote's work, while appearing Minimal in form and palette, has an abiding relationship with her family history as immigrants to the US from Mexico. Argote conjures this history through the layering of memory, experience, trauma, and nostalgia that is considered from a domestic site. This injection of the personal and domestic is characteristic of the layering of signs and meanings that I refer to as *feminin/alism*, the elision of a Minimal format with a gendered, feminine experience.

In a similar manner, Susan Hefuna's drawings and sculptures appropriate the *mashrabiya* screens ubiquitous in North African and Middle Eastern architecture. Transforming hand-drawn images into cast bronze or other materials, Hefuna recreates the latticed patterns associated with these domestic architectural elements that physically divide public and private, and thus male and female, space. *Woman Cairo 2010/1431*, 2010 derives from this body of work. Hefuna creates one *Woman Cairo* screen each year, which is indicated by both the western and the Islamic calendar dates. Seen alongside are her *Grid Drawings*, 2014/2015, smaller, bronze works. Hefuna utilizes the formal concept of the grid as the dominant organizational motif; however, in her practice the grid has a handspun nature, drawn by the artist herself as she embraces the inaccuracies and eccentricities of form that result from her process. Unlike the first wave of Minimal practitioners, Hefuna's work is determinedly not mechanical and rather embraces the human touch. Her grids are never straight lines because the artist notes, as in nature, nothing is straight or ever exists in the same incarnation twice.

This predominance of the hand in Hefuna's work is a direct relationship to her personal narrative. Growing up as half-Egyptian, half-German, she was acutely aware of her status as an immigrant and observer in either location, Düsseldorf or Cairo. Like Argote, she is fascinated by the architecture of her childhood, in particular the screens that divide the female space of the home from male public space of the city outside. Here the *mashrabiya* grid may also be considered as a metaphor for the barrier between East and West as well as understanding and misunderstanding—a site that the artist herself embodies by straddling two countries and two cultures. The place of women within both of these cultures is contested: while many in the West like to stereotype Middle Eastern women as having less privileges, education, and rights, these very privileges and rights are being threatened in Western democracies today. Hefuna's work transcends the specificity of Egypt or Europe; rather, it is relevant as a universal interrogation on the concept of borders, both physical and psychological.

Alex McQuilkin's paintings relate to both Argote's and Hefuna's work as they also examine the female space of the domestic interior. McQuilkin incorporates wallpaper motifs from 1980s suburban America, where home décor from designer brands like Laura Ashley and Ralph Lauren were seen as *de rigueur* for the upper middle class. Growing up in the Northeast, one would immediately recognize these floral motifs as *status quo*, representative of good taste as well as class aspiration for the lower middle class. McQuilkin's paintings, like Hefuna's and Argote's work, possess a handspun intimacy, which she combines with a nod to the girlish pink palette of teenage bedrooms. The paintings, although resembling wallpaper, are created entirely by the hand of the artist using a complex palette of hues that defies their seemingly mundane appearance.

McQuilkin's paintings, like Hefuna's screens, may also be read as expansions of the grid in terms of the repetition of patterns and formal structure. *Untitled (Purple Zip)*, 2016 and *Untitled (Pink Zip)*, 2016 are presented as grid formats, albeit rendered in confectionary palettes associated with feminine domestic

Shulamit Nazarian

Los Angeles

space. In these paintings, as well as in the floral works shown alongside, the artist inserts a zip line that disturbs the formal rigidity of the pattern. McQuilkin is interested in the idea of wallpaper that is applied improperly, resulting in a slight slippage of pattern or the revealing of wall colors from previous generations underneath. McQuilkin's zips grew out of her interest in Gordon Matta-Clark's "anarchitecture," as seen in *Splitting*, 1974, where he intervened in domestic architecture by sawing a split into a suburban house in Englewood, New Jersey. McQuilkin, however, condenses this radical intervention into an intimate scale and feminine palette in her paintings, cleverly connecting the two very different formal interventions into the tyranny of domestic architecture, another example of the concept of *feminin/alism*.

