

Why Mid-Career Stagnation Hits Female Artists Harder than Men

 [artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-women-artists-survive-challenges-mid-career-stagnation](https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-women-artists-survive-challenges-mid-career-stagnation)

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Each year, London-based collector Valeria Napoleone sets an acquisition budget for herself, and considers what works she might add to her roughly 400-work-strong collection of art by women, built over more than two decades. In the past five years, she noticed a strange, recurring phenomenon: Works by young artists, often barely out of grad school, commanded similar or higher prices than pieces by accomplished mid-career artists, some of whom she herself had been buying since the late 1990s.

“You have someone in her fifties, with a long story of exhibitions, and the price is the same as an artist who’s just had one or two solo shows in a gallery, so what’s happening here?” said Napoleone. “I’m confronted with this more and more every day.”

Any artist’s mid-career period—which, for this story, is loosely defined as an artist who has been working continuously for at least a decade—can be fraught. But it is especially challenging for female artists, who face deeply ingrained stereotypes and biases, whose work is less easily received by a male-dominated art market, and who may be less inclined to advocate for themselves than their male peers. Interviews with more than a dozen artists, dealers, and arts professionals show how women navigate this tricky terrain—with sheer perseverance, conscious reinvention, and the help and support of friends.

“It is definitely a sensitive time for male and female artists,” said Mary Sabbatino, who, as vice president and partner of Galerie Lelong, has worked with or represented the estates of artists such as Nancy Spero, Etel Adnan, and Ana Mendieta. Collectors will take a chance on younger artists, especially at a lower price point; artists with established museum track records are considered a surer bet. Curators, meanwhile, would prefer to be credited with the discovery of a new voice.

At middle-age, women no longer comfortably conform to the “wild child” image the world expects of an artist.

“In mid-career, artists are kind of in the middle. They’re neither completely vetted, nor are they new,” said Sabbatino.

This is regrettable, said Kathleen Gilrain, executive director of Brooklyn exhibition space Smack Mellon, because at mid-career, an artist is often maturing into a richer, more nuanced phase of their work. Smack Mellon, of which Gilrain is also chief curator, offers exhibition opportunities specifically to mid-career artists without gallery representation, with a focus on women.

“An artist might make a big splash when they’re younger and then they get into this mid-career phase when they’re not the name any more, and then they kind of disappear,” said Gilrain. “Well, they don’t disappear! They’re still making work, and they’re making a lot better work, maybe, than when they made that big splash.”

“The work gets better, artists get better when they keep making art,” she continued. But unfortunately, she added, “there’s a serious ageism problem in the art world, and I see it a lot.”

This problem can be compounded by the lack of clear professional stepping stones in the art world, said Mark Smith, executive director of Axisweb, a nonprofit supporting artists in the U.K.

“In other career paths, you can clearly see, ‘Okay, that’s where I go next,’ and as an artist, that’s not there,” he said. “If you consider an artist’s career, it’s very up and down. One of the problems many artists face when it’s 10 or 15 years in, is they’re no longer the new thing.”

The new generation of artists’ ease with social media and comfort with self-promotion and creating their own opportunities puts older artists at an even greater disadvantage, Smith said.

“They’re not so digitally savvy as younger artists, and don’t have that DIY approach to doing things,” Smith said. “Artists who’ve been doing it for 10 or 15 years, maybe they’re worn down by the process. Younger artists are more switched on to that DIY way of doing things.”

Lynn Hershman Leeson, 77, has worked for most of her life in San Francisco, holding as many as five adjunct teaching jobs at once to support herself and her daughter while pursuing her art career. “It was really scary and grueling, and I was like one step ahead of the land grabbing kid,” she said. “I was almost 50 when I got my first job.... Things like a postage stamp, you had to think twice about whether you’re going to buy that.” Leeson was finally “discovered,” as it were, in 2014 by Gavin Brown’s Enterprise’s then-

staffer Bridget Donahue, who took the time to pore through a binder of materials and DVDs covering Leeson's lifetime of work. In 2015, Donahue opened her eponymous gallery with a mini-retrospective of five decades of Leeson's work, helping jump-start her career in the United States.

