

## Art - re - archives

By KATHY O'BRIEN

Throughout history women have more often been the subject of art than artists themselves. But there is more to women's art than the Mona Lisa. There are women like Barbara Louder who feel alienated by the male art world, who don't identify with what is considered our artistic heritage.

Female artists are trying to reclaim and express women's place in history and culture. In Halifax there are women artists working outside the mainstream who do not see the world with the same eyes as men. Louder, Pam Pike and Lani Maestro have different visions and perspectives. Maestro is a Filipino, and her work is influenced by her home country. Pike's work is colored by her lesbianism. But still, these women share qualities in their expression of art. They use untraditional media and techniques to challenge society,

often questioning patriarchal institutions.

Although there are no definite rules to follow and no definite character or nature to feminist art, there is, as Louder points out, a "kind of tone to feminist work."

Wilma Needham, a feminist professor of art, warns against calling feminist art a style. "That implies that it is just a flash in the pan," she says. "But feminist art goes much deeper than that, hitting at the daily existence of women's lives."

Needham has always questioned women's role in society, but her work did not always have a feminist message. Still, even while she was doing abstract art, Needham says she felt she made certain images because she was a woman. "I used flowing, sensual lines and they seemed to come out of my persona."

Needham came to the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, where she teaches

feminist art criticism, in the late 1970s. It was at NSCAD that she began seeing artists doing feminist work. She turned to feminist art, using a diverse range of media, including performance, sculpture and slides.

Some feminist artists criticize the image of women that is portrayed in art or popular culture, says Needham. "By criticizing these images we are saying that they are not us."

To counter some of the images which men have created, Needham and other feminist artists depict women who are strong, intelligent, active, heroic.

In her work *Some Fine Women*, Needham uses slides to project images and documentation of 40 Nova Scotian women on the side of a Zeller's store. Needham presented not only upper-class white women, but black and native women as well. Needham chose a Zeller's store as her site because the store was largely staffed by women working in low paying, low status jobs.

Needham is also part of an anti-nuclear affinity group, N.A.A.G.S. These women have performed street theatre and published satire about social issues, including the effect of technology on women, the injustice of government spending and war planning.

Like Needham, Barbara Louder has moved from traditional to feminist art. She also is concerned about social issues, especially those which pertain to women, particularly violence against women, the peace movement, anti-racism and how the medical society treats women.

Last fall Louder had a show, *Caring, Curing, Women and Medicine* which illustrated the dangers that women face from male doctors, such as sterilization against one's will, and exposure to dangerous drugs and contraceptives. She had heard stories about women who had been treated badly by doctors, and through research she found out that this was "a far reaching problem." Louder combined sculpture, photography, cartoons and written text in this show.

Louder is currently making "trouble dolls," small sculptures based on Guatemalan novelty items. She is examining the culture and craftwork of the Guatemalan Indians and contrasting it with Guatemalan items found in Halifax. A vast number of the Indians were killed by the former Guatemalan military government and Louder is dealing with this in her art: focusing attention on the women who have been killed by the death squads.

While Barbara Louder has researched the culture of oppressed people, Lani Maestro has actually grown up in the Philippines in which political oppression has been rampant.

Maestro speaks of friends and relatives who have been imprisoned by President Marcos. Now that he has been ousted, she is waiting for news of their release. Perhaps, that is why Maestro often uses mail or envelopes in her work. It is a symbol of a link between Canada and the Philippines. Although Maestro has always been anxious to get letters from home — letters that were always censored by the government — she never knew what kind of news they might contain.

Maestro was one of the lucky Philippines. Although it was difficult, she was able four years ago to leave for Canada. Still the Philippines have not left her. It is the political persecution by the former Marcos government which has been the driving force behind Maestro's work.

While she was in the Philippines, Maestro did abstract art, which, she says, "was a way of coping. I could not mold my pain into social realism or other representational forms of art." When she came to Canada four years ago, Maestro's work

changed drastically. She studied painting which made her "redefine the value of abstract painting." Maestro now does untraditional mixed media installations, often using sculptural forms.

One of the pieces that Maestro created includes a table which could sit for an interrogation table. Spread on the table are twelve manila envelopes, which present the passage of time. Maestro repeats images in her works; repetition presents one way of coping, she says. *Pain* also contains repeated images. Her work *Maestro* covered thirty feet of wall with nails a feathery piece of paper which gave it, from a distance, a smearing effect, like "a form of sleep."

Maestro says she has learned to use political content with her art. Maestro's political art is influenced by feminism, yet it does not deal directly with women. "Although I am starting to focus on women I am more concerned with how issues affect humanity. In *Third World*, injustices done to women are part of a bigger problem."

"I feel a commitment to use art as a tool for the analysis and criticism of society; I want to tell people about the situation that's going on out there," she says.

Maestro is an innovative artist who uses discarded materials, such as, nails, and salt, in her work. Unlikelike traditional visual art, Maestro's work is tenacious. "I put up work and then take it down," she says. Maestro does not always work in art galleries: *Quiet Pwas* displayed in a hallway.