Cindy Hinant's work similarly embraces the relationship between gendered spaces and Minimal formats through the unexpected combination of gossip magazine images and makeup with the formal strategies of Minimal artists, such as Dan Flavin and Sol LeWitt. Hinant employs several formal mechanisms in conversation with their legacy, most notably in this exhibition the monochrome and the notion of seriality. By both embracing and subverting the monochrome, she acknowledges the utopian space of Minimalism and riffs on the commodified female sexuality seen in celebrity gossip magazines and sex tapes proliferated in our popular culture. The artist's interest in what she calls "an aesthetics of violation" is seen throughout the work on display in *Escape Attempts*. Three videos embody this theme: *I Night in Paris*, 2014, *Kendra Exposed*, 2014 and *Kim Kardashian Superstar*, 2014. Each video appropriates the sound from celebrity sex tapes, a new medium that has emerged in the past two decades. With rumors of leaked tapes used to bolster popularity, one is never certain how complicit the violation is with each subject. Hinant combines the dialogue with a monochrome screen of pink, blue, or black, which slowly fades to white over the course of the tapes, each approximately one hour in length.

Hinant's *Upskirt* series from 2016 also initially resemble black monochromes arranged into a grid-like display; upon further viewing, a faint photographic image emerges. Hinant, whose practice often examines the representation of young women in the mass media, appropriates images of celebrities exiting the ubiquitous black car or limousine—a staple of the celebrity circuit. The found photograph is typical of a millennial genre termed 'upskirt,' where starlets or reality television personalities 'mistakenly' flash their undergarments or their genitals. Like the sex tapes, whether these are really unintentional is beside the point; now an industry, there are websites and fan forums devoted to these lucrative images. Hinant appropriates the original image and renders it upside down, a play on the term 'upskirt', then almost completely obliterates it through a digital process of obfuscation. Typical of her practice, this edition combines conceptual strategies, popular culture, and gender politics.

Hinant has also created a series of *Makeup Paintings* from 2011 that interrogate the legacy of the monochrome. At first glance these look unremarkable, like flesh colored monochromatic painting. Upon closer inspection the viewer sees tonal variations and fluctuations in the opacity of the pigment. The artist creates these works by a daily ritual of blotting her made up face, which is combined with dirt and pollution by the end of each day, against paper hanging on the wall of her studio. This daily act—one might think of it as a disruption of the process of masquerade that many have associated with the female gender—while formally resulting in a Minimal aesthetic, also takes its cues from earlier conceptual practice. First generation conceptual artists as diverse as On Kawara, Eleanor Antin, and Lynn Hershman Leeson used daily rituals to create works of art. Hinant's *Makeup Paintings* are created with a similar ritual practice, which includes the artist's signature set of rules and constraints. While the twentieth-century works rely on strict formal and procedural documentation, Hinant also uses the notion of chance and performance. Seen in close proximity, the works reveal their intimate process and embrace of controlled experimentation.

Sarah Meyohas presents large-scale photographs from her *Speculations* series in which constructed props and a mirror in the artist's studio suggest infinite space defined through cubic forms. Following from earlier bodies of work, such as *BITCHCOIN* 2015 (ongoing) and *Stock Performance* 2015/2016, these pieces challenge rules of aesthetics and market value alongside the artist's role within such spheres. This body of work calls to mind earlier artists such as Hans Haacke and Seth Siegelaub, in particular the latter's contract, which stipulated resale and loaning rights in perpetuity and allowed the artist to retain more

Shulamit Nazarian

Los Angeles

control over the work post-sale. Like Haacke, who has actually upheld the contract in his practice, Meyohas has implicated and intervened in the relationship between the artist and the market.

In *Speculation*, 2015 she presents a large-scale photograph whose scale has a visceral impact on the viewer. Using a cubic shape as its formal anchor, a mirror flanked by blue and yellow flowers reflects into a pink infinity. Meyohas chose the cube for its quality as a pure form: it is one of the most basic forms in existence and one of the five platonic solids. A central trope of Minimal Art, the cube was evinced in the work of Larry Bell, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Hans Haacke, and Eva Hesse. In this series, she disrupts the form through the use of various props and colors, here with the insertion of the delicate flowers and colors, and in other images from the series through smoke or her own body. Meyohas adopts a gendered subjectivity through the hallucinogenic pink palette and flowers, both formal tropes associated with the female experience.

