The New York Times

ART REVIEW | 'A PARALLEL PRESENCE'

Women Determined Not Only to Make Art but Also to Have It Seen

By Karen Rosenberg

May 21, 2009

Decades before they had the right to vote and a foothold in the workplace, women were forging professional associations in the art world. One was the National Association of Women Artists, which began as a meeting of five friends in a Greenwich Village studio. This “carefully selected group of women painters,” as an official history described them, did much to dispel the prevailing image of creative women as hobbyists or dilettantes.

The group is now celebrating its 120th anniversary, with the show “A Parallel Presence: National Association of Women Artists, 1889-2009,” at the UBS Art Gallery in Midtown. The exhibition of artworks and ephemera highlights a small portion of the association’s 500-piece collection, now based at the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum on the Rutgers University campus.

The 56 works on view cover a lot of territory, from American Impressionism to contemporary video art. The first half of the show, which details the early history of the association, is the strongest. The stakes during this period were high: American art was coming into its own, and women didn’t want to be left behind.

The association, the oldest active American women’s art organization, was founded, under the name Woman’s Art Club, by five painters: Grace Fitz-Randolph, Edith Mitchell Prellwitz, Adele Frances Bedell, Anita C. Ashley and Elizabeth S. Cheever.

The organizers contended that if women were given access to professional training and a place to stage exhibitions, they could attain equal standing in the art world. Their mission statement argued that “serious consideration of the work of women could be won only when it could be shown in sufficient quantity to demonstrate that creative achievement need carry no sex distinction.”

Wary of being perceived as just another social group, the Woman’s Art Club established strict professional criteria. To gain admission artists had to be evaluated by a jury. (This didn’t stop New York newspapers from listing the group’s activities in the society pages.)

This emphasis on professionalism appealed to American ideals of meritocracy. It was also in line with general efforts in the 19th century to bring American art up to European standards. Talent, and patronage, were cultivated in salon-style exhibitions at the National Academy and other exclusive organizations.

From the beginning the group operated with a plucky, can-do spirit. Prestigious art schools, galleries and juried exhibitions excluded women? No problem; the club held its own art classes and exhibitions and gave out its own awards. (In time the National Academy provided space for the association's annual exhibitions.)

Cecilia Beaux's "Portrait of Alice Davidson" (1909), from the UBS Art Gallery show. John H. Surovek Gallery, Palm Beach, Fla.

These were, of course, socially prominent women. One early member, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, went on to found the Whitney Studio Club, a precursor to the Whitney Museum.

Scenes of upper-class women and girls at leisure, influenced by the Impressionists Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot, dominate the show's first few galleries. Cassatt and Morisot weren't members, but they took part in the group's exhibitions as esteemed guests.

Louise Cox's "Woman Holding Flowers" (1893), an autumnal interior scene of a redhead clutching yellow and orange dahlias, reminds you that even female artists as respected by their male peers as Cassatt and Morisot were limited in their choice of subject matter.

Cecilia Beaux's "Portrait of Alice Davidson" (1909), depicting a stylish girl walking a dog in Central Park, is urbane enough to justify Beaux's reputation as "the female Sargent." Still, it reflects a sheltered lifestyle.

There were exceptions. Abastenia St. Leger Eberle, a contemporary of the Ashcan School painters, lived and worked on the Lower East Side and became known for her sensitive depictions of children. Her small bronze statue of a roller-skating girl is a highlight here.

Although the association was founded by painters, sculpture became one of its strengths, given special attention in its exhibitions and singled out by visiting critics. The show alludes to this preference but doesn't explain it; perhaps women felt that they had more opportunities to stand

out in a medium that wasn't painting. In any case, there's a lot of it in "A Parallel Presence" academic bronzes by Gertrude Whitney and others, but also abstract wood constructions by Louise Nevelson and Dorothy Dehner and a 1970s soft sculpture by Faith Ringgold.

The association endured and even thrived during the Depression. Under the leadership of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the group sold its headquarters at a profit and leased space in the heart of the gallery district on West 57th Street. Female artists also benefited during those years from the many anonymous contests for Works Progress Administration murals and other public artworks. One of those artists, Virginia Snedeker, appears in a self-portrait standing before her easel in a Rosie the Riveter jumpsuit.

After the war the group continued to add members and took up the challenge of promoting their work abroad. It also celebrated itself, with a 75th-anniversary show in 1964 and a series of centennial exhibitions in the late 1980s.

The second half of the show offers a concise, conservative summary of postwar painting trends: large gestural abstractions by Sylvia Wald and Sumiye Okoshi, Pop and photorealism by Linda Lippa and Idelle Weber. It suggests that as more avenues in the art world opened to women, the idea of a professional association for one sex came to seem vestigial.

A "parallel" presence isn't good enough for female artists today, and that's as it should be. Still, the history of the association brings to mind more recent, less formal clubs and clusters of female artists: those in the "Pictures Generation" show at the Metropolitan Museum, for example. Until the power centers of the art world reach a 50-50 balance and they're not even close a little networking can't hurt.