

By Edward Helmore



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W Art Flash



Above: Martha Rosler (at left) and Joan Jonas at Rosler's house in Brooklyn. Below, from left: *Photo Op*, 2004, photomontage, and *Gladiators*, 2004, photomontage, both from Martha Rosler's "Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful, New Series."

Feminine Mystique

Martha Rosler and Joan Jonas are enjoying a long-deserved moment in the sun.

Portrait by KATHERINE WOLKOFF

The names Martha Rosler and Joan Jonas mean nothing to some, but everything to others. The two artists, both born in New York, came of age in the Sixties and Seventies, when they made groundbreaking experimental work—Rosler in video, photography, photo-text, installation and performance; Jonas in performance, video and installation. But while their contemporaries like Robert Smithson or Richard Serra attained widespread critical acclaim and considerable commercial success, neither Rosler nor Jonas attained a place in that canon of Famous American Artists. In recent years, however, the two women—who have never stopped working and exercising their creative muscles—have received newfound attention from museums and collectors. Both artists have major roles in the show "WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution," an exhibition of feminist art that opened this past March at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art and arrives at P.S.1 in New York in February. "Both have made major contributions to postwar American art," says Connie Butler, chief curator of drawings at the Museum of Modern Art, who organized the show.

Says Lynne Cooke, curator of the Dia Art Foundation in New York, "Both artists work in ways that are immediate, intense and succinct. And both offer engagement with issues that are particularly current."

“Martha brought the war back home with her collages,” says Lynne Cooke.



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MARTHA ROSLER

“All artists want to change the world. We’re messianic and utopic,” says Martha Rosler in her fabulously unkempt Brooklyn living room. “Feet on the street! That’s the way to change things!” As one of America’s preeminent political artists, Rosler, 63, hasn’t been so charged up about the state of things in a while. A generation after the Vietnam War furnished her with passionate causes, she finds herself as busy as ever. The work of a revolutionary, after all, is never done. “We’re in an Orwellian moment,” she declares. “We torture, but we don’t torture. It’s doublespeak.”

Throughout her career, Rosler has dealt with issues of feminism, war, media, architecture and social justice. One of her most famous works is “Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful,” a series of photomontages made between 1967 and 1972 that integrated Vietnam imagery of wounded soldiers and dead children into cheery scenes of American domesticity. “Martha brought the war back home with her collages,” says Cooke. “She offered ways of thinking about the political with acuity and humor.”

The artist, whose work was featured this past summer at the prestigious German exhibitions “Documenta 12” and “Münster Sculpture Projects 07,” is currently preparing an exhibition in Seoul, South Korea, which will feature some of her “Bringing the War Home” collages as well as work from a 2004 series titled “Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful, New Series.” The latter project is a pointed follow-up to her Vietnam-era series, combining Iraq war photos with glossy fashion imagery.

The daughter of a schoolteacher and a lawyer, Rosler grew up in Brooklyn and graduated from Brooklyn College in 1965. In the late Sixties, she moved to Southern California, where she made some of her most enduring work. Aside from wartime topics, much of her early work focused on the role of women in the home; *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) is a six-minute milestone of feminist art, a hilarious short black and white video featuring the artist, dressed in an apron, robotically demonstrating the uses of kitchen implements. Rosler moved back to the East Coast in the early Eighties, where she’s lived ever since.

“Martha is one of the few truly political artists in America,” says Rebecca Quaytman of Orchard, an artist-run Lower East Side gallery. “In terms of the antiwar sentiment, she’s perfect for now. She is a major inspiration to young artists.” To Rosler herself, the true artist and the art market are irreconcilable. She declined to be represented by any gallery until 1993, when she began working with dealer Jay Gorney. (Gorney has represented her ever since, currently at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, where he is director of contemporary art.) And though Rosler has certainly received her share of institutional recognition (in 2000 a retrospective of her work was shown in five European cities and in New York, where the New Museum of Contemporary Art and the International Center of Photography gave her a joint show), she finds the commodification of art troubling. “Artists still see art as transformative,” she says. “But they see that when their works are sold, they’re sold as things.”

She sees the marriage of fashion and art—a union largely pushed by artists, in her view—as dangerous because it can render art just as disposable as fashion: “Some, especially younger ones, are saying, ‘We are sold. We are whores. But we are looking for something to help us refind our social vision.’”