

The Women's Art Collection (Cambridge/online, 15 Mar 24)

Murray Edwards College, University of Cambridge, Mar 15, 2024

Deadline: Sep 10, 2023

womensart.murrayedwards.cam.ac.uk/event/the-womens-art-collection-artworks-and-artists-in-context-2/

Ella Nixon

"The Women's Art Collection: Artworks and Artists in Context".

THE WOMEN'S ART COLLECTION (WAC) is the largest collection of art by women in Europe. Works in the Collection are displayed across Murray Edwards College, one of the two colleges for women at the University of Cambridge, distinctive for its landmark Brutalist architecture by Chamberlin, Powell and Bon. Featuring over 600 works by modern and contemporary women artists, including Mary Kelly, Maggi Hambling and Lubaina Himid, it offers a unique perspective on art in Britain.

The conference will showcase research by academics, researchers, artists, curators and writers to deepen understandings of the artists, artworks and themes represented in The WAC. Papers should be situated in the context of feminist collecting and curating practices and of British art history of the 20th and 21st centuries.

Since the 1970s, scholars have explored the reasons why women artists are underrepresented in public collections. Primary issues include the historicisation of women artists in relation to men, engagement and non-engagement with the 'woman artist' label, and biographical approaches to women artists which perpetuate a male-centric history of art.

The WAC comprises a significant art historical resource for reflecting on these issues. Motivated by the acquisition of Mary Kelly's work *Extase* in 1986, a group of academics and staff at the College started an 'artist appeal' whereby they wrote to living women artists in the UK asking whether they would donate a work that could act as a source of inspiration to students, researchers and visitors.

Within a year, the College had received over 70 donated artworks – an act of collective giving that indicates women artists' desire to be represented at a time when they were largely overlooked. The history of the Collection and its methods of display therefore present a counter-narrative to traditional modes of collecting and curating. In 2018, The WAC received museum accreditation from Arts Council England.

We are looking for papers that respond to four broad themes, listed below. We particularly encourage applicants to conduct new research on the artists and artworks included within the Collection and/or themes represented by the Collection itself. The Collection is open and free to visit every day at Murray Edwards College. Archival materials relating to the history of The WAC and artists represented in it can be viewed in the Murray Edwards library by appointment.

HISTORY OF COLLECTING: Do university (as opposed to national, regional or private) collections offer a different approach to collection-building and how might this relate to women artists? What role have feminist scholars had in promoting the work of women artists in an institutional setting?

CHALLENGING HIERARCHIES OF GENRES: Are some genres deemed to be more 'feminist' and what effect does this have for collecting and interpreting these works? Does a hierarchy of artistic genres still exist? How have artists employed or subverted canonical art-historical genres?

THINKING ACROSS MEDIA: How do artists employ different media as a mode of artistic expression? How are the boundaries between traditionally conceived 'high art' and craft challenged by the artists and artworks? What is the history of performance art at the Collection and how does this fit with wider feminist art practices?

AGENCY AND CREATIVITY: How have artists within the Collection expressed artistic agency? What creative sources do the artists draw upon? Do any of the artworks subvert the traditional subject/artist/viewer relationship? What implications does this have for the stereotype of the male genius artist?

We welcome abstracts of no more than 250 words by 5pm on Sunday 10 September 2023. Presentations should not exceed 15 minutes. The conference is open to academics and graduate students in any discipline, as well as researchers, artists, curators and writers. Applicants will be notified about shortlisting in October 2023. Please submit abstracts and a 150-word bio to womensart@murrayedwards.cam.ac.uk with the subject line 'Conference proposal'.

The Women's Art Collection Paul Mellon Centre for British Art Studies

Reference:

CFP: The Women's Art Collection (Cambridge/online, 15 Mar 24). In: ArtHist.net, Jul 3, 2023 (accessed Apr 13, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/39670>>.