

ARCADIA EXHIBITIONS presents

## A STRONG IN-YOUR-FACE WORD WORKS FROM THE BRODSKY CENTER AT PAFA

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Spruance Gallery

### CURATORIAL STATEMENT

“A Strong In-Your-Face Word,” a title inspired by a 2008 essay by historian Martha Rampton, hints at the deeper sociopolitical and gender equity goals that the term feminism falls short of representing in the second decade of the 21st century.

This exhibition presents a selection of works on paper by twenty female artists who played pivotal roles in the 1970s feminist movement. It juxtaposes their contributions with eight new voices that reflect the evolving nature of the gender equality movement. The exhibition embraces the necessity of redefining feminism to address the historical limitations of the term, recognizing diverse identities and experiences across gender, race, and cultural backgrounds.

Over the past four decades, identities connected to the term feminism have experienced a shift, surpassing its historical association predominantly with the challenges faced by women to become a broader push for fairness among all genders. The notion of intersectionality, introduced in 1989 by scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, points to the concept of identity as relative and always in relation to larger contexts encompassing societal biases, economic inequities, and egregious lapses in civil rights. The rise of gender studies in the field of feminism in the 1990s has pointed to our understanding of gender as a construction and expanded its nature beyond the historical dichotomy of woman and man.

Narratives of gender, identity, culture, and historical perspectives in the works presented in this exhibition provide viewers with the opportunity to actively engage in a thoughtful examination of the nuances inherent in the fight for the now much wider notion of gender. The works bend old ideological frameworks, and in so doing, contribute to an ongoing process of redefinition of feminism to better represent the intersectionality of the movement today. While change is very much still in progress, a new term will eventually be coined, a strong in-your-face word that will better convey the nature of the open-ended landscape in which we live today and the support for it still to be won.

*The Femfolio* (2007), a portfolio realized by twenty women artists with roots in the feminist art revolution of the 1970s, serves as a tribute to the pioneers who facilitated the deepening of the impact of feminist ideologies on our society. Among the many critical themes developed by these second-wave feminists, this collection of works includes, for example, the memorialization of personal experiences of exclusion and practice of self-worth by **Faith Ringgold** and **Joan Snyder**, and the reconceptualization of the male gaze by **Sylvia Sleigh** and **Martha Wilson**.

Echoing the voices in *Femfolio* are the works of the late Chicana feminist artist **Yolanda López** and artist and historian **Nell Painter**. *Your Vote Has Power* (1997) by López proclaims that the old expression that “a woman’s work is never done” must be turned on its head and into a revolutionary impetus to work against oppression. Concurrently, in *You Say This Can’t Really Be America* (2017), Painter articulates her perspective engaging with a similar sentiment, reminding the viewer that the task of working against the grain remains unfinished, notwithstanding the semblance of comfort derived from seemingly improved political and social circumstances.

Among artists of newer generations, the portfolio *The Nature of the Beast* (2019) by **Sharon Hayes** transcribes an undated vocal exchange between feminist and gay rights activist Bella Abzug (1920–1998) – a prominent lawyer and politician during the presidencies of Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter – and an unidentified vocal instructor. The artist zeros in on Abzug’s sentiments of frustration and anger but also introduces an element of ambiguity by disembodiment the voices, prompting viewers to question the identity of the speakers and project a multiplicity of possible dynamics. In tandem stands *Forehead Kiss* (2019), a lithograph paired with a sound component recorded by artist **Jonathan Lyndon Chase** and their husband William Chase. This time-based media element diverges from conventional speakers and references assumed by the feminist discourse, introducing a metallic quality that expands the spectrum of voices engaged in the contemporary debate on gender equality.

Following these works, **Chitra Ganesh’s** portfolio *Delicate Line: (Corpse She Was Holding)* (2009–2010) employs delicate marks and grotesque depictions of disembodiment, symbolizing the fragmentation of feminist narratives into novel dialogues. Central to her imagery are reimagined bodies, serving as the place for boundless and empowering transformations. This approach can also be seen as serving to broaden the comprehension of feminism in modern discourse, transcending the traditional focus and encompassing a more expansive range of perspectives to include the artist’s own as a queer person.

The editions in this exhibition collectively narrate the trajectory of the feminist movement, spanning from the trailblazing women of the 1970s to the contemporary redefinition that positions feminism as an encompassing advocacy for gender equality. These works demand audiences to question their preconceptions of feminism, identity, and gender, and showcase the immense influence that visual artists have had in redrawing the practice of equality in our worlds.

“A Strong In-Your-Face Word: Works from the Brodsky Center at PAFA” features works by artists Emma Amos, Eleanor Antin, Nancy Azara, Zoë Charlton, Jonathan Lyndon Chase, Liz Collins, Betsy Damon, Mary Beth Edelson, Lauren Ewing, Chitra Ganesh, Sharon Hayes, Harmony Hammond, Joyce Kozloff, Yolanda López, Diane Neumaier, Farah Ossouli, Nell Painter, Faith Ringgold, Miriam Schapiro, Carolee Schneemann, Joan Semmel, Sylvia Sleigh, Joan Snyder, Nancy Spero, May Stevens, Athena Tacha, June Wayne, and Martha Wilson.

Grace Harmer, Curator of the Exhibition