

Adolescent Girls' Responses to  
Feminist Artworks in the Elizabeth A.  
Sackler Center for Feminist Art  
at the Brooklyn Museum

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*This qualitative case study investigated girls' interests in feminist art and their perceptions of gender (in)equality by engaging with feminist artworks. Adolescent girls participated in the 3-week program Women Artists and Their Artwork. Findings reveal that, given the opportunity to engage with a variety of feminist artworks, girls articulate their perceptions about women's experiences and learn more about women's history to contemplate their place within the world. Findings also show that beliefs and opinions of gender (in)equality vary among adolescent girls.*

Linda Nochlin's 1971 article "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" launched the discussion of women's roles in art by calling attention to acknowledgments and priorities given to artists based on gender and social status over talent and form (Gouma-Peterson & Mathews, 1987; Lauter, 1990). These discussions led to new areas of study and to feminist art activism: feminist art criticism, university courses on feminist art, feminist art exhibitions and conferences, and feminist publications (Gouma-Peterson & Mathews, 1987). Many female artists set out to "consciously reinsert . . . women's personal experience into art practice" (Chadwick, 1996, p. 356) and, in turn, challenged exclusionary practices and universal paradigms and paved the way for postmodernism (Broude & Garrard, 1994, p. 10). Today, feminist artists, art historians, and art educators continue to carve new paths from those blazed by the forerunners of the movement, breaking away from binary agendas and urging inclusive, pluralistic, and global approaches to feminisms (Reilly & Nochlin, 2007).

Feminist artworks often address controversial and complex issues through imagery that can be sexually and violently graphic, and concerns arise about how to meet the educational, social, and developmental needs of adolescent girls when teaching from these artworks. Determining a starting point that enables educators to understand adolescent girls' perceptions of feminist artworks is key to developing appropriate and beneficial programs and lessons for them.

Burton (2007) notes that adolescent audiences are diverse and have a different set of values than do adults when responding to artworks. Although institutions teaching aesthetic education are "now more sensitive and aware of the multitude of issues affecting the embeddedness of adolescent identity," given the lack of agreement in general about social definitions of race, class, ethnicity, and gender, "definitions [can be] at odds with how youngsters perceive and experience themselves" (p. 165). Best (2004) agrees, stating that "culture is a dynamic influence that changes over time" (p. 203) and that peer group socialization differs from adult culture and "may be a more important carrier of social change than . . . parents" (p. 213).

In the spring of 2007, the Brooklyn Museum in Brooklyn, New York, opened the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art (EASCFA). As an educator at the museum, one of my responsibilities was to plan programs for adolescents. Given the tendency of feminist artists to focus on the body as a source of agency, the first teen program that I organized in conjunction with the inaugural exhibition was a 6-week master class for dance. I hired a feminist dancer/choreographer as the master class teaching artist, and we collaboratively designed and taught the class, whose format had three components.

In the first 2 weeks, the teaching artist and I cofacilitated observing and discussing artworks. Our goal for this portion of the class was to have participants explore, through observation and dialogue, ways in which women are judged or mistreated based on their sex or gender. Prior to the class, we selected several artworks addressing these issues. The teaching artist chose four final artworks most germane for creating dance sequences that she could teach to participants. Over the following 4 weeks, participants rehearsed and worked with the teaching artist to create a dance piece responding to the artworks we had discussed. During the final session, participants performed the piece in the museum, which was open to the public. Class discussions, the dance practice, and the final performance were documented by a videographer.

Participant responses obtained from written surveys completed on the first day of the class, as well as verbal statements from class discussions, revealed that the participants, in general, lacked historical and political knowledge about the social construction of gender. It was observed that the participants had little to no exposure to the concept of feminism, knew very little about feminist art as a

genre, and confused feminism with femininity: Feminist art was defined by most participants to be art about women's femininity.

