Women Artists and Teaching: An Intersectional View

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This In the Round explores a foundational question: What is the relationship between women, art, and teaching? Women are often forced to take the professional positions they can get, when and where they can get them. As Sue Canterbury of the Dallas Museum of Art said of Georgia O’Keeffe’s lesser-known artist-sister, Ida Ten Eyck O’Keeffe, “Compromise was a central element of her reality.”1 Faced with similar professional realities, we found ourselves living in small Texas towns, teaching numerous courses while carrying heavy service loads and receiving limited support for research (Amy Von Lintel is a professor at West Texas A&M University in Canyon, and Liz Kim is a lecturer at Texas A&M University–Kingsville). In this environment, we each turned to projects in our own “backyards,” researching women artists who had taught at our institutions (fig. 1). But because Texas is such a big, spread-out state, we knew nothing of each other until 2020, when another woman educator who had similarly followed a job to a small town in a remote location brought us together.2 Once connected, we compared the overlaps in our projects and methods. We discussed the ways we had mined local collections and archives and come to the realization that this work not only shed light on the lives of women artists but also yielded new insights and raised important questions about the significant role teaching played in the careers of women artists.

To delve further into these issues, we organized a panel on women artists as educators for the 2020 annual meeting of the College Art Association (CAA).3 This gathering yielded a number of investigative paths, which included discovering the often-overlooked labor performed by women artist-educators, investigating the students and communities these women reached through their teaching, and recording the effects of pedagogy on their own artistic practices. These threads are further developed in the contributions to this In the Round: essays by Rebecca Giordano, Sally Brown, and Joanna Gardner-Huggett; and

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interviews with Johnnie Mae Maberry, Santa Barraza, Kelly Church, and Renée Dillard by Lynette Gilbert, Mary Thomas, and Melynda Seaton.

In her essay, “The Art of Living’: Selma Burke’s Progressive Art,” art historian Rebecca Giordano surveys Burke’s teaching career, beginning with her tenure at the Harlem Community Art Center in the late 1930s and continuing through her retirement from the Selma Burke Art Center in Pittsburgh in 1976. Mining contemporary newspapers and the archives at Fisk University, Spelman College, and the University of Pittsburgh, Giordano looks for clues to illuminate the career of an under-examined artist-educator. Her essay meticulously outlines how Burke negotiated the cultural shift from the Dewey-inspired teaching that characterized Black artist-educators in the foundational era of the Works Progress Administration to the Black-nationalist outlook of teachers who were part of the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s and the 1970s.

In “Institutional Time from Fresno to Today: Judy Chicago’s Career Through Art Education,” artist and educator Sally Brown offers a new reading of Chicago, arguing that her academic experiences played a crucial role in her artistic development. Going beyond the well-documented example of The Dinner Party (1975–79) and teasing out how Chicago’s intentions as an artist were inspired by her interest in education, Brown asks readers to look again at Chicago’s canonical works and notice the ways in which their display invites viewers to enjoy interactive and didactic experiences.

Shifting focus from the individual to the community, the art historian Joanna Gardner-Huggett, in her essay, “The Art of Flocking: Sapphire and Crystals, Education, Community Building and Collaboration,” explores the history of Sapphire and Crystals, a Black women’s collective based in Chicago. She asserts that the community-building, mentoring, and art-making practices of this collective are an example of what adrienne maree brown calls “flocking.” As Gardner-Huggett demonstrates, flocking, an approach to organizing that opens up new possibilities for social change through collaborative activism, provides an important avenue of artistic investigation and agency for women artist-educators.

