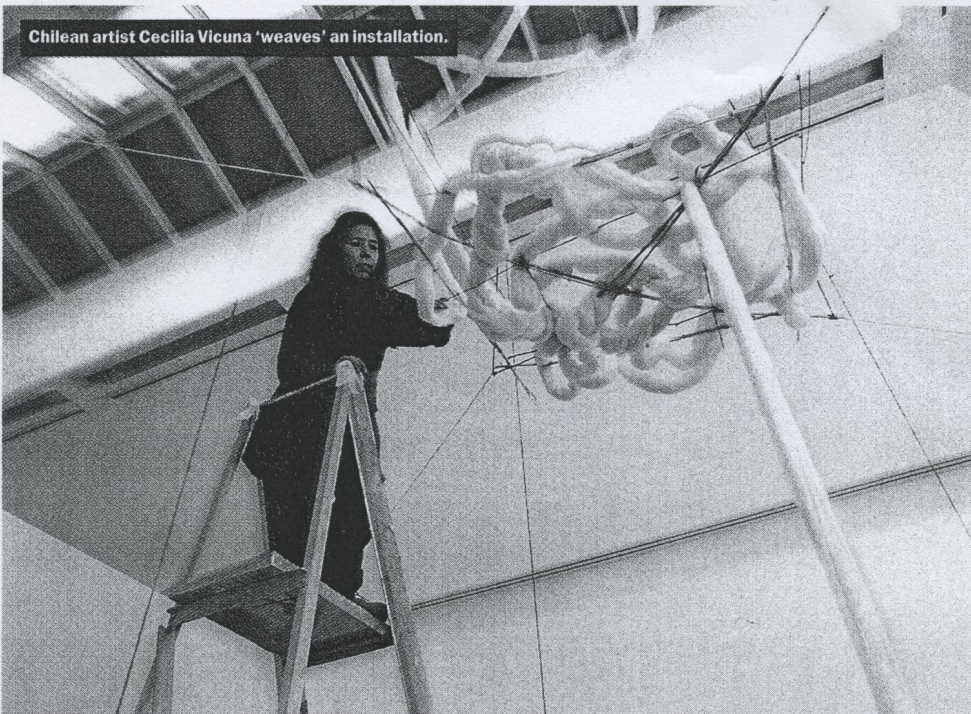


Chilean artist Cecilia Vicuna 'weaves' an installation.



# Change of art

Women artists now enjoy more credibility than ever, but there are still hundreds whose work is ignored by the mainstream art world. A new exhibition at the Whitechapel should bring a few new names out into the limelight.

Report **Sarah Kent** Photography **Barry J Holmes**

**O**ver the past ten years, we've seen dozens of brilliant young women emerge from art school. In the past, the chips would have been stacked against them. After a few years battling against neglect and scorn, most would have given up.

But things have changed. The resilient ones now manage to exhibit, find dealers and get reviewed, with respect rather than derision. The epithet 'woman' has been dropped. Their gender is no longer an embarrassment.

So things are looking rosy; or are they? This year's Turner Prize jury has produced an all-male shortlist. And although the Tate has given its Project Space to Georgina Starr and Tacita Dean, galleries like the Hayward, Whitechapel and Serpentine have bad track records when it comes to showing women.

In this climate, wouldn't an all-woman exhibition be a retrogressive step; a reminder of the bad old days of ghetto-isation, just as we thought it safe to throw away our gender-tinted glasses?

Let's not forget, though, that the majority of museum displays are exhibitions of male artists. And it is with art history that Belgian curator Catherine de Zegher has been meddling. Trained as an archaeologist, she is used, she says, 'to digging up hidden traces, uncovering things and analysing them'. For her exhibition, 'Inside the Visible', she has raked over recent art history and unearthed those who remained all-but-invisible because they were the wrong race or gender, or worked in the wrong way - people considered marginal, even within an avant-garde that prided itself on being outside the mainstream.