Group discussions in front of artworks revealed that, when participants were exposed to images created by feminist artists that challenged gender stereotypes and gender roles, participants could not immediately identify the critique being made by the artist. When participants were given information about the artists' intentions, participants agreed with the artists' points, but responses included phrases like "I'm not like that, but other people I know . . ." or "This doesn't affect me," or "It won't change." For example, when showing *Trans*, by Tejal Shah (2004–2005), in which two simultaneous videos display the female artist dressing like a woman on one side and like a man on the other, I asked participants if the videos reminded them of anyone they knew. This question was asked before I revealed the artist's gender. The participants agreed the videos did remind them of people they knew and then launched into an animated discussion about boys at school who they believed to be homosexual based on their mannerisms, but were, to their dismay, not out of the closet yet. One participant felt the artist was showing how men who enjoyed dressing up like women had to hide behind closed doors so others would not judge them. This comment led another participant to refer to a scene from *Desperate Housewives*,<sup>1</sup> which aired a couple of weeks prior to the class, in which a character was caught hiding his interest in dressing like women from his family. Furthermore, in a later class session, one participant described *Trans* as being about men while stating the other artworks they looked at were about women. Although participants were able to relate the issues to real life by giving examples outside themselves, they ultimately detached themselves from these issues and revealed no indications of how the issues related to their own sense of self and identity.

Participant responses on a final written survey showed participants had, indeed, developed a new awareness of feminism at the conclusion of the class. However, rather than seeing feminism as a forceful political and social movement as I had anticipated, the preliminary definition of feminism related to femininity was replaced by an awareness of sexism. Therefore, participants defined feminism by using words that described sexist practices toward women. One example of a participant's response was "Feminism to me now means the way people judge you on your sex. . . . Feminism is just judgmental to me just because of a certain sex." Although responses given by participants in the video documenting the class support feminism and feminist artists, based on my experiences the participants were still unable to articulate the relevance of feminism to their own lives and to the larger culture.

After close consideration of the responses from the participants in this class, it became evident that further examination of adolescent girls' interests in feminist

art was necessary for future education and program planning. In the winter of 2009, I set out to investigate more about girls' thinking about feminist<sup>2</sup> issues by investigating the following research questions: What can be learned about girls' interests in feminist exhibitions and why? How, if at all, does engagement with feminist artworks that interest this audience reinforce or change their thinking about gender (in)equality?

### Adolescents and Aesthetic Education

As adolescents begin to think more abstractly about the world, they are able to comprehend a multiplicity of ideas from varying perspectives and understand symbolic reasoning (Elkind, 1994). Support for exploration in adolescence can be found within aesthetic education. Scholars and researchers in aesthetic education define the *aesthetic* as an active process that encourages intellectual, sensory, and emotional engagement with the environment (Burton 2007; Csikszentmihalyi, 1993; Dewey, 1939/1980; Greene, 1997).

Hubard (2003) studied ways in which young people connect to artworks, collecting qualitative evidence capturing the sensibilities and thought processes she claims are at the essence of aesthetic experiences for adolescents when looking at artworks. Hubard looked closely at the relevance of intrinsic attitudes that young people bring to artworks and how this supports their quest for learning and motivates them to discover and connect to the world. Adolescents' "get to know" artworks through dialogues characterized as "web-like and organic" (pp. 127–128). Hubard refers to this as phenomenon as the "snowballing effect." Viewers open up the conversation and then, by allowing for it to branch off, discover a multiplicity of possible ideas and investigate the artwork more deeply (p. 110).

Hubard (2003) maintains that the process of investigating artworks leads to personal transformations by expanding the "horizons" or perspectives of adolescents, who attribute new value to artworks as well as to the experience of looking (p. 130). Hubard writes that the "meaning of a work cannot be reduced to a single idea, but is constituted by layers of ideas, sensations, and emotions" (p. 129). Substantiating adolescents' interests in exploring the plurality of meanings, as described by Hubard, echoes the philosophical views of Dewey (1939/1980) and Greene (1997), who warn against uniformity and the lackluster of the *anaesthetic*, defined as the opposite of aesthetic. Hubard's research asserts the authenticity inherent in adolescent responses and reminds educators that discussions with adolescents in front of artworks have the potential for reciprocal learning experiences between educators and students.

## Methodology

This qualitative case study involved 19 adolescent girls who participated in the program Women Artists and their Artwork. This study investigated what could be learned about girls' interests in feminist exhibitions and why girls' interests in feminist exhibitions are relevant when teaching them about feminist artworks. It also considered how, if at all, engagement with feminist artworks that interest girls reinforce or change their thinking about gender (in)equality. Participants engaged with artworks from an exhibition on view at the EASCFA. Four artworks were selected by the teenage participants to observe and discuss in depth. The artworks included Edwina Sandys's *The Marriage Bed . . . sometimes a bed of roses, sometimes a bed of nails* (2002, Figure 1), Bailey Doogan's *The Hard Place* (1990, Figure 2), Kiki Smith's *Born* (2002, Figure 3), and Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1974–1979, Figure 4).