Following these insightful essays are three interviews with women artist-educators working today. The art educator Lynnette Gilbert interviews her mother, Johnnie Mae Maberry, who was the first African American woman to join the art faculty at Tougaloo College. Gilbert and Maberry discuss the successes and challenges associated with teaching at a historically Black college in Mississippi, including techniques for conveying to students in studio classes the importance of African American artists, strategies for working with the community (including the Tougaloo Art Colony), and the importance of maintaining the Tougaloo College Art Collections (fig. 2). Maberry also explains the impact of Tougaloo’s art program on the lives and careers of its former students and outlines the value of working in conjunction with other historically Black colleges through organizations such as the National Alliance of Artists from Historically Black Colleges (NAAHBCU). Maberry insists that readers recognize

Fig. 2. Johnnie Mae Maberry, Memory Reflection, 2009. Mixed media with acrylic, pastel, and collage, 40 x 30 in. Courtesy of the artist
the importance of visual arts to the college’s history and the more widespread relevance of the disciplines of art, art history, and art education.

The scholar of visual cultures Mary Thomas offers an insightful interview with contemporary Chicana/Tejana artist Santa Barraza, in which the two discuss the relationship between Barraza’s studio practice and teaching in higher education and beyond (fig. 3). Working in the borderlands between the United States and Mexico, an in-between space that Gloria Anzaldúa has described as Nepantla, Barraza played an important role in the Chicano movement in South Texas during the 1960s and 1970s. Barraza describes how developing her art in this context impacted her practice and allowed her to build “something that extends beyond the physical spaces of the classroom and university—and that even transcends national borders.” Her study abroad program in Oaxaca, Mexico, is just one example of how women artists blend travel, art making, and experiential pedagogies.

The art historian Melynda Seaton interviews Kelly Church (Ottawa/Pottawatomi) and Renée Dillard (Anishinaabe), and they discuss the artists’ respective training in the techniques of black-ash basketmaking and how they teach these traditions in multiple contexts to both Native and non-Native people. Gender is a key aspect to how labor is divided and how art is taught in Native communities, with fundamental differences existing between tribes, bands, families, and individuals. Cultural appropriation is a concern the artist-educators must consider when teaching non-Native students, particularly as black ash is a sacred tree tied to creation stories of northeastern Native groups such as the Wabanaki. Unfortunately, an invasive species of beetle has been decimating black-ash forests. In response to this environmental crisis, the artists and their communities have been racing to save seeds and harvest dying trees, a communal action based on knowledge sharing.

As evidenced by the range of issues covered in these essays and interviews, the teaching experiences of women artists vary greatly. Women have worked with young children, art students, community members, and adult continuing-education learners, as well as with students across genders. They have taught in urban settings and rural locations, both within and beyond the borders of the United States. They have worked in established institutions as well as in ad hoc community spaces. They have taught classes, curated public exhibitions, given guest lectures, and participated in conferences. They have directed a wide variety of courses, from drawing, painting, printmaking, sculpture, and craft processes to art history, fashion design, penmanship, and technical drawing. They have mentored students and other professional artists, and they have created supportive social circles. And many have embraced their roles as educators, developing a compelling presence as teachers while creating their artwork.

Teaching as a career-building strategy for women artists appears to be a uniquely gendered phenomenon in American art history that, thus far, has been largely obscured and ignored. We posit that teaching has been especially significant historically for women artists because, in the modern era, teaching has been viewed as a service-oriented profession that—like nursing, social work, and secretarial...
work—was considered acceptable for women. For women artists, art education provided an important pathway to a career as a professional artist, since the tracks to success in the art world as an academic, gallerist, collector, or curator remained largely closed to women until the feminist movement of the 1960s and the 1970s. Teaching, then, was an arena within which women could take on leadership roles. As noted in these collected essays and interviews, some women artist-educators received important positions as chairs and professors, as was the case for Barraza and Maberry, who were chairs at Texas A&M–Kingsville and Tougaloo College, respectively.

Such prestige and stability were difficult to achieve for most women artists, however, given the longstanding gender biases in academe. We take seriously the import and impact of itinerant teaching by women artists, which includes short-term professorships at colleges and universities, filling in for other teachers during leaves of absence, and leading workshops and guest lecturing, which can take women artists to a wide variety of locations. Affording attention to the very real networking that accompanies teaching is something our work does not only when studying artists of the past but also when looking at contemporary artists such as Chicago, Barraza, Maberry, Church, Dillard and the members of the Sapphire and Crystals collective. The interviews in this issue, in particular, highlight the importance of networking. Public lecturing, curating, mentoring, and hosting community workshops have all greatly expanded the spheres of influence for these artists, and permanent positions and short-term gigs have worked together to support women artist-educators in ways that deserve recognition.