Maestro also invites viewer participation in some of her work. In *Response* Maestro made a large box stall one filled it with manila envelopes, each one containing the name and address of a political prisoner. Viewers were asked to take an envelope and write to the prisoner.

Maestro is not elitist; as she says, she wants her work to be "accessible".

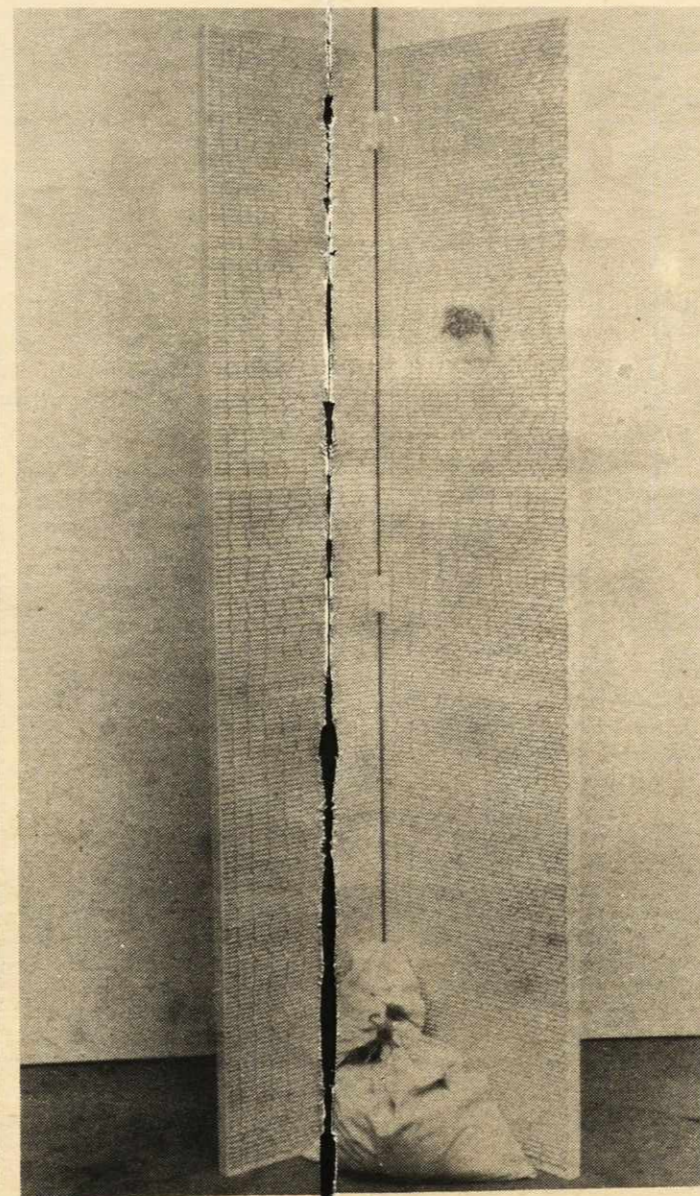
Pamela Pike also plans to invite viewer participation in her show, *Second Sex; Third Sex*, which opens Saturday. One of the main parts of the show will be a video about lesbianism, *The Absence of Us*. In one shot a group of women are scribbling lesbian messages on walls. Pike plans to take the graffiti-covered set to the show. There will be markers so that viewers can add their own messages to the walls.

Pike, a lesbian feminist, is the main actress in the video, which seems to contain autobiographical elements. There are many levels to the video. There are poetic images, such as the walls the women write on, which can be seen as the walls that enclose lesbians. The whispers on the sound track allude to the secret lives that many lesbians lead. Although *The Absence of Us* is about the oppression and isolation that lesbians often suffer, it also affirms lesbianism.

Pike also has work which deals with issues that affect all women, such as pornography and prostitution. Pike calls her art "a political analysis of issues that concern women." Although she has been accused of being anti-male, Pike says she is in fact anti-patriarchal.

Pike began doing traditional art, concentrating in printmaking, before moving on to mixed media. She is becoming more interested in audio and video media. It is easier for women to make videos because it is a new art form, one without a long male tradition, says Pike. Pike also likes videos because they can easily be shown to community groups.

Pike says that it is love of work, not money or fame, that motivates her. "When I decided to make feminist art, I had to give up any ideas about becoming famous," says Pike. "I now judge my success by how the women's community supports me."



"THERE IS NO FORGETTING" 1985, Artist: Barbara Louder

## Black women's music: spine-tingling dignity

By NAA DEI NIKOI

The Black woman has taken a rich, colourful, sometimes tragic and often times lonely route to the present, but her impact on contemporary music is unsurpassed.

Through the feisty independence of Bessie Smith, the spine-tingling soulfulness of Mahalia Jackson, the dignity of Marian Anderson and the supremacy of Leontyne Price, Black women have left no form of musical expression untouched: from classical to folk, from European to African.

