

Femininity, Front and Center: Chicago Shines the Spotlight on Female Artists

Introduction

This spring, three of the most important cultural sites in Chicago explicitly placed female artistic narratives at the forefront of their programming, either through special exhibitions or group shows. The Art Club of Chicago hosted the exhibition *Mina Loy: Strangeness Is Inevitable*. The Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago featured works by several pivotal female artists in the show *Descending the Staircase*. The Art Institute of Chicago curated the groundbreaking survey *Radical Clay: Contemporary Women Artists from Japan*. Through their critical efforts, these institutions have promoted the ongoing effort to deconstruct the patriarchal canon that is still prevalent in the art world.

The collected writings below are united both geographically and by their shared emphasis on female identity in art. All three passages discuss how each exhibition explored the aesthetic materialization of the feminine form—via materiality (or lack thereof), resistance against tradition, or even throughout the fluctuations of an entire career.

These reflections elucidate how the Arts Club, the Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Art Institute highlighted femininity—and a myriad of its manifestations, contours, and contradictions—in their recent presentations.

Entry 1

Style in the Strange: The Arts Club of Chicago presents an ambitious biography of artist and writer Mina Loy



Installation view, *Mina Loy: Strangeness Is Inevitable*

It's not difficult to paint a picture of “the modern woman”—someone who is independent, accomplished, strong, caring, etc. Yet, we often have trouble pinpointing specific, real-life sources for this concept. Who, if anyone in particular, can we posit as a trailblazing example of “the modern woman”? This question becomes all the more challenging as female figures of the sort have historically been cast away from the dominant cultural canon.

Mina Loy (b. 1882, d. 1966) was an artist, writer, lamp designer, and overall multi-hyphenate. Despite her involvement in a vast variety of creative mediums, as well as her known affiliations

with several big names in culture (namely Marcel Duchamp, Gertrude Stein, and Peggy Guggenheim, among others), Loy's name had not surfaced as a hallmark of the modernist movement until only recently.

Originally curated by Jennifer R. Gross and exhibited at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art, the exhibition *Mina Loy: Strangeness Is Inevitable* serves as the first monographic public compilation of Loy's artistic and literary careers. Arranged by chronological sections that delineate major stages of her life, it contains over 80 paintings, drawings, and constructions by Loy, plus several photographs, texts, and additional ephemera either by the artist herself or otherwise relevant to her work. As Loy cries out "Chicago! Chicago!" in her poem *Widow's Jazz*, the exhibition finds a home this spring at the Arts Club of Chicago.

The most immediate thing to note about *Strangeness Is Inevitable* is the sheer breadth of material it offers visitors. Loy's fashion designs, dreary mixed-media collages, poems (which are occasionally transcribed onto the gallery walls themselves), provocative photographs, and surrealist paintings cohabit the space. The presence of Loy's identity is present in each and every object displayed—whether that be in a candid image of Marcel Duchamp wearing a hat she designed or a rare painting abstracting mythological allegories.



Mina Loy, *Untitled (Surreal Scene)*, ca. 1935



Denise Browne Hare, *Marcel Duchamp Wearing "Sexy" Crown, Designed by Mina Loy*, ca. 1955

In a relatively futile attempt (at least within one visit) to contextualize Loy's life as much as possible, one is prone to engage with the textual and historical documentation in the exhibition more than Loy's actual artworks. While it is quite a curatorial challenge to take on a coveted yet canonically undermined figure like Loy, such an information overload (and not to mention of all kinds—visual, textual, biographical, literary, etc.) made the potential for a viewer to understand who “Mina Loy: artist” was a realistically insurmountable venture.

Perhaps, however, that was the exhibition's self-selected functionality, so to speak; to provide a comprehensive reserve of Mina Loy scholarship that has otherwise never been organized. Rather than making a succinct point about how Loy contributed to the radical contemporary of “the modern woman”, it emphasizes her incredibly multifaceted identity. Without this collection of records from her life, perhaps this identity would have been lost to time. It offers Loy at her fullest—her undeniably undefinable self—for viewers to decipher in their own ways while retaining an awareness of her complex nature in the foreground.

