



AN INTERVIEW WITH HEATHER BENJAMIN, CURATOR AND PARTICIPATING ARTIST OF "MAIDEN FORM"

June 28, 2018

There's a lot of discussion surrounding the validity of all-female group shows. Some argue that they do more harm than good by automatically pigeonholing artists based on their gender, others say that they are substantiated because they rectify the hundreds of years of underrepresentation in the arts. Whatever your opinion, one thing is clear, the art world *is shifting*, and it's because of curators like [Heather Benjamin](#) that female, nonbinary, POC and LGBTQ+ artists are gaining more visibility, and that is *always* a good thing.

Working as a full-time artist herself, [Heather Benjamin](#) has curated a stellar lineup for her group show [MAIDEN FORM](#) at [Andrew Edlin Gallery](#) in NYC. Pulling from a plethora of different mediums like painting, sculpture, textile, and new-media, Benjamin has given a voice to underrepresented artists from every background. With a keen curatorial eye and attention to artists working in subjects of oppression, body image, and political identity, [MAIDEN FORM](#) is an exceptional showcase of young talent. We recently sat down with her to discuss the origins of the show, how the feminist agenda has changed and what it means to have space (in all forms). Check out our short interview with her below and be sure to see [MAIDEN FORM](#) in person before it closes on July 20th, 2018.



Brittney Anele

Jessica Ross: Where does the title "Maiden Form" come from?

Heather Benjamin: The name *MAIDEN FORM* nods to the age-old visual symbol of women's lib, the bra and liberating oneself from all that it represents, while simultaneously opening the door to many more different and newer modes of interpretation beyond that of just that classic physical rebellion – while at first it references traditional restrictions and patriarchal subjugation of women's bodies throughout history, beauty standards, and interpretations of the physicality of being female, it opens out onto a vast expanse of other experiences of and struggles with womanhood and femininity – transgressions against the culturally imposed norms of what women should look like, who can call themselves a woman, and championing an inclusive and intersectional approach to womanhood and feminist ideas. And in a literal sense, *MAIDEN FORM* alludes to the fact that much of the work in the show is figural work by, for, and depicting all

kinds of women, and using that vehicle of figurative, representational work to articulate our different experiences as well as the common threads that run between them.



Heather Benjamin

You mentioned this is your first curatorial endeavor. How did this show come to be and how did you arrive at your lineup? (which is killer by the way)

I received an email pretty much out of the blue earlier this year asking whether I would want to put together a show in the underground space at Andrew Edlin, which is a new sort of project room-esque venture that they have going. *Maiden Form* is only the second show in that space, the first was called "Et Tu, Art Brute?" and was an insane open call show where they hung like, 700 different

pieces of artwork or something like that - that show went very much against the grain of typical "art world" curation and I think they probably asked me to do the next show because they thought I might do something somewhat unexpected or unconventional as well, that seems like the vibe they are going for with their downstairs space. Which I'm super down for! Not only because I'm interested in doing things differently and I love seeing art shows that are a little off the beaten path - but it was also inevitable that I would curate something a little bit different in some way, because, at the very least, I kind of had no idea what I was doing when I started! I have no background in curation, even though it's something I've always daydreamed about doing. So this was an incredibly exciting opportunity for me to be handed, and I am so so grateful for it.

It was thrilling to be given full creative control over a space and to be able to use that opportunity to lift up a bunch of artists who I admire, and play around with how I could make their work relate to each other and to the space, which is unconventional in and of itself (it's a basement that was previously used for storage for the upstairs gallery and the Outsider Art Fair, which is run out of the main Andrew Edlin space upstairs).

As far as how I got to the lineup, I tried to strike a balance between showing artists whose work is established or recognizable in one way or another, and artists who I think deserve more visibility than they have gotten so far. I wanted to use the opportunity of getting to curate this show to be able to lift up a bunch of artists whose work I love no matter where they are at in their careers at this point. Andrew Edlin is such an amazing gallery that I've admired for a long time, and to be able to put a bunch of exciting new work that I love into that context was honestly thrilling.



Install View

Do you have a statement about the exhibition you'd like to share, some over-arching theme or discussion you'd like to be at the forefront?

MAIDEN FORM is a show presenting meditations on contemporary notions of femininity. As a starting point, I'm inviting artists to interpret that and explore their own personal experiences through the lenses of any of the following perceived/desired/imposed attributes of conventional femininity, including but of course not limited to – concepts of sensitivity, purity, tenderness, deference, empathy, nurturance, beauty, sexual objectification, fragility, passivity. This is just a cross-section of some of the concepts which contribute simultaneously to the subjugation of all kinds of women, as well as provide structures which we both lean on and transgress against in order to define each of our personal womanhood.

Betty Friedan wrote in 1963 that the key to women's subjugation lay in the social construction of femininity as "childlike, passive, and dependent", and called for a "drastic reshaping of the cultural image of femininity". Over 50 years later, in many ways, we have progressed past some of the "classic" stereotypes about womanhood, but in just as many ways, we still struggle to throw off the same chains – and carry new ones as well. And that struggle has never been cut and dry – we can feel pulled in so many directions as we fight to hold onto pieces of our identities and shed others, to embrace one culturally imposed facet of femininity while transgressing against another, and all this happening under the shadow of what is societally or traditionally deemed appropriate or desirable. This show is a collection of artists making work about the multifaceted nature of that struggle, which can be so different for every individual and type of woman.

My hope with the show is to create an exhibition of vibrant, poignant, and emotional work about individual experiences of femininity, different takes on personal experiences of womanhood by different kinds of women, with the goal of creating an environment where any kind of woman who walks into the gallery can find something moving and relatable within the body of work as a whole.



Katie Stout

Any plans to curate some more shows in the future?

I definitely want to curate again! It was such an amazing opportunity to be given this space and the resources that came with it for my first experience curating. I am really happy with how it turned out, and the whole experience was so exciting for me. I also learned a lot about how I would or wouldn't do certain things next time, so I feel even more excited to try my hand at it again and work on different kinds of projects. I've been brainstorming a little bit already about taking on a more DIY curatorial effort, i.e. not in a previously established space, sometime next year, also in New York. I have a lot of ideas!

Curating was something I had always sort of daydreamed about, but I spend so much time on my own work that it was on the back burner, for sure - I never felt like I was prioritizing acting on it, it took having someone give me the space and time to try my hand at it for me to get the ball rolling on that dream. Now that I'm actually familiarized with what it entails and how it makes me feel I feel confident

and ready to do it again. I am really thrilled to have curating be something that is added to my skill set and I can't wait to do it more in the future!



Rubanee

MAIDEN FORM is on view at [Andrew Edlin Gallery](#) in NYC through July 20th, 2018. Be sure to check it out before it closes.

Interview and install photos by [Jessica Ross](#).

Portrait of the curator, [Heather Benjamin](#) by [Ben Trogdon](#).

PAINTING SCULPTURE HEATHER BENJAMIN JESSICA ROSS ANDREW EDLIN GALLERY