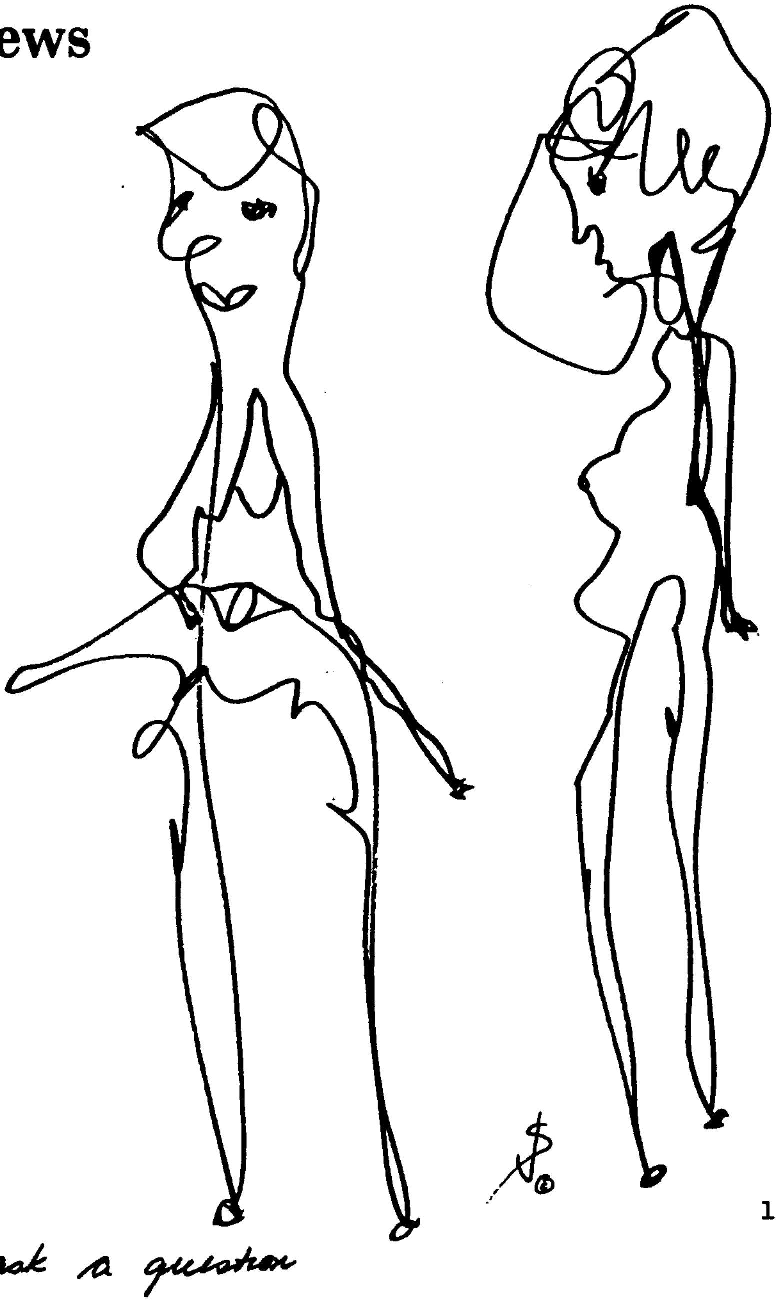
Reports and Reviews



I was allowed to ask a question

Women Artists and Germaine Greer: An Interview

by Grace Glueck

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The following interview with Germaine Greer appeared in the 28 October 1979 issue of *The New York Times Book Review*. *Greer recently has published* *The Obstacle Race: The Fortune of Women Painters and Their Work* *(New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), a review of which will appear in the next issue of* *Atlantis*. *The Editors of* *Atlantis* *wish to thank* *The New York Times Book Review* *for permission to reprint the following interview.*