Nina Katchadourian, 50, said her career has been marked by female "gate-openers" such as her San Francisco dealer Catherine Clark, as well as curators she has worked with very closely, often on multiple occasions.

"The people who have been the most supportive of my career in the past 10 years have been women," Katchadourian said. "My closest professional relationships have been actually with women...with the ones who have really put their full weight and trust and faith behind what I'm doing. There have been some amazing men, too, but it does sort of strike me now that it's mostly women, actually."

The artist Marilyn Minter, now 70, attributes the divergence between women and men's career paths in part to the power wielded by male collectors, who were unreceptive to the feminist work she and her female colleagues were making as they came of age. This was especially true of collectors of her generation, whose buying power also grew as they approached middle age.

Portrait of Marilyn Minter and Laurie Simmons by Laurel Golio for Artsy.

"I'm not a sociologist or anthropologist, but until recently, the collector base was all men of the same age as that of the women artist...and they never saw a powerful woman. If their mother had a job at all they were nurses, or teachers, or librarians, or housewives," Minter said. "They can't wrap their head around someone being an innovator and being female."

Minter watched as talented men in her cohort of artists were lionized by male collectors and the press, while equally talented women had careers that never quite reached the same peaks, especially in market terms.

"The male collectors, they go after the identified 'art heroes,' the so-called Picassos of the time, the ones that generate all the press," she said, acknowledging that some (she cited Jeff Koons, Christopher Wool, and

Richard Prince) “are very good,” while others, who are “just terrible,” nonetheless get the backing of dealers and auction houses.

“Why isn’t Kara Walker selling for as much as Jeff Koons? Why isn’t Cindy Sherman? They changed art history as much as Jeff Koons did,” Minter said.

Why, indeed. Artists offered a wide array of explanations of how the mid-career experience can challenge women, from the asymmetric social expectations or parenting obligations that hobble many women’s careers, to art-world specific factors such as the myth of the heroic male genius.

“The whole structure of the art world is built on getting a certain kind of commercial and institutional support that has been denied to women,” said

Joan Semmel

, 86. “In the beginning of a career, one can fight against it and get by on just the sheer novelty of them having a woman, that has, quote, ‘talent’ and ability...and but the problem is, how do you get the institutions to support that career?”

The historic worship of male creative genius, Semmel said, paves the way for collectors and museums to buy into men’s work.

“There’s the kind of mythology of the heroic male genius who comes on the scene and pisses in the fireplace,” she said. “It’s a little hard for us to piss on the fireplace. We don’t function quite the same way.”

“People are more comfortable after a certain age with the profile of the woman artist as a crazy old lady.”

Creative genius in women, in the art world’s stereotype, often wears a different frame, Semmel said. In women, genius often takes “the form of the beautiful fabulous woman who’s the lover of whoever and has made these wonderful paintings, or else the madness—it’s wonderful to have the madness in there somehow, that in some way accounts for the genius that this poor woman has.”

That latter aura is most readily ascribed to women in their reckless youth, or in old age;

Laurie Simmons

, 69, believes that “people are more comfortable after a certain age with the profile of the woman artist as a crazy old lady.” But at middle-age, women no longer comfortably conform to the “wild child” image the world expects of an artist.

Mary Kelly

explored this in-between period in a work tellingly titled *Interim Part I: Corpus* (1984–85),

a series of texts on aging, narrated through scenes of female camaraderie, discussions of fashion, a day at the beach preceded by the agony of bikini shopping. At the 40th birthday party of a friend, Kelly wrote, “Sarah interrupts to tell me the leather jacket is lovely but she distinctly remembers that I said I’d never wear one. I confess I finally gave in for professional reasons, that there’s so much to think about now besides what to wear, that the older you are the harder it seems to be to get it right and that the uniform makes it a little easier.”



Installation view of Mary Kelly, *Interim Part I: Corpus*, 1984–85 in Pippy Houldsworth Gallery’s booth at Frieze London, 2018. Courtesy of Pippy Houldsworth Gallery.