Being marginal is not synonymous with being female. 'It's crucial,' says art historian Griselda

Pollock, 'not to see this as a show of women's art. It's almost incidental that all 36 artists are women. The question is what, in the twentieth century, gets mainlined and what sidelined.'

De Zegher toyed with the idea of including a few men before opting to 'take up the stereotype of the women's label so as to undermine it from the inside'.

Most of the male 'rebels' have long since been dragged in from the cold. Those languishing outside the museums are often women who had the added disadvantage of belonging to a further subset - of being exiles, black, or lesbian, for instance. Claude Cahun was a Jewish lesbian living in Paris in the 1930s.

A strange set of photographs, in which she appears as a doll, anticipate Cindy Sherman's self-portraits by more than 40 years and suggest that identity is a masquerade.

Hannah Höch's collages are reproduced in books on Berlin Dada; but Max Ernst is often credited with discovering the medium she employed to create fractured images that mirror the moral and psychic chaos that prevailed during and after WWI. She had to wait until she was 87 before her contribution was acknowledged with a retrospective in Berlin and Paris.

Louise Bourgeois moved from France to the States in 1938. She now enjoys international fame, but she was 71 when the first retrospective of her sculpture was staged in New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1982. 'The men liked themselves so much that they didn't see that we existed,' she says wickedly. 'They thought they were the centre of the world, but they were not.'

De Zegher has chosen artists from three periods of political ferment - the '30s, '60s and '90s - and grouped them so as to establish links across time and space. The American minimalist Agnes Martin is shown with the Chilean artist Cecilia Vicuna, who makes installations from thread; Emily Carr, the Canadian landscape painter who died in 1945; Maria Helena Vieira da Silva, the abstract painter who died in Paris four years ago, aged 84; Lebanese exile Mona Hatoum, who lives here and last year was shortlisted for the Turner Prize; and Ellen Gallagher, the black American painter who uses clichés such as sambo lips and bulging eyes to explore racial stereotyping.

This nonconformist approach is designed to interrupt normal processes of classification. Instead of women being slotted into the mainstream, they are juxtaposed with artists of their own sex. Cheap or ephemeral materials, and subtle and ambiguous spaces, characterise much of the work; is de Zegher proposing the existence of a female sensibility that surfaces regardless of context? 'The exhibition is not about the distinction between men and women', she says. 'The idea is to allow the perturbing, the dissenting, the dangerous and the repressed to re-emerge.'

Lack of interest does not just isolate people, it undermines them. 'Everything is a dialogue, an exchange,' says Cecilia Vicuna. 'If one's work is not shown it doesn't develop. Exhibiting in museums and galleries creates possibilities. When your work is not given importance, you put it away.'

She now lives in New York, but does not feel at home. 'In the States you are labelled immediately; epithets of race and gender are foremost.'

Third World artists are not just marginalised, she says, they are robbed of cultural identity. 'The centre claims people as its own. Brancusi, for instance, is presented as an international artist, not a Romanian peasant. So Latin American artists think of themselves as international and try to conform to what is acceptable in the US.'

'Inside the Visible' comes here from Boston and Washington, but no European galleries would take it. The Art Gallery of New South Wales wanted the show to demonstrate to local artists the need to develop an independent language.

Trawling in obscure waters, one is bound to encounter prejudice. People assume that things languishing in the margins are not worthy of inclusion in the mainstream. But those who have seen the show rave about it. 'I was



Brazilian artist Anna Maria Maiolino working with clay.

**'The men liked themselves so much that they didn't see that we existed. They thought they were the centre of the world.'**

impressed by the number of people I had never heard of,' says feminist artist Martha Rosler, 'and by the amount of work made from inconsequential parts of the environment, such as thread, string and hair. It's a riveting show - wild and woolly, literally.'

'This is a radical move in art history,' says Griselda Pollock. 'Catherine de Zegher is asking us to look again at the history of twentieth-century art.' ●  
'Inside the Visible' is at the Whitechapel Gallery until December 8.