

When the prospect of writing this essay first arose, one of the exhibition's curators mentioned that she was struck particularly by the fact that all of the participants are women painting women. I can locate my interest in these artists' work precisely one word earlier. These are women painting. In Latvia, which these four artists happen to call their full or part-time home, contemporary art making and its institutional supports have been increasingly devoted to installations, object, text and photo-based art, performance and other post-Conceptualist modes that owe a certain amount of their popularity (and vitality) to their novelty. This novelty may seem anachronistic vis-a-vis developments in the West, but then, much of fin-de-Soviet culture was nothing if not anachronistic. Perhaps because Latvia's artists regained access to international art arenas in the waning moments of both this millennium and that empire — and two decades after the modernist project had run aground elsewhere — this persistence of painting has sometimes been described as decadent, most recently by Franceska Kirke during the televised opening of her March 1996 solo show in Riga,¹ and most superciliously by a group of recent graduates from the painting program of the Latvian Art Academy who referred to themselves as the New Decadents. The likelihood that collectively itself might qualify as decadence in the immediate post-communist era was also evoked by these painters, intentionally or not.

Yet it would be wrong to attribute the peculiarity of the act of painting in the mid-1990s to geopolitical circumstances alone. In Latvia, the strongest contemporary artists of the younger generation who continue to devote themselves exclusively to painting are, for the most part, women. And it is this generational, gender-specific concentration of interest and effort that may prove to be most revealing, particularly in how it plays out against historical, gender patterns of art making in the West during the past quarter century. Numerous accounts of late modernism and its aftermath that identify painting as a masculine enterprise arrive at this conclusion either through statistics, which note the disproportionate number of male painters featured in major survey exhibitions of art (not to mention their domination of entire art world phenomena like the Transavantgarde), or through feminist aesthetics, which emphasizes that art made by women from the 1970's onward tended — indeed, needed — to assume non-painting forms. Accounts which consider both aspects of the issue vary in the degree and direction of causality posited between them, but invariably these two terms are seen to be symptomatic of previous imbalances in the representation of women in art—whether that representation was visual, institutional or historiographic.

But what happens in a cultural context where women artists have experienced what might be considered, relative to elsewhere, parity with their male counterparts? Consonant with the more or less equitable status of women artists within the Soviet avant-garde, women artists in Latvia significantly determined the local character of modernism from the very beginning.² Painter Alexandra Belcova and sculptor Marta Liepina-Skulme, for example, were preeminent figures in Riga's small modernist community during the 1920s and 30s. Aleksandra Belcova's exposure to revolutionary aesthetics during her apprenticeship in Petrograd greatly influenced the early writings of her husband Romans Suta, who served as ideologue of the Latvian modernists, and together they operated an avant-garde porcelain workshop whose products received international critical acclaim. The fact that porcelain painting, traditionally regarded as a feminine art form, became one of the most widely recognized local manifestations of modernism may indicate just how differently gendered modernist sensibility was in Latvia. Belcova's paintings from this period featured motifs of family life alongside those of specifically modern, liberated pursuits, as seen in her 1927 work, *The Tennis-Player*. Another painting, *The White and the Black*, not only rendered visible a woman of color and the class differences between her and the white woman in the background, but Belcova treated this subject — previously untouched in Latvia — in the least sensational manner imaginable for that time and place. Similarly unusual for its high visibility, Latvian modernist sculpture was largely identified with a woman artist. Besides commanding space within exhibitions and publications commensurate to that accorded the work of male peers, Marta Liepina-Skulme's sculptures often rivaled contemporaneous Latvian painting for critical attention. This was true when she was a finalist in the design competitions for Latvia's national Freedom Monument in the mid 1920s, and it remained so

just last year when an image of an early Liepina-Skulme sculpture illustrated the lavish prospectus for the monumental Dictionary of Art to be published presently in London.

