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Collecting

Where are all the women artists?

Rachel Spence

Collector Valeria Napoleone talks about how she is tackling female under-representation in galleries and museums



“Why isn’t Agnes Martin recognised as being as radical as Jackson Pollock? Why not? I don’t understand it.” Valeria Napoleone looks as stern as her innately sunny personality would ever allow. “And who decides what is radical, anyway? And that radicality is the way to go?” she demands, raising her elegant eyebrows at me.

If anyone is qualified to talk about the challenges faced by contemporary female artists, it is this Italian-born collector. Over the past 20 years, she has built a collection of works entirely by women. As we chat in her west London sitting room, our companions include a fabric mannequin dressed in a patterned bra by Britain’s Julie Verhoeven and a wall drawing which reads “100% Stupid” by Dutch artist Lily van der Stokker.

Yet Napoleone is far more than a collector. With a masters degree in art gallery administration from the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York, she is on the board of organisations including New York's Institute of Fine Arts and the UK's Contemporary Art Society (CAS). Her long-term commitment to avant-garde south London space Studio Voltaire, which has helped kick-start the careers of artists including Marvin Gaye Chetwynd, sees her now heading its development committee.

This year, Napoleone is launching her most ambitious initiative yet. Entitled Valeria Napoleone XX, in a nod to the female chromosome, she describes it as an “umbrella platform for initiatives that work towards increasing the representation of female artists in major public museums”.

It kicks off with two projects. One is a collaboration with the CAS. Founded in 1910 with the ambition of encouraging an appreciation of contemporary art in Britain, the CAS regularly donates work to museums across the country. Now Napoleone, who is a trustee, has agreed to

donate “a significant work” by a living female artist to a different UK museum each year. The second project is in association with the SculptureCenter in New York. This not-for-profit exhibition space, which was founded by a group of artists in 1928, focuses on spotlighting experimental work by emerging talent. Napoleone's contribution will be to finance every 12 to 18 months the production of a “major work” by a female artist already selected for a show.

But, in 2015, is it really necessary to practise such positive discrimination? When Tate has devoted its three major spring shows to Sonia Delaunay, Agnes Martin and Barbara Hepworth, do women artists really still get a raw deal?



Valeria Napoleone at her home in west London

“There are still a lot of discrepancies,” Napoleone says. “There is still resistance to the work of women and there is still scepticism about whether or not women can carry out their job [as artists] professionally.” The most recent crop of statistics proves her indisputably right. In 2013 a study by the UK’s Fawcett Society revealed that only 31 per cent of artists represented by 134 commercial galleries in London were women. Tate’s spring roll-call notwithstanding, since 2007 just one in four of its shows has been devoted to women. According to statistics from the feminist art collective Guerrilla Girls, in 2012 just 4 per cent of works on display at the Metropolitan Museum were by women.

Inevitably, the lack of visibility affects the market. At auction, the top-selling work by a woman is a \$44.4m painting by Georgia O’Keeffe while its man-made counterpart is a Francis Bacon triptych at \$142.4m. In 2014 Artnet.com counted just five women in the top 100 living artists based on sales from 2011 to 2014. The reasons behind this are manifold. “It’s the whole system, there are still too many gaps,” says Napoleone, referring to the small number of women holding positions of institutional power in the art world. A 2014 report, *The Gender Gap in Art Museum Directorships*, by the Association of Art Museum Directors found that, though women hold 42.6 per cent of US art museum directorships, they are predominantly at the smaller institutions. Furthermore they earn, on average, 79 cents for every dollar earned by their male counterparts.

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There is a less tangible yet arguably more serious problem. Art by women still struggles to achieve the critical recognition awarded to work by men. As O’Keeffe put it: “The men liked to put me down as the best woman painter. I think I’m one of the best painters.”



Anthea Hamilton's 'Aquarius'

“Everything is so relative,” observes Napoleone. “We are brain-trained to look at things in a specific way.” What, I muse, would critics have made of Donald Judd’s minimalist sculptures, which often resemble shelving units, if he had been a woman? Napoleone laughs bleakly: “Exactly. They would have been seen as domestic!”

It’s unlikely anyone will use that adjective for the first work born from Valeria Napoleone XX.

The work by Anthea Hamilton, who is renowned for theatrical works that challenge notions of culture and sexuality, will be the centrepiece of a show of the British artist’s work at New York’s SculptureCenter from September. “I really admire her work and her as a person,” says Napoleone, adding that “[it was] really courageous” of SculptureCenter to give Hamilton, who is not attached to a gallery and is not American, such a prominent September spot.

It also proved serendipitous that Hamilton was fascinated by the work of Italian designer-artist Gaetano Pesce. A close friend of Napoleone’s for more than 20 years — Pesce’s whimsical vases dot her living room — she introduced him to his young admirer. Now Hamilton’s plan is to realise a 1975 design by Pesce that was never made. Described by Napoleone as a “giant arse on two legs”, the outsize rear — which will act as a doorway under which spectators can pass — appeals to Napoleone’s own irreverent temperament.

Launching the CAS project will be a lengthier affair. “We hope to start visiting regional museums from next April,” says Napoleone. She and her team will choose the museum best placed to receive a work by an emerging, female artist. “We will be looking at the needs of the local community. What do they like? What do they lack? There are many variables.”

Is there a danger, given Napoleone's own collecting activities, of a conflict of interests when it comes to choosing the artist? "Look, Anthea Hamilton is not in my collection," she replies firmly. "There are many artists I support who are not in my collection. It's not just my voice. There's Caroline Douglas, CAS director, and the curators of the museum," she says. In New York, meanwhile, she will be choosing to support an artist who is part of the centre's pre-planned programme. "So there's no potential for imposing anything."



Georgia O'Keeffe's
'Jimson Weed/White Flower No
1', which sold for \$44.4m last
year

She also points out that "there are potential conflicts of interests everywhere in the art world. All the big institutions, such as Tate and MoMA, have acquisitions committees [where patrons, who are frequently collectors, have a say in the works their funds acquire] and collectors on their boards."

Napoleone, with her gentle manner, is far from the archetypal image of a gender warrior. When I ask how she negotiates the line between femininity and feminism, the devoted mother-of-three laughs: "I am not an angry person. I am happy in my life. This project is not about being against something. It is about being for something. Essentially, I want to build something celebratory."

Photographs: Anthea Hamilton; Victoria Birkinshaw