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The female unique: 'Art Monsters' and 'The Other Side'

By Stephanie Bishop

Detail of Maria Lassnig, *Zwei Arten zu sein (Doppelselbstporträt), Two Ways of Being (Double Self-Portrait)*, 2000. Oil on canvas, 100 x 125 cm. Archive of the Maria Lassnig Foundation, CC BY-SA 4.0 via Wikimedia Commons

New books on women's art from Lauren Elkin and Jennifer Higgie explore the expression of monstrosity and the marginalisation of spiritual experience

In 1931 in London, Virginia Woolf gave a speech to the National Society for Women's Service. Its title was "Professions for Women", and it soon formed the basis for her essay of the same name. Woolf had started to think more directly about gender and power, and was considering what the future for women might look like. In her own writing life she had overcome significant hurdles, but perhaps the most insidious reproaches came from within: that infamous and internalised Angel in the House, who represents ideal femininity and sows only criticism and doubt. The angel insists that the woman writer proceed with caution and work to satisfy the male reader, the male critic, the male editor: "whatever you say let it be pleasing to men … be sympathetic; be tender; flatter". Woolf took this creature by the throat and did her "best to kill her". But the sentiment of the angel persists; she lives on undercover, masquerading as reason and pestering the novelist's imaginative reach: "My dear, you were going altogether too far. Men would be shocked." If Woolf could only destroy the angel she might overcome conventions in order to tell the truth "about women's bodies" and "their passions". "The future of fiction," she wrote (and here one might insert any number of terms – art, democracy, education et cetera – and note how prescient Woolf was in saying this), "depends very much upon what extent men can be educated to stand free speech in women." "I will wait", she wrote, "until men have become so civilised that they are not shocked when a woman speaks the truth about her body."

Taking up this baton, Lauren Elkin blazes onto the scene with *Art Monsters: Unruly Bodies in Feminist Art*, a triumphant exploration of monstrosity as a feminist aesthetic. Pairing Woolf's Angel in the House with a viral phrase from Jenny Offill's 2014 novel, *Dept. of Speculation* – "My plan was to never get married. I was going to be an art monster instead" – Elkin champions the creative power of "female monstrosity". The art monster is what is left when the Angel in the House has been killed off. But "when you have been socialised as a woman" the real challenge is how "to allow yourself to be monstrous".

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Delivering on Woolf's hope, the art monster is the woman artist who can at last tell the truth about the experience of the body. Elkin is referring here to artists across different mediums – writers, filmmakers, poets, musicians, painters – although she focuses her attention primarily on the visual arts, moving forwards from the radical feminist art of the 1970s. To date, she argues, the majority of the "discourse around the art monster … has focused on female artists' lives". Elkin seeks to redirect this discussion, attending to what it was these women were doing in their work in the first place that meant "they ran the risk of being called a monster". Biographical experience is secondary to the tactile and visceral power of their art: can we, she wagers, treat "art monster" as a verb, thinking instead about what the work *does*? "Western culture," Elkin argues, "has exhausted itself inventing female monsters", who are invariably relegated to the borders. But she isn't interested in appropriating this patriarchal predicament, its imagery or methods. Rather, she says a key challenge for radical feminist art is "how to depict the female body without either catering to or rejecting the male gaze". Working against received ideas, such art seeks to make "visible what we have been told to cover up, to correct, to make smaller, mainstream". Monstrosity invites an alternative way of attending to a work, not hermeneutically but responding to the tactile, the textural, the emotive. A process attuned to bodily histories and traces, and to our own bodily response – gradients of pleasure, comfort and disgust – allowing us to recognise "the work itself *as* speech". The art monster is she who inhabits and transgresses bodily boundaries, political boundaries and logical boundaries. She seeks to disrupt, and creates art "whose properties include decay, instability, bodily excess" and "anything that is too female".

Elkin is known for her edgy blends of memoir and critique, such as her widely acclaimed *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice and London* (2016) and *No. 91/92: Notes on a Parisian Commute* (2021). *Art Monsters* continues this concern, playing with the form of criticism in a revitalising way, working in fragments and across genres. It moves between essay, memoir and more traditional modes of historical analysis, so as to read "across borders of nation and temporality". While 1970s radical feminist art is a strong touchstone, the book roams widely through the late 20th and early 21st centuries, moving from experimental artist Carolee Schneemann, sculptor Eva Hesse and conceptual artist Sutapa Biswas, with forays into the work of writers Kathy Acker, Susan Sontag and Audre Lorde, among others. The book is at its strongest when responding to works at a gut level, attending to "what monstrous art does at its best, goes closer, gets touchy, tacky, ucky", ruining the "hierarchy between the viewer and the viewed".