Participants in this study took part in a free program developed for adolescents through the Brooklyn Museum. Participants were recruited via e-mail announcements sent to high schools and community organizations and from other teen programs at the museum. Registration was first come, first served.



Figure 1. Edwina Sandys (British, b. 1938), *The Marriage Bed . . . sometimes a bed of roses, sometimes a bed of nails* (2001), mixed media, 80 × 54 × 54 in. (203.2 × 137.2 × 137.2 cm), Brooklyn Museum. Gift of Henry Luce III and Leila Hadley Luce, 2004.29. × Edwina Sandys.



Figure 2. Bailey Doogan (American, b. 1941), *The Hard Place (For Mairead Farrell)* (1990), charcoal, pastel, aluminum dust, and collage on primed paper; diptych, each: 72 × 50 in. (182.9 × 127 cm), Brooklyn Museum. Gift of Mary Ann and Martin Baumrind, 2006.59a–b. © Bailey Doogan.



Figure 3. Kiki Smith (American, b. 1954 in Germany), *Born* (2002), lithograph, 68 × 56 in. (172.7 × 142.2 cm), Brooklyn Museum. Emily Winthrop Miles Fund, 2003.17. © Kiki Smith, courtesy of Pace Gallery.

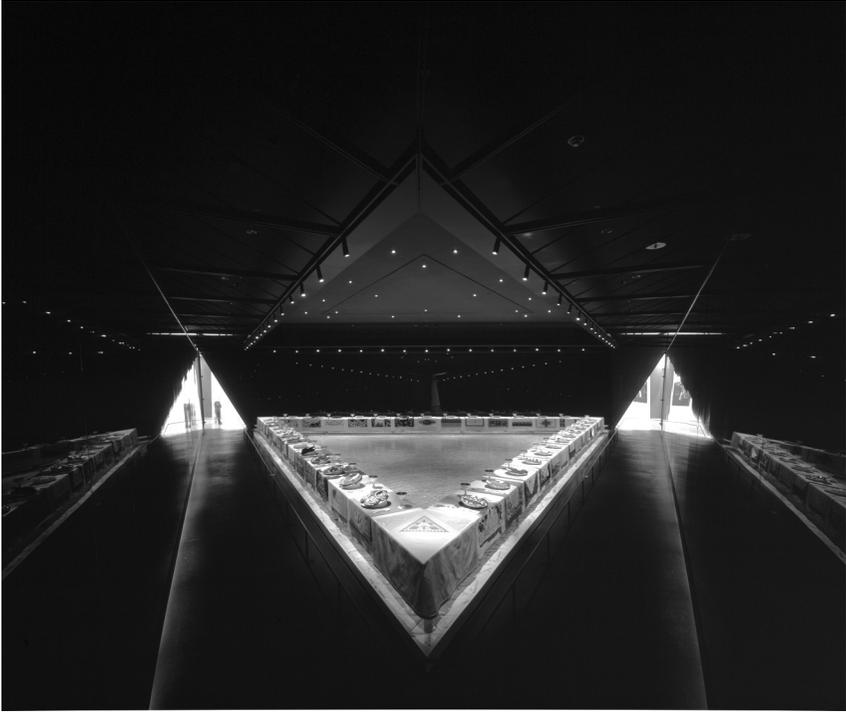


Figure 4. Judy Chicago (American, b. 1939), *The Dinner Party* (1974–1979), ceramic, porcelain, textile, 576 × 576 in. (1463 × 1463 cm), Brooklyn Museum. Gift of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Foundation, 2002.10. © Judy Chicago.

All participants self-selected to attend the program and participate in the study. The final roster included teenage girls from across the city. Since some teachers strongly encouraged their students to participate, several participants knew one another from their schools. Two participants were employed in the museum's teen apprentice program. Another had attended two previous free teen programs at the museum. The ethnic and racial backgrounds of participants were diverse, and participants ranged in age from 14 to 18.

The program consisted of three sessions, each 2 hours long, though the final session ran over by a half hour. My role in the program was that of teacher, as I facilitated the engagement of participants as they looked at and discussed artworks. Therefore, I was a participant researcher.

Data were collected through both audio recordings and written responses and were what Merriam (1998) refers to as “thick” or rich descriptive data: multi-layered, complex, and broad (p. 29). Discussions in front of artworks were divergent and were led by participants' interests. Historical and contextual information

was offered during the discussions to support participants' viewing and to aid in participants' understanding of the artwork(s). Information about the artists and their artworks was not given to participants prior to visiting the exhibitions nor before looking at and discussing the artworks. Furthermore, prior to visiting the exhibitions and looking at and discussing the artworks, participants were not given definitions of feminism, feminist, or feminist art.

