

Women at work: As the older generation of YBAs grows up, a new set of female creators is taking over

On the eve of a show at London's Whitechapel gallery that celebrates some of the most talented female artists, Hannah Duguid finds that, though they are less upfront than their predecessors, they are still producing fascinating art



PA

'The YBAs began something which has continued to grow,' says the Whitechapel Art Gallery's Iwona Blazwick

In the 1990s there was a definable generation of female artists who became famous, sometimes for their drunken, gobby antics, sometimes for their work. Whatever you thought of these women, they were bold. Tracey Emin flounced off a live television debate, Sarah Lucas made artwork that outlined the female form using a kebab and two fried eggs, and Rachel Whiteread cast the interior of an entire house in East London to make a vast and controversial sculpture.

This generation has matured, and it might seem now that no one has moved in to take their place. There aren't any female artists from the past few years who could confidently claim to be a household name. Eva Rothschild has a huge sculpture, *Cold Corners*, in the Duveen Galleries at Tate Britain but many people will have no idea who she is – neither are they likely to know Tomma Abts, who was the last woman to win the Turner Prize, in 2006. These women live quietly, get on with their work and tend to avoid media attention.

"The YBA [Young British Artist] moment is definitely now dead, but anyone who thinks they were a cut-off point is wrong. They began something which has continued to grow ever since. It's not over," says Iwona Blazwick, the director of the Whitechapel Art Gallery.

It may not be over, but the current crop of female artists appears very different to the last. Blazwick chairs the Max Mara art prize for women, a biennial event now on its second run: the exhibition of work by the latest winner, Hannah Rickards, will show a film of residents of Lake Michigan, discussing a weather phenomenon that appeared like a mirage over the lake. It is a serious and stark work that took the artist a year to make.

Blazwick believes the Max Mara prize has been an invaluable process in uncovering new female talent. She says: "These women can't be pinned to a certain generation, but most of them have emerged since 2000 and most have been through London art-school process. They come here to do an MA. The art-school effect is critical to the strength of this art, as is the cosmopolitan nature of London. They come to study from all over the world. Conversations between artists are like a cross-fertilisation.

"I look at art every day. Two years of judging the Max Mara prize means that I have been able to see work by artists I had never heard of, and the work has been so good that we couldn't decide who should win. We were debating for hours. It is a testament to the huge proliferation of work in London. As a curator, it's invaluable. There are no definable 'isms' but the quality of the work is outstanding. It is aesthetically sophisticated and intellectual. It has been a journey of discovery for me."

This generation of female artists is united by their differences: they work as individuals, singular figures, rather than within any kind of group identity. Anne Hardy constructs imaginary rooms in her studio and photographs them: she is as much a sculptor as a photographer. Tomma Abts paints small, abstract canvases using a rigorous geometric approach. Eva Rothschild makes sculptures, influenced by Minimalism, that are light and delicate in the way they occupy space. Hannah Rickards has worked with sound, making work using birdsong, the human voice and thunder. Goshka Macuga uses research and curating in her work, making installations from historic objects and documents. She explores the relationship between aesthetics and politics. At the moment she has a large installation on show in the Whitechapel Galleries. Titled *The Nature of the Beast*, it includes a tapestry of Picasso's *Guernica*,

Much of the work by women artists working now is not definably feminine; at first sight there is nothing noticeably "female" about it. Unlike work by earlier artists such as Emin and Lucas, there is not a clitoris or an exposed breast in sight.

"If there is a common theme, it is perhaps an interest in the past, in early Modernism and women in Modernism

and Surrealism," says Blazwick. "In the past artists used to look at the future, it used to be all about the future. This generation, they look back, finding the missing bits of history, and they are able to engage audiences."

Women artists do owe much to their forebears, not only in the kind of work they produce but in their attitude and the conditions within which they work. "One generation contributes to another," says gallerist Maureen Paley. "The thing that came out of the YBA generation was boldness, a belief that you can do anything."

Blazwick echoes this assessment: "Emin and Lucas were making work that looked at women's bodies and, in Emin's case, her art was confessional. But what they established was a paradigm, a way of working. They had a 'can do' attitude. They said: 'We don't need permission or need to wait to be discovered. The Tate hasn't heard of me but so what, we'll do it for ourselves.' Traditionally you would have waited for a show. They didn't. These artists made their own terms in the way they showed their work."