Despite the ambitious magnitude of its contents, *Mina Loy: Strangeness Is Inevitable* offers a plethora of objects and artifacts that any art-goer, ranging from newcomers to Loy's oeuvre to experts in her work, can and should encounter. In its assertion of Loy's far-reaching creative abundance and diverse individuality, it preserves that elusive quality frequently present in our perceptions of artists and, to some degree, of “the modern woman.”

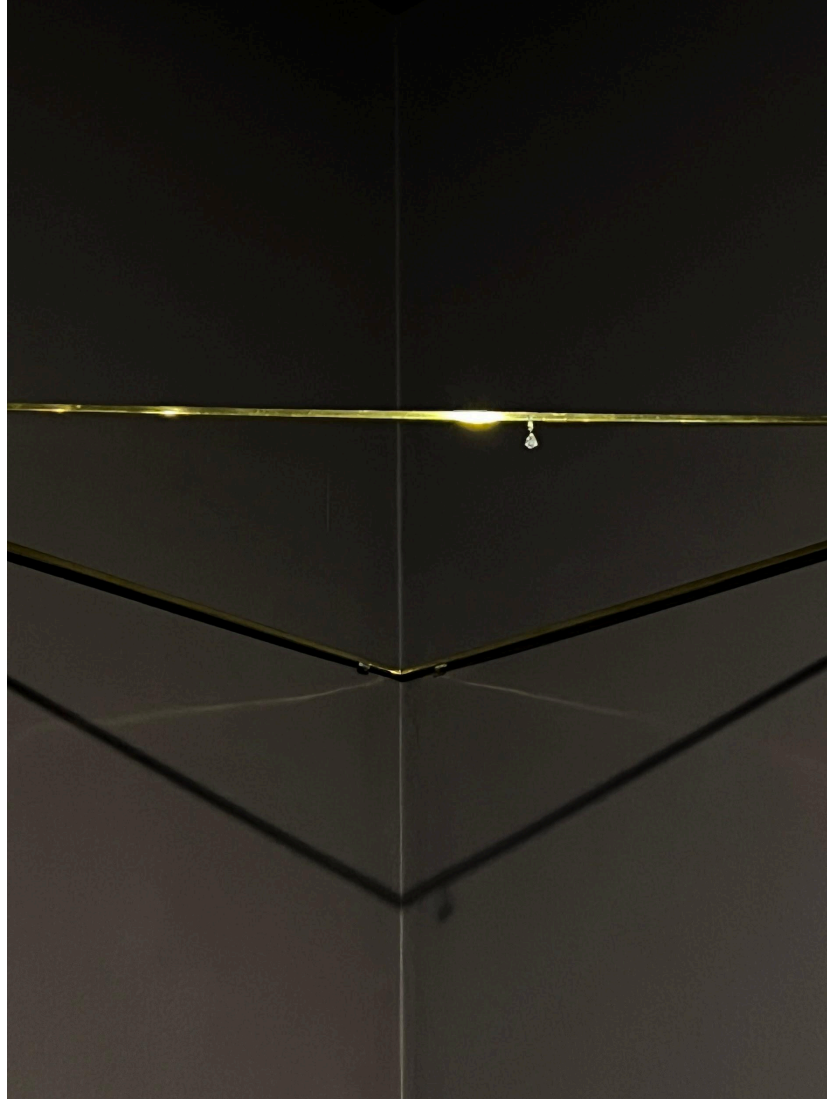
Mina Loy: Strangeness Is Inevitable is on view at The Arts Club of Chicago from March 19 – June 8, 2024.

