

Alien She: A new show casts a spotlight on Riot Grrrl, the pioneering punk feminist movement

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Riot Grrrl is not to be confused with Guerrilla Girls, a female collective satirically exposing gender inequality in the art world. Riot Grrrl is a third-wave feminist artistic and lifestyle movement that began in 1991 in the Pacific Northwest and simultaneously in Washington, DC, and which has since blossomed into a worldwide crusade. This hands-on movement was, and still is, spearheaded by teenage girls, many into punk rock, with a significant number advancing LGBT issues. Its creative projects and support groups have become diverse over the years, stretching into many facets of contemporary art and culture. Riot Grrrl is mad as hell at violent sexism, racism and homophobia in the music scene and in the larger world; and they employ any creative means available, including music, crafts, photography, drawings, sculpture, assemblage, videos and posters to express their outrage. They also engage in collaboration and DIY methods of creativity. In a broader sense, this movement encourages girls to take courageous approaches in their artwork and lives, while empowering them to pursue careers as artists, authors, educators and activists. Riot Grrrl has chapters in at least 30 states and 22 countries; and one of its most visible

influences is the Russian punk rock group Pussy Riot, that stages masked guerrilla performances in churches and other “sacred” locations.

A new traveling exhibition at Orange County Museum of Art (OCMA) in Newport Beach, titled “Alien She,” (through May 24, 2015) looks at Riot Grrrl in welcome depth. The show’s curators, Astria Suparak and Ceci Moss, are themselves former members of Riot Grrrl from Los Angeles and the Bay Area. As they explain, the show’s title “is a reference to a Bikini Kill (a ’90s girls’ punk rock group) song of the same name. The lyrics are about the negotiation of normalized gender roles, the uneasy line between feminist critique and collectivity, and the process of coming to a feminist consciousness... ‘Alien She’ conjures the possibilities of identity, self-determination, and subversion.” This exhibition of approximately 900 historical and contemporary artworks focuses on seven artists who were involved with the movement as teenagers and are still at it. Their works display a variety of art methods and disciplines in projects spanning 20 years, while demonstrating how Riot Grrrl inspires participants, as well as our larger artistic, cultural and political worlds.

A *Riot Grrrl Manifesto* poster in the first gallery proclaims, “Because... viewing our work as being connected to our girlfriends-politics-real lives is essential if we are gonna figure out how what we are doing impacts, reflects, perpetuates, or disrupts the status quo... we don’t wanna assimilate to someone else’s (boy) standards of what is or isn’t... we know that life is much more than physical survival... we are interested in creating non-hierarchical ways of being and making music, friends and scenes based on communication and understanding ... we hate capitalism in all its forms and see our main goal as sharing information and staying alive, instead of making profits or being cool according to traditional standards...” Supporting this manifesto, the show’s historic section includes a voluminous array of self-published zines, hand-designed posters, videos, CDs, tee shirts, and other memorabilia gathered from participants worldwide.

The most menacing pieces and perhaps this exhibition’s stars are Allyson Mitchell’s *Ladies Sasquatch* (2006-10). These three large sculptures, ranging from five to nine feet tall, depict ferocious cat-like females with fangs, claws and exposed genitalia, made from layers of unmatched, often furry and garish textiles, salvaged from thrift stores. This artist comes to contemporary feminism with vast knowledge, nurtured by comprehensive reading. Lining the long wall behind *Sasquatch* is her *Recommended Reading* (2010) installation, black-and-white wallpaper of shelves of feminist books, including Betty Friedan’s classic “The Feminine Mystique” (1963).

Stephanie Syjuco’s *The Counterfeit Crochet Project (Critique of a Political Economy)* (2006–ongoing) combines the DIY method with bootlegged knockoffs of signature designer handbags. Her table of Prada, Gucci, Chanel and Dolce & Gabbana bags, each crafted by a different woman, testifies against our off-the-grid consumerism. Also working with yarns, L.J. Roberts uses knitting machines and hand stitching to create X-rated installations, portraits and banners. Her *We Couldn’t Get In. We Couldn’t Get Out* (2006-7), a pink faux barbed wire fence, references discrimination against immigrants and gay people. *Her Mom Knows Now* (2003), a 15-foot high pink thong, was hung

down a Vermont church steeple in its early days. Even more visceral is Tammy Rae Carland's inkjet prints, *Lesbian Beds* (2002), which present close-ups of messy unmade beds with sheets in various colors and designs, suggesting that lesbians do have fun in bed.

Ginger Brooks Takahashi's *There is a group, if not an alliance, walking there too, whether or not they are seen* (2013) is an assemblage of driftwood as legs with work boots and socks, perhaps indicating the female desire to finally kick ass. *Joanie 4 Jackie* (2003), Miranda July's installation of homemade videocassettes, letters, postcards and posters, traces the history of this movement. Several photographs by Faythe Levine, *Time Outside of Time* (2010–ongoing), illustrate alternative female communities across this country.

“Alien She” was brought to OCMA by its highly regarded chief curator Dan Cameron, who mounted several groundbreaking shows there during his tenure, and who was released from his post in a restructuring, along with several other staffers, a month after the exhibition's opening. The show amply reflects the intelligence and curiosity that he is known for, and provides insightful context for a significant current in contemporary culture.

By mounting this long overdue exhibition, the curators make clear the importance of the Riot Grrrl movement, and its history. These young women concurrently manifest in their own lives this movement's profound mission, which includes artistic success through self-realization. Astria Suparak is a former director of Carnegie Mellon's Miller Gallery and an independent curator of performances worldwide; Ceci Moss is Yerba Buena Center for the Arts' assistant curator and an NYU PhD candidate. “Alien She” brings to light a cultural revolution that has remained largely underground, even as it empowers two generations of women; while Riot Grrrl demonstrates that when girls are encouraged to express their intrinsic creative abilities, they mature into capable, innovative artists.

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