

# Ms.

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EXCLUSIVE BOOK EXCERPT

## Fierce, Fearless, Feminist FAYE

A Champion for Choice,  
Faye Wattleton Tells All  
About Her Life on the Front Line

**GLORIA STEINEM**  
On the Plot to Keep Women  
Away from the Polls

A Conversation with  
Rebel Actor Lili Taylor

YOUR HEALTH:  
The Power  
Of Touch





## Breaking the Mold

By Sharon Fitzgerald

I was in bed nearly two months, so weak that I could hardly walk down the stairs," wrote African American sculptor Nancy Elizabeth Prophet about her life after she arrived in Paris in 1922. "As soon as I could stand, I went to work with a dogged determination to conquer. I worked away on my first piece of sculpture with a calm assurance and savage pleasure of revenge . . . I remember how sure I was that it was going to be a living thing."

The illness that marred the beginning of Prophet's artistic journey was a by-product of poverty; having loaned most of her savings to her brother, she left the U.S. with only \$380. Taken by a friend to Paris' American hospital, she was assumed to be a drug addict rather than someone suffering from malnutrition.

Works by Prophet, as well as by nine other artists—ranging from Mary Edmonia Lewis, who began sculpturing in the 1850s, to Selma Burke, who died last year and whose bust of President Franklin Roosevelt provided the image imprinted on the dime—are now on display at Philadelphia's Afro-American Historical and Cultural Museum. It took nearly five years to secure funding for this landmark exhibition, *Three Generations of African American Women Sculptors: A Study in Paradox*, which will later travel to New York, Dallas, Los Angeles, Boston, Savannah, and Washington, D.C.

The ten artists comprise a time line that links two centuries. The 60 works displayed—in bronze, marble, plaster, metal, stone, or wood—are proudly, securely, albeit invisibly, connected by a

spirit of courage and artistic passion. Viewing the works of these women makes one feel—almost viscerally—how extraordinary it has been for African American women to create sculpture and to excel at it. "The paradox of the show centers around the whole idea and premise that, historically, sculpture has been a male-dominated field," explains Leslie King-Hammond of the Maryland

Institute, College of Art, and a guest curator of the show along with Tritobia Hayes Benjamin of Howard University.

King-Hammond points out, "Because it was heavy, monumental-scale work, there was a great amount of gender bias." She also notes: "For the better part of the nineteenth century and really until the break of the twentieth century, women were not allowed to be in classes

vantage, greater economic challenges, and probably greater social oppression and repression," says Lowery Stokes Sims, a curator at New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art and an essayist for the *Three Generations* catalog.

Despite the strictures of race and gender placed upon them, all of the artists in

this show achieved a measure of success. Displayed together as they are here,

they form an eclectic and evocative congregation of equals. The luminous marble figures of neoclassicist Mary Edmonia Lewis mingle thoughtfully with the bronze and painted plaster works of the Rodin-influenced Meta Warrick Fuller. Beings created from glazed terra cotta, bronze, and fired clay were inspired by the everyday African and American people whom Beulah Ecton Woodard ob-

### SCULPTURE

*"The number of African American women who have been involved in sculpture is astonishing, given the social oppression."*

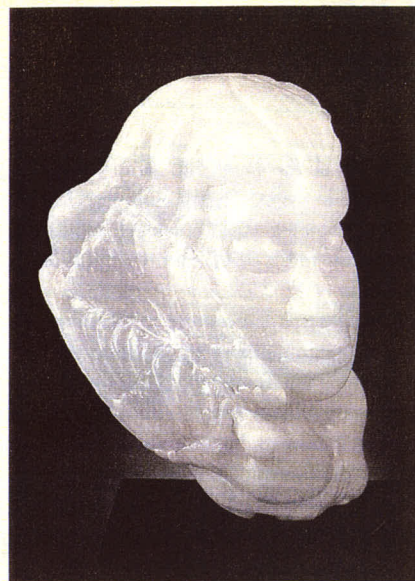
with nudes. So how possibly could a woman become a sculptor if she was denied the basic education and experience that was necessary?"

"If you take the specific community of African American artists over the last 200 to 300 years, the number of women who have been involved in sculpture is astonishing, given the great social disad-

served so thoughtfully. They sit in comfortable juxtaposition to May Howard Jackson's painted plaster busts of literary dignitaries Paul Laurence Dunbar and Jean Toomer. The full-scale totems-as-revolutionaries created by Elizabeth Catlett Mora; the small- and large-scale, mixed-metal abstractions of Geraldine McCullough; and the looming, multitex-







Facing page: Beulah Ecton Woodard at work on *Bad Boy*, circa 1936. This page, clockwise from top left: *Talking Skull*, by Meta Warrick Fuller, 1937; *Peace*, 1972, by Selma Burke; Augusta Savage with *Realization*, circa 1934; *Portrait of Gwen*, 1934, by Augusta Savage

tured symbolic work of Barbara Chase-Riboud, all reveal a daring, uninterrupted cultural vocabulary.