Speaking alongside the *Corpus* installation, which was shown [at Frieze London](#) in October, Kelly described how approaching one’s mid-career phase, especially as a woman, makes it harder to conform to the “marketable identity of the artist as younger, dissident” type who “has a drug habit,” which is part of the myth of the artist as a creative Other. “We’re part of the entertainment industry,” Kelly said. The sexism women face is pernicious and grinding. “It’s very hard to even talk about it, because it’s like a thousand blows,” Semmel said. “It happens in increments, in small shots, over and over and over again, in different ways, and a lot of people get discouraged.”

Judith Bernstein—represented by [Kasmin](#) gallery in New York, [The Box](#) in Los Angeles, and [Karma International](#) in Zurich—said the biggest obstacle facing women in the art

world is self-doubt. She cites the writings of

Louise Bourgeois

, another artist famously ignored for most of her career, as inspiration.

"She never stopped making work," Bernstein said. "That is the way to overcome self-doubt, to continue on."



Judith Bernstein's large charcoal drawing, 9' x 12-1/2', entitled "Horizontal", is being censored from the FOCUS show in Philadelphia: "Women's Work - American Art 1974." The show will be held at the Philadelphia Civic Center Museum on April 27 through May 26 and will include 170 works by 86 artists. Cindy Nemser, art critic and editor of The Feminist Art Journal, is the member of the invitational jury who selected Judith Bernstein's work. The Jury was also comprised of Marcia Tucker (Whitney Museum), Lila Katzen (Sculptor), Adelyn Breeskin (National Collection of Fine Arts) and Anne d'Harnoncourt (Philadelphia Museum of Art). The decision to censor this work was made by John Pierron, Executive Director of the Philadelphia Civic Center and its Museum Curator, Marian Aguilera.

The piece was judged, not according to aesthetic standards, but according to an inappropriate legal statute. Mr. Pierron, as quoted in The Philadelphia Daily News, said, "I have yet to see the redeeming social value in the work." This phrasing is usually applied to "porno" material in a court of law and not to works of art. James Joyce ran into this problem, many years ago, when Ulysses was first brought into the States. In the history of art, there have been many erotic works, both iconographic and explicit, that have been displayed and admired for centuries. (Judith Bernstein's metaphors and allusions exist in an art context.) The curators of this museum have acted in an extremely arbitrary and limiting manner in making their decision. Freedom to show one's work is an issue of importance to all artists.

We, the undersigned, protest this action because we feel this issue is crucial and that the work must be reinstated:

Lawrence Alloway
Dore Ashton
Elizabeth C. Baker
Carl R. Baldwin
Liza Bear
Blythe Bohnen
Louise Bourgeois
Miriam Brumer
Lawrence Campbell
Cynthia Carlson
John Coplans
Alvin Demick
Agnes Denes
Janet Fish
Audrey Flack
Peter Frank

Clement Greenberg
Mary Grigoriadis
Nancy Grossman
Thomas B. Hess
Laurace James
Lila Katzen
Joyce Kozloff
Max Kozloff
Pat Lasch
Lucy R. Lippard
Harriet Lyons
Brenda Miller
Mary Miss
Ree Morton
Alice Neel
Cindy Nemser

Linda Nochlin
John Perreault
Lil Picard
Howardena Pindell
Barbara Rose
Irving Sandler
Miriam Schapiro
Willoughby Sharp
Jeanne Siegel
Arlene Slavin
Sylvia Sleigh
Joan Snyder
Marcia Tucker
Judith Van Baron
Angela Westwater
Barbara Zucker

This letter is being sent to you and the other eighty-five artists in the show, as well as some critics and magazine editors. If our petition is to be effective it should be presented to the Philadelphia officials within the next week; consequently, if you are in sympathy, please sign and return immediately.

Philadelphia Civic Center Censorship Petition, 197 Courtesy of Judith Bernstein.

For nearly a quarter-century, from her early forties until her mid-sixties, Bernstein, 76, did not have a solo show. Her radical critiques of male sexuality, as seen in her famous “Screw Drawings,” didn’t earn her many admirers among the male establishment.

