

The reappearing oeuvre

Women's art in the Germaine Greer Archive

Lachlan Glanville

A book on art history seems an odd follow-up to Germaine Greer's feminist incendiary *The female eunuch* (1969). However, in many ways *The obstacle race* (1979) extends and refines the arguments that Greer put forward in 1969 on the neutering of women's power and potential. Rather than being an exercise in unearthing forgotten and overlooked female artists of excellence, it focuses on the ways in which women's creative abilities have been hampered and squandered by patriarchy through a range of 'obstacles', including outright repression, false flattery, and the sidelining of talented artists into domesticity.

The obstacle race had its origins in an earlier project with a broader remit and various working titles, including 'A problem of waste', 'The boundaries of female culture' and 'Women and creativity'. That project sought to 'explain why there cannot have been a female Beethoven'.¹ It was never a case of naturally occurring talent or ability, but the social environs that allow men the freedom to create while barring women from a place among the canon.

In preparing the book, Greer spent five years travelling Europe searching the back rooms of museums for the works of forgotten and neglected artists. The Germaine



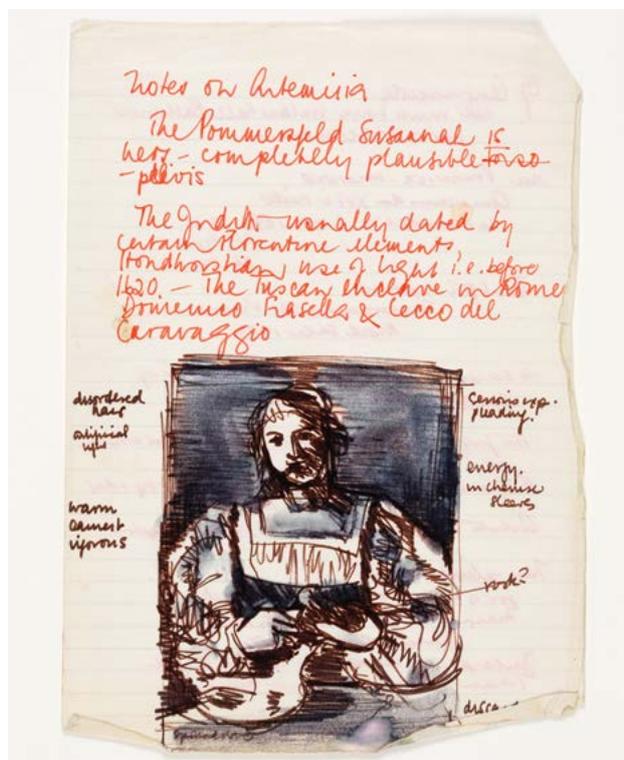
Previous page: Germaine Greer, handwritten notes on Lavinia Fontana, with accompanying sketches, c. 1976. From item 2014.0045.00007 (*Obstacle race*—green notebook), Major works series, Germaine Greer Archive, University of Melbourne Archives.

Below: Germaine Greer, notebook page with sketch of *Woman with dove* by Artemisia Gentileschi and accompanying notes, c. 1976. From item 2017.0016.01759 (Gentileschi, Artemisia), Women artists series, Germaine Greer Archive, University of Melbourne Archives.

Greer Archive is full of requests for information and photographic reproductions of museums' holdings. Her notebooks from the period contain many sketches of identified works, often with annotations about the poor conditions under which they have been kept. These are remarkable documents, veering from long lists of names and places in Greer's looping calligraphy to thoughtful musings on the social environments that produced remarkable artists such as Sofonisba Anguissola (c. 1532–1625). There is the sense of jigsaw pieces clicking into place. In a page devoted to details and figures from paintings by Lavinia Fontana (1552–1614), Greer muses: 'The question is: what kind of a place was Bologna that this could happen in it?'.² *The obstacle race* devotes a whole chapter to 'The Bolognese phenomenon'.