In the context of this study, data reflect experiences and perceptions of the girls who participated in the program. Data were reviewed to identify themes that emerged from participants' discussions in front of artworks. Responses from three participants with a prior knowledge of art, but whose experiences with art varied from one another, were studied in depth: Ruth, who worked at the museum as a teen apprentice and had an extensive arts background; Kelly, who had some exposure to the visual arts and women artists and a strong interest in writing and reading about women's history; and Lauryn, who had taken studio art classes as part of the standard city curriculum and had visited the museum on school field trips and with her family.

## Findings

This study draws attention to adolescent girls' interests in feminist artworks. In viewing and discussing feminist artworks, girls explore their personal feelings and thoughts about human experiences, which in this study included four themes: romantic relationships as shown in *The Marriage Bed . . . sometimes a bed of roses, sometimes a bed of nails*, familial relationships as depicted in *Born*, morality and political attitudes as suggested in *The Hard Place*, and women's history as told through *The Dinner Party*. In comparing the visual details of these artworks, participants selected artworks containing everyday objects, such as in *The Marriage Bed . . . sometimes a bed of roses, sometimes a bed of nails* and *The Dinner Party*. *The Hard Place* and *Born* were figurative works in which figures were rendered in a realistic style.

When looking at and discussing artworks, participants identified details they noticed and speculated about their meaning(s). For example, when discussing the *The Marriage Bed . . . sometimes a bed of roses, sometimes a bed of nails*, participants noted the rusty bed frame and connected its weathered condition to the passage of time:

SARAH:<sup>3</sup> It's really rusted. It looks old. Like, it's been through a whole bunch of a family history . . . passed down through generations.

NICOLE: Yeah, the bed frame shows an older marriage that had grown over the years.

Other participants contemplated Sandy's use of roses and nails:

RUTH: I think that the roses symbolize a woman and that the nails might symbolize men.

ANGELINA: The roses are always beautiful and spikes are evil.

Another participant stated that the triangular shape created by the mattress being divided diagonally references a "love triangle." Other participants debated the symbolic meaning of the red roses. They wondered whether the red symbolized "death," "blood from pain," or "good luck." According to one participant, if the roses symbolized love, the roses' height indicated "more love" in the relationship. This observation was affirmed up by another participant who simply stated in response, "Love conquers all."

As in *The Marriage Bed* . . . *sometimes a bed of roses, sometimes a bed of nails*, the identification of the color red and its potential meaning(s) is noted by participants in subsequent discussions. While discussing *The Hard Place* and *Born*, participants continued to assert red as a symbol for blood and suffering:

EMILY: The blood drip from her ear, her chest, and that random spot right in the middle.

JESSICA: You can see that "weapon" is in dark red so it pops out the most while everything else is faded.

LAURYN: It looks like she is dying and trying to get a message across before she fades.

While considering the meaning of red in *Born*, one participant recalled the discussion of *The Marriage Bed*, and wondered if the red cape, worn by one of the figures, could also symbolize "good luck" or "love."

Excerpts from the discussion of *The Hard Place* show how participants' collectively interpret the artist's message. Since this artwork addresses political authority, human rights, and individual agency, participants' explored the influence of politics on the lives of individuals in relation to a quotation, in the upper right corner, that reads in bold letters "YOUR MIND IS YOUR STRONGEST WEAPON BECAUSE THEY CAN'T CONTROL YOUR MIND THEY CAN'T GET INSIDE AND THAT'S THEIR FAILURE:"

NINA: I agree . . . but I also disagree with that your mind is your strongest weapon because I feel that sometimes most of us are easily swayed. People [are] influenced greatly by writers, advertisements, or propaganda and it's hard to think consciously and to really make your own opinions because we have . . . the media, telling us what to think.

LAURYN: I agree with Nina, I think that people can be distracted and that's why maybe your mind can be less strong but I think it's still strong as a whole.

KELLY: Weapons can only go so far. You can only bomb so many cities and shoot down so many people. But, when it takes your mind, it can take a few couple of phrases and it can just take a couple of words and you can instantly wipe out an army.

LAURYN: I just want to go back to something [Kelly] said. Hitler . . . at first [had] just a thought so it can be the strongest weapon . . . everybody followed it. . . . What you think can influence many things.

