



Fine Art and Feminism, Education and Inspiration: The Bigger Picture

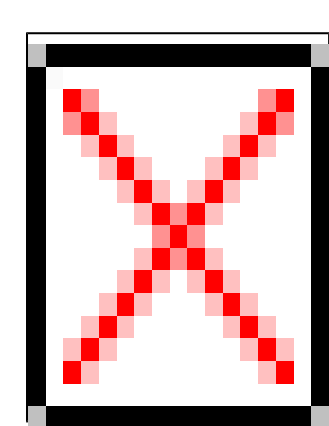
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Fine Art and Feminism, the bigger picture by **Sophia Bennett**

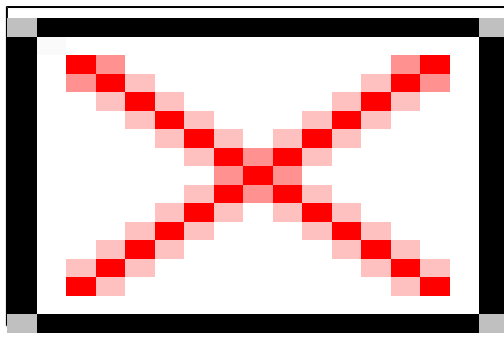


Until very recently, the story of art told in the western world has been focused almost exclusively on the lives and work of male artists. The curators at Tate have been making a big effort to increase the number of women artists in the collection and on display in their galleries, in all their diversity. **The Bigger Picture**, a new book by Sophia Bennett aims to play a small part in helping reach that goal, by inspiring, informing and supporting the next generation of fearless female artists and their allies. It looks at the many roles played by women in the art world, from curators and conservators working behind the scenes, and tells the stories of some great women artists from the past, and those working today.

Sophia Bennett tells the story of the book.

?Look what she can make! So can I ??

Much in the spirit of **Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls**, **The Bigger Picture** tells the true stories of over 30 inspirational female artists, in a language and style accessible to young people. Exactly *how* young was a tricky issue, and one of the reasons I came on board. In the end, we pitched the writing at 10 to 14 year-olds, but the exclusive interviews with many of the artists themselves, and detailed illustrations from Manjit Thapp, mean the book can be enjoyed by younger children who just want to turn the pages and older students who want to use it as a springboard for discovering more about the story of women in art. I find it quite hard to describe, but I love to see the fascination on people's faces ? of all ages ? as they flick from Yayoi Kusama's dots to Bridget Riley's stripes and Frida Kahlo's unsettling self-portraits.

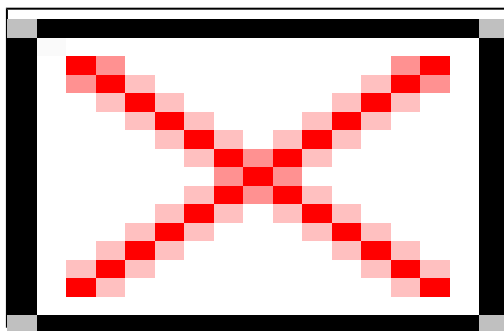


The book is my first foray into non-fiction. I wrote it working closely with Manjit and Holly Tonks, the editorial mastermind. The idea came from Holly, then a commissioning editor at Tate Publishing. I was pitching her a picture book idea about Matisse. We got chatting about other projects she was working on, and she mentioned the idea of creating a book for teens to shine a light on the female artists in the Tate's collection. Instantly, I knew I wanted to write it.

Holly already had a strong sense of what she wanted: a book that was contemporary, that covered artists from a wide range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds around the world, and that would inspire young people. This was everything I love: fine art, feminism, education, inspiration, and talking to a teenage audience. I'm not sure how many highly illustrated non-fiction books there are out there for teens, but I'd love to see more of them. In my writing I've always reached out to young people who think visually – designers, artists, photographers – many of whom will go on to power our economy, and it's good to make something that appeals to that side of their imagination.

Manjit, came on board before I did. I checked out her illustrations on Instagram (where she has a large following) and was instantly won over. I love her bold, colourful, fashion-oriented style. She's based in Birmingham so we only actually met after the book was published, but as drafts went back and forth it was a joy to see a research detail, carefully crafted into half a sentence, suddenly appear as a drawing that really brought the artist's world to life.

My academic background is in French and Italian literature, and I write for readers who, like me, are not experts in the field of fine art but are keen to learn. Having said that, I researched like crazy, trawling books, film, video, newspapers and galleries for interviews and nuggets of information that would resonate with a teenage reader. Focus groups with friendly Year 8s told me they wanted to know what the artists were like at their age, so I made a point of including this where I could. It certainly gives the book a new perspective.



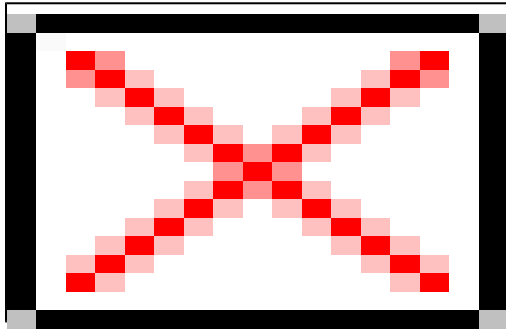
Curators at the Tate helped with choosing the images of the artists' work, and contacted them for permissions and interviews. Knowing that the artist herself, or her estate, would get to read and approve my text certainly piled on the pressure.

I give school talks about building girls' confidence and more than anything teenage girls need role models: women who have challenged the status quo, but also survived the issues that teen girls face: mental health problems, anxiety, a sense of seeing the world in a different way and not fitting in. Girls need them and I think many boys need them too. A history of women in art has them in abundance.

Take Yayoi Kusama, for example. Based in Tokyo, and just turned 90, she is a constant innovator who has accepted her lifelong mental illness and worked through it to become one of the most popular artists in the world. She says, "I fight

pain, anxiety and fear every day, and the only method I have found that relieves my illness is to keep creating art.? To our readers she says, ?Tell your truth. Enjoy the process. Make art for always.?

Judy Chicago is another trailblazer. She was brought up by her communist father to believe in her abilities, and was shocked when the US art world of the 1970s refused to take her seriously. She invested her own money and several years of her life to create *The Dinner Party* ? an installation that is a tribute to nearly a thousand great women in history. Locked away for decades, it?s now on permanent display in Brooklyn.



The Bigger Picture doesn?t only talk about artists. It also recognises some of the female historians, critics, collectors and curators who have been changing art history to include all talents, regardless of ethnicity or gender. Today, a talent such as Lynette Yiadom-Boakye can make art in a world where it is possible to be an experimental black female artist and to feature at the Tate. She uses the most traditional of genres, oil portraiture, and her imagination, to create extraordinary paintings of people who don?t exist. She is exactly the sort of role model I?d like the readers of this book to be inspired by. ?Look what she can make! So can I ??

The Bigger Picture: Women Who Changed the Art World by Sophia Bennet, illustrated by Manjit Thapp is published by Tate, 978-1849766210, £14.99

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