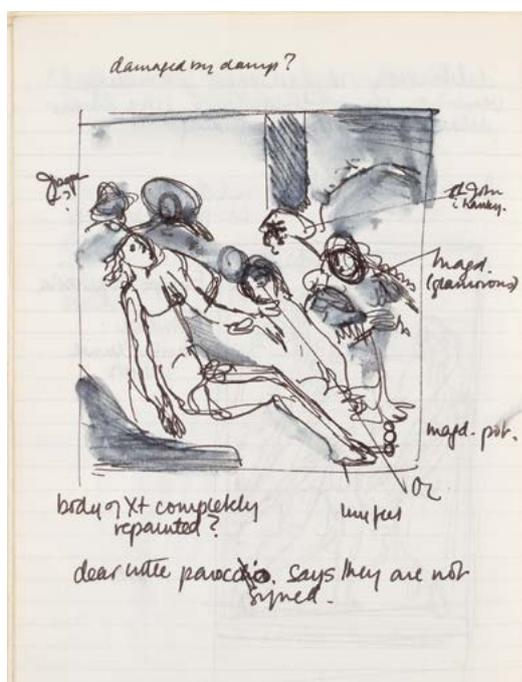
Although systemic barriers to women's creativity are the focus, individual artists are singled out for their brilliance. Greer wrote of Angelica Kauffman: 'Her painting has the same sort of understated but enduring appeal that she had herself; once one has learned to appreciate the depths that glimmer under her reserve, one finds her unmistakable and irresistible'. The chapter on Artemisia Gentileschi is titled 'The magnificent exception'; in it Greer notes that 'we shall never know how much of her potential was expended in fruitless friction'.³ She later expanded on this in an interview with Lisa Tuttle for her book *Heroines* (1988): 'Her anger burned in her all her life. She painted more confused and inadequate men and more strong and angry women than probably any other painter ever did'.⁴ Of Gentileschi's masterpiece *Judith beheading Holofernes*, variations of which Gentileschi painted three or four times, Greer says: 'Usually Judith is seen as being aided by heaven to kill this giant, but in Gentileschi it's just a woman's rage. She would have torn him apart with her bare teeth if she didn't have any other way of doing it'.

The obstacle race restricted itself to artists no longer



living, but Greer's writing on the visual arts did not end with *The obstacle race*. Notable later examples include 2003's *The boy*, numerous catalogue essays for artists as diverse as Marc Quinn, Paula Rego and Tacita Dean, and her stint with *The Guardian* from 2007 to 2011, writing 'Arts Comment', a wide-ranging column that touched on film, literature, the Eurovision Song Contest, and soft toys, but inevitably circled back to women artists. For this last assignment, in 2010 Greer interviewed then septuagenarian painter Rose Wylie in her studio. While

Germaine Greer, Notebook page with handwritten notes on Sofonisba Anguissola, and sketch of *Pietà*, c. 1976. From item 2014.0045.00011 (*Obstacle race—red notebook*), Major works series, Germaine Greer Archive, University of Melbourne Archives.



Wylie is known for her exuberant, wall-sized canvases, Greer was so enamoured of a drawing of a dancer in a red dress, scrawled on the back of an envelope, that she bought it on the spot, telling Wylie to advise her dealer ‘I spilled some coffee on it’.⁵ The cassette recording of the interview, the final article and the drawing itself are all part of the Germaine Greer Archive.

Throughout her career Greer has continued to ask: outside the rare Gentileschis and Fontanas, where is the female canon? Is there a parallel but ignored mirror to the male Western canon, or are women’s creativity and art fundamentally different? In a conversation with conceptual artist Susan Hiller (1940–2019), Greer ventured the idea

that what distinguishes female creativity is its lack of monumentality, that women’s creativity ‘was continuous with the unsynthesised manifold’.⁶ In Greer’s view, women didn’t see the point of an art that sought to separate itself from life, as for example landscape painting does when it separates a view from the whole and places a frame around it. For the record, Hiller disagreed.

The term ‘unsynthesised manifold’ surfaces periodically in Greer’s art writing, and even earned her a Golden Bull Award from the Plain English Campaign. Greer fiercely defended her use of the term in a 2006 *Guardian* column, where she opined that ‘Anyone who uses the word “somewhat” wouldn’t know plain English if it mugged him in the street’.⁷ The concept originates in Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of judgment*. Greer uses the term ‘to describe the endless flood of undifferentiated sensory data we accumulate throughout our waking hours’.⁸ The power of the art object is to create a space differentiated from the roar of unfiltered reality in which we operate from day to day. She first used the term in a 1983 catalogue essay for landscape painter and close friend Jeffrey Smart, in which she stated that beauty is not something intrinsic to the unsynthesised manifold but is instead imposed by the artist.⁹

