

Mary Mary

JEFFREY, MOIRA; SCOTLAND ON SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 2009

Art review: Lili Reynaud-Dewar: The Power Structure, Rituals & Sexuality of the European Shorthand-Typists

Mary Mary, Glasgow

THERE has been a bit of anguished debate in Glasgow these last few weeks about the status of women artists and whether they get the same opportunities as men. Sarah Lowndes, whose book *Social Sculpture* charts some of the history of feminist activism in

the city, recently chaired a conference at the CCA on the subject. It featured female speakers such as artist and educator Sam Ainsley in a day of readings, screenings and debate.

The answer on the back of a postcard is quite simply no. Women artists still aren't on an equal economic or cultural footing in the UK – just look at the annual boys club of the Turner Prize or the British Pavilion at Venice. And much of the work that women artists value (education, publishing, collaborative practice) doesn't seem to make it into the public domain.

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There's one small venue in the west of Scotland, though, where women clearly get a decent bite of the cherry. It's Hannah Robinson's commercial gallery Mary Mary.

The clue is in the name. Starting off as a temporary space in a student flat (famously giving a fledgling young band named Franz Ferdinand their first gig), the gallery is named after female role models Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley. Just over half of the names on Robinson's roster of artists are women, and some of those, most notably the excellent Karla Black, represent a new wave of thoughtful feminist practice.

The gallery is currently showing Lili Reynaud-Dewar, a Frenchwoman who studied on Glasgow School of Art's prestigious MFA course and is now based in Paris. It's testament to Robinson's reputation (and ambitions) that in leaving Scotland the artist did not give up her Scots connections.

If there's still a chance that women artists are viewed as exotic, then Reynaud-Dewar makes play with that possibility. Mary Mary's gallery space is in reality a rather unprepossessing former office on the Clyde. The artist has played that up by creating a pair of office-bound installations, each featuring a glamorous mirrored desk and chair in the style of 1980s Italian design group Memphis. Each desk bears an obsolete electric typewriter and is fenced in like some ethnographic museum display of an African village. There are accompanying silent films, where two women practise their typing craft on a windblown lagoon, urged on by their boss and accompanied by some unclear magic ritual.

The joke is not just about an era when ancient office rituals are once again becoming fetishised in the pencil skirts and lacquered nails of the secretarial caste in the TV series *Mad Men*. It's also about obsolescence in general, about the possible utility of redundant activity. Although Reynaud-Dewar makes work in film, print and text, she thinks of herself largely as a sculptor, a curious and some might argue rather useless profession.

Reynaud-Dewar's work is stamped with the ideas of the "cyborg feminist" Donna Haraway, who has suggested that machines, instead of being a social threat, might be agents of liberation. If some women now appear to have been freed from the typewriter, it's as well to remember that at some points in history typing really did make women free.

So just what is the situation on the ground in Scotland for women practitioners? The picture is still poor. Our public galleries vary from the very good to the pretty pathetic when it comes to supporting women artists, though there is an army of women running our contemporary gallery system at the coal face. The National Galleries of Scotland, for example, has a lamentable record when it comes to giving women a senior curatorial voice or a seat at the top table. Currently only three of its 12 trustees are female.

And women are clearly under-represented in our main commercial galleries. But there are exceptions. Susanna Beaumont's gallery Doggerfisher works with a roster of men and women but has notably nurtured the latter, with a remarkable two-thirds of the gallery's artists being female, including Claire Barclay, Rosalind Nashashibi and Turner nominee Lucy Skaer.

Galleries such as Doggerfisher and Mary Mary aren't hanging around waiting for the world to change. They are simply changing things. Women artists, of course, are getting on with the work. If Lili Reynaud-Dewar is anything to go by, they are not averse to having a bit of fun along the way. v