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The world has not heard much from Germaine Greer, the Australian-born feminist, since the fanfare died down over her first book, "The Female Eunuch," in the early 1970's. That feisty and ardent polemic, which held that women had been castrated--deprived of their true sexual identity--to render them more docile in a male-ordered society, brought Miss Greer international fame and a respected place in the ranks of feminist writers, as well as a slew of more dubious dividends: public praise from Henry Miller, a Town Hall debate with Norman Mailer, endless appearances on television talk shows and a good deal of money, which she now says has been drained away by taxes and bad investments. Although she has been offstage since the flap over "Eunuch," she has not been idle. A woman of ferocious energies who holds a Ph.D. in literature from Cambridge, she has managed over the last eight years, between bouts of teaching and journalism, cooking and gardening, to devote a good deal of time to producing "The Obstacle Race." The book was sparked, she says, by the Town Hall debate with Mr. Mailer.

A presence slightly larger than life, by virtue of her six-foot height and extraordinarily vivid personality, Miss Greer is currently teaching poetry to graduate and undergraduate students at the University of Tulsa, a new, apparently enjoyable turf where "they laugh at my jokes." She has also produced a book on gardening (made up of pieces she has written under the pseudonym Rose Blight for the British magazine Private Eye), to be published in England at the same time as "The Obstacle Race." And she is beginning another book, "The Politics of Human Fertility," which deals with population control. Visiting New York on a recent weekend, she was unreluctantly persuaded to air her views on the volatile subject of women artists.

Q. It's a rather rarefied sphere of feminism, the problem of women artists. What got you involved in it?

A. I wanted to do a book on women and creativity, and since I've always been interested in painting, I decided to focus on that aspect of it. But I found that the intermediate work--you know, what would give people some insight into what women were doing in the field--just wasn't there. There was nowhere I could send them to find out what the paintings of, say, Vigée-Le-Brun were like. So I thought, well, what I'll do is, I'll hire some researchers and write a dictionary of women painters. And we'll use it as a reference book for my work on women's creativity. But do you think I could find a backer for a dictionary of women painters that would be just an unassuming reference book? "No, no," they said. "We don't want that." Because the selling point, of course, was me. They wanted a book written by me. I had done one already, and my name had to be exploited, I suppose. They didn't want this dictionary, which would have been an absolutely rock-solid reference book.

Then, during this time, onto the market came books that--with some brilliant exceptions--perpetuated all these idées reçus about 20 women painters of whom everybody's heard more or less, with terribly infantile commentary. Also what was coming out in the way of polemics about women's painting was so second-rate that it didn't advance the argument a step. I got to thinking, we can't go on like this. I can't leave it like this. I have to do it myself.

Q. Have you always had an interest in painting?

A. Well, when I was at school in Australia, I studied art until I was ready to go to the university. I was a very facile draftsman when I was 16. But by the same token I was convinced I was no good at it, and so I gave it up. Then I'm also aware of painting as part of being middle-class and being born into a certain culture, I suppose.

And I think my interest comes partly from something else: When I was at the University of Melbourne, I studied a lot at the Melbourne Public Library, which was in the same building as the Victoria National Gallery. It had beautiful things, so when I couldn't work for various reasons, because I was bored or tired, I used to walk and walk in the gallery. So it just sank into my eyeballs. I really got hot for all the painterly painters. And you know, the funny thing is, it became involved in my mind, and still is, with sexual pleasure--I was a 50's virgin. Looking at the Rubens got all involved with sex because someone was usually watching me looking at the Rubens. Then I'd go back to work quite calm and happy as if I'd had some sort of orgasm through my eyes in the gallery.

Q. You've also said that the book was sparked by your confrontation with Norman Mailer at Town Hall in 1971, when you and other feminists held a "dialogue" on women's liberation with him. Can you explain?

