

After 35 years, lost feminist art back on display



The exhibition at the Rowan Art Gallery. The 1974 idea was for a kind of women's hall of fame: Images of great women by female figurative painters, each working in her own style.



By Samantha Melamed, Staff Writer

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A decade ago, Andrew Hottle, a professor of art history at Rowan University, undertook what he thought was a mundane task: finding an image to show his class of *The Sister Chapel*, a feminist art collaboration from the 1970s.

He had come across a brief article about the work, but as he searched for more information, he found little had been written about the exhibition or the artists. A few were well-known - the most famous was painter Alice Neel - but others he had never heard of. And the artwork itself was nowhere to be found.

"The turning point for me was when I visited the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C., and I was looking through their artist files," he said. "One of the artists, Cynthia Mailman, had offered to donate her painting to the museum, and the curatorial staff declined it. So I was sitting in that office, holding the letter, thinking, 'If I don't save this, no one will.' "

Over the last 10 years, Hottle has been single-minded in that pursuit. He tracked down all 13 component works - disinterring some from storage, coaxing an artist to replace a painting that had been destroyed, and working with a team to create a pavilion that had been designed for the original installation but never constructed.

Now, for the first time since 1980, the full *Sister Chapel* is on view to the public, at Rowan University Art Gallery West. And, at last, it has been completed to fulfill the artists' original vision.

The idea of *The Sister Chapel* - the title is a play on the Sistine Chapel - dates to 1974. Ilise Greenstein, an abstract painter, conceived it as a feminist statement in the form of a women's hall of fame: images of great women by female figurative painters, each working in her own style.

Sharon Wybrants, one of five contributors who will speak on a panel at the exhibition's opening Thursday evening, said that at that time, women were struggling to be taken seriously by men as well as by other women.

"For that transition to happen in the late '60s and '70s was huge - to say, 'Maybe I can trust other women.' In consciousness-raising groups, we came to realize, in all our suffering, we had things in common," she said. "Then we started to get angry. We started to march on museums."

The Sister Chapel, then, was an act of solidarity. Eleven painters would contribute monumental portraits, Greenstein would paint an abstract ceiling with a mirror at its center, and Maureen Connor, a sculptor, designed a fabric-wrapped enclosure.

"The important thing was women coming together and using a different model than the male system," Hottle said, "a model that was to work together for the good of women."

It was a simple idea, but it took years to coordinate.

Artists dropped out of the project and were replaced. The concept was updated and adapted. Eventually, the paintings were completed, representing figures like Betty Friedan, Frida Kahlo, and Joan of Arc.

The women courted exhibition venues, hoping to land the installation in the collection of a major museum. Instead, they showed it in 1978 at the P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center (now MoMA PS1) and later at three other venues. They never came up with the money to build Connor's pavilion; instead, they showed a model of it.

Still, it made an impact.

"It got a lot of critical acclaim for where many of us were in our careers in that time," Wybrants said.

After Greenstein died in 1985, the surviving artists took their paintings and went home.

Then, in 2006, Hottle began contacting the artists, asking for interviews.

"My interest was not only in reviving this," he said, "but really contextualizing the work so the art could be understood."

He wrote a book, *The Art of the Sister Chapel*, published in 2014.

He also began inviting the artists to donate their paintings to Rowan's collection for safekeeping.

"I couldn't just let it disappear," he said. "It was too important as a statement on women by women at a particularly important moment in women's history."

Over time, Rowan obtained seven of the figurative paintings (two are on loan for the current exhibition) and Greenstein's ceiling.

But Wybrants' painting - a self-portrait as Wonder Woman - was lost decades ago. She had sublet the place where she'd been staying, and the tenant had taken all her paintings to the dump.

Wybrants had long despaired over the loss of that painting. But at Hottle's suggestion, she finally re-created it. The image itself referenced the Wonder Woman shirt she used to wear while painting, to convince herself she was good enough. Revisiting it after nearly 40 years, she had a new perspective.

"The first one felt kind of naively hopeful and more angry than anything," she said. "This one, I wanted to have vulnerability and fear: What are the costs to a woman of being powerful?"

Now, that more-complicated version is part of Rowan's *Sister Chapel* collection.

And, for the first time, it will be shown as the artists intended - complete with Connor's pavilion, fabricated at last.

"We thought, if we were going to do this, we should do it right and show it the way they wanted it to be shown," Hottle said.

Rowan gallery director Mary Salvante oversaw the fabrication.

"There were a lot of unknowns of how it would come together," she said. "We just discovered when we put it up how the light works and how the sound creates these beautiful acoustics. It's very similar to if you were to walk into an actual church chapel."

For Connor, in particular, it's a remarkable sight.

"I never honestly thought that they were going to build it," she said. "Something I designed in the '70s, which I never thought anything would come of, actually turned into something. That was really amazing."

The exhibition is scheduled to remain through June, but Salvante hopes to extend it, build programming around it, and put it on tour to other institutions.

Connor thinks this artwork continues to resonate.

"You still see many shows with no women," she said. "It's hard for people to question what they've been taught about what's interesting and beautiful."