“Being a woman, feminist, and making sexual work that critiqued men had its many disadvantages,” Bernstein said. “There were so many mid-career women who were also dead in the water. We did what we had to do to sustain ourselves and our studios. I taught,” she added, though she believes the censorship also affected her academic career. “I never made tenure and was always given adjunct positions.”

The perceptual barriers women face in their mid-career years are often compounded by the demands care burden that comes with parenthood, which, in every country and culture, still falls disproportionately on women. While many female artists describe parenthood as an experience that enriches their lives and deepens their artistic practices, it unquestionably demands time that previously might have gone to the self-promotion and networking that is often critical to career advancement in the relationship-driven art industry. In a 2011 Axisweb survey of 138 artists, half of the respondents said childcare responsibilities had hindered their career; according to Smith, the majority of artists who said that were women.

“It definitely becomes harder, once you have a family and you’re raising kids, to find the time to not only spend time in the studio making your work, but to promote and...[go] out there and [meet] people, the curators and writers that can promote your work,” said Gabriel de Guzman, Smack Mellon’s curator and director of exhibitions.

Men, Semmel said, “could hide [children] more easily. They were able to handle that kind of double life more easily than a woman could, because she was charged with most of the childrearing.” Regardless of how much childrearing a female artist did, the decision to become a parent often changed people’s perceptions.

“I have a list of things male artists said to me that are just so insulting,” said Simmons, whose mid-career period coincided with the birth of her elder child, the director and writer Lena Dunham. “Well, maybe you should find a gallery that’s sympathetic to women with children,” one man told her. “What gallery exactly would that be? The ‘Women With Children Gallery?’” Simmons laughed. She recalled another critic and curator who was known to tell people, “Oh, Laurie’s work was much better before she had children.”

“There was a time when you couldn’t admit you had a child because that would immediately make you ‘not a serious artist,’” remembered Semmel. “Not men of course, but just women. So you hid your children when people came to look at work.”

Natalia Nakazawa, a New York–based artist and the assistant director of EFA Studios at the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, agreed that when an artist’s mid-career period coincides with the raising of small children, it can be challenging.

“It’s the highest point of activity,” said Nakazawa, 36. “The amount of stuff that has to be completed—you have to be at ultimate functionality.”

“There was a time when you couldn’t admit you had a child because that would immediately make you ‘not a serious artist.’”

But in her experience, it pushed her and other mothers she knows to greater heights of creativity, ingenuity, and collaboration, both in life and in art.

“I actually think it’s a very dynamic period, and I think it’s one that...the art world has had the wrong attitude about,” Nakazawa said. “It’s like, ‘Oh, poor you, you have a child, that must suck for you.’”

Nakazawa and her friend Wanda Gala, a performance artist, are both parents. To save on childcare and support each other’s careers, they trade babysitting duties when they need to go out at night and network. Gala drops off her son with Nakazawa if she has to work all night on an installation, or she’ll watch Nakazawa’s three-year-old son while she goes to an opening.

“Let’s face it, the whole art world is based on evening events,” she said, which normally ties up parents or forces them to pay for expensive babysitters. “It clicked on so many levels, and our kids love each other. It was one of those things where it makes sense, if we rely on each other.”

When

Abigail Reynolds

, a Cornwall-based artist in her forties known for her intricate collages, won 2016’s BMW Art Journey award, she saw a marked contrast between her deep ambivalence around leaving her children, then seven and eight, and the reactions of men she spoke to about her upcoming journey, which took her along Silk Road trade routes, photographing and documenting lost libraries.

“They’d be like, ‘Ah great, you can just not have the children with you, you can have all that time on your own!’” she said. “But it doesn’t feel like that for me. It’s not just, ‘Yay, off I go, yippee.’ It’s actually bittersweet, and I’m torn....I noted how many men said that to me, because I actually thought about taking the children with me along the Silk Road, which would have been nuts.”

“Women tend not to leave their children for extended periods over that time,” Reynolds continued. “It’s very hard to do so, because your partner basically has to pick everything up, that’s a big negotiation, that’s a big ask. And partly because you just miss them and you feel like you should be there.”