A. Well, in that debate I was only interested in talking to Mailer as a male artist on behalf of female artists because it's so depressing, this supermale view of the artist. It's so alienating, so profoundly wrongheaded. It seemed to me at that time that the really important question was the one of women's creative potential. And it also seemed to me then very clear that what you have to do is make it obvious to people that the creative potential of women has never been realized. I'll give you a parallel: the Jews. You know, despite the prohibition against graven images in the Jewish religion, there were Jewish painters in the European tradition.

Q. But not many.

A. Nevertheless, there were. The German court painter Anton Raphael Mengs [1728-79], for example, was a Jew. But like all Jews who wanted careers as painters--and they had to be mad even to want to get into it--he had to pretend to be Christian. You could not get a court commission if you were a Jew. If you consider the Jews who did emerge in that cultural situation, it's obvious that they're going to be at a disadvantage. They're going to be followers, not initiators. They're going to have triumphs of fashion rather than actually advancing the forms of expression, which takes genius to do. Genius is the most fragile thing of all, and it may be that Anton Raphael Mengs started off as a genius; but by the time he'd followed his personal bent through all the hurdles that faced a Jew in the Christian world, he was just a fashionable painter. The energy was gone.

Q. One of the things I like about your book is that you really don't hesitate to say when a woman painter wasn't all that marvelous. You don't seem to feel it's necessary to overstate your case.

A. I tried very hard not to. I tired very hard to make the right claim. Once, for example, I got a letter asking whether I had ever heard of the Italian painter Barbara Longhi [1552-1638]. You'd have thought that people had got Barbara Longhi's paintings, locked them up and pretended she never existed. The letter said that Barbara Longhi was another Leonardo da Vinci. So I wrote back saying, you're quite wrong; her paintings are perfectly well known, very carefully preserved at great expense to the Commune of Ravenna, and anyone who thinks she's another Leonardo needs his eyes examined. I happen to think that Leonardo's overrated, but even so, he doesn't even paint in a style that's remotely parallel to Longhi. What interests me about her is her refuge in primitivism. It gives the work a strange kind of strength, a purity. It's quite useless to make these wrong claims.

Q. It interests me that, though your book concedes that women have not achieved greatness as painters and attempts to analyze why, you reject some of the standard apologies made for them even by sympathetic males. For example, you dispute Augustus John's claim that the women graduates of the Slade School of Art in the 1890's were destroyed by domesticity.

A. In the case of the girls at the Slade, the ones who took all the prizes, our researches indicated that it wasn't true that domesticity destroyed them. They were middle-class women; they were not perpetually pregnant; they were not even mopping floors. The circumstances of their lives did not close over their heads. But then I was up against another possibility. When it came to it, these women were faced with a choice which does not necessarily face a male painter. The choice was between art and life. A male painter can have both. First of all, he's allowed by the tradition to invest his esthetic sense in an external person who will be the muse, his love, or whatever, and who will marry him and--apart from fueling his imagination--wash his socks. He can have children, he can live in a house, he can eat three meals a day, he can have friends, he can have escapades. Women have nothing like that. They make the choice: Will I be a painter, or will I live in a graceful manner? Will other people come into my life in the right way? There wasn't one of those girls from the Slade who, when the chips were down, decided that art was more important than life. In the early 20th century, such a choice for them would mean sterile virginity and egomania.

Q. In one of the most interesting chapters in your book you take up the question of dimension and the fact that women tended to work in smaller scale. And you decry the fact that our esthetic judgments seem to take size so much into account. Is that one reason that women's work has been slighted?

A. Actually, I argue that there are two esthetics. There's the interested esthetic because it's partly a political esthetic of the great and the imposing and the heroic; on the other hand, there's the pure esthetic of the perfect. Consider, before you begin to repeat judgments about "trivial," "unimportant," "minor" work, that the latter is the esthetic of the connoisseur rather than the historian. The historian looks at the milestone; the connoisseur looks for the perfect. And if you're looking for the perfect, there'll be plenty of women in your collection. If you're looking for Delacroix, if you're looking for the imposing, the trumpeting painting that says stand off and admire, you'll have very few. But really, you ought not to base your assessment of the value of the work of either on that sort of criteria because it's misleading.

