

Finding Intimacy in the Immensity of Infinity

In *Intimate Immensity* at PAFA, touch, materiality, the sensual, and the subversive are part of a feminist lineage.



Installation view of *Intimate Immensity* at PAFA, Philadelphia (all photos by Constance Mensh)

PHILADELPHIA — *Intimate Immensity*, a group exhibition at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, takes its cue from Gaston Bachelard's essay of the same name. In the essay, Bachelard suggests that daydreams permit the contemplation of infinity, and that art becomes the "by-product" of these meditations.

The works in this show emphasize touch, materiality, the sensual, and the subversive. For Alexis Granwell, who curated the show, these meditations are part of a feminist lineage. In the catalogue essay, Bea Huff Hunter calls Bachelard's focus on only male poets

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“blindspots.” This exhibition, she suggests, offers another version of “internal immensity,” and she sees the nature of this tradition as “collective” and “restorative.”

Louise Bourgeois’s “The Angry Cat” (1999) is one of two touchstones from established women artists in the show. Bourgeois’s drawing depicts a stern-faced cat that simultaneously coaxes the viewer into an imaginative space and sharpens one’s attention: anyone who has ever spent time around a cat knows this look should not be taken lightly.



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The other artist is Judy Chicago. Chicago’s “Untitled (test plate) from the Dinner Party” (1976), a vulvic image in china paint on porcelain, appears courtesy of the Linda Lee Alter Collection of Art by Women. *The Dinner Party* (1974–1979), on permanent exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum, consists of 39 place settings for mythical and historical women. The test plate included in *Intimate Immensity* is for Georgia O’Keeffe, an indirect inclusion of another feminist touchstone.

Brie Ruais’s work emphasizes the corporeality of the body while highlighting the value and presence of human labor. Ruais begins most of her pieces with a mass of clay equivalent to her body weight, and then uses her body to shape the clay into large ceramic sculptures.

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Her two works in the exhibition, “Spreading and Tearing Away from Center” (2018) and “Double Unzipped” (2015), both large-scale, came in several separate pieces and each required eight hours of installation time. Both pieces bear the deep marks of the artist’s arms, hands, and shoes. In this sense, they operate like archeological evidence from time past.

Of the 11 artists in the show, Ghanaian artist El Anatsui is the only male. His “Untitled” (2012), like Ruais’s work, feels archeological. But for El Anatsui the marks are not parts of the body. This piece, on semi-transparent Kozo paper, seems instead to reference the impermanence of language systems and pattern-making. El Anatsui’s inclusion in a show of mostly women is not a token gesture, but rather underscores the fact that a feminist lineage of artists does not have to be limited to women.



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Granwell, who began as painter, has several of her own sculptures in the show, mostly grouped together. Bespeaking her background as a painter, each work is composed of handmade paper painted with abstract patterns, cut, and wrapped around papier-mâché

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constructions she's made. The finished works visually and sensually engage with their textures: the gleam of sea shells and the errant marks on a painter's drop cloth. Installed on individualized pedestals, "Invisible Eye" (2017) seems to float above a piece of rectangular pressboard, with a large part of its middle cut in a circular shape. The upper right corner is missing, suggesting that the work cannot be held within the frame.

Not surprisingly, notions of self and reflection are strong threads in the show; questions around artistic lineage, by their very nature, position the self to be examined. But these notions are also brought to light by the artist's materials. Michelle Segre's "Untitled" (2019) resembles the outline of a face made of yarn. In the eye's socket is a piece of bread cast in ceramic that looks more like a sponge. But the dangling mirror, which Segre uses again in "That's all Folks" (2016), truly underscores reflection as a subtle theme. The mirrors in these two works, one at either end of the gallery, are small and yet they catch more than the light. They reflect many of the other artworks and, most significantly, they reflect the viewer's actions within the gallery.



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Intimate Immensity's strength derives from its quiet concentration, which feels to me like resistance built for the long haul. It also strikes me as particular to the ideas and attitudes that seem only to develop inside the nurturing world of artist-run spaces. PAFA provided this space to Granwell — who has most often worked in artist-run spaces, in particular Tiger Strikes Asteroid — not as a means to co-opt alternative methods, but because it's leaders seems to understand the supporting role it can play in the development of artists and curators.

Other major institutions in Philadelphia — the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Barnes Foundation, and the Institute for Contemporary Art — should rise to this challenge. To meet this call would be to focus on the collective and the restorative, which as Bea Huff Hunter writes, is at the heart of *Intimate Immensity*.

Intimate Immensity, curated by Alexis Granwell, continues at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (118-128 North Broad Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) through April 7.

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