Artists such as Lucas, Emin and Gillian Wearing may have paved the way for this generation but, back in the 1960s and 1970s, female artists had to claim their terrain, making work that elevated femininity as a subject in its own right. The French artist Louise Bourgeois drew on her own story, on her family and her relationship with her father. She worked in a way that was traditionally considered to be female, using crafts, sewing and weaving. American Mary Kelly explored the relationship she had with her infant son: dirty nappies appeared in her work and she looked at the development of her baby towards language. Barbara Kruger, also American, used found photographs to create slogans that attacked the conventions of patriarchal structures and capitalism: "I shop therefore I am" and "Your body is a battleground". These female artists had to fight their way to be recognised as serious artists, as worthy as the men.

"They cracked everything open and dismantled it, allowing younger women artists to explore their work in a slightly more singular way. They liberated artists from having to fight that fight of identity, making them free to explore wider," says Blazwick.

Katy Moran is a successful young painter, aged 33, and collectors compete to buy her work. She currently has paintings on show at Tate St Ives. "I once asked a museum director if women artists were judged differently and he said that, yes, they were," she says. "It started to frighten me that my work would be judged differently because I was a woman. You can only think like that for so long, as you have to believe the best otherwise it would be too easy to despair.

"But I wouldn't want to get lost in a feminist cause. You lose the sense of your work. Then I wouldn't make the work I need to make. I didn't want to make work where you thought, 'oh a woman did that'. Although as I get older I think that life experience is going to be reflected through your work. I had a miscarriage and my work changed. These influences do come in and change your work. It irked me a bit that this prize had to be segregated. There isn't a man's art prize. It almost felt patronising. I wish it didn't have to be like that, that people didn't think it necessary."

Eva Rothschild is also hugely successful. She also believes that female artists have a harder time. "There is still a massive disparity between male and female artists showing and being represented. I personally do not feel under-represented, but you only have to look at the list for any major group exhibition, award, or gallery stable to see the imbalance.

"I have been in shows curated to showcase UK art internationally where the balance has been two women to ten guys. That's hardly representative. I hate to mention the old Turner prize, but it is perceived by the public as a cultural barometer, so how then in 24 years have there been 21 male winners and only three female winners – and one of them was even chosen from an all-women short list?" she asks.

"What I noticed," says Moran, "was that on my MA there were three times as many women as men but when I looked at galleries in London there were a quarter of women to three-quarters men. What happened to all these women?"

The art market certainly appears to favour men, as Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons and Lucian Freud vie for the title of the world's most expensive living artist. Two years ago, a Jeff Koons sculpture from his Hanging Heart series – a magenta heart, cast in stainless steel and weighing 1,600kg – sold at Sotheby's for just under £15m.

The highest amount paid for an artwork by a female artist was a painting by the Dutch-South African artist Marlene Dumas that sold for just over £3m. This disparity is perhaps most pronounced in the top echelons of the market.

"There are some women from the previous generation, painters like Fiona Rae, Cecily Brown and Jenny Saville, who made huge ambitious work. I think that was indicative of that time. There has been a change in the way that work is made now. This earlier work was very ambitious in scale. I do look at the money side of things and how women are put last," says Moran.

Blazwick says: "The market tends to be bullish with machismo values. Women artists can be seen as less serious, as frivolous or decorative. And if as an artist you take a year out to have a baby then you are gone, forgotten. Women artists need a huge amount of support.

Maureen Paley does not agree that women artists get a raw deal, and she is prickly on the subject, believing that the market is not the only indicator of artistic success. "Amongst the artists who have gained prominence in the last 10 years there seems to be a level of success, both financial and in terms of recognition, that has established a number of women within this generation to be as successful as their male peers," she says.

Paley represents a stable of 28 successful artists, 10 of whom are women. There's the sculptor Rebecca Warren, who makes amorphous sculptures that hang between abstraction and representation. She received critical acclaim for her solo exhibition at London's Serpentine Gallery earlier this year. And Hannah Starkey – a favourite of Blazwick's – whose photographs are like images of film sets which show women in modern environments: the office and domestic interiors. Then there's painter Kaye Donachie, named as a Woman to Watch by a Washington museum, and Maaïke Schoorel, a young Dutch painter working in London.