There were other costs besides the racism and sexism that these artists had to deal with: costs of purchasing and transporting materials, securing sufficient studio space, studying with teachers in both the U.S. and Europe. The expense has put sculpture out of reach of most women, regardless of eth-

nicity. There were social factors to be considered also: the artists in this show were women who often had to balance marriage and domestic responsibilities, who chose to live abroad unchaperoned, and to assert themselves as independent thinkers, while mastering materials and tools usually considered unfeminine.

The majority of women included in this exhibition managed to attend prestigious art institutions in the U.S. and Europe. Few were women of economic

means, although most married and had children with men who held respected positions in their communities. Some worked as teachers, nurses, writers, laundry women, and housekeepers. Nearly all faced and fought the limitations that racism, sexism, and classism placed upon their aspirations. Each held on to, and created, a vision of humanity, startling in its honesty and in its esteem.

The stories of these artists' lives are often as compelling as their work. Take,



▼ Amid all the sound and the fury about abortion in the U.S., what often gets lost is that choice is about providing women with a full range of reproductive options. *If These Walls Could Talk*, an HBO film out in October and coproduced by Demi Moore's Moving Pictures company, provides a timely reminder. "My womb—and every other woman's—does not belong in politics," says Moore, who, with Sissy Spacek and Cher, stars in the film. (It's also Cher's directorial debut.) Choice is at the heart of this trilogy,

## TELEVISION

which explores how the personal and political

converge in the lives of three women, each confronted with an unwanted pregnancy in pre- and post-Roe v. Wade eras.

The walls in the title refer to the house that serves as the setting for all of the stories. In the first tale, the year is 1952. A young widow (Demi Moore) finds herself pregnant after a brief affair, and must choose between social ostracism and a kitchen-table abortion. Twenty-two years later, abortion is legal, and Sissy Spacek plays a wife and mother of four, torn between ending and continuing her unexpected pregnancy. In the third, contemporary, story, Anne Heche portrays a college student seeking an abortion at a time when right-wing protests have become increasingly violent; Cher plays a doctor in the besieged clinic.

The folks at HBO insist that they didn't have the elections in mind when scheduling *If These Walls Could Talk*. But we couldn't have asked for better timing for this moving, prowoman film.

—Jennifer Matlack

for instance, Mary Edmonia Lewis (c. 1843–death unknown), the earliest sculptor documented in the show. Born of an African American father and a Native American mother, she was raised on a Chippewa reservation after both parents died. In 1859, she was offered a scholarship to Oberlin College in Ohio as part of an early effort to recruit people of color. But after entering the college, where she studied liberal arts, she was accused of poisoning two white schoolmates. As the legal case unfolded, she was abducted one night by a group of angry townspeople, brutally beaten, and left for dead in the woods.

Miraculously, Lewis recovered from the attack and was cleared of all charges, but Oberlin refused to allow her to grad-

a home with educated, professional parents who respected the arts. As a high school student, she attended weekly classes at the respected J. Liberty Tadd Art School.

In 1895, Howard became the first African American woman to attend the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. Her detailed, naturalistic approach to plaster and bronze was not unique to that period, but her dignified statues of black subjects presented a direct challenge to the existing racial stereotypes.

After marrying high school educator William Jackson and moving to Washington, D.C., she taught at Howard University and continued working as an artist. But Howard Jackson's promise was stymied by segregation. She was declined

*"The paradox of the show centers around the premise that, historically, sculpture has been a male-dominated field."*

uate. With money from her brother, she opened an art studio in Boston, where she discovered patrons within the abolitionist movement. Her neoclassical marble work, perfected during a period of study in Italy, pays homage to her dual ancestry. *Forever Free* (1867) shows the joy and strength of a black man and woman at the moment of emancipation; *Hiawatha* and *Minnehaha* (both 1868) are cameo-like busts of Indian leaders.

Unlike Lewis, May Howard Jackson, born in Philadelphia in 1877, grew up in

membership in Washington's Society of the Fine Arts when its members discovered that she was African American. The National Academy of Design displayed her work enthusiastically, but then refused further support after sending a messenger to verify the color of her skin.

Nearly a generation later, Augusta Savage was busy discovering her sculptural talent via childhood mud pies. Despite beatings administered by her God-fearing parents, who thought that she was creating "graven images," Savage persisted. She went on to become a respected artist and a champion of artistic development during the Harlem Renaissance. As director of the Harlem Community Center (a WPA-funded art program during the Depression), she created a model for such programs that was copied throughout the U.S. Her workshops and salons first inspired and empowered important artists such as Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence, Norman Lewis, and Ernest Crichlow.