Q. Speaking of collecting, what can be done to establish the work of women artists more in collections, both public and private?

A. Well, people are often interested in paintings for the wrong reason, and the fact that it's by a woman artist is as good a reason as any. I don't think there's anything particularly reprehensible in creating an atmosphere of demand for a certain artist; it's done all the time. What I can't bear is the sort of plangent tone of writing about women's art: They've been dreadfully discriminated against, blah, blah, blah. That may or may not be true. That's not the point. The point is, you've got to bring as much astuteness to bear in creating personalities, which is what sells paintings in the end. Alas, I wish it didn't, but the fact is, that's what sells paintings.

Q. Are you saying that women should get together and try to make a market in women's art?

A. I've always thought women should become streetwise as collectors. The ones with money have tremendous power. We should sleuth around for good women artists and boost them. I never miss an exhibition if I can help it; I'm always trying to find somebody, so I look at everything. Women should act as patrons of other women, they should be cruel and ruthless about buying women's art only. Rich females should go to openings with checkbooks in hand instead of struggling to buy Kandinskys at Sotheby Parke Bernet. Once there's a solid corps of women collectors, the art will be worth more; there'll be more women's art.

Q. What can critics do, if anything, to further the development of women's art?

A. They shouldn't debase their standards for any criterion of propaganda or politics. They should always maintain the highest standards. Anything else is an insult. I buy paintings by women I like. But I don't fool myself that I have a Braque on the wall. I love my paintings, but I don't have false standards for them.

Q. You haven't touched much in your book on the question of female imagery, which is a hot topic among certain women artists and critics today. Do you believe there is such a thing as "female imagery" and if so, how is it manifest?

A. Well, if there is a female imagery, it's in parts of paintings done by "primitive" painters, such as Aloïse Corbaz and Madge Gill--shapes and rhythms we can't read, a way of orchestrating the material. What I don't think is valid is to introduce propaganda into painting: the repetition of fetal imagery, wombs, vaginas, etc. Every week I get packets of slides containing such paintings. I suppose women have to get it off their chests. And as for stained Tampaxes in Lucite cases, well, I've had that. It's a guerrilla tactic. On the other hand, menstruation is a theme in Tantric art, and I've seen at least one painting where it's beautifully depicted.

Q. Well then, what do you think of the current vogue among some women artists for "erotic" art, which generally includes the very clinical depiction of male nudes?

A. Oh, you mean the attempt to portray the male body as a sex object. The trouble is, most of the paintings I've seen of that sort are done in a photo-realistic style, and they are so cold and reductive, so out of love with paint and flesh. I haven't seen one that really celebrates the male nude; they're all pretty journalistic I think it's a phase that has no real vitality.

Q. The introduction to your book begins with a quotation from the feminist writer Shulamith Firestone, who talks hopefully of the breakdown of "fine art." Where do you stand on this?

A. I really don't know. Because I love paintings and I want to live with them all my life. But I consider myself to be a strange survivor of a patrician culture that I was educated in at enormous expense and for no terribly good reason. And it takes a lot of money to keep my tastes fueled. I don't mean because I spend a lot, but I've got to have public libraries and museums and things to keep me burrowing away and snug. So I'll go on collecting paintings and loving them. But there's no earthly reason why there should be more of me.

Painting is not the answer--it's still a repository of values for middle-class households. What we need is an art that communicates more directly with the environment, that doesn't need a space in the future. Not a monument. Actually, painting today so often jumps out of the frame and tries to connect with reality in all sorts of ways that bring it closer to the traditional arts or crafts of women. And women are now developing an approach to external reality, beginning to see that they don't have to realize themselves through other people. They do work now that doesn't relate to someone else's and can make direct contact with the world on their own terms.

But it's only 10 years since the new feminist artist, a blink of an eye as civilization goes. We're building up an atmosphere in which real development can happen, but it hasn't happened yet.