

TEMPLON



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The Guardian view on an explosion of solo exhibitions by women: move over old masters

From a landmark Tracey Emin show at Tate Modern to the first female painter in the Royal Academy's main space, the art world is finally catching up

“Do women have to be naked to get into the Met Museum?” the feminist art collective Guerrilla Girls asked in their famous 1989 poster. It pointed out that fewer than 5% of the artists in the modern art sections were women, but 85% of the nudes were female. They could have asked the same question of any major art gallery in the world. Four decades later, this year's biggest UK exhibitions finally show a different picture.

Dame Tracey Emin might be naked in many of her self-portraits, but that isn't what got her into Tate Modern for a landmark retrospective. Rose Wylie, 91, is the first female painter to have a solo exhibition at the Royal Academy. The Colombian artist Beatriz González (who died, aged 93, in January) is at the Barbican. And that is just this week's openings.

From Chiharu Shiota at the Hayward Gallery, Gwen John at the National Museum Cardiff and 94-year-old Bridget Riley in Margate, to Frida Kahlo and Ana Mendieta at Tate Modern this summer, female artists from all over the world can be found across the country. Lubaina Himid will be the second black woman to represent Britain at the Venice Biennale in May (Sonia Boyce was the first in 2022). The list goes on.

It might seem shocking that the Royal Academy has not seen fit to give its main gallery to a female painter until now, but the National Gallery, which celebrated its bicentenary last year, held its first major celebration of a female artist, Artemisia Gentileschi, only in 2020. In 2019, Tate Britain planned seven solo male exhibitions and a single temporary one for female artists.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that when Katy Hessel, author of the 2022 bestseller *The Story of Art Without Men*, conducted a poll of 2,000 people, only 30% could name three female artists: Emin, Kahlo and Dame Barbara Hepworth were the favourites.

Both Emin and Kahlo turned their scars - physical and emotional - into art. No wonder they are so popular today. Over the past decade, [films](#) and [books](#) have reflected the #MeToo movement. The art world may have been slow to catch up, but Emin got there first. From enfant terrible to grande dame (she was given a damehood in 2024) she has become an emblem of female defiance. Now, the pain and resilience of her work resonates with recent testimonies of abuse survivors. Gisèle Pelicot's [memoir](#) is subtitled "Shame has to change sides". Female artists show what happens when the gaze changes sides. In depicting women's bodies in all their messy vulnerability, they have reclaimed them from the old masters.

Last year's highlights included [Jenny Saville's](#) colossal, fleshy nudes and [Sarah Lucas's](#) witty bunny sculptures. Where the swaggering male Young British Artists - Damien Hirst et al - captured the laddish 1990s, it is the female YBAs whose work has endured. "It has taken until this decade for their sustained power and influence to be properly recognised by museums, by the media and by the market", Maria Balshaw, the departing director of Tate and co-curator of the Emin exhibition, [said recently](#). Now, that moment has come. Male artists "sort of peak in their 40s", Emin [said](#) mischievously a couple of years ago, whereas "women tend to come and come and come ... So as a woman, you carry on coming all your life until you're old."