

# FRIEZE

## Cecilia Paredes, Xaviera Simmons and the Artists Challenging the History of Female Portraiture

A curated selection of work from the Deutsche Bank Collection puts women photographers into focus

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Among the jaw-dropping findings in the most recent Burns Halperin Report, compiled by the art journalists Charlotte Burns and Julia Halperin, is the fact that 'women artists account for just 3.3% of all fine-art auction sales since 2008.' Indeed, the auction sales from 2008–22 for just one male artist—Pablo Picasso—reached US\$6.23 billion, 'exceeding the combined sales of all female artists in the database by US\$30 million.' While some arts organizations have attempted to improve historical disparities by acquiring more pieces by women and presenting them in formal settings, institutional collections also evince the persistence of gender inequity: according to an article published in the Public Library of Science, a 2019 survey of 18 renowned American art museums found that 87% of artists represented in their collections were men.

This is the situation that this year's Deutsche Bank presentation at Frieze New York and on the Frieze Viewing Room hopes to engage in dialogue, highlighting the work of women photographers from around the world, including K8 Hardy, Cecilia Paredes, Alessandra Sanguinetti and Xaviera Simmons. 'Early on [we wanted to] focus on portraiture,' Britta Färber, Global Head of Art at Deutsche Bank, said in an interview. 'Showing a different angle of life from female artists was very important to us.'

Since its inception in the late 1970s, Deutsche Bank's collection has sought to acquire a variety of works on paper, spanning drawings, collages and photographs. The collection initially focused on works on paper created after 1945 from German speaking countries, but since the late 1990s the perspective has become far more inclusive, and it now features hundreds of pieces by female artists from around the world. The works on view at Frieze are all currently hung in the Deutsche Bank Center on Columbus Circle in New York.

'[There has been] a stronger focus on women artists in recent years,' Färber wrote in a 2018 collection essay. This, she asserts, 'is inextricably intertwined with the increasingly global focus of the collection. The increased attention paid to female practices is bound up with the move away from a Eurocentric perspective on contemporary art. The numbers alone document this. Today, a total of 669 women artists from 62 countries are represented in the Deutsche Bank Collection.



Xavier Simmons, *Into the Sea (Nomad)*, 2009. Courtesy: the artist

'This year's presentation at Frieze in New York continues to speak to these questions, putting work created by women to the fore. One of the photographs on view—*Into the New Sea (Nomad)* (2009) by Xavier Simmons—depicts the artist wandering through a wheat field. She stands to the right side of the frame, her head—which is covered by a saffron-colored shawl that she clutches with both hands—is turned to the side. It's difficult for the viewer to determine exactly what the subject is thinking, and we're left to create our own stories about how this character relates to the world around them. 'I was really thinking about the history of painting and photography as it relates to the landscape,' says Simmons. Later she adds, 'For me, there's some mystery in that photograph, but it is part of a larger series of works that are in conversation with the history of painting and the history of figures inside landscapes: [it asks] which characters can live in certain landscapes and which characters can't.'

Paredes's work also contemplates themes of nature and the female body, albeit in different ways. Two of her pictures in the exhibition — *Asia* (2009) and *Paradise Hand* (2009)—depict camouflaged bodies set against ornate patterns of flowers and foliage. The latter shows an outstretched hand painted in the same design as the wallpaper behind it, creating an interesting tension between foreground and background, prompting us to ask questions about where these designs came from and how we feel in our surroundings. '*Paradise Hand* is part of a series called 'Elusive Paradise' Paredes explains. 'It sits within the 'Landscape' series where I talk about our search for happiness and how elusive it can be [...], while not recognizing it was already there and we didn't notice.'

Though many of the works on view prompt similar questions about nature and the body, the distinct range of photographs on display speaks to the multiplicity of perspectives from female artists. Some of these works depict their subjects looking straight into the camera, others show them turned away from the viewer, while some are devoid of a recognizable human presence. Such diverse portrayals of women—created by women—challenge the history of female portraiture, which in the words of K8 Hardy 'has been largely in the hands of men and the male gaze'. 'If curators are the ones who make the decisions, and if this group of people is not diverse, then the exhibitions will not be diverse either,' Färber said. 'This is something that we are really committed to, and why we partnered with Frieze to develop an emerging curators fellowship for curators from a BIPOC-background in key art institutions.'

*Main image: Cecilia Paredes, Paradise Hand, 2009. Courtesy: the artist and Echo Fine Arts*