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POW! SOK! SHE'S BACK

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For artists, is Wonder Woman a corporate flack, a feminist icon—or a bit of both?

BY ELEANOR HEARTNEY

Between 1978 and 1979, Dara Birnbaum produced what was to become her signature video piece. Titled *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, it consists of a tightly edited seven-minute collage of scenes from the then-popular television series *Wonder Woman*. The work focuses on the moments when Lynda Carter, the actress portraying Wonder Woman, effected her transformation from boring secretary Diana Prince into a buxom superheroine as she twirled into a blast of light. In short clips, the video presents the heroine running after criminals, repelling bullets, and rescuing a helpless man. Whereas today such samplings of found footage are commonplace, in 1979, when the work was completed, they represented a revolutionary approach to the television medium.

As Birnbaum observed in 2002, “It marks a moment in time when I felt I had to capture that idealized vision of a woman, with a perfect body, wrapped in the American flag. This was a horrendous image for me. In the year that I made the videotape, Wonder Woman bathing suits were the hottest-selling items for girls.” Linking her recollections to the politics of the early 2000s, she added, “If Bush has his own ‘axis of evil,’ then that image was mine. . . . For me ‘the evil’ was and is the industry—an industry that men dominated, where they could form a commodified, corporate image of women.”

While for Birnbaum the television incarnation of Wonder Woman represented the mass media’s wholesale objectification of women, for others she was a formidable symbol of women’s strength. Only a few years earlier, *Ms.* magazine had paid homage to the original comic-book character by emblazoning her image on the cover of its 1972 inaugural issue, presenting Wonder Woman as a giantess battling off tank fire and exploding fighter jets as she strides down an urban street under the banner “Wonder Woman for President.”

SO WHICH IS IT? WONDER WOMAN AS CORPORATE FLACK or as feminist icon? Fantasy arm candy or empowering female role model? As it turns out, the ambiguity is coded into her comic genes.

In Birnbaum’s interpretation, Wonder Woman has become a symbol of feminist art. Meanwhile, Suzanne McClelland, who is 13 years younger than Birnbaum, has a different memory of TV’s Wonder Woman. “I found her a bit absurd, but not offensive,” she said. “She was also the only example I remember from television at the time of a woman undergoing a physical transformation.” In that sense she contrasts with the character in *I Dream of Jeannie*, another popular ’70s television show, who instead was constantly erasing herself. In 2011 McClelland created a video that paid homage to both the television Wonder Woman and Birnbaum’s critique. Titled *Sweep for Dara Birnbaum*, the piece also consists of clips depicting the process of Wonder Woman’s TV transformation. McClelland, however, focuses on the left turn the character takes to gain momentum before going into full spin, an action edited out of Birnbaum’s clips. McClelland sees this recurrent but unfinished twist as a metaphor for the experience of incomplete revolution that haunts the feminist movement.

Two recent books bring Wonder Woman’s ambiguous relationship to feminism to the fore: Jill Lepore’s *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*, which looks at the character’s creator, William Moulton Marston, focusing on the history from which Wonder Woman emerged and

the cultural meanings that have coalesced around her, and Tim Hanley’s *Wonder Woman Unbound: The Curious History of the World’s Most Famous Heroine*, which gives a history of the character rather than the creator.

Lepore considers the complex dynamics behind the personal and professional life of Marston. Self-described at the time as an eminent psychologist and inventor of the lie detector, Marston was also a staunch feminist in a pre-feminist world, a polyamorist, a bondage aficionado, and a bit of a charlatan. After a number of failed business ventures, he joined forces with DC Comics to create a female superhero who would demonstrate women’s superiority and natural dominance of men through “love control.” He was encouraged in this by a menagerie of women, including his wife, Elizabeth Holloway Marston, an editor who supported the whole family; his mistress, nanny, and secretary, Olive Byrne, who was the niece of birth-control crusader Margaret Sanger; and Marjorie Wilkes Huntley, a shadowy figure whom Lepore credits with encouraging his interest in bondage. A major thread running throughout the book is the way that Wonder Woman, with her bullet-deflecting bracelets, golden Lasso of Truth, and American flag-inspired costume, was inseparable from to the progress of early feminism.

Hanley, by contrast, highlights Wonder Woman’s predilection for bondage, offering charts comparing the number of bondage-related incidents per issue. He also sets Wonder Woman in the context of the history of comics in America, noting the deleterious effect of the Comics Code Authority, established in the 1950s after studies claimed to connect comic-book reading with juvenile delinquency. Both authors lament how post-Marston Wonder Woman, like the women who had been empowered on the home front during the war, was domesticated and subordinated in the ’50s and ’60s. The television Wonder Woman arrived on the heels of the feminist revival of the ’70s, but, as Hanley notes, the producers cleaned up the darker aspects of the original character to make her wholesome and family-friendly.