In more recent decades, when Latvian artists were reasserting independence from official Soviet strictures, women painters like Dzemina Skulme (daughter of Marta) and Maija Tabaka played significant, if not unproblematic, roles in that process. Though Skulme's inclusion in a recent collection of interviews with "dissident" artists is mystifying given her professional personae as Artist Laureate of the USSR, president of the republican artists' union and delegate to the All-Union Soviet, it's inarguable that she promoted cultural autonomy and stylistic freedom in Latvia.³ Benefiting personally from her positions, Skulme was also able to defend less powerful artists from censorship and run interference with Kremlin policy-makers when they threatened the integrity and insularity of the Latvian art community. Ultimately her politics are divivable in her paintings, which have appropriated female images from diverse art historical sources and reworked them, using the ostensibly masculine tropes of Abstract Expressionism. At the same moment Skulme's life and work exemplified, respectively, the East European feminist achievement and transEuropean phenomenon of womens' self-symbolization that Julia Kristeva first discussed in 1979,⁴ Maija Tabaka was expanding the inquiry of acculturation and self-definition into an East-West sociopolitical dialectic. Tabaka and her surrealistic paintings became instantly popular with the Fluxus artists she met during a year's residency in West Berlin, and one wonders if the conspicuous Fluxus aversion to painting and its patriarchal implications was assuaged by the resistance to order that Tabaka's particular practice represented (though it was by no means Fluxus). Even after receiving the imprimatur of wary Soviet authorities upon her return to Riga, Tabaka popularized the most challenging work of Latvian émigré artists, in effect promoting what would later be called a "Fourth World identity": one less bounded and informed by nationality than by the pervasive 20th-century diaspora experience, a strategy against becoming overly defined by one's colonial predicament.⁵ All told, however, a spirit of cultural latitude in the late Soviet period might better be found — meaning: it was less mitigated by bureaucratic affiliation — in the work of other women, notably Biruta Delle, Inta Grinberga, Maruta Jurjane, Zenta Logina and Aija Zarina, whose investigations in painting, performance, experimental film and fiber art had clear parallels within feminist art of the same vintage in the West.

Paradoxically, my point in recounting this history is that the artists in "Women Painting Women" feel little to no obligation to acknowledge such a legacy, explicitly nor even implicitly. For example, Zoya Frolova has insisted that a feminist critique is the furthest thing from her mind when she decides what to paint, since, for her, the childhood memory of her grandmother astride a motorcycle, distributing revolutionary broadsides in Ukraine, renders subsequent commentary on sexual equality quite beside the point.⁶ Even when one's reckoning with artistic precedent might be construed as confrontation of male privilege, this isn't necessarily so: Several years ago Ieva Iltnere responded to the legendary painting career of her father Edgars Iltners, paragon of official Soviet Latvian art, when she deconstructed, in all the literal and theoretical senses of that overused term, one of his Socialist realist masterpieces by simultaneously recreating and dematerializing the composition of his renowned painting through a configuration of aluminum screens cut to match the shapes in the original work. However, her eradication of color and destabilization of form was hardly a simple Oedipal gesture. The layered screens' moiré effect recalled the essential passages in her father's work wherein ecstatic, Pollack-like handling of paint, contained within discreet areas of figuration, belied the orthodoxy of his public life.⁷ But even as homage, Iltnere's work was critically trenchant insofar as it constituted the exercise of deskilling so valued by first-generation Conceptualists in the West. Such coarseness of method was (and remains) doubly provocative in Latvia, where the average high-school-level art student possesses a technical fluency beyond that of most American graduate art faculty.

Such background information may prove illuminating, but to discuss the artists in "Women Painting Women" in terms of genealogy alone—stylistic, familial or sociopolitical — is to risk preoccupation with oppositional issues. And that, to paraphrase the venerable feminist argument, is to risk becoming ruled by the opposition. Yet, in this neo-Conceptual moment, painting is the oppositional

mode, and certain issues raised by Iltner's screen-work (which she insistently calls "painting")⁸ indicate that our revised understanding of the medium may provide greater access to the work in this exhibition than knowing particulars about the artists.

Franceska Kirke's works, for instance, contain all the physical evidence needed to conclude (if one's been asleep or behind an iron curtain) that painting has renegotiated its claim on our attention, and, moreover, that good painting endeavors to expose the conditions of its continued visibility. In part, we see painting anew because of photography. Her bilateral compositions allude to photographic based entertainments of the late 19th century, most obviously the stereoscope or stereopticon, which, ironically, marked the beginning of the end for painting's popular reputation at the very moment modernists commenced its transfiguration. If we imagine the stereoscope being used to effect a third, occult, dimension within paintings — which, by reason of flatness, were the one category of visual phenomena unsuitable for the device — we can begin to appreciate Kirke's comments about decadence. Instead of the slightly shifted perspective between the stereoscopic images contained on Victorian-era postcards, Kirke juxtaposes halves that interrelate in any number of complex ways: as displacements of each other, as condensations, as surrogates (in both the visual and psychoanalytic senses of these terms). Equally and simultaneously available to our binocular vision, the image pairs are only fusible in our minds through interpretive effort, but like the parlor game original, the resultant depth of perception is startling. In *Woman and Volcano*, the pairing of a cabaret star in billowing dress and the eruption of Vesuvius is attributable to their visual correspondence,⁹ which generates the symbolic libidinal connotations one would expect: repressed natural forces, cataclysmic release, the fetishization of unknowable nature, etc.

