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## The X Factor: Is the Art Market Rational or Biased?

By GREG ALLEN

**I**N the early 1950's Lee Krasner, not yet famous but already a promising Abstract Expressionist painter, asked Hans Hofmann, her former teacher, to help her land a gallery show. He offered her the biggest compliment he could: "This is so good," he said of her work, "you would not believe it was done by a woman." Nonetheless, he declined. Female artists were a relative rarity at the top galleries, and the most famous painters of the day were all men. The disparity was even more extreme at museums, and when paintings came up for sale, those by male artists fetched by far the higher price. By 1989, the artist-activists known as the Guerrilla Girls, founded to call attention to these disparities, were posterizing SoHo with a list of 67 women and artists of color whose work could be purchased with the record \$17.7 million one Jasper Johns painting brought at auction.

Flash forward to spring 2005. With the Guerrilla Girls preparing to exhibit in the first Venice Biennale overseen by two women, a casual observer might think the art world is at the vanguard of gender equality. But next week's contemporary art auctions, one of the most prestigious art markets in the world, tell a very different story indeed. Of the 861 works that Christie's, Sotheby's and Phillips de Pury, & Company are offering over three days starting May 10, a mere 13 percent, are by female artists. Sixty-one pieces have each been assigned an estimated price of \$1 million or more; of those, only 6 are by women: a marble sculpture by Louise Bourgeois, 2 grid canvases by the late Minimalist Agnes Martin and 3 paintings by the South African artist Marlene Dumas.

The first two are venerated figures in the canon of contemporary art, whose work has been shown and taught for decades; Ms. Dumas is a relative newcomer whose recent price jumps have attracted considerable attention. The male ranks of the million-plus club, by comparison, include those of some lesser-known contemporary artists. "When you're talking about the market, there may be a glass ceiling," Irving Sandler, an art historian and expert on the New York school, said. "It's not as if women aren't recognized; they are. But look at your top auction people, and there is a vast discrepancy between what the men get and what the women get."

THOUGH Krasner and her fellow Abstract Expressionist Joan Mitchell were overlooked in their youth, curators and historians now recognize them as nearly as important as male contemporaries like Franz Kline, Philip Guston, or Willem de Kooning. Yet their paintings still sell for a small fraction of what the men's command.

At next week's auctions, "When They Were Gone," which Mitchell painted in 1977, is estimated to sell for \$400,000 to \$600,000. Works by Guston and Kline are estimated at \$3 million to \$4 million. The de Kooning on offer is expected to fetch \$10 million to \$12 million.

Nor is this disparity a lingering relic of less enlightened times. Take two contemporary artists, Damien Hirst and Rachel Whiteread, who both came to prominence in the 1990's as so-called Y.B.A.'s: Young British Artists. Both have won the Tate museum's Turner Prize: Ms. Whiteread in 1993 and Mr. Hirst in 1995. And both have made their way into high-profile collections. Next week Christie's is offering an important early sculpture by Ms. Whiteread, a fiberglass and rubber cast of two mattresses from 1991, which has been on extended loan to the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin. Christie's suggests a value of \$400,000 to \$600,000. Meanwhile, Mr. Hirst's most famous early sculpture, a tiger shark suspended in a glass tank of formaldehyde, from 1992, sold in January for \$13.3 million.

According to conventional wisdom, the value of an artist's work increases when she has shows in prestigious museums. But as Mark Fletcher, a private art adviser who has dealt in work by both artists, said, "Whiteread has an extraordinary, esteemed museum exhibition and patronage history, but it's Hirst, which has little such institutional support, which does extremely well in the marketplace."

One more example. Since three emerging figurative painters - Luc Tuymans of Belgium and the Americans John Currin and Elizabeth Peyton - were exhibited together at the Museum of Modern Art in 1997, they, too, have come to seem almost like classmates, all heralded as leading figures in painting's contemporary resurgence. The two men's canvases have sold for more than \$1 million. Meanwhile, Ms. Peyton's 1996 oil portrait of a languorous John Lennon is estimated by Christie's at \$200,000 to \$300,000. And even that is a lot more than the current record price for her work: \$136,000, set in June 2002.

Art defies head-on comparison. Forget apples and oranges; how does one judge the value of Ms. Whiteread's cast fiberglass and rubber mattress relative to Mr. Hirst's deteriorating shark? Or of Maurizio Cattelan's sculpture of a taxidermied ostrich compared with Martin's canvas with the faintest of graphite grids on it? The

contemporary art market has at least one frustratingly simple answer: price. And from that perspective, the comparison is unmistakable: art made by women is regarded less highly than art made by men.

The problem, of course, started long before the current boom in the art market, with its dizzying seven-figure prices. Through the middle of the last century, many galleries simply refused to show the work of female artists; others reportedly had quotas. There were exceptions, most notably, perhaps, Andre Emmerich, whose gallery represented Helen Frankenthaler, Dorothea Rockburne, Beverly Pepper and Anne Truitt, among others. But as Paula Cooper, the longtime dealer and SoHo pioneer, recalls, "Until about 25 years ago, women just weren't shown that much."

Even those who were found that success was dependent on networking in heavily male-dominated cliques. Some women chose to withdraw from the market, even as their reputations were rising. "Both Lee Bontecou and Jo Baer," Ms. Cooper said, "who were two of the best-known artists in the second half of the 60's, just split. They just left because they just didn't want to have that kind of life or be in that kind of situation."

