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 Have You Ever Really Looked At The Sun? III

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NEW YORK 01.12.06



Left: *New York Times* critic Roberta Smith with artists Collier Schorr, Joan Snyder, Tamy Ben-Tor, and Barbara Kruger. Right: Joan Snyder. (All photos: Erin Feinberg)

Is Feminism undead like vampires? Mythical like Bigfoot? Or more like porn: You know it when you see it? Moderated by *New York Times* art critic Roberta Smith for the paper's fifth annual "Arts and Leisure Weekend" this past Saturday, artists Joan Snyder, Barbara Kruger, Collier Schorr, and Tamy Ben-Tor offered a bouquet of symptoms triggered by the f-word: "Feminisms" plural, Smith clarified (at Kruger's suggestion).

"Did you have to be a Jew to be on the panel?" wondered my gentile, veteran artist pal as we grabbed our coats afterward. "What was with all the Holocaust references?" "It's a hotline to gravitas," I speculated. But I'd wondered, too. Schorr had hitherto evaded my Jewdar, but my shiksa friend was right. The women artists chosen by Smith were in fact all Chosen. I then wondered why Smith, who surely must have noticed, neglected to mention this in a context where identity issues were being served on a platter to *Times* culture vultures. Far from dull—as one might fear of anything with "isms" in the title—this panel was disturbing in so many ways.

Senior panelist Snyder, a self-described "maximalist" abstract painter, recalled the bad old days when "feminism was a dirty word. I would write on a painting and people would say, 'She's a *feminist!*' Julian Schnabel would write on a painting and people would say, 'Oh, he's so *sensitive*. He's a hero!'" Poor Schnabel. He emerged as the afternoon's shorthand for overvalued, puffed-up masculinity. "I'm really excited to be a girl!" Schorr recalled enthusing when co-panelist Barbara Kruger lectured at SVA, where she studied in the '80s. Today she was dressed like a superannuated schoolboy with a butch coif, natty blazer, and riding boots. Back then, the impressionable younger Schorr noticed that Schnabel's catalogue was way bigger and fancier than Snyder's. But she pored over the female painter's again and again: "You gain a lot when you do something big and padded," the creator of a photo entitled *The Purloined Dick* paid homage to the elder artist seated beside her. "But sometimes people want to look at the smaller thing."

"Schmoozebeasts!" scribbled my neighbor into her pad.

Smith noted that women compose more than half the humanity "vomited out of art schools" every year but only twelve percent of the collection at MoMA. What's up with that? The panel didn't quite solve that mystery, but did expose oodles of problems with the word in its title. The two younger panelists were eager to distance themselves from the f-word—lumping "feminism" with "victimism." "All women are different, and all Holocaust victims are different," declared the Sabra Ben-Tor, equating "the weak" that need feminism (unlike her) with Holocaust survivors. "I don't want to be in the roundup of lady artists, or gay artists, etc.," agreed Schorr, who emerged amidst the identity politics of the early '90s when gender-bending was welcomed aboard the multicultural rainbow. "Put me in a show of landscape artists," suggested the photographer, whose series "Jens F." portrays a German schoolboy posed as Helga, the housewife that painter Andrew Wyeth studied in secret for two decades.

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Left: Tamy Ben-Tor. Right: Barbara Kruger.

Ben-Tor bravely came out against ideology. “This situation is for me awkward,” confessed the performance artist, “because I don’t believe in it [feminism] at all. My art is about my personal interests. [Feminism is a] struggle of human beings, not just women. The Holocaust is not just a struggle for Jews. Ideology hides the truth. Once you have ideology, people have interests.” If people didn’t have interests, there’d be no ideology—maybe even no “isms” at all! Snyder got concrete right on the anti-ideologue’s ass: “Don’t you think most of the problems in the world now are caused by men?” asked the abstract painter to hearty applause. “That’s a very superficial version of reality,” retorted the grad student at Columbia. The Upper East Side-looking old bat next to me with a Henri Bendel bag perked up: “Identifying with the aggressor!” she hissed. Oy.

“It was so healing when I was in Germany to see the Holocaust through the point of view of the German—not just the victim,” Schorr added, supporting the not-weak Ben-Tor, who she hadn’t yet flattered. May I say, Feh-minism? Agreed, we don’t want to be victim-identified here, but must we go the extra mile and embrace our inner Nazi? “The thread that motors this discussion is power,” observed Kruger, sounding just like a Barbara Kruger piece. “How is power threaded through our culture?” Identifying with the victim and identifying with power are two sides of the same coin. “I think it would be great if women didn’t have to be extraordinary to be considered mediocre (like one of the boys),” she said to cheers from the audience, mostly women, mostly of a certain age.

“Invisibility is not a pretty picture,” Kruger summed it up eloquently, despite jet lag. She was just back from opening a retrospective in Australia. Earlier, Snyder quoted her feminist born-and-bred daughter, Molly Snyder-Fink, who asked: “Which women are able to tell their stories and which women are not? And why?” The panelists offered four distinct answers. They weren’t particularly pretty—but this isn’t a beauty contest, right?

— Rhonda Lieberman

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