

A Sense of Self

Judge Women as People, not as Wives – printed on protest placards at women's marches in 1960's/70's

Nevertheless, she persisted – on placards at recent international women's marches, January 2018

Women's consciousness-raising groups were the backbone of the Women's Liberation Movement developing in late 60's through 70's – strongly in US, UK and Ireland. The strong, distinctive component of this new movement was its structuring: meeting in living rooms, cellars, attics, empty offices, church basements – women gathered, sat in circles to talk about their lives. This was not focused on gossip or nattering. Through these weekly, monthly, regular formations, women found camaraderie, a support system, and an understanding of their personal lives, their particular experiences and the gender roles they played in their families. They discussed things they might not have felt comfortable to utter before. They listened to each other, developing a trust and courage to speak freely. They explored domestic duties, education, sexuality, child rearing, domestic abuse, financial limitations. Layer after layer was stripped away until a consciousness arose through the process of sharing, recognizing, naming – an awareness of the gender roles women were assigned from birth by society, their parents, their schools, their partners, their children and on and on. They moved from being objects to subjects. Ultimately, they realised they no longer needed to feel isolated, alone, unnoticed and insignificant to society, their communities, their families, each other. And most importantly they had the potential to create and experience their lives within the context of a liberated and conscious sense of self. Women began to identify and articulate the true value of their place within the family, the marriage, the workplace, the community. Eventually, the Personal became the Political and organized activism fought and succeeded in attaining Women's Rights in many areas of society at large. And it continues.

For her exhibition at Platform, the artist Helen de Main has used the women's consciousness-raising circles as an impetus and basis for the year long process of creating the installation *You Know, Things Like That*. Helen met regularly at Platform with a local women's knitting group – as they talked and lovingly knit clothing together. Through the gentle mediation of the artist, a structure of sitting in a private place, creating a dialogue, listening and speaking about personal matters without interruption was established. Eventually, the artist chose to focus the artwork on the conversations that had held around motherhood and family life. She became a mother during the process of working with the knitting circle.

Using her artistic voice, Helen created a visual reflection of the experience of participating in this women's circle. She gathered personal photographs from the participants, turning them into large prints placed along the prominent exhibition wall within the public library. Each is printed in pale pastel colours – like those of the yarns selected to knit children's jumpers, caps, scarves and wee mittens.

Soft tones. Each photo is subtly overlaid with the knitting patterns used by the women. Conceptually, this building of layers by the artist portrays the richness of a conversation, a friendship, a life. Reflecting on how individual strands of yarn are transformed as they are knit into patterns to form textiles. Likewise, individual statements within a consciousness-raising circle are woven together to become conversations – a texture of meaning, support and self-realisation takes shape. Quotes from members of the knitting group spoken during their gatherings are placed along the long wall between the large photographs. They are not captions for the images, nor are they necessarily related in any way to the images. Nothing is attributed to a specific individual – allowing anonymity, each represents an aspect of a collective process. The process and the experiences that were shared remain discreet. Viewers can walk past, observe the images and the short texts and weave a story of their own, or reflect on just one image or a phrase. Perhaps they might sense a relation to and a deeper understanding of the women in their own families.

There is also a separate collection of what were originally small photographs that the artist obtained from one of the knitters, titled *What's Expected*. Here, Helen has sensitively represented them as screen prints on glass, taking away certain parts of each image and positioning them to create a photographic essay revealing and portraying the aspects of singularity and otherness that the knitter felt growing up within her family.

When I first began reading feminist texts as a young woman, Simone de Beauvoir's two simple words – *Second Sex* – rang loud and clear. *Second Sex*: not equal – second. As the Women's movement gained momentum and more and more women began to recognize their likenesses and acknowledge their differences – more and less privilege among themselves based on class, race, sexuality, religion and culture – the consciousness had an opportunity to develop deeper. And, it encouraged a deeper awareness and recognition of all who must struggle for a rightful place. A sense of humanity. As de Beauvoir so aptly stated, "For women it is not a question of asserting themselves as women, but of becoming full-scale human beings."

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