

“Strong Women on the March at Seattle Art Fair”

by Kirk Johnson / August 13, 2018



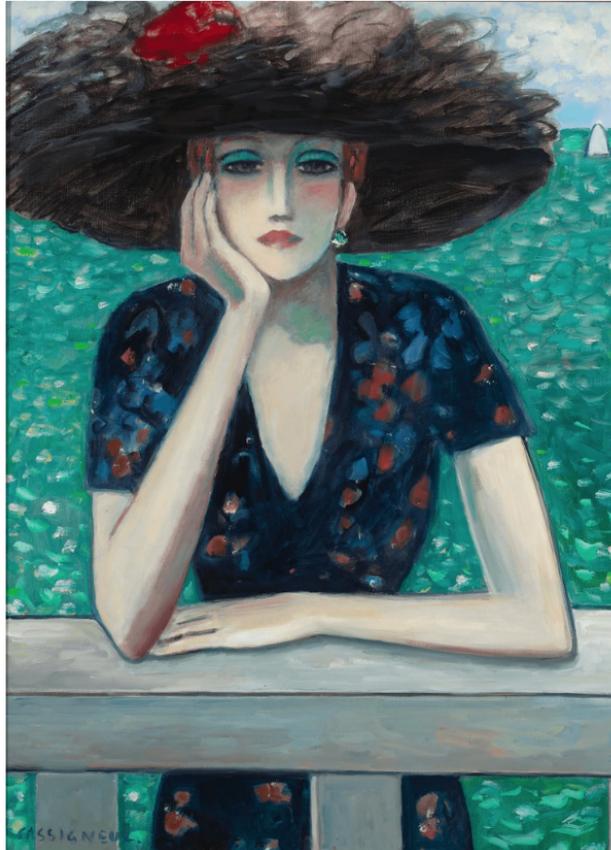
Female-themed art at the Seattle Art Fair included 30 hanging facial sculptures from DNA obtained from Chelsea Manning, the transgender woman and former military analyst, by Heather Dewey-Hagborg. Credit Kyle Johnson for The New York Times

SEATTLE — The woman in the painting by the French artist Jean-Pierre Cassigneul that greeted visitors as they entered the Seattle Art Fair last week looked confident, rich and perhaps a bit bored, accustomed to getting her way without needing to try very hard. She sat, staring straight into the viewer’s eyes, languid hand to her chin, eye shadow matching the emerald green of the sea behind her. The cut of her clothing, and her elaborate hat, said that in her world it was cocktail hour, around 1927.

The prominent placement was no coincidence.

“Images of strong females sell easily,” said William Rau, the president of M.S. Rau Antiques, a New Orleans-based gallery that had staked out a position by the door and positioned the \$198,500 piece front and center. He said that more female art buyers are out buying, and they are responding, as are men, he added, to art showing women in charge. “Whether that’s a ‘me too’ connection or just female equality, I can’t answer,” he added.

Strong women were on the march in many places across the Art Fair here this year — some objectified and up for sale, like Ms. Green Eye Shadow from the Cassigneul painting, called “Devant la Mer,” others making statements of their own in performance pieces or videos. Some of the female-themed art was overtly political, connecting the dots of race and gender, while other pieces were more cryptic, raising questions about the nature of identity and gender itself, like the 30 facial sculptures hanging by threads in air — all derived from extrapolations of DNA obtained from Chelsea Manning, the transgender former military analyst, by the artist Heather Dewey-Hagborg.



“Devant la Mer” by Jean-Pierre Cassigneul. The subject’s gaze seems indicative of someone accustomed to getting her way without needing to try very hard, in alignment with the Art Fair theme of strong women. Creditvia M.S. Rau Antiques

Seattle’s four-year-old fair has from its inception been on a journey of self-invention, as organizers sought to reflect something distinctive of its home city that was, through that same period, on its own roaring trajectory of growth and change. Technology has always been part of the mix, perhaps in a nod to its original sponsor, Paul G. Allen, the entrepreneur and co-founder of Microsoft, or to Seattle itself, where Amazon now dominates much of the economy and has helped make Seattle one of the nation’s fastest growing big cities. This year, for example, robots cruised the fair’s convention space, offering with exquisite gentleness to shake visitors’ hands.

