

Hodara, Susan, "Taking on the Role of Gender in Media", THE NEW YORK TIMES, 12 March 2011.

ART REVIEW | WESTCHESTER

## Taking on the Role of Gender in Media



Lynn Hershman/Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco

**IMAGES** "The Deconstructive Impulse" showcases women's role in illuminating media messages. Above, "Seduction," by Lynn Hershman.

By SUSAN HODARA  
Published: March 12, 2011

NEAR the entrance to "The Deconstructive Impulse," at the [Neuberger Museum of Art](#), is Lynn Hershman's 1988 black-and-white photograph "Seduction." In it, a woman vamps for the camera as she sprawls on a bed. She wears a short black dress and high heels, but instead of her head, a television set frames her oversize, mascara-heavy, closed eyes. The photograph is one of 68 works by 22 American artists supporting the show's premise, boldly stated in its subtitle: "Women Artists Reconfigure the Signs of Power, 1973-1991."

Deconstructivism in art seeks to disassemble and recontextualize materials from the mainstream media to illuminate potentially harmful messages. Until now, the established understanding was that deconstructivism was steered by men. In mounting "The Deconstructive Impulse," the curators, Helaine Posner and Nancy Princenthal, were intent on setting the record straight.

"This is the first show to survey women's contributions to deconstructivism," Ms. Posner, the chief curator at the Neuberger, said, describing the exhibition as "a revisionist show" based on 25 years of perspective.

Questions of authorship and authenticity, the dangers of stereotyping, and racism, classism and sexism in the media are addressed in prints, posters, paintings, photographs, videos and installations. Occupying three large gallery spaces, the show is organized into six sections — "Women's Experience," "Masquerade," "Appropriation," "Mass Media," "Fashion" and "Critique of Cultural Institutions" — illustrating different approaches to deconstructivism.

"What we realized was not only that women were at the forefront of this movement," said Ms. Princenthal, formerly the senior editor at [Art in America](#), "but also that a lot of the issues they covered were motivated by feminism."

In "Women's Experience," six photographs from [Laurie Simmons's](#) "Early Color Interiors" series, from 1978 and 1979, depict elaborate dollhouse setups in which a suburban housewife doll enacts daily rituals. In "Semiotics of the Kitchen," a six-minute video made in 1975, [Martha Rosler](#) demonstrates the use of familiar kitchen tools with a particularly aggressive brand of humor.

Other artists use appropriation to critique the news and entertainment industries. In her video “Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman,” made in 1979, [Dara Birnbaum](#) rearranged clips from the television series to direct viewers’ attention to the biased portrayal of its skimpily clad superhero. In “Verbs,” [Sarah Charlesworth](#) reproduced a front page of The New York Times from 1978, but extracted everything except its verbs and images. “By making selective changes,” Ms. Posner said, “she is talking about how newspapers might manipulate our understanding of the news.”

“These artists were so prescient,” Ms. Posner said. “We talk about media saturation in the ’80s, but media has invaded our lives now in a way that’s absolutely pervasive, much more so than when these artists were making their work.”

Perhaps the most blatant commentary in the show is about art itself — in three posters by the [Guerrilla Girls](#), a collective of feminist artists formed in 1985. In one — titled “Do Women Have to be Naked to Get into the Met. Museum?” — a nude reclining in a classic pose clutches a feather duster and wears a growling gorilla mask. Text in the poster replies to the title question: “Less than 3% of the artists in the Modern Art sections are women, but 83% of the nudes are female.”

“Younger generations of women artists have been the beneficiaries of all the work that was done previously,” Ms. Posner said. “Feminism has opened up many possibilities for them, so maybe their awareness of being women doesn’t have to be as central as it was a few decades ago. Feminism really has changed the world.”

*“The Deconstructive Impulse: Women Artists Reconfigure the Signs of Power, 1973-1991” runs through April 3 at the Neuberger Museum of Art, 735 Anderson Hill Road, Purchase; [neuberger.org](http://neuberger.org) or (914) 251-6100.*

*“Art Sandwiched-In: Deconstructive Impulse,” a lunchtime examination of the show, is on March 16 at noon; free with museum admission.*

*“Hot and Cool: Feminism, Deconstruction and Desire,” a panel discussion with the show’s curators and Sarah Charlesworth, one of the exhibiting artists, is on March 17 at 6:30 p.m., and “Artist Talk: Deborah Kass,” featuring another exhibiting artist, is on March 24 at 6:30 p.m.; both events are free.*