Through teaching, women built community. This has been especially true for women artists of color and those at the cultural and social margins who did not have access to or support from traditional institutions such as museums. Museum gallerists and curators are the gatekeepers of the art world, which ties art-historical significance to the art market. Markets, as systems of capitalism, are often sexist, racist, and classist, which leaves women artists on the sidelines. One way to reassert the significance of women artists is to recognize their teaching as a unique form of labor and institution building that works outside of, and in subversion to, the museum-gallery system. In other words, teaching should be viewed as a form of history making by women artists. To enact this conceptual shift, it is important to connect two fields that rarely overlap—art history and the history of education. The richness of artists’ archives offers an excellent resource for both fields. The Archives of American Art of the Smithsonian Institution, for instance, which includes the papers of thousands of artists, can be mined for evidence of lived teaching experiences. Likewise, artists’ letters are preserved more often than those of educators in other fields, especially when the artists gain some fame, and such letters can be rife with direct observations about teaching practices. At the same time, the students of established artist-teachers have often given statements about their teachers, offering direct evidence for the reception of their pedagogical methods, an aspect otherwise hard to track.

This In the Round discussion pulls heavily from both art history and education, and it draws upon important work in both fields that focuses on Black and Native women artists—including the scholarship of Melanie Anne Herzog on Elizabeth Catlett, Sharif Bey on Augusta Savage, Rebecca VanDiver on Loïs Mailou Jones, Seth Feman on Alma Thomas, Melissa Messina on Mildred Thompson, and Lara M. Evans (Cherokee) on Linda Lomahaftewa (Hopi/Choctaw). Focusing on the ways in which women’s teaching practices have contributed to their career development, influence, and legacy, the essays and interviews collected here reveal a gap in art history—one that is both gendered and raced.
Some of the most renowned artist-teachers in the United States have been women of color, and women educators often interacted with diverse populations through their travels related to teaching. Maberry taught students at Tougaloo, where she expanded the art curriculum and incorporated the college’s African American art collection into her teaching. Church emphasizes the differences between teaching “in [her] Native way” and teaching academically, and she outlines how, at times, she brought her traditional, socially oriented methods of education into the college classroom. Similarly, Dillard shares how she has withheld some teaching knowledge from non-Native communities by sealing recordings of her work until after her death to avoid their cultural appropriation, “not to be selfish . . . but to be protected.” To be sure, sharing the stories of women artists as teachers helps highlight their lived experiences of intersectionality, an area of research that demands attention.

Intersectionality, an analytical framework conceptualized and coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989, is key to understanding how aspects of a person’s social and political identities combine to create different modes of discrimination and privilege. How do gender, race, teaching, art making, class, and location intersect in the careers of women artists? The intersectional method of inquiry employed by the contributors to the present discussion was mirrored in our experience as guest editors. Due to the significant challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, this In the Round went through several iterations. When potential collaborators were not able to access archives or conduct research, we shifted gears, turning to interviews, which gave priority to the voices of artists. This move was inspired by a pillar of intersectionality, This Bridge Called My Back, a collection of writings by radical women of color edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa. Santa Barraza recommended Anzaldúa’s work to us, and it became a key point of reference as we conceptualized this section. For Kim, the focus on intersectionality is a continuation of a theme that arose from a panel she cochaired with Sally Brown at CAA in 2020. Sponsored by the Committee on Women in the Arts, “Women and Voter Suppression: A Roundtable” looked at the politics of intersectional work in relation to the then-upcoming presidential election and included panelists Karen Mary Davalos, Jo-Ann Morgan, and Marshall Reese of the artist collaborative LigoranoReese. Davalos’s book on the late Yolanda López, which argues for the recognition of López’s groundbreaking feminist work as shaped by the intersectionality of the Third World Liberation Front, also became a key point of reference and inspiration. Beyond these connections and experiences, the project’s emphasis on intersectionality is part of a wider effort in the field evidenced in the work of scholars such as Louise Siddons and Cherise Smith. Intersectionality as an art-historical method was described recently by Siddons and Jeffrey Richmond-Moll in the Fall 2020 issue of Panorama.

