

# MARGARET HARRISON

## DANSER SUR LES MISSILES



JUNE 28 OCTOBER 6, 2019



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From North American comic-book superheroes to Manet's *Olympia*, Margaret Harrison (Yorkshire, UK, \*1940) subverts genre hierarchies and indiscriminately combines the history of art and popular culture. Adopting the strategies of the grotesque, such as exaggeration, parody, and subversion, she humorously questions the codes and stereotypes that separate the sexes.

An influential figure in the feminist art movement in Great Britain, this committed artist has been engaged for over fifty years in a cross-fertilization of class, gender and, more broadly, the place of women in society. For her first major exhibition in France, 49 Nord 6 Est - FRAC Lorraine has chosen to highlight the diversity of her practice which includes installations, paintings, drawings, and texts that aim to challenge visual canons and codes that determine the representation of women as well as their self-perception.

Her drawings of superheroes sporting stilettos and her portrait of Hugh Hefner, the founder of *Playboy*, as Bunny Boy, led to the police shutting down her first exhibition in London in 1971. Going forward, Harrison began engaging with issues of labor conditions of the working class, a preoccupation that spans her entire career.

Attentive to economic and social developments in rural UK and United States, from the rise of Manchester and Liverpool in the late nineteenth century to the industrial crisis of the 1970s, which affected England as well as California, Margaret Harrison has produced an extensive body of work based on sociological surveys.

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**FREE ADMISSION**

Tuesday-Friday: 14h - 18h  
Saturday & Sunday: 11h -19h  
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1- *Captain America II*, 1997  
© Collection particulière  
Courtesy Nicolas Krupp, Bâle (CH)

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Le 49 Nord 6 Est - Frac Lorraine bénéficie du soutien de la Région du Grand Est  
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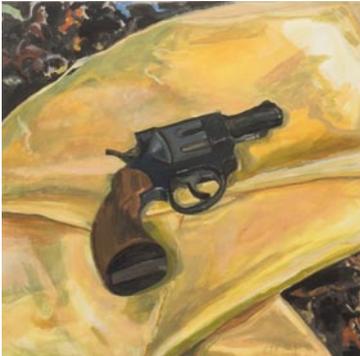
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She also examines Western cultural icons, exposing their normative potential and the power relationships they both replicate and perpetuate. Long available only to limited audiences, her work is now beginning to enjoy wider recognition and renewed relevance in the context of current debates on gender and sexual identity. Harrison encourages us to go beyond binary approaches to race or sex.

Practicing art and activism on equal footing, Margaret Harrison works to foreground the structural violence manifested in the professional and domestic spheres, as well as in art history and popular culture.

*Anonymous was a woman* (1977–1992, image 2), a painting which opens the exhibition, speaks of the violence committed under the cover of the social invisibility imposed on women, which is accompanied here by the structural violence historically faced by female public figures. The work, part acrylic on canvas and part photographs, evokes Virginia Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929), and more broadly the consequences for women of their notoriety, possible only under certain condition. This work was produced for an exhibition devoted to the work of contemporary European women artists (*Künstlerinnen International 1877–1977 / Female Artists International 1877–1977*, Charlottenburg Palace, Berlin). It pays tribute to eight women who were victims of their political and social commitment, or of their condition as women: Rosa Luxemburg, Annie Beasant, Eleanor Marx, Annie Oakley, Bessie Smith, the bride of Frankenstein, Marilyn Monroe, and Janis Joplin. By bringing together their destinies, the work reassesses historical events considered to be inconsequential. The artist takes a similar approach in her pieces on Dorothy Wordsworth (1982), including two diptychs based on the notebooks of this English writer, who lived in the shadow of her brother, the poet William Wordsworth. The atmospheric quality of these watercolors (image 3), perceptible also in the three paintings in the series *Landscape: Australia/England* (1982), stands in contrast to the sociopolitical concerns raised in the sentences inscribed in these paintings. These works underscore the extent to which our view of nature can be biased by our cultural experience.

The five portraits of Marilyn Monroe on canvas and paper, which close the exhibition, reveal the dull violence suffered by this pop culture icon who had become a blank screen onto which others projected their ideal fantasies. Her body had remained unclaimed in the morgue for several days after her death.



1-

The artist correlates this violence, manifest in the public sphere, and the violence perpetrated in the private realm. In her series of oil paintings on canvas, entitled *Beautiful ugly violence* (2003–04, image 1), she highlights the aestheticization of violence in mass media and film, while the accompanying texts, partially painted over in watercolor, draw on interviews with prisoners convicted of domestic violence.