Canvas Speculation, 2015 depicts a rolled canvas that is positioned into an arch-like, roughly cubic shape and then repeated into infinity in the photograph. Canvas here may be representative of the longstanding tradition of painting, which the artist literally rolls up and appropriates into a lens-based work. The canvas, combined with the scale of the work, creates a sense that the photograph invites a viewer into the limbic space of the work. The implication of the viewer is typical of Minimal Art that demanded a physical rather than emotional reaction on the part of the viewer, who would often walk around or peer through a work. Here, Meyohas investigates the act of speculating—in terms of seeing as well as speculative market activity—through large-scale editioned photographs.

Virginia Overton's work often employs a similar viewing process. Through an abiding interest in reclaimed mass-market materials including lumber planks, doors, shelves, and industrial lighting, Overton wryly combines objects found in everyday life to create sculptures that investigate platonic forms such as circles and squares, reconfiguring them in arrangements that are at once familiar and strange. In *Escape Attempts*, Overton shows three works. *Untitled (Waterfall)*, 2016 is made of three found elements: a cubic, mass produced trunk that the artist found, covered with a decal of a kitschy landscape; a sound machine inside the trunk; and a Kleenex box, with another kitschy American landscape, placed on top. An ironic nod to Judd's cubes, Overton's is a metaphor for class aspiration. The landscape with waterfall is a cliché of the splendor and promise of the great American West, which is mirrored in the found Kleenex box. The insertion of the ambient noise sound machine is on one level a reflection of the waterfall imagery. This may also be read as a comment on Robert Morris's *Box With the Sound of Its Own Making*, 1961, where the artist recorded the sounds of constructing a simple wooden box and placed it inside the work. Where Morris demystified the romantic idea of an artist's studio process, Overton follows in his footsteps as she chooses not to hide the electrical cord for the sound machine, preferring instead to reveal the actual process of making the sculpture from everyday, accessible materials.

Two additional sculptures by Overton combine commonly found objects that the artist reassembles into simple, yet dynamic sculptures. In *Untitled (orb)*, 2016 a discarded countertop is repositioned on the wall, with an industrial light inserted into the center of one surface. Shown on the wall, Overton's sculpture glows a pinkish hue, a reflection of the cheap mass-produced countertop lit by the bulb. Everyday industrial materials take on a new presence, more akin to the light and space movement than the context in which these materials would normally be found. The work also formally plays on platonic forms: the light becoming a circle on top of the square of found countertop. *Untitled (landscape)*, 2012/2015, like *Untitled (orb)*, again combines basic materials—a slice of cedar (the artist transports via truck fallen trees from her family farm in Tennessee to her studio in New York) with a pine plank, while a fluorescent light fixture with blue gel tops the sculpture. Like its counterpart, *Untitled (landscape)* may be read in the legacy of Dan Flavin's use of industrial fluorescent lighting. With simple dexterity, materials that could be found at any hardware shop, combined with a sheath of a tree occurring in nature, create a constructed landscape—a depth evoked by the contrasting wood and the blue light simulating sky. Like Flavin's works, the use of light in Overton's sculptures extends their presence into the surrounding architecture of the gallery space.

Overton, like each artist in *Escape Attempts*, considers her complex relationship to Minimal Art and displays a decidedly new engagement with the simplicity of form. Far from the industrial, unemotional

Shulamit Nazarian

Los Angeles

sculpture associated with their mostly male precursors, *Escape Attempts*' artists embrace the subjective and revel in a self-consciously intimate approach to art making. These seven artists inject subjectivity into the work through various terms—personal history, imagery from popular culture, and female associated palettes—and subtly disrupt Minimal practice with the notion of gender, exemplifying the concept of *feminin/alism* and heralding a new era of art practice.