

Birgit Jürgenssen

Neil, 1979 © Estate of Birgit Jürgenssen / Courtesy of Galerie Hubert Winter, Vienna / SAMMLUNG VERBUND, Vienna

# THE POWER OF THE WEAKER SEX

**EN |** The fifth edition of the **SUMMER OF PHOTOGRAPHY**, which is being staged by no fewer than 30 partners, focuses on women and on gender issues. Among the many exhibitions to be seen in Brussels, "**WOMAN. THE FEMINIST AVANT-GARDE OF THE 1970S**", the event's key exhibition at Bozar, turns the spotlight on 29 female artists – including Cindy Sherman, Francesca Woodman, and Birgit Jürgenssen – who, on both sides of the Atlantic, completely changed the ways in which women are depicted. **ESTELLE SPOTO**

**I**n 1971, the US art historian Linda Nochlin caused a stir with an article entitled "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" In the course of the Seventies, buoyed by the May '68 wave and the revival of feminist demands, a whole generation of female artists took to photography, video, and performance – territory over which men had not yet established hegemonic domination – in order to present their own images of womanhood. The "WOMAN. The Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s" exhibition brings together more than 400 disconcerting, amusing, crude, poetic, and ironic works that, almost 40 years later, have lost none of their power and relevance. "Some of these works are still provocative today," explains Gabriele Schor, the exhibition's curator, who is the director of

## SUMMER OF PHOTOGRAPHY

the Sammlung Verbund, a Vienna-based collection from which all the works on show have come. "Before Brussels, we presented the exhibition in Rome, at the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, but there were some things we couldn't show. One of the feminist slogans of the time was 'The personal is political'. From that perspective, and often using their own bodies, these female artists tackled, for the first time, subjects such as pregnancy, maternity, sexuality, the canons of beauty, rape, etc."

**What is the main difference between the image of women as presented by men and the image of women as presented by women themselves?**

**GABRIELE SCHOR:** Here, it is the women themselves who decide to show their bodies. You can feel that they have a different sexuality, a different way of expressing themselves. There is also the fact that they are not too concerned about beauty - or that they have a different idea of beauty. Beauty is not the most important thing for them.

**A large part of the exhibition is devoted to Cindy Sherman, who is undoubtedly the best-known of all these artists - but with works from early in her career.**

**SCHOR:** The works in question are not very well-known; they date from when she was a student at the State University College in Buffalo, before the famous series of "Untitled Film Stills". In her self-portraits, she already adopted several identities, using make-up and dressing up. One of the artists who influenced her was Hannah Wilke, by whom we present a series in which she adopts poses characteristic of Mary Magdalene and Jesus in Christian iconography, gradually shifting from one to the other.

**You are also showing quite a few works by another American, Francesca Woodman.**

**SCHOR:** She was an artist who produced photographs over nine years, from the age of 13 to the age of 22, when she committed suicide. Lots of people say that you can foresee her suicide from her photographs. But I think the most important thing is to look at her work, not taking the



Francesca Woodman

© George and Betty Woodman, New York / SAMMLUNG VERBUND, Vienna

end as your starting point, but starting at the beginning and seeing how she staged her photographs in abandoned factories, using objects and her own body. In her work, space is very important.

**Did this female avant-garde movement develop mainly in the United States?**

**SCHOR:** The movement began in New York and Los Angeles, but exhibitions of feminist art took place in almost all the big cities of Europe. In Austria, there was Birgit Jürgenssen, who speaks of metamorphoses and of the female body with irony and a certain kind of surrealism, as

well as Renate Bertlmann, Valie Export, and others. There was Ketty La Rocca in Italy, Annegret Soltau in Germany... For the most part, those artists didn't know each other, but they show a very similar approach. Most of them are not very well-known internationally, but they did work that was very important at that time and some of them are still working today. In terms of the history of art, it's good that they are beginning to be discovered. **A**

**WOMAN: The Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s** 18/6 > 31/8, Bozar

**NL I** De vijfde editie van de Zomer van de Fotografie zoomt in op genderkwesties. De hoofdtentoonstelling bij Bozar, *WOMAN. The feminist avant-garde of the 1970s*, stelt scherp op het werk van 29 vrouwelijke kunstenaars (Cindy Sherman, Francesca Woodman...) die de beeldvorming van de vrouw ingrijpend hebben gewijzigd.

**FR I** La cinquième édition de l'Été de la Photographie se focalise sur la femme et la question des genres. Parmi les multiples expositions proposées, *WOMAN. The Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s* met en avant 29 artistes féminines - dont Cindy Sherman et Francesca Woodman - qui ont bouleversé la représentation de la femme.



**SUMMER OF PHOTOGRAPHY** • 18/6 > 31/8, VERSCHILLENDE LOCATIES/DIVERS LIEUX/  
VARIOUS LOCATIONS, Info Point: Bozar, rue Ravensteinstraat 23, Brussel/Bruxelles, 02-507.82.00,  
www.summerofphotography.be

## BEYOND THE MALE GAZE



**RÓBERT SZABÓ BENKE: BACHELORETTES**  
> 31/8, Balassi Institute

38 women. What have they got in common? They are all aged over 25; they are not married; they haven't had children yet; and each has been immortalised by the Hungarian photographer Róbert Szabó Benke in the same white wedding dress, wearing the same shoes and the same lily in her hair. The difference? Each has chosen, in her own home, the background for the portrait and the pose, thereby reflecting her own personality. The women are all the same, but they are all different.



**ASH BOWLAND: FEMALE GAZING**  
19/6 > 28/8, InBetween

What happens when it is the woman who looks at the man and no longer the man who looks at the woman? A young photographer (who sees herself as a "manufacturer of images and sculptures, who happens to use photography") who studied at the Sint-Lukas Hogeschool in Brussels, Ash Bowland pointed her lens at Bruno Roels, who is both a photographer and a journalist specialised in photography, thereby taking the opposite approach to what the cinema theorist Laura Mulvey calls "the male gaze".



**SEPT FEMMES EN RÉSIDENCE**  
25/6 > 28/9, Contretype

Contretype, "Centre d'Art contemporain pour la Photographie", based in the superb Hôtel Hannon town house, has been hosting artists in residence, both Belgian and foreign, since 1997; the artists are encouraged to create traces of their stay in Brussels. The results are presented, for the first time, in two exhibitions: the work of the 29 residents can be seen at the Centrale for Contemporary Art, while Contretype focuses on the seven women photographers hosted in the context of the programme.



**POWER & PLAY**  
> 13/7 & 4 > 24/8, De Markten

How do things stand today in relation to the question of gender and the rights of women in the former Eastern bloc. 25 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall? The "Power & Play" exhibition presents ten monographic projects devoted to artists (women, for the most part) from the countries of the East - including Katarzyna Kozyra from Poland, Anetta Mona Chisa from Romania, and Lucia Tkacova from Slovakia - who have tackled these subjects, sometimes in a provocative way.