But diversity is a complicated subject in a city where the white male still dominates, especially in the computer-science and engineering world that is Seattle’s economic driver.

And as questions of power relationships and abuse have percolated through Hollywood, politics and business, encouraging artists to make statements of race or gender runs the risk, fair organizers said, of looking cynical or crass, as if you’ve thrown some diversity into the mix after meeting with your consultants, or simply awkward, because there might be no right way to do it.

“Awkward and good are not necessarily diametrically opposed,” said, Max Fishko, the art fair’s director. “There are some moments where it’s good to make it awkward for people.”



Wayne White's "Here Come the Boren Sisters," an installation of puppets representing the Seattle pioneer sisters Mary Ann and Louisa Boren. Credit Kyle Johnson for The New York Times

Wayne White said he certainly felt a little awkward as he prepared for an installation of two 14-foot-tall puppets representing the sisters Mary Ann and Louisa Boren, two largely overlooked women who were among the founding pioneers of Seattle in 1851.

"If you're a man telling a woman's story, you're open for investigation," Mr. White said. "But I love strong women characters in literature and art and this has inspired me."

Then there's the delicate question of history. Suggesting that power imbalances between genders or races is something new in the world, or in art, is simply wrong, said Nato Thompson, the artistic director of the fair, which ran Aug. 2 through Aug. 5 and was co-produced by Vulcan Arts and Entertainment and Art Market Productions.

"I'm not unaware that we live in a very crazy political period, but I think it's also important not to get caught up in the 'nowness,'" he said. Indigenous people, for example, he said, have faced existential issues for generations. "You say, 'this is a tough political time' to an indigenous person, and they would be like, 'huh?'" he said.

One scholar who studies the interconnections of tech and art, the law Prof. Sonia K. Katyal of the University of California, Berkeley, said she thought the Seattle Art Fair stands out for being willing to take risks and ask hard questions. The tech industry, she said, simplifies the question of diversity; art explores the complications.

“In tech, it gets simplified into numbers — how many women and minorities do we have in the company,” said Professor Katyal, who is also a co-director of the Berkeley Center for Law and Technology. Art can look deeper, she said, at both itself and the broader world. “The task of art is for us to say, ‘are these numbers enough,’” she said.

But reimagining the past itself was part of the fair’s mix too. C. Davida Ingram, a Seattle-based artist, presented a multimedia project that reimagined the 1999 World Trade Organization protests in that city with indigenous and black people as central players, and a video of young girls engaged in a beautiful dance, which the viewer only gradually comes to see is taking place in front of a federal immigration detention center.

Charlene Vickers and Maria Hupfield, performance artists and friends, both born and raised in the Anishinaabe culture in Canada, offered a piece that involved a big paper megaphone decorated with traditional symbols and jingles, to convey connection with their forbears (it was inspired by the work of the Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore.)

Ms. Hupfield said that for her, performance art was also an assertion of authority. “We’re the ones who set the terms for the audience,” she said.

But where lines of power, gender and tech converge, things can also be pretty messy.

Mr. White’s puppet installation, for example, featured a rope system that visitors were encouraged to yank on to make the hand-holding Boren sisters dance. It was also in its way a tech statement, as in low-tech. “I love the fact that he made it entirely out of cardboard,” said Greg Canote, 67, a fair visitor who said the Boren sisters had stolen his heart.

The dancing pioneers also provided a stark contrast with a robotic project out in the parking lot by the artist Mark Pauline, whose clanking metal behemoths, looking like something from the dystopian future of the Mad Max movies, prowled their display space treating art as prey. In one performance, the robots, directed by a member of the team, methodically shredded a copy of an Andy Warhol painting.

And the Rau Gallery took “Devant la Mer” home without selling it. One elegantly dressed woman stopped by on the fair’s opening morning, assessed the Cassigneul for a long time, then asked Mr. Rau what his best price offer would be. He scribbled some numbers. She assessed again for a while and kept shopping.