Elkin traces this ethos through a wide range of practices, such as that of the Austrian artist Maria Lassnig, whose "body awareness paintings" convey "what it felt like to be a body". For Lassnig, these were less artworks than "register work[s]", in which she pursued a form of radical self-portraiture whereby the method was to lie, lean or sit on the canvas, close her eyes and paint the parts of the body that she could feel. This approach to bodily centric art is explored more literally in the work of the late 20th century British artist Helen Chadwick, who used meat and other decaying matter as the subject of her work in order to "test the boundaries of disgust, to find out where they bordered on or overlapped with pleasure". The monstrous dimension is there again in a very different kind of work, when Elkin responds to Lynda Benglis's 1974 photo ad in *Artforum* that depicted Benglis naked other than for a pair of white sunglasses, holding a giant dildo up to her crotch. It is a work, Elkin argues, that seeks to "wrong-foot people's expectations about the female body, what it should look like, what attributes it should have. It gives female desire the characteristics that have been attributed to male desire, aggressive, phallic. It turns machismo into a myth, as well as feminine passivity."

The American artist Judith Scott's tactile and evocative woven sculptures – "cocoon like" bundles of rope, string, yarn and fabric – warrant special attention. They invite touch and trouble the boundary between art and craft. This is a distinction that has long been problematic for women's art, in which skilled handiwork is reduced by its association with domesticity and sentiment. The haptic response that Scott's work invites is instinctual and atavistic, running counter to the ways we have been encultured to respond to beauty: "We are used to art being untouchable." The very presence of emotive, corporeal or tactile excess that "threatens the careful exoskeleton of cool" is the means through which a woman's work is readily discredited as being too touchy-feely. An "aesthetics of touch", however, of the kind that infuses Scott's work, "changes our sense of what it means to know" – inviting us to shift away from "understanding" a work of art to experiencing it in an "embodied" sense.

Unconventional ways of knowing are also at the heart of Jennifer Higgie's *The Other Side: A Journey into Women, Art and the Spirit World*, in which she offers a majestic account of the ways in which women's art has developed in response to spiritual experience. Such work, Higgie contends, has also been marginalised and overlooked – deemed uncritical, too bodily, too intuitive, the artists too domestic, untrained and irrational. If the monstrous speaks to and on behalf of artworks that unsettle and disturb the boundaries, Higgie's women fit the bill.

"Across millennia," Higgie argues, artists have used "forms of enchantment as a springboard" for their practice. But the playing field was never even: "When a male artist explored spirituality it didn't necessarily harm his career, but when a woman followed the same path, she was dismissed as, at best, eccentric, at worst a maverick." While male artists have long been celebrated for these radical forays into the otherworldly (think Kandinsky, Klimt, Rothko, to name only a few), women's art that has explored similar experiences has been routinely sidelined and omitted from the Western art-historical canon. This argument marks a development of Higgie's longstanding concern with the ways in which women artists have been overlooked or excluded, a preoccupation powerfully unpacked in her previous book *The Mirror and the Palette*. The woman artist, she writes there, is:

> in competition with history, which has always been dismissive of her power. Until very recently, museums wouldn't buy her work, artist historians wouldn't acknowledge her, commercial galleries would only rarely represent her. She's a miracle, a marvel, a mystic, a seductress, a changeling, a visionary, and man-hater, a freak; she's never considered normal.

The Other Side offers a further corrective, attending to artists whose work was wrongly overlooked or belittled as a result of its spiritual orientation. Importantly, these specific case studies are examined in light of a larger counter-narrative. The story of modern art, Higgie argues, has leant hard on the idea that "innovation was the preserve of powerful men" and that the development of modernist abstraction was a masculine movement assumed to be "cool, sleek, rational: an art movement that eschewed the superstitions of the past". Such a narrative "misrepresents a historical moment" and fosters the exclusionary ethos that saw so many women left out of the canon. Higgie traces a compelling route through an alternative history that attends to the astonishing work of female artists whose practice was deeply connected to spiritualism and the occult, and which was often far ahead of its time, anticipating practices and modes of modernist abstraction.

The historical trajectory of the book is interleaved with sections of memoir that cast back to Higgie's early life in Australia as an art student, and her feelings of restlessness: "I was looking for something but what it was I couldn't say." Finding herself in London in the mid 1990s on a fellowship, she discovered that the "big brash" art of the Young British Artists wasn't her thing, as "it was like being shouted at in a pub". Dejected and unsure, Higgie stumbled across an exhibition of Victorian fairy paintings and a new path of inquiry began to unfold. The book runs on parallel tracks, following Higgie's own interests in spiritualism and female creativity while tracing art styles from the mid 19th century to the contemporary moment. Across both strands, Higgie pushes back against the historical narrative that values male creativity, and the male artists who insist on the status of their work "by articles and manifestos". In welcome contrast, *The Other Side* considers creativity as a form of fundamental openness "to not knowing", and a radical way of being in the world: "Why do we need to rationalise an act, that, in the main, depends on the suspension of reason to evolve?"