An unfortunate omission in this suite of essays is a consideration of Asian American women artist-educators, and this is one of the regrets we have as guest editors—particularly given the fact that the previous issue of Panorama highlighted the importance of Asian American artists. We point readers instead to the forthcoming book on Chunghi Choo, an artist-educator based out of the University of Iowa for nearly five decades, who built a world-class metalworking program in the art department with her students. Also, we must remember the contributions of one of the most important Asian American artist-educators in the United States, Hung Liu, who passed away this past August. A new catalogue on her delayed exhibition, which opened in late August, details her Soviet-style training in China and her subsequent requiem for improvised learning, as guided by Allan Sekula. Her education formed the foundation for her twenty-two-year teaching career at Mills College, where she
sought to bring together both pedagogical styles. The work of a newer generation of Asian American women artist-educators was highlighted in “EcoArt: Grief, Healing, and Care in the Time of Our Enviro Crisis,” the Diasporic Asian Art Network’s 2021 panel at CAA, which was moderated by Alexandra Chang and featured artists Jean Shin, Mary Ting, and Sue Huang.

With few exceptions, the traditional methods of gaining legitimization as an academic, gallerist, collector, or curator, which have been the professional pathways for male artists, were not readily accessible to women until the later twentieth century, with the rise of second-wave feminism. As an alternative, US women artists often turned to teaching as a way to demonstrate their seriousness and independence as professionals and as a way to build strong networks of influence. Through this In the Round, we hope to show that a good number of women artists found powerful voices, artistic recognition, and healthy markets for their art not despite but because of their teaching. For many, their work as educators became a key part of their artistic personas, an aspect that has been well recognized in the scholarship on some women but entirely overlooked in the work on others. We wish to highlight the examination that has been done to date but also invite scholars to continue exploring teaching as a central facet in the lives of women artists in the United States. Our focus on teaching recognizes root problems in art history—making apparatuses: the patriarchy, the financial value of art, and the structures of power that have long shaped the art market and museum collections. And to this day, the work of women artists is significantly undervalued compared to that of their male colleagues. The highest-selling painting by a woman artist—Georgia O’Keeffe’s Jimson Weed—went for $44.4 million in 2014, a mere fraction of the $100+ million that the work of male modernists has demanded for decades. Perhaps it is time to take a different approach to recognizing artistic legitimacy—one that redefines success as based on public impact and outreach instead of market value.

Notes


2 This connection was made by Rachel Middleman, now at Chico State University in California and previously at Utah State University in Logan, Utah.

3 The papers in the session were: Jenni Sorkin, “Part-Time Pedagogy: Women Artists in California after WWII”; Sally Brown, “Institutional Time from Fresno to Today: Judy Chicago’s Career through Art Education”; and Liz Kim, “The Role of Regional Women’s Universities for Building Women Artists: The Case of Coreen Spellman.”

4 Examples here include Georgia O’Keeffe teaching young children (ages six to eighteen) from 1912 to 1914 in the Amarillo Public School District, and then later at the Training School for West Texas State Normal College, where the college students attained student-teaching experience with younger children. Agnes Martin also taught young children in the 1940s. It might be noted, too, that although neither Martin nor O’Keeffe had children of their own, both connected deeply to young children through their teaching. See Amy Von Lintel, Georgia O’Keeffe’s Wartime Texas Letters, American Wests (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2020), esp. 82, 109, 116; John F. Matthews, “The Influence of the Texas Panhandle on Georgia O’Keeffe,” in Georgia O’Keeffe in Texas: A Guide, ed. Paul H. Carlson and John T. Becker (College Station: State House Press, 2012), 73–99; and Nancy Princenthal, Agnes Martin: Her Life and Art (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2015).
Elaine de Kooning taught for the New York School summer program in Paris, while Elizabeth Catlett was the first woman to teach sculpture at the Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. Catlett’s teaching appointments in Mexico were vehemently opposed by male colleagues, who claimed she was inept and unqualified because she was a woman, a foreigner, and could only teach “African” sculpture. See Cathy Curtis, A Generous Vision: The Creative Life of Elaine de Kooning (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 104; and Melanie Anne Herzog, Elizabeth Catlett: An American Artist in Mexico (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 119.