During the 1920s in the classical blues period, Black women first recorded their songs for wide distribution. The blues were song-stories, about everything from bad feet to straying husbands, which evolved from cotton field chants and slavery work-songs.

The success of the blues record by Mamie Smith in 1920 led white record companies to search for more Black women who could sing the blues.

This led to the discovery of Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, considered the first great female singer of the blues, who sang in tent shows in the American South since 1902.

The union of this great folk art and the commercial music industry invariably benefited the industry more than the artist. By 1928, the popularity of the blues began to fade. After 92 records Ma Rainey returned home to the tent-show circuit and, until her death in 1939, supported herself by operating two movie theatres in Rome, Georgia.

Earlier Black female musicians were exploited and left out of all levels of control by the producers, promoters and assorted sharks on whom they had to depend.

Bessie Smith, the Empress of the Blues, did not have a royalty agreement; she was paid a flat fee for each session. She earned the paltry sum of \$28,575 for 160 recordings made at Columbia Record Company, an amount equal to what many performers earn today for one show. Smith's 1920s recordings sold so many copies that she was an important factor in saving Columbia from bankruptcy.

The folklore of Black music is strewn with victims of the exploitive white commercial system.

Bessie Smith died at age 42 in Clarksdale, Mississippi in a hospital following a car accident — amid questions about whether her race prevented her from receiving proper medical attention.

Billie Holiday, the beautiful woman with an edge to her voice and who influenced a generation of singers, died at 44 after being arrested for narcotics addiction.

Dinah Washington, the Queen mother of modern rhythm and blues, died at 39 after mixing alcohol with prescription drugs.

Phyl Garland, Associate Professor at Columbia University Graduate School of



Journalism, has followed the progress of Black women in popular music.

"It is hard to think of any of these women as winners in anybody's game. Yet they were, in a strange kind of way. By the sheer force of their creative powers, they defied the constraint imposed on them to influence American musical tastes and to create a rich musical heritage."

Black female artists have established a tight family of influence.

Ma Rainey's legacy was carried on by Bessie Smith, who later influenced Billie Holiday, Dinah Washington's work during the fifties and early sixties influence Aretha Franklin, who has inspired countless others, including Whitney Houston.

Black women pioneers in classical music have also paved the way for others. Marion Anderson, who had a "voice heard but once a century", was denied an opportunity to sing at Washington's Constitution Hall in 1939. Segregation limited her career and she was past her prime in 1955, when she became the first Black to sing at the Metropolitan Opera.

Anderson opened the door for Leontyne Price, the first Black prima donna of opera and today one of the world's most honoured women.

The present generation of singers has learned that the key to success lies in planning personal strategies for longevity, not just short-term survival.

For Patti LaBelle, longevity has meant diversification. She has undergone many transformations since the long-gone "Supremes" period of the 1960s. She had hits with the Bluebells, later renamed LaBelle.

After the group disbanded in 1976, LaBelle concentrated on developing a career as a solo artist through efforts like her one-woman Broadway show and as an actress in *A Soldier's Story*. Her banshee-like voice leaves one feeling haunted and definitely moved.

The key to longevity for Valerie Simpson of Ashford and Simpson has been to establish herself behind the scenes as a pianist and songwriter. In 1971, she began recording on her own, producing two solo

albums and in 1973 with her husband, Nick Ashford, established an act that plays to SRO crowds everywhere.

Chaka Khan attracted attention in 1974 as the voluptuous lead singer with Rufus. Said to sing like she has 'seven lungs', she has steadily built a solo career since 1978 in the popular R & B domain while experimenting with jazz.

Khan tackles the rhythmic and harmonic intricacies of jazz singing as if she was born to it and has recorded with Dizzy Gillespie, Freddie Hubbard and Chick Corea.

To achieve popular success, an artist must cross over. The \$4 billion-a-year record industry provides widespread exposure and mass acceptance instantaneously all over the world.

Black female artists are moving into a period of greater influence and acceptance in the music business by diversifying their activities and broadening their stylistic base to reach a larger share of the overall audience.

Tina Turner, phoenix-like in her rise from the ashes of her old career, is today cast in a new setting, produced by British rockers who favour synthesized effects and a razor-edged sound. The result has been a renewed interest on the part of fans from her Ikettes days while teens from Michigan to Mad Max land have welcomed her as a new discovery.

Diana Ross has become as shrewd with a balance sheet as with a music sheet, controlling her own multi-million dollar corporation while still managing to stay on the charts. Ironically, it was Ross's portrayal of Billie Holiday in *Lady Sings the Blues* that elevated her to superstardom and earned her an Oscar nomination for Best Actress.

Aretha Franklin's powerful, stirring voice earned her the mantle of the Queen of Soul. Her inspirational quality is derived from her deeply-rooted spirituality.

For Black women in popular music, with acceptance comes greater power and with power, greater freedom to express their heritage with dignity and pride.

The creativity of the Black woman is being kept alive. As Lena Horne says, "inside every Black woman there is an Aretha Franklin dying to come out."