

# Jacqueline Humphries: Creating as a Woman

BY JEROME NEUTRES | JUNE 28, 2019



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Jacqueline Humphries at work  
(Photograph: Gil Blank)

[Jacqueline Humphries](/artists/jacqueline-humphries-2008/) (/artists/jacqueline-humphries-2008)'s solo exhibition is currently on show at the Dia [Dan Flavin](/artists/dan-flavin-176/) (/artists/dan-flavin-176) Institute in Bridgehampton, New York. She is also featured in "Sun Women," the spring-summer exhibition of the Charles Riva Collection in Brussels. Curated by our contributor **Jerome Neutres**, this original group show focuses on the topic of abstraction as an inner statement of feminism in the history of the American art scene. The exhibition takes as its starting point that female artists should not be categorized because of their gender. We should not seek to

essentialize their work, but rather to show artworks and artists who have long been neglected by a scene that has privileged male creators. Just as all expression necessarily hails from somewhere, artistic creation arises out of a given personal, sociocultural and historical context. In our desire to avoid discriminating against female artists' work, we can nonetheless appreciate, in terms of aesthetics and anthropology, the artistic particularities engendered by the Western women's liberation movement in

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the 20th century. To create is to emancipate oneself and, in turn, the emancipation of women was a tremendous lever for creativity. It is no coincidence that many female artists have turned to Abstract or Conceptual art as a form of liberation and a statement of artistic freedom.

The title of the exhibition at the Riva Collection in Brussels, on view until June 29, is based on [Lee Krasner](#) (/artists/lee-krasner-101159)'s series "The Sun Woman." [Jacqueline Humphries](#) (/artists/jacqueline-humphries-2008)'s painting is exhibited there along with works by [Helen Frankenthaler](#) (/artists/helen-frankenthaler-2528), [Louise Bourgeois](#) (/artists/louise-bourgeois-3648), [Joan Mitchell](#) (/artists/joan-mitchell-284), [Louise Nevelson](#) (/artists/211578-louise-nevelson), and [Eva Hesse](#) (/artists/84505-eva-hesse). What unites these seven artists is not some hypothetical form of feminine sensitivity or any other such cliché. In their quest for freedom in a male-dominated society — with the art world being no exception — they saw abstraction as the perfect medium. Given they had to defend themselves more vigorously than their male counterparts, these artists were arguably more radical in their artistic choices and less affected by the ways of the art world. We asked [Jacqueline Humphries](#) (/artists/jacqueline-humphries-2008) to react to these statements and to tell us more about her art.

**JN When and how did you come to abstract painting? Who have been your main references in the history of art? Were painters like [Lee Krasner](#) (/artists/lee-krasner-101159) or [Joan Mitchell](#) (/artists/joan-mitchell-284) important?**

I turned to abstraction when I was in art school, so it was very soon after I moved to New York. [Lee Krasner](#) (/artists/lee-krasner-101159) and [Joan Mitchell](#) (/artists/joan-mitchell-284) were and remain important to me, but more because of their work than because they were women. Abstraction was the radical art that was being made in New York when I moved here in 1982. I loved the conversation in abstraction, especially since the New York School; there was an argumentative and polemical quality there which felt vital. More vital than, say, telling stories with one's paintings. With abstraction, the story resides in the provocation of the culture by the artist. The way, say, Krasner would do that as opposed to Nevelson; or the (perhaps in my imagination) aesthetic argument between Joe Baer and Dorothea Rockburne.

**In our Brussels show, your work is exhibited along with works by six other artists; what you have in common is that you are all abstract American artists and female artists. Do you feel that you belong to a certain history of art? Has being a female artist in a very masculine art world influenced you in your art?**

I'm really an American artist, but I don't believe there is an art history which is women's art history ~~✗~~ opposed to men's art history. There is just art history. While it's true that there are very few women within it, the emergence of many more women artists in our own time has more to do with civil rights or women's rights movements. I mean until fairly recently, women were not even allowed to have money in most cases. I will paraphrase Virginia Woolf from "A Room of One's Own" and say that when I'm painting, I paint as "a woman who has forgotten she is a woman." Here is the quotation: "... she wrote as

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a woman, but as a woman who has forgotten she is a woman, so that her pages were full of that curious sexual quality which comes only when sex is unconscious of itself.” She's talking about the struggle women have with being seen (and seeing themselves) in their own right, not just in their relation to men. But in the quotation above, the funny thing is that Woolf says it about an entirely fictional writer that she invents, Mary Carmichael, as a kind of future writer of her imagination, who by being free to write without defensiveness, is more herself. I would say that what Woolf is dreaming of in Mary Carmichael becomes real in many of the artists in the show.

**Lee Krasner (/artists/lee-krasner-101159) once said: “I, as an abstract artist, was politically active.” Would you say abstract painting is still a form of political or social commitment?**

I absolutely would say that but it's a different thing than what's understood today as political activism. Perhaps it pertains more to the politics inherent in all subjectivity, and anyone's attempts to understand the world as it really is. While insisting that one encounter my paintings on their own terms, I leave it very much up to you to interpret what that experience is about or what it might mean. But to place a painting in a room and ask someone to look at it is a very political act, although not extremely defensible as one.

**What are the challenges of your current new shows? What did you seek to create?**

My current exhibition at the Dia [Dan Flavin \(/artists/dan-flavin-176\)](/artists/dan-flavin-176) Institute in Bridgehampton, New York is a site-specific installation of work that's entirely new to me: resin casts imbued with fluorescent materials, viewed in black light. It's not a painting show, though there are some resin casts of actual paintings, and it moves in the direction of sculpture though I wouldn't call it strictly a sculpture installation.

**As one of New York's figures of Contemporary art, don't you think the city has changed tremendously, moving from a capital of creativity to the capital of the art market? What does New York still bring you as an artist?**

The New York of today is not the New York of 1982 when I moved here; it has undergone a total transformation especially on the surface. Many of those changes reflect changes in the culture at large, others have to do with culture industry tourism, like The Shed, which doesn't seem designed to serve the city itself or its residents, despite how it was advertised. But much remains of organic grass roots culture here, like The Kitchen or Participant Inc. New York City for me has always been about the people here, and it continues to attract ambitious and talented people interested in authentic culture. I have made strong and lasting friendships here, and that still remains.

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