

“The Influentials,” Interview with Suzanne McClelland and Judy Pfaff,  
Essays by Amy Smith-Stewart and Carrie Lincourt

# THE *influentials*

School of Visual Arts Women Alumni  
Invite Artists Who Have Shaped Their Work

Q+A

## Suzanne McClelland

**How has the artist you chose influenced or inspired you? What does feminism mean to you? Does it influence your practice or the way you position your work? Some public figures have said we live in a post-gender condition, would you agree?**

The “F” word seems to scare so many people these days, even some women. Reagan was successful...he and Nancy squashed a lot of voices in 1980. I have been shaped by the many facets of activism that I witnessed close up, while growing up in the '70s. Anti war protests, unions, the SDS, Weathermen, Black Panthers and many factions when civil rights and feminism were in conversation. It was not about unity. They all spoke to each other, and heard each other some of the time...and sometimes it was just “parallel play.” I perceived this as language embodied in action or speech functioning as action. The single most important thing I absorbed was that individuals who hold power always make choices—to be responsive and to let people in the front door or not. Silence is a position that works well for the privileged in our culture. It is powerful and can often offer open space but it can also be calculating and look like a steel door. My mentors have been soft-spoken and verbally engaged people, people who act and have created a position for themselves by refusing to block movement or to disappear.

My mother worked with the local NOW offices in our western Pennsylvania town where the Catholic Church blocked Planned Parenthood from having any public presence. She also was elected to the all-male public school board in our rural Michigan town. Voters had chosen to cut school buses, art, music and all sports for girls, yet they found the money to light those football fields at night! The philosophy of many of the voters in these manufacturing towns—women and men who preferred funding boys sports over arts and sports for all genders—was the following: “I didn’t get this stuff, so why should these kids have it.” My mother didn’t wait—she spoke up and helped change things with a sense of adventure, humor, optimism and hard work.

So later, as an artist new to NYC, in the years that Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holtzer, Lady Pink, Basquiat and Schnabel (and a resurrected Cy Twombly) were part of the public discourse, I looked and found two people who were not afraid to hear a woman’s voice come out of a woman’s body. Judy Pfaff was my teacher and an early influence. She is still an artist who lives and breathes art. I saw her installation at Holly Solomon Gallery in 1983 and discovered, in that room, that the art I connect with is materially adventurous and fundamentally conceptual, which to my mind meant it contained a series of conscious and semiconscious decisions...consciously abandoned

for viewers to enter. Judy responds to visual history with a distance and yet is deeply inside of her work. She is inclusive and observant of the ideas and materials that are potentially useful for making things. She looks and she listens to the world and is never afraid to build something that is bigger than her own body and mind expanding. She includes students in her studio life in ways that are inspiring.

Judy knew Elizabeth Murray, who I met in 1992 while making prints at ULAE in West Islip. The fact that they were friends and colleagues was very important to me. I grew to know Elizabeth from inside this printshop where our work was being made. Dissecting processes and sharing the same master printers alongside someone like Elizabeth was a life changing experience. She generously invited me into her world, so that our children became close friends and we spent time together upstate. We traveled together to see Sarah Charlsworth’s museum exhibition in D.C. and Laurie Simmons’ museum show in Baltimore. We shared the top floor of a building on 15th Street where her woodshop was set up next door to her painting studio. I saw how her drawings became wood constructions and then how color could actually optically dissolve those powerful physical forms.

Both Judy and Elizabeth are light in spirit but tough in the studio and they were tough in mine. From both of these artists I learned, in different ways, how to live and make art in this world of women, men and children who are often inclined to place faith in male voices, first. It was educational to see Judy and Elizabeth manage the absurdity of life. They both knew how to belly laugh and how to allow snubs, exclusions and erasures fly by them. They helped me understand how much artists really do need each other to stay sane.

## *What feminism means to me*

**When I think about feminism in this post-millennium moment** I am compelled to locate it within the context of my relationship to its legacy as a combustible polemic. Historically, we tend to perceive this grand narrative in opposition: us vs. them, you vs. me (men vs. women, another story about the "other"). But this shouldn't be the case. It should be for everyone. It is not an inclusive group or about one group dominating another. It is about all of us.

Even the very definition of feminism is divisive. But that's because feminism, like all struggles of inequity, is founded on a conversation that has progressed with time. It endures its many iterations, the beating back of its opponents, the revising of itself as new ideas bubble up. We'd all love (at least most of us) to wake up to a world where difference is not something we must defend. That's why feminism is so important. It keeps us fighting for a better world.

Some have criticized feminism for being too essentialist, others have argued that gender is socially conditioned. But what it all comes down to today is women believing in women so we will all believe in each other. I've heard many say the feminist label is confining, suffocating, pigeonholing—or worse—those that even believe gender is no longer an issue. Feminism shouldn't be a burden; it should be empowering, because it's empowering to be a woman. One woman's struggle is all of ours.

So, to grapple with the legacy of feminism, you must look to see how it lives in yourself, your mother, your neighbor, your colleague, your daughter and your world. To celebrate those women who told us who we are, where we've been and where we want to go. Our life-shapers. For me, there has been a rotating cast of tough matriarchs. Visionaries, really. My mother who made me want it all. My mentors Alanna Heiss, Katharina Sieverding, Marilyn Minter, Georganne Deen and Aleksandra Mir, who showed me how to be strong. And my peers Kate Gilmore, Mika Rottenberg, Jen DeNike, Nicole Cherubini, Ylva Ogland and Elif Uras who believed in me over and over again.

I like to think of feminism and its legacy like a daisy chain. It's connecting—generations, genders, races, religions and power structures. It's lasting—absorbing all the attempts made to end it. It's defying—boundaries, categories, limitations. So, let's exploit it. Let's identify it in all of us. That's how it lives on.

**Amy Smith-Stewart**

"The Influentials" looks at the remarkable number of successful female fine artists that have graduated from the School of Visual Arts. It is a reflection of the majority female student body at SVA and art colleges in general, and an examination of how the notable success of these alumni has frequently been achieved through a model of engagement and cooperation.

Each alumnus was asked to select one artist of significance to her for inclusion in the show. Some selected a fellow alumnus or an SVA faculty member, others chose peers, still others selected mentors or artists they had never met but whose work had had a major impact on theirs; nearly half of them chose male artists. With many of the pairings, the relationships of content, form or concept are readily apparent, in other cases, less so.

In this way, "The Influentials" partially charts a creative community started by SVA alumni and built upon by the artists who have, through action or example, supported them. While group exhibitions are often built around a technique, or philosophical or aesthetic concern, the work in this show is diverse in approach and philosophy, the unifying principle being these alumni's success and their willingness to credit the members of the creative community who have inspired them. In essence, "The Influentials" is evidence of connections across generations, gender, mediums and geographical space: a deeper kind of social networking that happens in the studios, galleries and minds of the participants as well as in the digital realm.

Does this new paradigm of community displace the modernist trope of the genius creating masterpieces in solitude that earlier generations subscribed to? Is it the femaleness of so many artists that marks the sea change in how opportunity is shared, or is it coincidental? The new generation of gallerists and curators have access to artists and their work in ways that means far more opportunity for a more diverse representation of the art world than in the past. We may never be able to conclusively tease out the threads of this fabric, but the work and the relationships demonstrate the way that female SVA graduates are integral to, and have enriched, the art world as a whole, and we are pleased to step back and look at the patterns of mentoring, patronage, teaching and friendship that this exhibition reveals within SVA.

**Carrie Lincourt, Director of Alumni Affairs**