

“With Love and Bananas”: Houston Gorilla Girls Seek Equality for Female Artists

By Vince Lee

Being an artist is hard and being a female artist is doubly so. When we think of equal rights and equal pay, the media tend to focus on women who have broken the glass ceiling in business or in politics and neglect the strides women have made in art. The world of art, traditionally male dominated, has seen women such as Frida Kahlo and Dorothy Hood rise above gender bias to become great artists. With the passage of time, their works reached a wider audience and the artistic community reappraised their works, finally truly appreciating posthumously the works of true, female, artistic legends.

At a time when female artists continued to lack the full recognition they deserved, four Houston women banded together as the Houston Gorilla Girls in protest against the status quo. The group organized in May of 1987 as the local incarnation of the original “Guerrilla Girls” that began in New York City two years prior. Like their New York counterparts, the Houston chapter existed as an anonymous group of women artists who devoted their efforts to exposing the gender inequalities within the world of fine arts and exhibit venues. However, unlike their counterparts, they consciously altered their name from “Guerrilla” to “Gorilla” because they thought it was funnier and humor was a big part of what they did. Also, the slight name change signified the difference in their approach, preferring to be perceived as apes rather than soldiers.¹

Dressed in gorilla suits to protect their identity, the women’s visits to local area art venues became known



Gorilla Girls “Caught in a Jungle” poster, undated.

All photos and images courtesy of Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

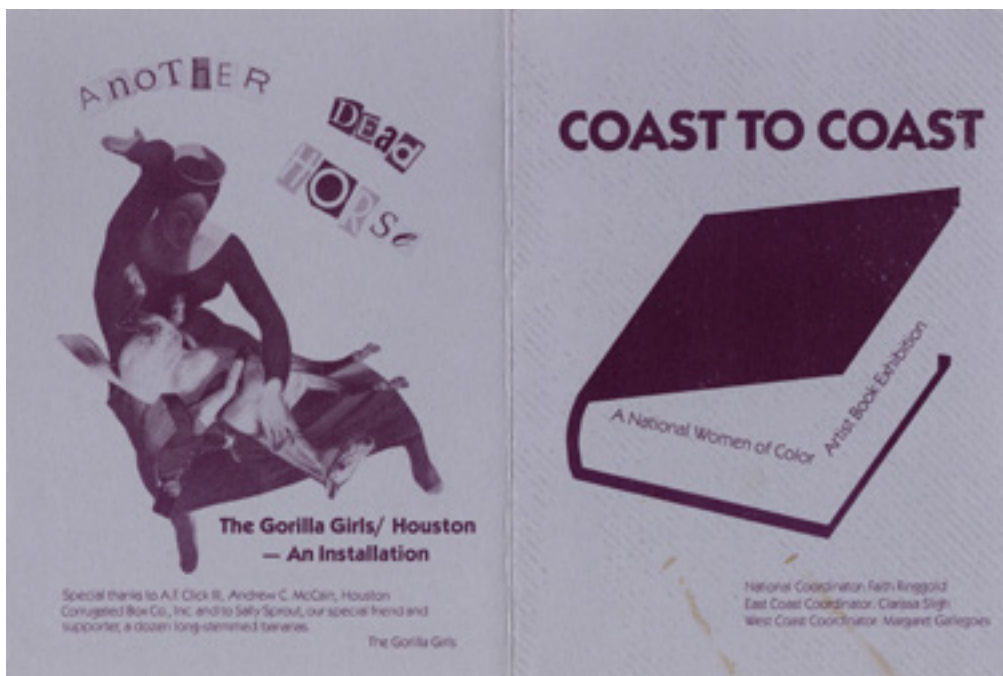
as “hits,” a selective targeting of galleries or museums in which women artists and their works were under-represented or not represented at all. The anonymity afforded by the gorilla suits served two purposes. First, it kept the art establishment off balance with the “hits” and kept them guessing as to the identity of the Gorilla Girls. As expressed by the group’s spokeswoman, Sally Sprout, during a *Houston Chronicle* interview in 1988, “Being anonymous is much more effective politically because if people knew who was doing it, they would be able to make

associations with that personality and dismiss the issue.” Second, it provided them a measure of personal safety from both physical and verbal attacks for their actions. As reiterated by Sprout, “There is a certain amount of protection: people have been punished for their political views.”²

The Gorilla Girls made their debut at the Glassell School of Art on May 28, 1987. Their appearances at events drew the attention of visitors and owners of the galleries, as well as increasing press coverage of the event. Depending on the individual, reactions generated from their appearances ran the gamut from shock and disgust to support and awareness to the plight of women artists. In addition to their first appearance at Glassell, the



The Gorilla Girls made their “first appearance” at the Glassell School of Art on May 28, 1987.