But the more compelling aspect of this combination is the degree of textuality assigned each spectacle: volcano has name, age, and national identity, while woman is captioned by a black bar floating alongside. The inconsistent motives of photographic representation are evoked, too: verifiable actualité versus convertible *fantaisie*. And while superimposed rectangles prevent the conclusive, total reading of these images, such lacunae only ensure our investment as they position us at the threshold of apperception. As Rosalind Krauss remarked in *The Optical Unconscious*,

There is no way to concentrate on the threshold of vision, to capture something en *tournant la tête*, without *siting* vision in the body and positioning that body, in turn, within the grip of desire. Vision is then caught up within the meshes of projection and identification, within the specularity of substitution that is also a search for an origin lost.¹⁰

This threshold of vision sometimes becomes the object of vision as Kirke manipulates interstitial elements that would otherwise remain unseen — for example, the black, numbered band alongside a photographic negative. In this way, the objectifying operation of the gaze is itself objectified by the reframing of the female image.

Perhaps it is contemporary painting's small revenge to show the slippage of vertical or horizontal holds within the frame of newer art forms, a possibility that bears certain appeal for Iltner as well. She writes, "Principles of photography allow me to do everything. To 'copy' two photos into one, to lay a modern event over the ancient one..."¹¹ This is a very curious statement, for Iltner's work is anything but photographic in appearance — painted sprocket holes bordering one of her canvases notwithstanding. Here it seems that painting's revenge may be the displacement of the new traditional media, photo and text, with which Conceptualists had once dematerialized the art object. But even in reasserting itself, painting does not recover the object in its original condition. In Iltner's work, the slippage is not primarily material but temporal, and her canvases appear less as double-exposures than as palimpsests, that classic metaphor for the human unconscious. Not only do various moments coexist within a single composition, but the individual moment is compressed into pictographic figures that emerge and merge within patterns of electronic static. Even the static is analog — which is to say, it is conspicuously hand

drawn like a quick scientific notation for endless noise. If, as Iltner believes, "a human being in the world is a deformed and fragmentary hero of a video clip," her frequent quotation of medieval ornament, Renaissance costume, Madonna motifs and the like can be seen as cheerful devaluations born of post-modern expediency. When Iltner says, "instead of golden rain there are computer rays pouring on my Danae," the joke is on both classical and cyber-art.

Decidedly more deferential toward the classical is a series of paintings by Zoya Frolova titled "Beauty, Loss, Renaissance," which inventories paradigmatic representations of femininity. In *The Three Graces*, for example, the *Venus of Melos* and a dilapidated mannequin from a Jersey City clothing store flank a muscular woman who could teach predecessors a thing or two about *contrapposto*. It's possible that the central figure is no less of a cultural artifact than the other two, not only in terms of socially-constructed identity, but also because the woman is, after all, a painting. The erosion of painted beauty is as manifest here as the loss of limbs, but rather than describing a tragic corporeality or grandstanding about superficial visual appeal, Frolova seems to invoke the Kantian sublime in this return to elemental nature. (Whether elemental nature is the burnished marble surface of *Venus*, the opalescent plaster and *cracquelure* of the mannequin, or the woman's healthy nude body seems not to matter.) Nevertheless, Frolova's virtuoso brushwork makes it impossible to ignore that any progression here has occurred under the auspices of painting, so we must consider these works interrogations of our assumptions about beauty as it relates intrinsically to painting. Among the conclusions that one might draw: Beauty no longer seems predicated upon noncontradiction, completeness or atemporality—Greenberg be damned yet again.

This is not to restrict the content of Frolova's paintings to that of a neo-formalist critique, of course. In fact, certain interrelationships between painting and beauty suggested by these works have resonance in the realm of human relations—say, ethical conclusions regarding delicacy and strength. For example, the woman holding a suit of armor apart from her lithe body in *The Beauties* recalls Laura Mulvey's analogy of the carapace as a defense against social exploitation.¹² Does the alluring sight of the armor's removal perpetuate the exploitation or, because the painting operates on this symbolic level and foregrounds a deconstructive image of female beauty to the right (one might even see it as Kristeva's abject body of the mother), can it serve as aversion therapy? We might expect that any painting this prepossessed will show us beyond such a postmodern endgame, but that may not be possible.