Data reveal girls' aptitude for recognizing and understanding the intricacies of relationships. An excerpt from the discussion of *The Marriage Bed* . . . *sometimes a bed of roses, sometimes a bed of nails* demonstrates girls' embedded perceptions of romantic relationships:

ASHLEY: With the bars it seems like more of a trapped feeling between love, which represents the roses and the spikes, which are evils. So, I can't really describe it, the love and the turmoil that you go through when you're dealing with stuff that is as complicated as love.

KELLY: When I see the bed, I think of a love/hate relationship. I think the bars can mean that you're trapped but not really in a negative way. Sometimes people like being trapped in their love and also they're trapped in their hatred. As much as you love that person you can also hate that person just as much.

The complexities of familial relationships were expressed by participants when viewing and discussing *Born*. Lauryn describes the grandmother as protective and loving:

LAURYN: It shows the love between the grandmother and granddaughter. 'Cause she's touching her face and they have eye contact. . . . [T]hey just feel happy to be with each other again. . . . It kinda looks like the grandmother saved the little daughter for some reason 'cause it looks . . . the granddaughter's scared . . . [and s]he was saved by the grandmother. . . . [T]hey're happy because they both have each other and they are both with each other and they're safe with each other.

Ruth articulates a contrary sentiment:

RUTH: It looks like the granddaughter is trying to reach for her grandmother and the grandmother looks like she is pushing her down, kind of. . . . I think she is reaching toward the grandma's face for help.

In this study, adolescent girls' exposure to feminist artworks not only provided an opportunity for girls to discuss women's experiences, it provided a chance for them to learn more about women's history. The historical references shown in *The Dinner Party* sparked discussion about women's roles in the past, present, and future:

ASHLEY: I was particularly interested in the women from the Mesopotamia era because they portray women in a different light than women you see today. They portray women as warriors with great power . . . wisdom and responsibility. Now you just see women as just there, like just flimsy, some of them just plain stupid.

TAMARA: I was wondering why the plates? I was wondering why women are portrayed like they are supposed to be in the kitchen and men are supposed to be somewhere else. . . . Women did a lot of stuff before and now you don't see that anymore. . . . Now, they're like servants to men, always cooking and all that stuff. Before women were seen as stronger.

LIZ: Even though before women were portrayed as more helpful or more hard-working, all you see now, in the day that we live in, women are more portrayed as sex symbols more than anything.

KELLY: In the time of the Amazons, women were fighters. Then, all of a sudden, women were housewives, taking care of the children, cooking. . . . Then in the late 1800s and early 1900s we had the Women's Rights Movement to get to be able to vote and we . . . started seeing a little more fight going on than when women were docile. Now, a lot of women [are] career women. You still see a lot of women who are housewives, but there are a lot of career women who are empowered just like men are. We're starting to get a little more neck and neck with them. With the election, one of the reasons why Hillary Clinton was shot down so much was because she was told by the Democratic Party that she had to be pro-war because they didn't want people seeing her as soft, as a soft woman.

Participants' foregoing comments reveal the variance in adolescent girls' perceptions of women's status and their roles in contemporary society.

During this program, participants' discussions of women artists and their artwork sparked participants' curiosity about women's history and facilitated their thinking about ways women have been included, excluded, and represented in artworks, throughout history, and in contemporary society:

ASHLEY: Before I came here I wasn't familiar with the whole women artists thing. I was use to seeing so many male images. I didn't really know that women played a big part like they played. . . . I'm just glad that I'm not the only one who actually sees women for what they look like on the outside. At first, I just thought it was me. . . . I actually see myself as the characters that some women paint.

EMILY: First, I thought feminism was this radical "men should die or something." But I realized that feminist was actually a way for women to be portrayed, correct. Well yeah, correctly, without all the stereotypes and prejudices.

LIZ: I never gave the word feminism a whole lot of thought. I just thought it was women who thought they should have the same affords as men. Now that

I came to this program, I realized it's more than "Hey, I want equal rights." It's different. The process of . . . getting there and striving for it because they obviously haven't achieved it yet. We're still getting there.

ANGELINA: I really thought it's like what [Liz] said. I thought the feminists were in the '70s trying to fight against men for getting rights and stuff, but it's not. It's way more than just that.