Many of these artists are in their mid- to late thirties – it takes that amount time to begin to gain recognition. Lucy Skaer, the only female nominee for this year's Turner Prize is 33. All the artists shortlisted for the Max Mara art prize are in their thirties or early forties. Louise Bourgeois, now in her nineties, did not find recognition until well into the second half of her life. Not that such tales put young women off. There is a burgeoning movement of female artists and curators in their twenties whose dynamism, intelligence and imagination may see them take over.

"There is activity within this generation that's really exciting," Paley comments on the situation. "They are in their late twenties and they are doing things."

Katy Guggenheim is 26 and is described by Paley as bright, with a lot of energy, and definitely someone to watch. Last year she put on a performance at Tate Britain in which she re-staged conversations with three of the twentieth century's most revered artists: Jackson Pollock, Andy Warhol and Joseph Beuys.

Hannah Barry is a 25-year-old London gallerist, an up-and-coming member of the art world who could well be part of the next generation of top gallerists. She is not much concerned whether her artists are male or female, but there are young women artists working out there who she believes are extraordinary, such as Katie Paterson, 27, who makes research-based installations that combine subjects as diverse as science, biology and literature. It is, says Barry, landscape art for the 21st century. Paterson made an artwork that involved the viewer being connected by telephone to a microphone plunged into the melting icefield of an Icelandic glacier.

"The women that do make it through are extraordinary," says Blazwick. "They have kept true to their vision. And it's a huge achievement. During the judging for Max Mara there was a great spirit of collaboration. The panel is all women: a collector, a gallerist, a critic and an artist. Each year there's a story about how these women got where they are, they're all at the top of their game and everybody is there to give a leg up to the next generation. The atmosphere is not so competitive. It's about artists supporting other artists."

It is not in doubt that there are many talented women artists working out there, but it is impossible to know now who we will remember in 50 years time and who will fade into obscurity. But what many women in the art world hope for is that the discussion around whether female artists are treated fairly will become irrelevant, that they will be received on equal terms as artists, with no need to focus specifically on gender.

Yet for now they do not begrudge Max Mara for making a prize only for women. When Hannah Rickards won it meant that she had her London rent paid while she went off to Italy for a year-long residency. Her trips to America, where she filmed, were funded by Max Mara. She has had a year to devote herself entirely to her artwork without worrying about lack of money or time – she usually teaches art on the side in order to make a living. She says: "The more prizes of any kind that support artists making work, the better."

*Max Mara Art Prize for Women is at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, 5 to 23 September
(www.whitechapelgallery.org)*

Lucy Skaer, 33

Born in Cambridge and lives between London and Glasgow. She graduated from Glasgow School of Art with a degree in environmental art and has been nominated for the Turner Prize this year. Skaer is a founder member of the artist collective Henry VIII's Wives, who aim to build the unrealised utopian tower designed by the artist Vladimir Tatlin in the 1920s. This work, even though it was never built, is regarded as one of the greatest works of the Russian Constructivist period.

Eva Rothschild, 36

From Dublin. She was given the Duveens Commission at Tate Britain this year, a prestigious award, and her sculpture 'Cold Corners' consists of 26 enormous triangles that snake through the grand neoclassical hall. Her work is usually on a smaller, intimate scale, delicate sculptures that reference Minimalism.

Hannah Rickards, 30

From London and the winner of the MaxMara Art Prize. She works with sound as well as other visual media. 'Thunder' (2005) is a recording of an eight second thunderclap stretched into a seven-minute passage. She recreated the sound of birds singing, using her own voice, in 'Birdsong' (2002).

Katie Paterson, 27

Scottish and a graduate of London's Slade School of Fine Art. She had an exhibition at Modern Art Oxford last year in which she painstakingly translated Beethoven's 'Moonlight' Sonata into Morse code then transmitted it to the moon, where it was reflected back to earth. She uses modern technology to find poetry in landscape.

Katy Moran, 33

Born in Manchester and lives in London. She graduated from the Royal College of Art in 2005 with an MA in painting. Her work has been shown in London, at Tate St Ives and at the Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York. Her canvases are domestic abstractions: small and beautiful with a touch of nostalgia. Her palette is muted with flashes of colour, an ethereal cascade of blue and white that could be a waterfall, a hazy beach or a snowstorm.