

The book cover features a central photograph of a woman with long blonde hair, seen from behind, sitting on a wooden swing seat. She is holding onto the chains of the swing. The swing set is positioned in a dark space, possibly a gallery, with large, white, draped fabric panels hanging from above. The background of the entire cover is a vibrant, abstract composition of green and blue tones, with some white and yellow elements, suggesting a modern art installation or a stylized landscape. The title 'MOTHERS OF INVENTION' is printed in large, bold, black, sans-serif capital letters across the middle of the image. Below the title, the subtitle 'THE FEMINIST ROOTS OF CONTEMPORARY ART' is written in a smaller, black, sans-serif font. At the bottom, the authors' names are listed in a similar font.

MOTHERS OF INVENTION

THE FEMINIST ROOTS OF CONTEMPORARY ART

Eleanor Heartney, Helaine Posner,
Nancy Princenthal and Sue Scott

BEYOND TRAGIC AND TIMELESS

WOMEN, ABSTRACTION AND FEMINISM

Sue Scott

I want to reclaim abstract art for women and transform it on our own terms.¹

—Harmony Hammond

the oral histories that exist around the world, and this story has many names. In most versions, an acorn or a coconut falls on an animal's head with a resounding thump. Believing the end is near, the animal goes on a campaign to spread the news that the sky is falling. Everyone she meets joins the hysteria, not believing what they see with their own eyes but what they hear from others. Myth congeals into fact quickly. Just as McClelland absorbed the ambient sounds of the playground, social media has become an ambient situation. With the rise of social media and cable news shows, the speed with which rumors fly can have devastating effects. The word *Boo* is both a sound and a word. It emerges, like a warning to Dorothy to turn back, in white and black cursive, floating across the skies as if it's in on the cosmic joke. The sky isn't really falling.

Post-Postmodern

'Feminism is no longer univocal', art historian Jeanne Willette notes. 'Feminism has become a movement of many voices, male and female, Western and non-Western.'⁴³ Today, artists of both genders making abstract work are deeply indebted to the pioneering contributions of the female abstract painters who preceded them. In a postmodern art world, 21st-century artists can draw from any number of sources, many of which came out of feminist innovations – including Performance art, Process art, a multiperspectival approach to artmaking, the use of unorthodox materials and means and reimagined craft. Unlike so many of the women painters working abstractly who had an ambivalent relationship with the pulls of pure abstraction and content, these artists use abstraction to explore the explicitly political and the deeply personal. While this reflects postmodern tendencies and styles, it is also deeply indebted to feminism for its objection to established hierarchies and rigid rules.

This is certainly true for Franklin Evans (b.1967; fig.30) who sees, in the push and pull between abstraction and representation, a way to deal with biographical issues such as queer identity, his Mexican heritage on his mother's side, his life as an artist and his background in economics and finance. 'My work has a strong relationship to the

