

NG ART GALLERY MEDIA RELEASE

SUSAN O'DOHERTY - IT'S A MAN'S WORLD

ARTIST STATEMENT



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My last show *The Perfect Woman* dealt with observations on women's identity, gender inequality and self-esteem. This process led me towards the parallel world of male identity, male preoccupations and the seeming obsessions of this alternate universe. While this uncovering was taking place I reflected on the English art critic Brian Sewell's statement (*Sunday Independent*, 6th July 2008) that only men were capable of aesthetic greatness and that there had never been a first rank woman artist. Sewell believed that the art market is not sexist. "The likes of Bridget Riley and Louise Bourgeois are of the second and third rank."

Art should not be a numbers game, where women compete with men for "rank." What is there to gain by comparing one artist with another, whether male or female? I saw Sewell's beliefs as perhaps characteristic of a male ego that saw celebrity and market success as the sole arbiters of quality. But doesn't a work of art have its own voice, with its own meanings and intentions? My mind played with the great women artists I could immediately name to refute his comment - Georgia O'Keeffe, Frida Kahlo, Lee Krasner, Joan Mitchell, Helen Frankenthaler, Cindy Sherman, Elisabeth Cummings, and Emily Kngwarreye; and further back to Clarice Beckett, Margaret Preston, Vanessa Bell and Barbara Hepworth.

Sewell did note that maybe child-bearing was a factor but it seemed to me there were other social forces at work. Marcel Duchamp's urinal and bicycle wheel had changed the way we look at art but imagine for a moment if the same response would have greeted a woman who placed a toilet in an art gallery. Possibly she would have been considered unhinged. Art reflects society and women are not given the same latitude in any arena of power, be it politics or painting.

Other commentators have lamented the fact there are very few women in the top 50 artists at auction and that even so-called 2nd rate male artists achieve better figures than artists like Louise Bourgeois. But who is disappointed - the women or their dealers? Bourgeois' dealer claims that women "are the bargain in today's market" but such statements only pander to the notion that art can be calibrated on a financial scale, linking it to the aggressive, competitive, "macho" world of the stock market. These financial inequities mirror inequality in business, religion, politics, the military, music and sport. One can't deny that men have been great artists, inventors, discoverers, explorers, composers, writers and scientists. They have been the risk takers, encouraged, applauded and some would say pressured or coerced by society to be so.

These reflections were a stepping off point for this body of work. It is not about judging men but rather reflecting what I see. *It's a Man's World* is the observational flipside of *The Perfect Woman*. For me it is about the world we all occupy.