Reynolds avoids identifying herself as a “middle-aged woman,” the same way she wears vaguely androgynous clothes; biographical details or labels are “a constraint as much as they are useful,” she finds. Middle age, in particular, comes with a set of assumptions wholly at odds with her outlook and personal values.

“I prize flexibility, suppleness, openness, and simple direct enjoyment,” Reynolds said. “None of these qualities do we socially attribute to middle age.”

What sustains men in the rocky mid-career period? The explanations often mirror the experience of their female peers. Instead of exclusion and discrimination, boys’ clubs; instead of childrearing obligations, a partner who will do the lion’s share of the work; instead of self-doubt and discouragement, entitlement and ambition.

“Men were, and still are, much more aggressive,” said Bernstein. “They dominate conversations, and their entitlements and expectations are far greater. This is changing, but it is so entrenched and still present in the art world.”

Leeson has noticed it, too.

“Men have a different kind of entitlement and confidence than I did, and even when I went out and tried, I think I made it worse. I’m not a great schmoozer,” she said. “In fact, once someone was interested in buying something, and then they met me and changed their mind,” she added, an experience that further diminished her appetite for schmoozing. “When you are rejected like that, it just does not build your confidence.”

Plus, men had many more colleagues and peers in the art world, Leeson said: “They had groups, so they met, and they helped each other.” Women weren’t necessarily showing or selling enough to exercise leverage on each other’s behalf.

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Sculptor

Judy Fox

, 61, said the schmoozing came naturally to her when she was younger; she rather enjoyed the openings and parties. The problem arises later, when women approach what comedian Amy Schumer delicately termed their “last fuckable day.”

“Being an artist now is...almost 50 percent celebrity-ness and charm, and in order to get past that, you have to have really strong work,” said Fox. “Men’s charm, aka sexiness, lasts up until they’re 55, whereas women aren’t sexy after 40, 45, and there’s a huge flirtation thing that goes on in the art world that has to do with charming curators.”

Men, Fox added, are also socialized to value professional success more, giving them “a lot more motivation,” in her observation. (Over the years, studies have shown that people in general are uncomfortable with ambitious women, who often face backlash for self-promotion).

Katchadourian was still grappling with these questions in her thirties. Now, coming off of a traveling mid-career retrospective at age 50, she is no longer ambivalent.

“It took me a while to become comfortable with the idea of being ambitious and wanting success and having success when it happens,” she said. “It feels like a different thing if you’ve been working really hard at something for 25 or 30 years.”

“The art world loves young bad boys and old ladies,” Marilyn Minter loves to say.

In recent years, women in their seventies, eighties, nineties, and even hundreds, as well as long-deceased female artists, have been championed by dealers in need of new material to offer collectors and museums belatedly assessing their male-heavy collections.

The attention lavished on the post-menopausal set has not gone unnoticed by women in their mid-career stage.

“As a woman, maybe what I should expect is to be pretty much ignored, and if I’m lucky enough to get to my seventies, ‘Oh, look, this woman’s been making this interesting work for 70 years,’” Reynolds said, gently mocking the “discovery” of women who have been hiding in plain sight.

“Why do we have to play such a long game?” she continued. “And what if you die when you’re 50? You’re fucked because you never got through the bad bit?”

There are signs that the landscape is beginning to shift. Female storytellers, journalists, and politicians are reshaping popular culture and political and public discourse. In the art world, Frieze London has, for the past two years, featured special sections devoted to female artists. Female artists are even making their way into evening auctions, long the dominion of men. When Sotheby’s held an auction in November 2017 featuring nine lots by women out of 72, the auction house billed it as the most women to appear at one of its contemporary evening sales in its history. Most recently, the sale of Jenny Saville’s *Propped* (1992) for \$12.4 million made her the most expensive living female artist.

“And what if you die when you’re 50? You’re fucked because you never got through the bad bit?”

