Year of the Visible Woman: Artpace Opens 2020
With Exhibition, Gender Parity Pledge

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Continent, by 2018 Artpace resident Jenelle Esparza, is part of the Visibilities: Intrepid Women of Artpace exhibition.

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Today, Artpace opens its first exhibition of 2020, a year that finds the institution celebrating its 25th anniversary. Visibilities: Intrepid Women of Artpace Compiles work by 17 women artists of diverse backgrounds, ages, and stylistic approaches, a nod to the institution’s history and to another 2020 anniversary of note: the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment, which granted women in the United States the right to vote.

Visibilities, with an opening reception scheduled from 6 to 8 p.m. today, will be on display through April 26.
Artpace also has announced, via news release and its Twitter page (https://twitter.com/artpace/status/1210939920027738624), that “with an eye to gender parity” it has “committed to focusing all non-residency exhibition programming to female and female-identifying artists in 2020.”

A nonprofit artist residency program that hosts local, national and international artists throughout the year, Artpace was founded in 1993 by San Antonio artist, collector and businesswoman Linda Pace.

One of Pace’s principal goals for the program was to foster connections and creative cross-pollination between the local art community and the broader art world. Since opening its doors in 1995, the institution has hosted more than 240 international artists-in-residence and become a significant part of the San Antonio art landscape.

For Erin K. Murphy, curator of the exhibition and Artpace’s residency and exhibitions manager, both Visibilities and the yearlong commitment pay homage to Pace, who died in 2007, as well as the anniversary of women’s suffrage.

“It’s a nod to Artpace’s legacy and to Linda Pace and her feminist convictions,” she said of the exhibition, citing Pace’s passion for art, attitude of inclusivity, and feminist perspective as guiding considerations in the researching, planning, and execution of the exhibition.

In honor of the 25th anniversary, all of the exhibition’s artists have a share in Artpace’s history. Visibilities includes a piece by Pace and one by Janet Flohr, whose Hare & Hound Press (https://harehoundpress.com/index.html) has worked with Artpace artists since the beginning, and 15 artists who have passed through the residency program over the years.

“One of the things that I realized when considering Linda, her vision for Artpace, and our history,” Murphy said, “is that the women artists that have been through Artpace are speaking in very diverse voices but are often speaking about common themes like identity and gender and feminism and just what it means to be a woman or to have been a woman in the past or even to be one in the future.”

The exhibition, therefore, features work that – ranging from silly to sorrowful, from enraged to empowered – expresses, interrogates, and celebrates the many facets and forms of the feminine experience. Its pieces also run the gamut in terms of medium, including video, sculpture, textile work, drawing, painting, photography, and more.

“It all came together in what I believe to be a really powerful presentation,” Murphy said.
Discussing the feminist mandate of the exhibition, Murphy referred to a wry and incisive 1971 essay by art critic Linda Nochlin titled “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” (https://www.artnews.com/art-news/retrospective/why-have-there-been-no-great-women-artists-4201/)

“Visibilities is “not an answer to that question,” she said, “but an inquiry into why art history has so often ignored women artists and why it has taken so long for women to be represented, to be visible ... and, of course, it’s something we are still working on.”

Murphy said Artpace’s commitment to showing only female and female-identifying artists this year was inspired, at least in part, by the Baltimore Museum of Art's November announcement (https://www.npr.org/2019/11/19/780935457/baltimore-museum-of-art-will-only-buy-works-by-women-next-year) that it would only buy art by women in 2020.

“It was their initiative that actually inspired this for me,” she said. “I saw that and I thought, ‘There’s no reason why we can’t do something like this ourselves – we have to.’”

“It’s the least we can do, basically, in an effort to push for equity in the art world and to honor the anniversary of suffrage.”

“It’s an admirable effort on Artpace’s part,” exhibiting artist and 2018 resident Jenelle Esparza said of the institution’s 2020 commitment, adding that she believes “it will be an insightful enterprise” because of the amount of research and planning it will take to execute.

“I think it is going to be phenomenal,” she said, “and it has potential to grow the community’s knowledge and appreciation of women artists.”

Continent, Esparza’s piece in the exhibition, “has to do with the resilience and resourcefulness of women in South Texas, specifically this cotton-picking era that my family comes from. It’s about them being self-made and self-taught.”
A detail photograph of the stripes in *Continent* by Jenelle Esparza

The piece is a large quilt – made with textiles including old tablecloths, clothing, and unfinished embroidery pieces of her grandmother’s that Esparza later finished – in the shape of an American flag.

The idea, Esparza said, is “imagining a continent of women – or even that the women in South Texas form their own continent – and this is their flag.”

Exhibiting artist and summer 2019 resident Jennifer Ling Datchuk spoke of a particular kind of bias against women in art.

“Speaking from my perspective of working within craft, ceramics and textiles are always deemed women’s work or a hobby and therefore [are seen as having] no place in contemporary art,” she said.