## Implications for Education

### *Suggestions for Education*

Acknowledging that it is important to introduce adolescents to artworks created by feminist artists is in and of itself a huge step toward creating a paradigm shift in education, given their lack of exposure to women artists and women's artwork, even over 40 years after the beginnings of the feminist movement. The ways in which adolescents girls are introduced to feminist artworks are critical in their understanding of feminist artists and the ideas presented in their artworks. Paramount to introducing adolescent girls to feminist artists and artworks is an awareness of girls' interests and an awareness of their thinking about gender (in)equality. Teaching adolescent girls about feminist artists and artworks need not alienate girls, nor does it require they adopt feminist perspectives prior to, or as a result of, engagement with feminist artworks. Educators need to take into consideration the varying and diverse perspectives that girls bring to the table without assuming all girls share the same beliefs about gender (in)equality.

Although some educators may be tempted to front-load students when teaching about feminism, this study suggests that, through their engagement with multiple feminist artworks, girls will become familiar with feminist ideas at a gradual pace that is comfortable for them. Furthermore, allowing adolescent girls to connect their personal thoughts and bring their everyday experiences to discussions about feminist artworks provides these girls with the acknowledgment and independence they desire. Lesson formats inclusive of multiple perspectives allow girls to ponder ideas and respond thoughtfully, enabling them to think critically on their own. In turn, girls gain a sense of agency useful to support their developing identities. As Greene (1997) describes, agency is the "power to choose and to act on what is chosen" by asking questions and playing an "authentic role in on-going dialogues" (p. 110).

### *Suggestions for Art Educators in Schools and Museums*

Artworks most engaging to this audience explore women's experiences, spark debate, and provide information about women's history. Adolescent girls prefer artworks that are visually accessible with recognizable imagery, and these girls enjoy looking at and discussing artworks created in a wide range of media. While the

goal for teaching about feminist art is for students to familiarize themselves with feminist ideas and understand themselves within the larger cultural context, learning activities can be focused on enabling girls to explore themes and ideas most relevant to them. This can be done by exposing students to multiple artworks. A single engagement with one work oversimplifies feminist art and feminism in general and will not offer the type of learning experience necessary for girls to identify and relate to women artists and their works.

In this study, girls did not select artworks depicting explicit sexualized nudity, nor did they select conceptual artworks or artworks containing figurative fragmentation. As a result, these types of artworks are not recommended for introducing adolescent girls to feminist topics. Multivisit classes or programs, in which educators build rapport with participants, might be a better match for exploring adult content and advanced forms of art making in depth. Student's religious orientations should be considered. At the onset of this study, two girls were unable to participate for religious reasons, saying that their parents did not support their participation in a program discussing artworks containing nudity.

Although not all feminist themes directly relate to core subjects in some school curricula, this study finds that adolescent girls incorporate ideas learned in core subjects into their discussions of artworks. This included historical and cultural events, as well as literary references. Bringing these references into discussions helps girls connect old and new knowledge, and educators can use these references as windows into students' interests and thinking and as a way to guide discussions. As pointed out by Burnham and Kai-Kee (2005), educators equipped with historical and contextual knowledge can introduce information strategically throughout discussions of artworks to expose their complexities and ambiguities, helping adolescents to look and think more deeply. In cases where numerous feminist artworks are being discussed, educators can have girls consider the relationships between and among them. Thus, addressing feminist topics in art classrooms or museum settings has the potential to enrich adolescent girls' lives by supplementing content that is not discussed or articulated in core subjects.

## Conclusion

The feminist movement opened doors for artists, historians, and educators to challenge the traditional Western art historical canon, and allowed for the inclusion of women artists and their artwork. To support adolescent growth and development, educators must encourage adolescents' desire to explore their developing ways of thinking. Aesthetic education offers opportunities for educators to nurture adolescent development when imagination and participatory engagement from adolescents' is encouraged.

Precedence should be given to exposing adolescent girls to artworks created by women so that these girls can see themselves and their experiences reflected in these works. Adolescent girls' experiences vary, and educators can guide them to discover and articulate their opinions and beliefs about themselves, women, women's art, and feminism through engagement with artworks.

Further research might study boys' interests in feminist artworks or explore ways adolescents relate to feminist artworks that address topics of race, ethnicity, and sexual identity.

## Notes

1. *Desperate Housewives* is an American television comedy-drama that follows the family and domestic lives of a group of women living in a fictional American town. The episode "Big Dress" aired in the third season on April 8, 2007.
2. The *Merriam Webster On-line Dictionary* (n.d.) defines *feminism* as
  1. The theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes
  2. Organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests
3. References to participants' comments are by pseudonyms.

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