Institutions are actively seeking artists from demographic groups they have ignored in the past. The female

Surrealists

have been dusted off and given museum shows. London’s National Gallery finally acquired its first work by

Artemisia Gentileschi

in July, bringing to 20 the number of works by female artists in its collection of over 2,300 items. In 2017, the Uffizi Gallery announced that it would be showing more work by female artists. In 2016, 197 years after its founding, the Museo del Prado held its first show by a female artist,

Clara Peeters

, and will open another female-focused show in 2019, with the work of 16th-century painters

Sofonisba Anguissola

and

Lavinia Fontana

. These developments establish women and other previously marginalized groups as part of the canon, creating more opportunities for today’s artists.

There are also several prizes dedicated to supporting women in their mid-career period. Smack Mellon offers shows to mid-career female artists. The three-year-old Freelands Award gives £100,000 to a regional arts organization to present an exhibition (including new work) by a mid-career female artist; £25,000 of that is paid directly to the artist.

Melanie Cassoff, managing director of the Freelands Foundation, came from a corporate background before heading up the arts organization. She had expected female artists to face similar challenges as women in other parts of the workforce, especially around parenting obligations and access to childcare, but hadn’t realized the art world presented its own unique challenges.

“I had no idea that the concept of mid-career was a very different thing for artists, male and female,” Cassoff said. “It had to be explained to me—that even though you can emerge and make your name, unless you are constantly reinventing yourself, you fall by the wayside.”

In bestowing the inaugural award—to Scottish artist Jacqueline Donachie and Scotland’s Fruitmarket Gallery—the founder of Freelands, Elisabeth Murdoch, noted that despite Donachie’s prominence in Glasgow’s booming art scene, she had never in 25 years of work had a comprehensive exhibition spanning new and old work. In its second year, the

award went to Lis Rhodes, who is in her seventies and has been making films since the 1970s, and Nottingham Contemporary.

“The art world loves young bad boys and old ladies.”

This past year, Susan Unterberg, the philanthropist behind the longstanding prize Anonymous Was a Woman—which gives 10 \$25,000 grants annually to women over 40—revealed her identity for the first time. Unterberg, 77, who began her career as a photographer in her thirties after marrying and raising two daughters, said she had not been encouraged by those around her to pursue her practice.

“The way I grew up, I wasn’t supposed to have a career, I wasn’t supposed to be an artist, I wasn’t supposed to sell work, which I’m sure was true of a lot of people of my generation, living on the Upper East Side,” she said, referring to the New York neighborhood that includes some of the wealthiest zip codes in the country.

The recipient of a large inheritance, Unterberg was able to work on her art without worrying about finances. But she said winners of the prize, which is funded through a foundation she and her sister inherited from their father, have also said the award for them was “not as much about the monetary need as the personal need for recognition.” By coming forward, she hopes to be a more vocal advocate for women supporting one another.

And a younger generation of female artists are finding their mid-career period to be as fruitful as any other.

Amy Sherald

was in her mid-forties when she painted Michelle Obama’s portrait for the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. Demand soared for her work, and Sherald was subsequently picked up by global mega-gallery Hauser & Wirth. Katchadourian says her mid-career period has brought peace with her own ambitions, and intimacy with the questions that ground her work.

“I am finding 50 much more comfortable and pleasant than 30,” she said.

For

Yamini Nayar

, 43, a New York-based artist working in different media, the mid-career period has been one of risk and growth. She left her part-time job at a conservation studio when she became pregnant, and turned to making art full-time. While well-meaning colleagues warned her about becoming a parent, she, like Reynolds, found that parenthood has enriched her work, leading her to new ways of looking, feeling, and seeing.

“I can see the shift toward the body and thinking more bodily,” Nayar said. “I deal a lot with architecture and faith and buildings, but the figure and the body [have] become such a strong part of my thought process now....It’s really about experiencing it as the body moving through space, and being more in touch with that aspect of myself.”

In fact, Nayar said that until she was reached for this story, she was wholly unaware that mid-career anxieties were common.

“I don’t feel like I’m slowing down,” she said. “I don’t have that sense at all.”

Anna Louie Sussman

Header image: Portrait of Marilyn Minter and Laurie Simmons by Laurel Golio for Artsy.