The Other Side covers an impressive scope of artists both in terms of historical period and medium. Higgie delves into the work of Annie Besant, Suzanne Duchamp, Julia Margaret Cameron, Ithell Colquhoun, Janet Sobel, Sheila Hicks and Anni Albers, among many others. What is also significant here is the range of spiritual practices that these women drew on in the process of making their art – from seances and mediumship, to communication with spirit guides, the use of dream and tarot, free association, tantric Buddhism, colour vibrations, trance states and energy transference. The influence of spiritualism and theosophy runs strong throughout, with spiritualism in particular offering a place of refuge where women's creativity and suffrage was supported. A key early example of this is found in the work of the 19th century British artist Georgiana Houghton, who practised automatic painting under the influence of her spirit guides. Houghton used colours to represent particular states, and her gouache paintings depict networks and layers of fine lines and semi-transparent washes of luminous tones, as if revealing the spirit realm to be a mass swirling fibrous tissues, like densely woven ectoplasm. It's as if, Higgie writes, "her dreams are ensnared by a spider web: primary colours swell and dance beneath a delicate net of white translucent lines". Largely overlooked in her own lifetime, Houghton's images, Higgie argues "anticipate some of the radical art movements that were to shine so brightly in the 20th century".

Swedish artist and mystic Hilma af Klint is another stand-out figure. "For af Klint", Higgie writes, "the very air throbbed with unseen energies. The question was, how to interpret them? How to give them shape?" The artistic language that af Klint arrived at was far ahead of its time, as she worked to transform "messages from the other side" into pictures. She created large and tender watercolour paintings of biomorphic and geometric abstractions, simultaneously bold and delicate. Her work depicted "kaleidoscopic land-and-sea-and-cloudscapes, heads enveloped in rays of light or spewing fire; bodies entwined amidst a pulsating expanse; abstract colour experiments, nature studies, spectral beings". In her own lifetime, her work was rarely seen, and only recently has it begun to find a mainstream audience and receive the acclaim it deserves. The influence of Houghton, af Klint and others can be felt deep into our own era.

The reach of Higgie's book is endlessly surprising and ambitious. In later sections she explores artists whose work developed from a therapeutic framework, such as Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn and Emma Kunz, while charting a similarly compelling line to Elkin in terms of the debate between art and craft, the nuanced work of botanical art and textiles, and the relationship between touch and embodiment. Throughout *The Other Side*, Higgie's own journey and the art she encounters are elegantly interwoven: the questions she asks of her life are answered in some way by the artworks. In this and Elkin's book, the art is granted the power to speak back, with the viewer de-armoured and open to the embodied affect of the work. The resulting dialogue is a rich and moving account of creativity, one that invites us to engage with alternative modes of being. At a time when there is a "widespread hunger for new ways of inhabiting the planet", Higgie's corrective history not only encourages a different kind of attunement to the world and our place in it, but also brings long-overdue recognition to the women who were bold enough to step out of the fray and give shape and colour to new ways of seeing.

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John Safran
An observation from Father Bob Maguire – and an antisemitic man in need of charity – taught the author a valuable life lesson

Chai standards
Tom Hawking
Pining for an authentic Indian street-corner chai leads the author to a gastronomic carpark in Geelong

A firelight stick on the hill
Patrick Dodson
As momentum builds to this year's referendum, the man long regarded as the 'Father of Reconciliation' reflects on a life fighting for a better Australia

The voice and our inauthentic heart
Richard Flanagan
Racism, the Murdoch media and what success or defeat for the voice to parliament means for the stories we tell

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Emotional virtue: 'Pierre Bonnard: Designed by India Mahdavi' and 'Rembrandt: True to Life'
Miriam Cosic
Concurrent exhibitions at the NGV survey the intense realism of Rembrandt and the emotional power of colour harnessed by Pierre Bonnard

Gilded feet have got no rhythm: 'Carmen'
Judith Lucy
Paul Mescal and Melissa Barrera's lack of chemistry exemplifies Benjamin Millepied's unrestrained Mexico–US border rework of the classic story

Cult viewing: 'The Clearing'
Harry Windsor
Elise McCredie's barely disguised account of Melbourne cult The Family seeks to explore how power is exploited differently by a female leader

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Peter Craven
The ever-likeable New Zealander delivers that rarest of things, a memoir by an actor without vanity

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Tony Birch
A new novel from the acclaimed Indigenous writer occasions a survey of her work, immersed in Country and the ongoing experience of colonisation

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Helen Elliott
The Australian author of 'The Age of Fibs' shares with Elena Ferrante and Annie Ernaux the desire to write truthfully of ordinary women's lives

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Megan Davis
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Zacharias Szumer
Caps on campaign spending and political donations may finally be addressed, following a new report

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Tara Kenny
Plus, Sarah Snook shines in 'Run Rabbit Run', the second season of so-bad-it's-almost-good 'And Just Like That', and 'I'm a Virgo' delivers social commentary with absurd humour

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