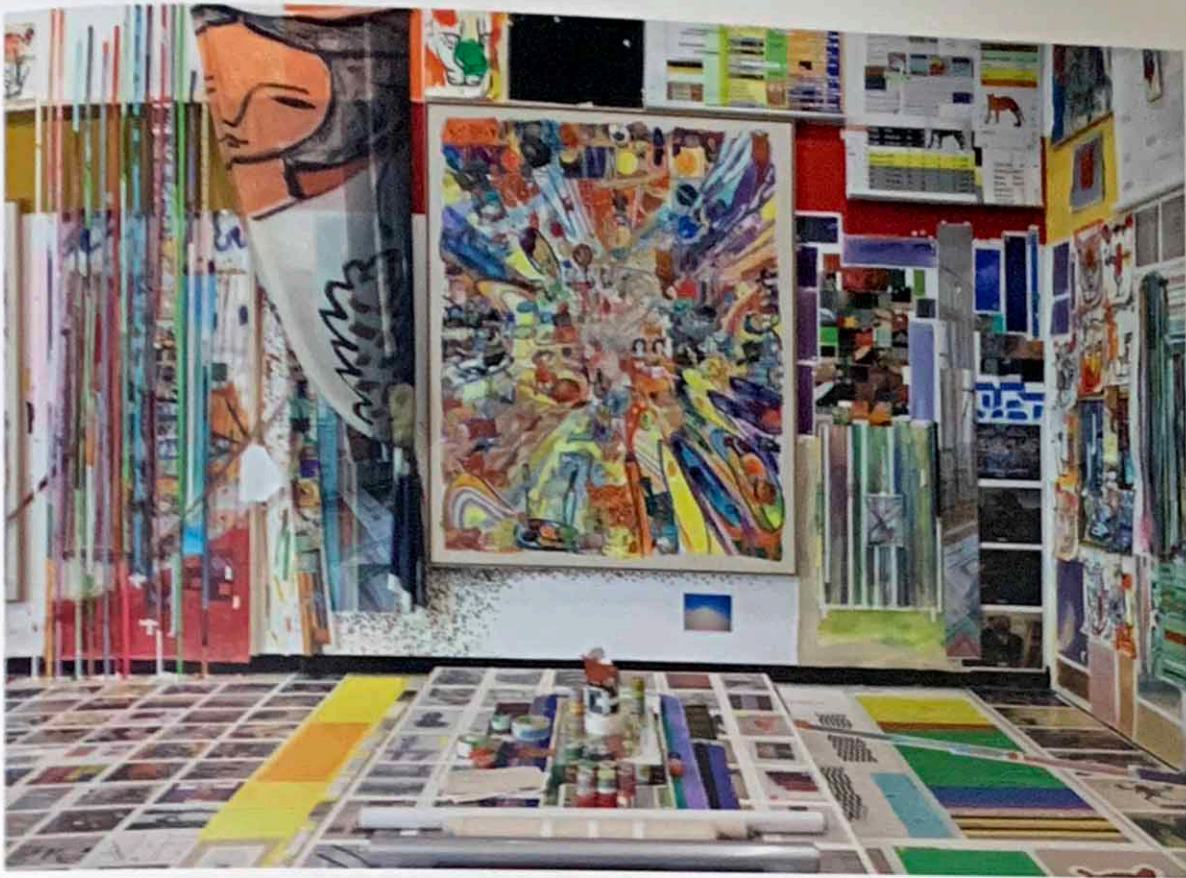


Fig.30 Franklin Evans, *perpetualstudio*, 2022, painting, collage, site-specific installation, dimensions variable, commissioned by MAXXI – National Museum of 21st Century Arts, Rome

aspect of feminism that challenges the white cisgendered heteronormative patriarchal position of modernist painting/ abstraction.' Evans says, 'My work as queer and absorptive uses the powerful impulses and visual knowledge of modernism'.⁴⁴

Each contiguous installation is an extension of his studio practice and continued exploration of what he sees as his 'brain space'. Evans is not only a cannibal of other artists but dismantles and reassembles his own work for each successive installation. The cacophony of visual images in any exhibition can include traditional paintings on canvas; floor to ceiling screens made from painter's tape; press releases from other art shows; art books; paint cans; faux Polaroids of friends or trompe l'oeil paintings of the Polaroids and homages to an entire litany of artists from Caspar David Friedrich and Henri Matisse to Donald Judd and Frank Stella. Recently, Evans has looked to the work of Pat Steir. She is, he says, 'now powering several of my paintings as I collapse her forceful drip onto my imagistic paintings – as a sort of dance among process, abstraction, and image memory'.⁴⁵ He sees in Helen Frankenthaler a connection to the way he uses the floor to make some

of the work, the staining of the canvas and paper, but also in the way the floor is an important element of his installations.

Evans acknowledges his debt to feminist art practices, noting:

The awareness that the specificity of singularity is contingent upon the forces surrounding it (history of patriarchy, colonialism – both the gains and losses of each). I tend to draw from the gains, but I also see that this lens is tied to feminism in its powerful grasp of agency. Feminism grabs the situations and negates, expands and creates from a new vantage. It is multivalent. It employs the history of otherness as a force, materially, perspectivaly, imagistically, abstractly.⁴⁶

Early on, Evans was inspired by Judy Pfaff's expansion of painting into an abstract field to realize his own paintings in the third dimension. While Pfaff's use of materials – pigment, canvas – was familiar to Evans, it was the way she pulled them apart and into an environment that he connected to, and it is the reason he now describes his own work as 'painting installations'. His environments are 'othered', a place to enter, a way to experience time and space. The paintings are worlds within worlds, psychedelic without a single-point perspective. A recent incarnation of Evans's ongoing explorations entitled *perpetualstudio* (2022) commissioned by MAXXI, the National Museum of XXI Century Arts in Rome, as part of the exhibition *What a Wonderful World* (2022) allowed him to increase the experience to even a grander scale.

It is through his lived experience that Mark Bradford (b.1961) channels the ever-widening aftershocks of feminist art, both with his choice of subject matter and materials and the way he looks at art history. As Dallas writer and poet Darryl Ratcliff writes, Bradford felt 'the most revered artists were, as he describes them, "white male cowboy macho heterosexual painters," and declar[ed] himself, as a six-foot-eight-inch skinny Black gay man, to be just as macho. "I was hiding behind the material and having a conversation with art history and who wasn't there," referring to people of color and women.'⁴⁷

Bradford came to art in a circuitous way, working as a stylist in his mother's hair salon in South Central Los Angeles for most of his 20s, saving money to make extended visits to Europe each year. He enrolled at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) at the age of 30, earning

Many of the most important tendencies in current art are rooted in the ideals of the early feminist movement. This original and thought-provoking book examines four key areas where art and feminism have entwined to transform society while offering a vision of a world that works for all.

Blurring the boundaries between art and life, the painters, sculptors and performance artists featured here have been instrumental in shaping issues now dominating the art world: the vulnerability of the environment, the rise of activist art, the challenge to the reign of high technology (including digital culture), and the development of a new language of abstraction.

Illustrated with a spread of work from the last sixty years (and including contextual discussion of earlier practitioners too), this book makes a compelling case for the ways that feminist art and artists laid the groundwork for today's globalized, multi-media, postmodern art world.

'In one genre after the next, with clarity and a wealth of insight, the essays here show how critical innovations by women artists have been not merely additions or correctives to established art history, but have served as the beating, living motor force that has kept the entire corpus of recent art alive and vital.'

Ben Davis, National Art Critic, Artnet News

'*Mothers of Invention* is a vital contribution to the ongoing re-evaluation of women's role in the evolution of contemporary art. These four remarkable writers draw on decades of experience to create a narrative that profoundly reshapes our understanding of art today.'

Susan Fisher Sterling, Ph.D., The Alice West Director, National Museum of Women in the Arts

'In *Mothers of Invention*, Heartney, Posner, Princenthal, and Scott have given us the most comprehensive and convincing argument for why women artists should not be seen as outliers, second thoughts, or "nice to haves", but rather integral to our understanding of both the contemporary moment and to the history of art itself.'

Hall W. Rockefeller, founder of Less Than Half

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ISBN: 978-1-84822-540-4



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