Entry 2

**The Other Woman: Searching for what is missing from Tania Pérez Córdova's
*We Focus On a Woman Facing Sideways***



Tania Pérez Córdova, *We Focus On a Woman Facing Sideways*, 2013-17
Brass, Swarovski Crystal drop earring, and a woman wearing the other earring



Tania Pérez Córdova, *We Focus On a Woman Facing Sideways*, 2013-17 (detail)

Two make a pair. Yet in the case of the sculpture entitled *We Focus On a Woman Facing Sideways* (2013-17) by Tania Pérez Córdova, the codependency intrinsic between parts of a whole is instead resisted by its absent party. Part sculpture and part performance, the piece is composed of a hung brass ribbon adorned with a singular Swarovski earring, plus the figurative presence of the second earring's wielder (aptly described as "a woman wearing the other earring"). As such, it presents two images of a woman: one physical, the other abstract.

Córdova's piece can be encountered at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago as part of the exhibition *Descending the Staircase*. Divided into four categories (Action, Objecthood, Form, and Mind), the exhibition considers the various ways in which the human body is represented in art, and primarily sourced works from the museum's permanent collection. Córdova's piece lands

in the "Action" box, given the activity implied by the existence of the other Swarovski-clad woman.

Formed precisely for the indentation of a corner and installed at a height beyond our reach, *We Focus On a Woman Facing Sideways* materializes a female figure and suspends her position for our gaze. She remains static—subordinated to her dynamic counterpart. As viewers, we can't help but appreciate the only part of her we have access to: the gleam of her crystal. As its name rightfully suggests, the sculpture posits that jewelry designs for women enforce their value determination based on appearance—their adorned physicality.

Despite the obvious restraints imposed by the object on the figure it presents, particularly its insistence on 2D female beauty, the “woman wearing the other earring” nonetheless roams free, or so we can assume. This woman is not confined to the triangulating structure of her complement. Rather, her movements are unrestricted, occupying any and all facings—her and her earring, that is.

Córdova's sculpture-performance hybrid, in simultaneously harnessing demonstration and obscurity, combats derivative views of the female body. It presents both a constructed and an imagined female figure, yet the latter is much more interesting to ponder. Who is she? What is she doing? What we can deduce for certain is that this woman—denoted as “other” and invisible to us—nonetheless is autonomous within her own realm.

Descending the Staircase is on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago from Dec 16, 2023 to Aug 25, 2024.

Entry 3

Resistance via Production: The Art Institute of Chicago surveys the counter-hegemony of female Japanese clay artists



Hattori Makiko, *Wandering*, 2012
Porcelaneous stoneware

It's quite an irregular group. Some are ugly. A few are beautiful. Some appear to be artificial, yet also feel like they must be sourced from the natural world. Others are impressively hyperrealistic.

The mesmerizing objects in *Radical Clay: Contemporary Women Artists from Japan*, a special exhibition currently up at the Art Institute of Chicago, comprise a rather eclectic collective.

Curated by Janice Katz, Roger L. Weston Associate Curator of Japanese Art, the exhibition features 40 unique sculptures by 36 different female artists. From grotesque nondescript body masses, to intricate geometric masterpieces, to perfect imitations of cloth, the exhibition presents visitors with a breathtaking array of objects just oozing with novelty, craftsmanship, and detail.

Through the idiosyncrasies of its selected works, *Radical Clay* explores innovation in ceramic sculpting. These objects embody the ramifications of the art historical canon in and of itself. As the exhibition literature posits, the artists displayed pertain to a frequently contested role as female ceramicists in a society where the pursuit of an art practice, especially such a physical one, is more commonly appreciated from the opposite sex.

For the artists included in *Radical Clay*, the historical context they occupy in Japan surfaces through their counter-hegemonic creations. These makers comment on their positionalities as women in a particular artistic discipline by going against the grain of ceramics tradition and working in opposition to the patriarchy within art history. They reclaim feminine iconography and harness masculine images. They demonstrate delicate and beautiful craft as well as harsh and menacing abstractions. In defying convention (and instead constructing frankly strange objects) while occupying an underrepresented positionality, these radical makers highlight a facet of the historical narrative that would otherwise remain invisible.

The thesis of *Radical Clay*, one that it argues very well, seems to be that history permeates through the actions of the counterculture. To be different is to reflect on the environment—physical, metaphorical, social—where one stands.

Radical Clay: Contemporary Women Artists from Japan is on view at the Art Institute of Chicago until June 3, 2024