The exploitation of women, inherent in the social organization of labor markets, is another issue addressed in the exhibition. *Homeworkers: Mrs. McGilvrey and the Hands of Law and Experience*, was produced in 1978–80. This piece is comprised of interviews conducted by Margaret Harrison with homeworkers. The artist uses photographs, written testimonies, and drawings to direct the audience's attention to the precariousness of these isolated and non-unionized women who are both underpaid and silenced in their demands of a fair wage. *Craftwork (the prostitution piece)* (1980, image 2), another major piece, was produced as part of the emblematic feminist exhibition curated by Lucy Lippard at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. The artist draws a connection between the loss of women's manual skills and the development of factories. Industrialization led to a change in activities and dependence on machines, both in terms of livelihood and production, and it reduced the possibilities of collective production and reuse of materials within the household. It was in this context that women resorted to prostitution, confronted with the loss of resources and increasing precariousness, as shown by the audio recording integrated into the installation, and produced with the "English Collective of Prostitutes". *Scent of identity* (1992), a series of watercolors inspired by Edouard Manet's *Un Bar aux Folies Bergères (A Bar at the Folies-Bergères, 1880)* is presented as a counterpoint to *Craftwork (the prostitution piece)* (1980). The artist questions the commodification of women's beauty more figuratively by representing them behind the counters of department stores.



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1- *Beautiful ugly handgun*, 2004  
2- *Craftwork (détail)*, 1980



1-

Margaret Harrison emphasizes the importance of women's view of the world, especially in her works involving mirrors. For example, her installation *Common Land/Greenham* (1989–2012, image 1) reflects the strategic creativity and tenacity of women living near the Greenham Common, which became an American airbase on British soil. When American cruise missiles were installed on the site, women of all generations and from all social classes mobilized in protest. The social action was conducted continuously from 1981 to 1989. On 11 December 1983, 50,000 women encircled the military base carrying mirrors in order to literally force the military personnel to face their actions.

*The Last Gaze* (2013), an installation that won her the Northern Art Prize Exhibition in 2013, also features mirrors. It takes as its starting point the 1842 poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson, *The Lady of Shalott*, in which the heroine is cursed to only be able to see the outside world reflected in a mirror. The artist revisits here John William Waterhouse's eponymous pre-Raphaelite painting to create a garment embroidered with American comic book figures, where the ornament relates the *Lady of Shalott* to contemporary context.



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From her earliest work, Harrison has been using figures from popular iconography to spark a reflection on the codes associated with gender. She often humorously reverses traditional power roles. These tropes can be found, for example, in the portrait of Hugh Hefner as Bunny Boy (1971–2011) or in the series of superheroes such as *Captain America I* (1971), drawings that caused her first exhibition in London in 1971 to be shut down by the police on the charge of "obscenity." By contrast, the female figures depicted in *Good Enough to Eat* (1971) or *Banana Woman* (1971), which are overly sexualized, submissive, and "good enough to eat," failed to shock the censors. A satirical critique of the way women are represented in advertising, Harrison's work, which she herself describes as "anti-pornographic" because it was drawn by a woman, continues to raise the same questions today.

Some thirty works on display in Margaret Harrison's first solo exhibition in France testify to her ongoing commitment as an artist who, for nearly fifty years, has put her activism into the service of women.

1- *Common Reflections*, 20132- *Banana woman*, 1971



## MARGARET HARRISON

*Born in 1940 in Yorkshire, UK.*

*Lives and works in the United States and the UK.*

Margaret Harrison (b. 1940, Yorkshire, UK), radically challenges sex segregation—whether in classical and popular culture, still lifes and portraiture, or in terms of masculinity and femininity—by feminizing men's bodies and humorously inverting the power structures reinforced by society and the media. A product of the women's liberation movement of the 1970s (she co-founded the *Women's Liberation Art Group* that same year), she became aware very early on that the private space was also political space.

Harrison's work was featured in the exhibition *Issue: Social Strategies by Women Artists* curated in 1980 by Lucy Lippard at the Institute of Contemporary Art (London), an emblematic group show that highlighted feminist artistic practices nourished by social considerations. Most recently, Margaret Harrison participated in the major travelling exhibition *WACK! Art & Feminism Revolution* (Los Angeles, Washington, New York, 2007).

She currently splits her time between the United States (San Francisco) and England (Carlisle, Cumbria), where she has held solo exhibitions, notably at the New Museum in New York and the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art. In 2017, the Azkuna Zentroa Society and Contemporary Culture Centre in Bilbao also hosted her solo exhibitions.

Margaret Harrison has participated in several group exhibitions at international institutions: at the Tate Modern, Tate Britain, and the Victoria Albert Museum in London, the MOCA in Los Angeles, and the Museo Chiado in Portugal, among others.

In 2013 she received the *Northern Art Prize*. Her works have entered public art collections, such as those of the Tate, the Arts Council of Great Britain, Manchester Metropolitan University, the Kunsthhaus in Zurich, and more recently the Province of Hainaut Art Museum BPS22 in Charleroi (BE).

Margaret Harrison studied at the Carlisle College of Art (1957–61), the Royal Academy Schools in London (1961–64), and she graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Perugia, Italy (1965).

She was research director at the *Social Environmental Art Research Centre* at Manchester Metropolitan University while conducting research as part of her own artistic practice.

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