Unfortunately, the disappointments that she suffered were just as extraordinary as her successes. When the Palace of

LARA TOMLIN





Fountainbleau, near Paris, turned her down for a study program, the case became a cause célèbre after the U.S. administrators admitted they were concerned that Savage's presence would upset the white students. Her acclaimed monument for the 1939 World's Fair, *The Harp* (also known as *Lift Every Voice and Sing*), was subsequently bulldozed when funds could not be raised to move it or to cast its plaster form permanently in bronze.

Savage rarely took her defeats quietly. "I realize now that she was a feminist," says painter Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence. "There was not this movement then, but if she were living now, and doing the same things, she would be a black feminist."

Of the modern artists in the show, Elizabeth Catlett Mora is one of the most intriguing. The subject of a one-woman retrospective that closed in August at New York City's Caribbean Cultural Center/African Diaspora Institute, she has spent the last six decades creating art and agitating for political causes. Her sculpture, which was influenced by Mexican murals that she first viewed while an art student at Howard University, is known for its use of simple, precise detail to achieve the sparseness of modernists, without ignoring the humanity of her subjects, who were often women. "We need to know more about women," Catlett has said. "I like to interpret women: women's ideas, women's feelings. The female aestheticism is more sensitive, and I'm happy to be a part of it."

The assemblage of these works is a triumph not to be ignored. This is the first time that the works of these artists have been recognized as forming a continuum; it is the first time that their importance and effect on other artists can be seen. The show's generational approach encourages viewers to understand the evolution of the women as artists and as activists. It demonstrates how the conflicts of early artists made way for the radicalism of later sculptors. It's almost as if ideas were being telegraphed from one artist to the next.

"The beauty of having three generations," says Karen Buchholz, director of collections for the Afro-American Histor-

ical and Cultural Museum, "is that you really can compare and contrast the different aesthetics and the influence of African art traditions on African American artists in the twentieth century. You see how the work gets more politicized, becomes more feminist."

The show's curators struggled for years to research the sculptors and then to locate the artworks now on display. Pieces that were described in critiques or correspondence, and sometimes photographed over the years, were lost; some were left unclaimed when there was no money to retrieve them from storage. Too much important work was destroyed—either by accident, as in the case of a warehouse fire that took all of Meta Warrick Fuller's early work, or intentionally, as with Savage's World's Fair piece. Gratefully, the work that endures provides a stunning look at a determined and resilient portion of art history.

"It became a fascinating quest," says curator King-Hammond, of the effort to create this show, "to pursue the personalities, the conditions, the politics of the time, the nature of creative drive and artistic energy. That these women would do this: to push forward against apparently insurmountable odds when there was absolutely no promise of their recognition, no access for them to be received."

Through that quest, King-Hammond and Tritobia Hayes Benjamin have resurrected artists of whom historians have rarely taken account: "They were women, and they were African American women," says King-Hammond. "Society did not recognize them beyond being maids, or maybe teachers or nurses. But fine artists? American society did not recognize that as even a remote possibility." Until now. *Ms.* Sharon Fitzgerald is a freelance writer based in New York City.

## Quicktakes

**FILM • Beautiful Thing** An urban fairy tale of first love—it's the story of a London pub manager (Linda Henry) who, on discovering her 16-year-old son's (Glen Berry) new romance with another



guy, fears it means she will "never have grandchildren." Witty interludes lighten the heavy moments and make this well worth seeing. • **Female**

**Perversions** In director Susan Streitfield's chilling exploration of female power and desire, she probes beneath the surface of an up-and-coming lawyer (Tilda Swinton) to reveal deep cracks behind her flawless facade. Swinton is sexy, strong, obsessively self-critical, and deeply driven, in a drama that quickly becomes a whirling feminist nightmare. • **Secrets and Lies** Mike Leigh's latest is a frolic in Hyde Park, compared with his bleak but riveting *Naked*. The story centers on working-class Cynthia (Brenda Blethyn), her unhappy daughter, and their relationship with Cynthia's brother and his wife. They all resent one another until an adopted woman searching for her birth parents shakes them out of their petty rut. Nice.

**MUSIC • Gone Again:** Patti Smith Onetime punk/poet Smith is now an older, wiser, more hopeful artist, seasoned by motherhood and



loss. In "My Madrigal" she repeats "Oh, till death do us part" until it becomes a plaintive wail about the curse of love.

• **One World:**

**Various Artists** Ranging from the Zulu street music of Johnny Clegg and Juluka (the first major South African interracial band) to the folk-rock of Inna Zhelannaya (one of the few women on the Moscow music scene), this CD is soulful and socially conscious—one dollar from each sale goes to the U.S. Committee for UNICEF in support of children in war-torn countries.