



# 'The Future is Female' Offers Potent Reinterpretation of '70s Feminist Art

By *Ashlie Stevens*

ARTS AND CULTURE November 19, 2016

21c curator Alice Gray Stites pauses in front of a coil of colorful tentacles emerging from a stark white wall in the hotel-meets-museum lobby. On first glance, they look as if they are covered in shards of glass or mosaic tiles.

"But you get a little closer and actually see that they are made of acrylic nails," Stites says as she leans into the sculpture, eye level with a tentacle tip.

This piece by South African artist Frances Goodman — called "Medusa," a reference to the Greek mythological figure with hair made of snakes and a stare that could turn men to stone — is emblematic of the museum's new exhibition, "The Future is Female."

Stites says it's an expansion of the themes found in "A Global Gathering," a collection of artworks from the 21c permanent collection currently on view in celebration of the museum's 10th anniversary. Both exhibitions broadly explore portraiture, power and the environment, while "The Future is Female" homes in more specifically on feminine identity politics.



21c Museum

*Frances Goodman (South African) "Medusa," 2013-2014*

Take “Medusa.” As a sculpture, it registers as traditionally feminine. It’s streaked with pink, plastered in fake nails; yet contextually, it’s meant to be subversive.

By hearkening back to Medusa’s gaze, Goodman challenges the premise that many artworks featuring women are meant for the male gaze, a theory first posited by writer Laura Mulvey in a 1975 essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”

And by relying on DIY materials, Goodman is overtly referencing the feminist art movement of the 1970s, during which women reclaimed craft-based practices like quilting, embroidery and sewing — practices that were often relegated to the canonical sidelines as “kitsch.” These are themes that are played with again and again throughout “The Future is Female.”

Stites says the title of the exhibition — a phrase that was often seen as a hashtag on social media during Hillary Clinton’s presidential run — came from that era as well.

“Actually, ‘The Future is Female’ was designed as a T-shirt that was sold in the first women’s bookstore in New York City in the 1970s,” Stites says.

Fittingly, 21c’s “The Future is Female” registers as a modern take on the work of feminist artists like Howarda Pindell, Adrian Piper and Judy Chicago, whose famous “The Dinner Party” sculpture is called to mind in this exhibition by E.V. Day’s “Waterlily,” a giant fuchsia photograph that blends flowers and the female form. As such, it also asks the viewer to examine what “female” actually looks like today.



21c Museum

*Nandipha Mntambo (South African)  
“Umfanekiso wesibuko” (Mirror image), 2013*

For some, like artist Nandipha Mntambo, it's again about subverting gender stereotypes. In her piece, "Umfanekiso wesibuko (or 'Mirror image') we see two female forms fashioned from animal skin. They are kneeling and faceless.

"But they are not engaged in domestic labor," Stites says. "You can tell with them by their grace and poise, they are instead in a kind of dance — the hybridity of the human body, where the human meets the animal."

For others, like Louisville artist Gaela Erwin, it's about confronting topics rife with controversy, like depictions of the aging female body. This is something she does in her pastel likeness of her mother, whose close resemblance to the artist suggests this could be dual portrait in addition to an examination of mortality.



21c Museum

*Michele Pred (Swedish-American)  
"Reflections" (Powerful), 2015*

And finally, some artists — like Michele Pred — use the word "female" as a basic call for equality. She does this through her hot pink hand mirrors that combine the symbol for the female gender with captions that render the viewer "Feminist," "Equal" or "Powerful." The result is both a self-portrait and an invitation to action, and both register as particularly potent in our current political climate.

Collectively, "The Future is Female" is a vivid examination of the intersection between ancient mythology and modernism, what "female" as an inclusive term actually means, and how art informs activism. It is now on view at 21c.