Another Dead Horse installation postcard, 1988.

Gorilla Girls “hit” the Menil, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and the Lawndale Arts Center.

Although some viewed their methods as unorthodox and over the top in drawing attention, the Gorilla Girls’ work and preparation behind their “hits” were anything but unconventional. Being a Gorilla Girl was not a mere hobby for these women. As many of their members came to realize, it was a full time job that demanded planning, coordination, publicity, press releases, and most importantly funding. From a financial standpoint, the group carried on their activities at great cost to themselves, many times risking bankruptcy. If not for the support and donations of like-minded women, supporters, and other members of the art community, many of their “hits” and installations would not have happened. According to Sprout, “These people (the Gorilla Girls) have given up a great deal of their personal lives and will never be known for it. There is no personal gain, other than the intangibles.”³

Evidence of the group’s meticulous nature can be found throughout the collection of materials they kept, including: organizational records, correspondence, mailing lists, financial statements, photographs, notebooks, flyers and brochures, and statistical materials. In fact, they were so careful to cultivate their anonymity that they extended it even on to their correspondence, financial statements, and ledgers. The women were simply known as GG or the Gorilla Girls. When communicating with gallery owners or granting interviews with the press, they handled such transactions through their spokeswoman, Sally Sprout, who acted as their intermediary.

Besides demonstrators and protesters, these women considered themselves, above all, visual artists in their own right. The Gorilla Girls recalled their art student

days when they witnessed professors’ sexist and dismissive attitudes in their courses. Such attitudes ranged from espousing their views on what a woman’s role in society should be to offering advice to deny their gender and become more masculine in order to succeed. As such, the Gorilla Girls used their works as a reminder to society of the current state of inequities that women in the arts faced. Nowhere is this more forcefully stated than in their submitted proposal for the Diverse Works Installation, “Another Dead Horse.”

“We want to make it clear that our plan is to make the strongest possible statement concerning women and women

artists in particular, and we will use any device to express our position and our anger. We will use sarcasm, irony, perhaps even blatant vulgarity, as well as historical data and hundreds of lines of quotations about women (presented as graffiti) to reinforce our portrayal of the jungle the woman artist lives in.”⁴

From 1987-1997, the Houston Gorilla Girls’ activities, performances, and installations made them a fixture of the Houston art scene, helping to open the door to female and minority artists and their works. Almost as quickly as they appeared on the scene, they vanished into anonymity after a decade of targeted appearances, performing their last act in Verona, Italy, at the Villa Carlotta.

The Houston Gorilla Girls may be gone but the legacy and impact of their work lives on for all to see



The Gorilla Girls out in front of the Menil, undated.

Expenses (g.g. out of pocket)
Sewell Gallery Show 1992

Date	Description				
	Firehouse show	bal.		35.00	
	Ph. Video				25.00
	Ph. Table & B'di		43.33		
	Ph. Plastic / Acrylic	63.47			
	Ph. Red Chest	35.82			
	ph. Posters				45.00
	"				12.00
	ph. Banners		186.21		
	Ph. Slides		32.22		
	Tapes				
	Elo's Frisk				
	Misc:				
	Ph. Hdwan (Hulls etc.)				31.58
	" Film				6.27
	" Beer				8.25
	" Slony			5.00	

Expense report for Sewell Gallery "hit," 1992.



The Gorilla Girls are "Married to Art," undated.

through their materials and artifacts contained within their archival collection, replete with their masks and tiny stuffed gorillas. In the end, what they wanted is universal to all women and may be best summarized by their spokeswoman, Sally Sprout. "They want to be seen as people. They want to emphasize that they are not anti-male, anti-family, anti-children ... They want to emphasize that they are sisters, daughters, wives, and mothers."⁵

In a final gesture, befitting to their legacy, the materials that encapsulated their cause and life's work were donated anonymously to University of Houston Special Collections through an intermediary on their behalf. Always taking their cause of combatting gender inequality seriously, but not themselves, perhaps, the Houston Gorilla Girls *joie de vivre* is best expressed with their signature closing found on their correspondence "With Love and Bananas."

Special Collections in the M. D. Anderson Library is open from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday to Friday during summer break. For more information on how to view the Gorilla Girls' collection or visit the archives, go to <http://info.lib.uh.edu/about/campus-libraries-collections/special-collections>.

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