The sheer number of higher-education institutions that have employed women artists in the last hundred plus years would be worth a study itself. The range of institutions in this list includes art academies, like the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA) where Cecilia Beaux taught; state universities, like the University of New Mexico where both Elaine de Kooning and Agnes Martin taught briefly, or Penn State University and Texas A&M University—Kingsville where Santa Barraza taught; private colleges and universities, like Texas Women’s University where Spellman taught; museum programs, like the basket-making classes at the Grand Rapids Art Museum discussed in this issue by Kelly Church; HBCUs, like Howard University in Washington, DC, and Dillard University in New Orleans where Catlett and Mailou Jones taught; religious institutions, such as Immaculate Heart College where Sister Corita Kent taught, St. Mary’s College in Omaha where Kelly Church taught, and La Roche College where Barraza taught; as well as foreign universities and art academies. On Catlett and Mailou Jones, see note 14 below. On Kent, see Susan Dackerman, ed., Corita Kent and the Language of Pop (Boston: Harvard Art Museums, 2015), and Ian Berry and Michael Duncan, eds., Someday is Now: The Art of Corita Kent (New York: DelMonico/Prestel, 2013); and www.corita.org/about/corita. The involvement of artists in community workshops, in contrast, would be much harder to trace.


Catlett, for instance, taught drawing, painting, and printmaking at Dillard University in New Orleans. Georgia O’Keeffe taught drawing and penmanship in Amarillo, Texas, between 1912 and 1914.

On this mentoring and social support, see the interview with Barraza in this issue, in which she states, “I think we need to form our own groups, because we need to self-identify ourselves. We need to support each other.” Mary Thomas, “Teaching and Creating Art in the Borderlands: A Conversation with Santa C. Barraza,” Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art 7, no. 2 (Fall 2021), https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.12627.

On artists who have enjoyed their teaching experiences, see, for example, Canturbury, “Professional Artist,” 72; Von Lintel, O’Keeffe’s Texas Letters, esp. 126, 137, 145; Herzog, Elizabeth Catlett, 157; Princenthal, Agnes Martin, 120. In Church’s interview in this issue, she says, “You can learn from your students; as much as you give to them, they can give to you. I love that about teaching.” Melynda Seaton, “An Interview with Black Ash Basket Makers Kelly Church and Renée Wasson Dillard,” Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art 7, no. 2 (Fall 2021), https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.12619.

See https://www.aaa.si.edu.

Such student statements include interviews of Georgia O’Keeffe’s students in audio files held at the Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum Research Center and entries in the yearbooks from Athens College, where Ida O’Keeffe taught in 1935 and 1936 (Canterbury, “Professional Artist,” 73). Statements of Corita Kent’s students are collected in Berry and Duncan, Someday is Now. See also the student statements in the panel discussion “Mildred Thompson Remembered,” Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, filmed 2019, 1:13, https://vimeo.com/362666246.


Catlett, for instance, who had been raised with middle-class privilege, discovered more about the working-class challenges for Black and Latinx populations through her position at the George Washington Carver School in Harlem. Ida O’Keeffe gained broader exposure when she taught at Pembroke State College for Indians, where her students included members of the Lumbee and Cherokee tribes. See Herzog, Elizabeth Catlett, 36–39; Canterbury, “Professional Artist,” 84–85.


On this, see Langa and Wisotzki, American Women Artists. The introduction to this volume discusses in depth the “uphill battle” that women artists faced, including the discouragements, stereotypes, and barriers; the critical disregard and devaluation; and the scholarly misunderstandings of their work.