We're not particularly rescued from this dilemma by the paintings of Helena Heinrihsone. Again, an intensity of human transaction is communicated by pure painterly means: saturated color, athletic abstraction, and martial brushwork. But the questions linger: Is this intensity the same sort of intensity we once associated with late modernist abstraction? Or: Is this painting's expressionism as ingenuous and direct as it appears? This is hardly a criticism of Heinrihsone. Previous works like *The Scar*, which depicted an isolated female figure examining the searing trace of abdominal surgery across her middle, did not lack for pathos, and their economy of means was shocking. But more recent works evince a hypertrophic ambition in which Heinrihsone is not so much painting women, but painting Painting. If this is indeed intentional, hers is a quintessentially post-modern practice, one that is also symptomatic of a nonconformist artistic culture that, for decades, appropriated and deployed complete sign-systems that had evolved elsewhere. Not coincidentally, Gerhard Richter was among the first to show us abstraction and realism as meta-discourses, and his academic training as a Socialist realist is no small contributory factor. It is then Heinrihsone's choice of a rhetorical trope from the various available that becomes interesting. As Thomas Crow posits neo-Conceptualism to be the new genre painting,¹³ Heinrihsone's use of torrid abstraction, with all of its mythopoeic implications in late Modern practice, may prove to be our new history painting.

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NOTES

1. Interview with Franceska Kirke on the nightly news program "Panorama" February 1996.
2. Notably, the best-known Latvian male artists involved with the Russian/Soviet avant-garde - Voldemars Matvejs, Gustav Klucis and Aleksandrs Dreivins — were all married to accomplished artists: Varvara Bubnova, Valentina Kulagina and Nadezhda Udaltsova.
3. Indeed, some have questioned my mention of her in a recent book about Soviet nonconformist art, equivocating as that was. For a fuller discussion of artistic resistance to official Soviet policy, see my "Smaller Measures, To Equal Effect: Nonconformist Art in Latvia," in Alla Rosenfeld and Norton Dodge, eds. *From Gulag to Glasnost: Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union* (New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Rutgers University Press and Thames & Hudson, 1995), pp. 189-200.
4. See Alice Jadine and Harry Blake's translation of Kristeva's "Le Temps des femmes," in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 7 (1981): p. 13-35. Kristeva's comments about changes in concepts of the nation and identity, and how these relate to feminist issues of self-representation, are particularly interesting today in light of renewed nationalism in Eastern Europe.
5. Lucy R. Lippart, "Art in a Multicultural America: An Interview with Lucy R. Lippart by Neery Melkonian," reprinted from *Artspace* (Sept./Oct., 1990) in *The Pink Glass Swan. Selected Feminist Essays on Art*. (New York: The New Press, 1995), p. 304-305.
6. Conversation with the artist, 18 February 1996.
7. Such 'action-painting' can also be found in works by Janis Pauluks, Rita Valnere and Boriss Berzins of the late 1950s. That drips and splashes of pigment were eminently meaningful as decoration contravenes the heroicness of the tachiste splatter in peculiar and interesting ways.
8. Antra Klavina, "Sechs," *Karyatiden: Sechs Malerinnen aus Riga*. [exhib. cat.] ed. Juris Boiko (Bonn: Frauen Museum, 1992), p. 14.
9. Kirke has described the rationale for her pairings in this series of paintings in a letter of 29 February 1996.
10. Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*. (Cambridge, MA, & London: MIT Press, 1993) p. 140.
11. From an unpublished statement by Iltnere of February 1996.
12. Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press; and London: British Film Institute, 1996), pp. 14, 121-122. Mulvey writes, "It is this sexuality of surface, a sexuality that displaces a deep seated anxiety about the female body, that feminist film theorists have recently analyzed as a bridge between the screen and the market place where woman, consumer par excellence, also consumes commodities to construct her own sexual surface into an armour of fetishistic defence against the taboos of the feminine that patriarchy depends on."
13. Thomas Crow, "The Simple Life: Pastoralism and the Persistence of Genre in Recent Art," *October* 63 (Winter 1993): 41 - 67.