



Anita Kunz Calls Art by Her Name

By: Shana Nys Dambrot

They say Art History is the history of styles -- but of course it's much more than that. Like flies trapped in amber, the evolution of artistic vision contains within itself the full parade of society's priorities, standards of beauty, balances of power, forms of religion, war, and governance, aesthetic tastes, and all manner of demonstrations of values and ideas about race, class, gender, morality, science, sexuality, and the nature of reality. According to artist Anita Kunz, it is therefore alarming and unacceptable to realize that this entire epic sweep -- even including its most progressive and avant-garde moments -- has been overwhelmingly rendered from the point of view of straight white men. Art History, it seems, is due for a makeover.

That's where Kunz's REDUX project comes in. For the past few years, she's been working on a revisionist, counterfactual Art History, producing a series of paintings that put the question directly: What if art history had instead been made by independent women, without the oppressive religious interference disguised as patronage. Kunz operates with a profound social wit, advanced visual mimicry skills, and an eye for telling detail honed during her career as a successful editorial illustrator; though in her personal work she has found greater freedom as to the commentary she amplifies. It's now her own. Except, wondered Kunz, where did she come by the pantheon of artistic influences who shaped her aesthetic, style, and worldview? From museums, full of men. "The series became more political for me when I realized that an identical painting by "Davinia" Hockney would mostly likely never have been shown."

Besides Hockney, REDUX has taken on iconic works and styles from Picasso's *Guernica*, to Klimt's *The Kiss*, some famous anonymously painted French Renaissance sisters, Egon Schiele, Magritte's *The Son of Man*, Rousseau's *Sleeping Gypsy*, court painting, religious altarpieces, and

so many more. In an age of popular culture revolts and twitter meltdowns triggered by such trespass as an all-female *Ghostbusters* reboot, the first female *Doctor Who* in its 50-year history, and Reba McEntire playing Colonel Sanders, Kunz might be expecting a similar backlash from defenders of the cis-Renaissance. "I've always assumed equality so it has all been a bit shocking for me." But at the same time, even with the clear feminist perspective of these paintings, they are only one aspect of Kunz's art-historical reimagining.

Besides seeking balance on the gender continuum, Kunz also advocates for environmental justice and interspecies respect as a metric of evolved humanism. Essentially, she makes the same thought experiment, except with primates -- reimagining western history from the point of view of a species other rather than a gendered other. "The animal paintings are about how we treat the planet," says Kunz. "And about how we understand ourselves." Just as replacing the gaze and agency of men with that of women per above showcased the imbalance in society, so too replacing humans with primates amplifies the problematic relationships of humans to the environment and its denizens. Not for nothing, but she volunteers at a primate sanctuary. In her work there she has come to more fully grasp that embracing our own primate nature might be the best way to explain our own enigmatic behaviors. "Politics, sexism, war, love. We are brilliant and beautiful, but tribal, and we know better, so why do we do the things we do? Maybe if we thought of ourselves as primates," wonders Kunz, "then we'd have a better understanding of our humanity." Or if men could imagine themselves as women sometimes, we'd have a more complete sense of our common existence, and the respect that is due, and the true experience of equality. In the end, this is no more or less than a demonstration of the powerful potential of art itself.