Greer’s conversation with Hiller is a robust dialogue between academic and artist. Hiller considered Greer’s views essentialist, while acknowledging that preferences and predilections for modes of expression can be a result of gendered conditioning. Hiller concedes that although her work often consists of installations that fill and span entire rooms, the sum of their components pack up quite small. Greer expanded on this idea in a 2009 *Guardian* column exploring the success of installation and multidisciplinary artists such as Tacita Dean, Shirin Neshat and Marina Abramović: ‘But when art escaped from the frame and descended into the real world, women artists were suddenly in their element. As long as the work

was open-ended, as long as life flowed through it, from its conception to its realisation, women could make it as well as anyone'.¹⁰

It seems likely that Greer's championing of an art that is continuous with life is as much aesthetic as it is political. Greer's interest in the arts doesn't confine itself to women, and the women artists she is interested in don't necessarily confine themselves to that mode. Greer took considerable joy in Martin Creed's winning the Turner Prize for *Work No. 227: The lights going on and off*. Paula Rego, Rose Wylie, even Tacita Dean all routinely make work that is monumental—at least as far as physical scale is concerned. Yet it was the drawing on the back of the envelope at Wylie's studio that drew from Greer the remark: 'I love the postmark, I love everything about it'.¹¹

One of the most remarkable items in the Germaine Greer Archive is the photograph or counterfeit postcard by Tacita Dean created for the hybrid performance work *Lorca's olive*, commissioned for the exhibition *everstill/siempretodavía*, held at the House Museum Federico García Lorca in 2007–08. Dean created the work in response to a story that Salvador Dalí and Federico García Lorca once met in an olive grove in Cadaqués. When Dean went in search of the grove she found that it had burnt down. She took a photograph of an olive tree and coated the front of the prints in silver emulsion to emulate the appearance of a vintage postcard. During the exhibition Dean arranged for a postcard to be sent every day from the Dalí Foundation to the exhibition at the House Museum Federico García Lorca, where a new postcard would be placed on the dining table. In the Germaine Greer Archive we find a stowaway postcard filed with catalogues and personal correspondence. In Greer's catalogue essay for Dean, in which she reflects on the nature of women's art and women's absence from the canon, she writes: 'So much art is about art, but there is,

there must be an art which is about life, an art which has hardly been able to call attention to itself, an art without monuments'.¹²

Lachlan Glanville is the digital archivist at University of Melbourne Archives.

The Germaine Greer Archive at University of Melbourne Archives documents Greer's work as an academic; film, television and theatre performer; writer (notably her extensive work as a journalist); and environmentalist—as well as her personal relationships with friends, lovers, family, colleagues, students and fans. A selection of research materials, sketches and artworks from the Germaine Greer Archive and related works from the University of Melbourne Print Collection is currently on display on Level 3 of the Arts West building. See <https://archives.unimelb.edu.au/explore/collections/germainegreer>.

- 1 Women and creativity 1970/1, 1970–1973, Major works, 2014.0044, Germaine Greer Archive, University of Melbourne Archives (UMA).
- 2 *Obstacle race*—green notebook, c. 1976, Major works, 2014.0044, Germaine Greer Archive, UMA.
- 3 Germaine Greer, *The obstacle race: The fortunes of women painters and their work*, London: Secker and Warburg, 1979.
- 4 Correspondence TUS, 1988, General correspondence, 2014.0042, Germaine Greer Archive, UMA.
- 5 Rose Wylie (6/7/10), 2010, Audio recordings produced and received by Greer, 2014.0040, Germaine Greer Archive, UMA.
- 6 Germaine Greer and Susan Hiller in conversation, 2002, Audio recordings produced and received by Greer, 2014.0040, Germaine Greer Archive, UMA.
- 7 Germaine Greer, 'The Plain English Campaign have given me a "Golden Bull" award. Well, they can stuff it', *Guardian*, 4 December 2006, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2006/dec/04/1.
- 8 Greer, 'The Plain English Campaign'.
- 9 Correspondence Smart, Jeffrey, c. 1983, General correspondence, 2014.0042, Germaine Greer Archive, UMA.
- 10 Germaine Greer, 'Women used to shrink from creating art. Now they're taking over. And I think I know why', *Guardian*, 30 March 2009, www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2009/mar/30/women-art-gender.
- 11 Rose Wylie (6/7/10), 2010.
- 12 Germaine Greer, 'Tacita Dean', in *Tacita Dean: Recent films and other works*, London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 2001, pp. 40–1.