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IN HER OWN VOICE

I was going to write this article myself, but realized that it would have been nothing more than a report on conversations I have had with these women. Such an article would have had less to do with what they had said, than with what I had heard. It would once again be a man explaining women, interceding on their behalf, describing and formalizing their ideas. Their individual identities would have been homogenized into a group of my construction.

Therefore, I asked a group of painters to write short statements covering these points:

Saul Ostrow, NYC, May 1987

1. What does it mean to say "painting is a male language?"

It means that because historically women were not given the same opportunities to make paintings as men the fiction was developed and nurtured that "Painting is a male language." We are all familiar with the various belief systems and caste systems worldwide that discouraged and excluded certain members of a group from participation in specific rituals and activities. These activities range from the Western European tradition of painting being a male language, to the Sumatran Batak tradition of taking of heads being a male language.

2. What does it mean for a woman at this point in time to try to make a painting.

It means giving voice (using a male language in some minds) to the issues and ideas that serve to express ones' own personal convictions. Paintings are made in the studio—an intimate conversation with oneself. Painting careers are made outside of the studio; part two of the conversation.

3. What do women do differently than men in painting?

The greatest difference I see between men and women in regard to making paintings is one of attitude. Women have fewer self-delusions of grandiosity concerning the overwhelming importance and timely relevance of their work than men. This has no genetic foundation but is simply a manifestation of certain behavioural patterns allowed and encouraged according to gender. The importance that men give to their accomplishments and activities and the lesser importance usually given to women's accomplishments and activities is an attitude developed by society.

4. Is the idea of male-female a cultural phenomena?

Women are the child bearers and for the greater part of our history were responsible for the initial feeding/survival of the child. A distinction between male and female roles developed in regard to such issues as nurturing and aggression. Yet, male and female mental processes are not fundamentally different. The greater part of our behavior is determined not by genes but by what is thought to be appropriate to our sex and role in culture.

5. Is there a possibility for a painting that isn't gender-bound?

There do exist activities that are truly gender-bound, such as child bearing. Painting is not a gender-bound activity, therefore painting may exist without the distinction of gender for both men and women. It is only because our cultural traditions create male and female roles that questions such as the above exist

Marilyn Lerner