

Feminine artists a power to be reckoned with in concurrent reveals on the Amon Carter

In the gap between “Wild Spaces, Open Seasons: Hunting and Fishing in American Art,” which closed last month, and a major sculpture show that opens in a few days, the Amon Carter Museum of American Art is — as usual — brimming with fascinating smaller exhibits.

In its upstairs photography galleries and in a couple of petite spaces that highlight smaller-scale shows, the Carter is featuring three exhibits of works by contemporary artists.

You can’t help but notice that all of the artists are female.

But what’s most remarkable may be how very unremarkable that is.

The three newest shows now on exhibit are: “Commanding Space: Women Sculptors of Texas,” a one-room display of works by five living artists; “In Her Image: Photographs by Rania Matar,” with works from four photographic series by the Lebanese-American artist; and “Ellen Carey: Dings, Pulls, and Shadows,” featuring colorful abstract works that explore the photographic process itself. March is Women’s History Month, and op-ed pages have been buzzing lately with claims that 2018 is (yet another) “Year of the Woman.”

Yet curators at the Carter say the confluence of these three shows was not intentional — it’s just how things worked out.

They’re always mindful of diversity. “We make a concerted effort to think holistically about the exhibitions schedule each year and balance it in ways that allow us to tell stories of American art that are increasingly diverse and varied,” says Brett Abbott, director of collections and exhibitions.

The historical canon is almost all male but, he says, “we have an opportunity, particularly through our living artist program, to shape the future of the canon in ways that are more representative.”

The Carter’s rich photography programming, especially, is a place where that’s been evident.

“We’ve had an ongoing dedication to women artists,” says assistant curator of photography Joy Kim. “Our photography program has long been in the contemporary realm.”

Kim is the curator of “In Her Image: Photographs by Rania Matar,” the biggest of the three exhibits. Arranged across two galleries are four series of photographs that explore the development of female identity.

The first shows us portraits of preteen girls who live in the U.S. and in the Middle East (Matar, born in Beirut, is a naturalized American citizen). “She’s showing what is universal to growing up and being a female in both countries,” Kim says. The girls are seen striking camera-ready, sophisticated poses, suggesting that “received images of women were already affecting the ways in which these girls present themselves to the world.”

Another series depicts slightly older girls in their bedrooms. Whether in Massachusetts, in Beirut or in a Palestinian refugee camp, each girl has created a distinctive private space. “It’s where they carve out their identity,” says Kim. A third series offers side-by-side portraits of preteen girls next to their teenage selves.

Finally, a more dramatic passage of time is explored in a striking series of mother-daughter dual portraits. The artist, Kim says, was “interested in these two moments in a woman’s life that are very different — the mother is exiting her reproductive years just as her daughter is just starting to come into adulthood. She’s placing these two different moments side by side in the same portrait.” In some cases, there is such a strong resemblance between mother

and daughter that it looks like two versions of the same person. “It’s the passage of time.”

“Ellen Carey: Dings, Pulls, and Shadows” is a thoroughly different kind of show. The artist, an experimental photographer in Hartford, Conn., challenges you to think about the nature of photography itself.

The small exhibit includes what the artist calls “pulls,” made with a large-format Polaroid camera, in which she manipulates the instant-camera development process to create wholly abstract images — just big smears of color.

“When we think of photography, we think of a transparent image, evidence of something that was in front of the camera. What Ellen is trying to do is dismantle that notion,” Kim says. “She’s thinking about color, about light, about what happens in the darkroom.”

For the “Dings & Shadows” series, Carey didn’t even use a camera, just photographic paper exposed to lights.

“Her interest is in showing us that a photograph is just as much of a made image as a painting or drawing — it’s no less a kind of interpretation of reality than those other media.”

The third show, “Commanding Space: Women Sculptors of Texas,” features a small number of pieces in the little Texas Gallery, a space that is dedicated to regional artists. In this case, the exhibit of sculptures by Celia Eberle, Kana Harada, Sharon Kopriva, Sherry Owens and Linda Ridgway was programmed to complement the larger sculpture show, “A New American Sculpture, 1914–1945: Lachaise, Laurent, Nadelman, and Zorach,” that will open at the museum Feb. 17.

Both shows were organized by Shirley Reece-Hughes, curator of painting and sculpture at the Carter. She was interested in how the group of contemporary female sculptors, in their various ways, are working in different modes and conceiving space differently from those earlier masters, who used heavy

traditional materials. “It was interesting to go from that dominant sense of mass and weight and look at what regional women were working in,” she says.

Owens, for example, uses crepe myrtle branches she collects in her Dallas neighborhood, as in “Dust Devil,” an ethereal piece that evokes a West Texas dust devil. Japanese-born Dallasite Harada uses foam sheets, a crafting material you might buy at a big-box store, in pieces such as “Foojin — God of the Wind,” a tornadolike shape that hangs from the ceiling. Reece-Hughes recalls how the people who installed it commented on how light it was. “It looks like metal, but it weighs ounces, not pounds.”

She was drawn to the way all these artists were using untried materials to make their statements. The degree of handcrafting — Harada cut each piece of foam by hand, with scissors — and the allusions to nature and the sense of space common to all Texans are shared connections, too.

It adds up to a distinctive way of, well, commanding space.

“I think it’s great that these female artists are being recognized at the museum,” says Kim. “Maybe there’s just something in the air. It’s just reflective of an openness in this moment in art making and in art communities.”

In Her Image:

Photographs by Rania Matar

Through June 17

Ellen Carey: Dings, Pulls, and Shadows

Through July 22

Commanding Space: Women Sculptors of Texas

Through Nov. 18

Amon Carter Museum of American Art

3501 Camp Bowie Blvd., Fort Worth