Such obstacles slowed or prevented women from establishing a strong base of collectors. Agnes Gund, the former president of the Museum of Modern Art and a major collector of postwar art, said that over the last 15 years, at least half of the artists whose work she has collected are women. "But if you go back to 1968 when I started collecting seriously, I hardly have any. There weren't that many women doing artwork then, and I would say that it's very hard to collect women when there really weren't that many available." When she asked why they were so scarce, she recalls, "dealers would say to me, 'I just can't sell women artists as well as males,' or 'I can't sell them for enough.' And sometimes these would be women saying that."

In 1972, the feminist art historian Linda Nochlin published an influential essay that linked women's lack of parity in the art world with the biases women faced in the culture at large. Since then, each successive generation of female artists has found the playing field a bit more level. "I think some of the best painters in the country are women now, and that's a change," said Elizabeth Murray, whose large, intricately shaped paintings have been shown and collected widely since the 1970's.

Kiki Smith, whose sculptural investigations of the human body came to prominence in the 1980's, said, "For younger women artists, there've been tremendous inroads in economic compensation that's more equal to younger men."

Ms. Bourgeois, now 93, rejects the idea that her art has ever suffered from bias. "No, it hasn't," she said assuredly. "I don't see any difference in the art, whether men's or

women's."

But such defiance is rare. In more cases, female artists who try to be optimistic find the exercise has its limits. "When you compare yourself, you really have to look within your own generation," Ms. Smith said. "And then you have to say there's a difference between the economic value and the cultural value of the women's work. It's a tremendous difference. You see that over and over again."

And you see it across generations. "It's true!" Ms. Peyton said when asked about the persistence of a male-female price gap. "One reason may be the way women can be marketed by their dealers. There's something about a great male painter; it's an ideal. Also, maybe women are concerned with different things, and so they're making different kinds of work. Maybe the market thinks that's less valuable."

The video artist and photographer Shirin Neshat said the distinction may be greater at auction than in galleries. Auction houses are often reselling early works, and only the seller, not the artist, sees the profit. A gallerist, on the other hand, often has a personal relationship with the artists he or she represents, and focuses on placing (the dealer's term for selling) work in collections that will enhance the artist's reputation as well as pay the bills.

Still, as the Minimalist painter Ms. Rockburne cautioned: "There's something with how this ricochets. Because women's work is often undervalued in the auction houses, that feeds down into the gallery market; it gets to be a bad cycle."

And that cycle can be hard for even the most determined artists to ignore. "Somebody told me once, when the auctions started to be a big deal," Ms. Murray said, " 'You're never going to be anywhere until one of your paintings goes for over \$500K.' I'm beginning to think there's something to that at this point, it's so much about money."

WHEN asked if Sotheby's considers an artist's gender when setting the estimate for her work, Tobias Meyer, the director of the auction house's contemporary art department, replied: "Not at all. We base our estimates on the quality of the artist's work and on their importance."

His counterpart at Christie's, Amy Cappellazzo, concurs. "Estimates are based on the overall position of the artist's market," she said, "and the quality of that particular work of art relatively. Gender is never a factor."

For Mr. Meyer, the recent art boom has had a liberating effect. "The bourgeoisie now wants to buy contemporary art; they're not afraid of it any longer," he said. "Now

you see something that's really only based on talent, and the market is based on that." When Eva Hesse's "Unfinished, Untitled, or Not Yet" (1966) was sold at auction in 1997, he said, its \$2.2 million price held the record for a female artist for more than half a decade. But in just the last two years, the record has been toppled three times: by Martin (\$2.6 million), Mitchell (\$2.69 million) and most recently Ms. Dumas (\$3 million.) "It's no longer about gender," he said, "it's about quality. This has finally broken."

As for this year's auctions, he said: "Are there more male artists in the catalog than female artists? Yes, but it doesn't reflect at all negatively on the quality of the work in the sale. And in my whole career, I've never heard anyone say they bought a work because it was by a man or a woman."

Ms. Cappellazzo paints a somewhat less rosy picture. Among artists in their early 30's, "There's definitely a parity in gallery representation now," she said. "But if you look at even a generation up from there, at artists in their 40's, it looks vastly different." As for the paucity of women whose work has broken the million-dollar mark at auction, she said, "it looks relatively extreme."

But noting the many challenges that every artist faces - having the right dealers, the support of the right curators, the right placement, the right reviews, the right pacing - Ms. Cappellazzo wondered if some female artists are, "by their very nature, less" - here she paused - "Machiavellian about their careers."

By any stretch, the factors at work here are complex. But are they really as complex as these theories suggest? Can they only be understood in terms of this precise moment in the history of the economy? Or only in the context of debates about the emotional differences between women and men?

Michael Plummer is the president and chief operating officer of Fernwood Art Investments, which is raising a fund of reportedly \$100 million or more for long-term investments in art. Mr. Plummer employs a complex analytical methodology to explain how artistic reputation and value are created. But when he talks about male versus female artists, he raises a pretty basic question. "While women have taken positions of prominence in the art world," he said, "collecting remains a male-dominated activity, and it appears that's going to continue for some time. I would ask what might be the impact of having the large part of the customer base be men."

Of all the world's markets, the art market is perhaps the most intrinsically subjective. No one calculates the price of a painting by tallying the time it took and multiplying that by the artist's hourly rate. Nor do raw materials count for much: expensive paintings are, more or less, made of the same stuff as cheap paintings. For

all the experts and connoisseurs and scholars and analysts, when it comes right down to it, the price of a work of art is based on what buyer and seller agree it's worth, and that's all. And as in almost every other field where money changes hands in society, women's production has been and continues to be valued below that of men, except in this field, the difference is sometimes tenfold or more.

Asking why women's art sells for less than men's elicits a long and complex answer, with endless caveats, entirely germane qualifiers and diverse, sometimes contradictory reasons. But there is also a short and simple, if unpopular, answer that none of those explanations can trump. Women's art sells for less because it is made by women.

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