MANY OTHER ARTISTS HAVE BEEN INSPIRED BY THE LESS decorous original comic-book character, not least among them British artist Margaret Harrison, who caused a furor on the occasion of her first gallery exhibition at Motif Editions in London in 1971, in which she presented a drawing of a transsexualized Captain America wearing

PREVIOUS SPREAD Mexican artist Dulce Pinzón’s photo of Brooklyn Laundromat worker Maria Luisa Romero portraying Wonder Woman. OPPOSITE The inaugural issue of *Ms.* magazine, July 1972.

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MONEY FOR
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stockings and garters and sporting large female breasts. It was a moment when America's veneer of invincibility was crumbling under the weight of the Vietnam War, and the image hit a nerve. In response to an outcry over indecency, the London Police shut down the show. Harrison went on to become a celebrated feminist artist, but she didn't return to the superhero motif for almost 30 years, until the late '90s, when she produced new superhero-inspired works expanding on her interest in disrupting popular symbols of masculinity and femininity. Captain America returned, accompanied by various other iconic figures, including a flirtatious Betty Page, an appropriation of the pre-Raphaelite painter John William Waterhouse's *Lady of Shalott*, and many comic-book superheroes. Among them is Wonder Woman, who appears in full battle regalia, caught mid-leap as she presses forward to avenge evil.

"In the '70s," Harrison noted, "I didn't know how to use Wonder Woman. I knew her from the Lynda Carter TV series, but when I was growing up, comic books in England tended toward outer space and schoolgirl adventures. Recently, however, she has just started flying in." The character makes a provocative appearance in a drawing diptych titled *Getting Very Close to My Masculinity* (2013). It presents near-mirror images of a hyper-muscular Captain America in a corset and stiletto-heeled boots, turning away from us to look in a mirror that contains, in one version, Wonder Woman, and in the other, an image of a weeping woman in a head scarf. Surrounding the figures like medieval putti are smaller representations of Wonder Woman and other such cultural markers as Josephine Baker, Narcissus, and the Scarlet Witch. "I realized that Captain America was gradually becoming female, was becoming me, and was becoming Wonder Woman," said Harrison.

RENEE COX ALSO FOUND HERSELF BECOMING WONDER Woman. Her "Raje" series of photographs draws inspiration from the origin myth Marston created for his character, according to which Wonder Woman was an Amazon princess. Based loosely on Greek mythology, Marston's Amazons comprise an all-female society of superhumans watched over by Aphrodite, goddess of love. By virtue of her superior prowess, Wonder Woman, a.k.a. Diana Prince, was sent into the world of men to fight injustice. In a post-Marston narrative, she meets Nubia, her black Amazon cousin. Cox picked up on this reference, turning Nubia into Raje—a sexy black super-

OPPOSITE Margaret Harrison, *Getting Very Close to My Masculinity*, 2013. Harrison disrupts symbols of masculinity and femininity.

woman who rids the world of racial injustice. In dazzling staged photographs, Raje is decked out in form-fitting Jamaican colors, and is played by Cox herself, who is a body builder. This heroine engages in remarkable feats: she liberates Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben from their demeaning stereotypes, wrestles with an older white businessman in outer space, and takes on Napoleon's army when soldiers shoot the nose off the Sphinx.

No stranger to controversy (her 1999 photograph *Yo Mama's Last Supper* was condemned as anti-Catholic by then-New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani when it appeared in a show about black photography at the Brooklyn Museum), Cox embraces the sexual aspect of her heroine's power. Raje's taut, beautiful body seems as much a part of her arsenal as her silver dagger and her take-no-prisoner's attitude. Cox describes her as extending Wonder Woman's battle against injustice into the realms of racism and colonialism. In a 1998 interview, she remarked, "Clearly this body of work exposes the ultimate truths and contributions, past and present, that blacks have made in the United States. It also gives little girls and women a sense of empowerment while illustrating to the female population that she can do anything and go anywhere without following the law of tradition and limitations."

Viewed from the distance of Mexico, Wonder Woman's outsidership makes her a perfect foil for considerations of the marginal status of immigrants and women.

Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, Mexican artist Dulce Pinzón was working as a trade-union activist with fellow Mexican immigrants. She began to think about the meaning of heroism and how it applied, not just to the dramatic actions of the first responders, but also to the quieter sacrifices and difficulties faced by a more invisible segment of the population. The outcome was her photographic series "The Real Story of the Superheroes." These works portray actual Mexican immigrants struggling to survive in New York on minimum-wage salaries. Each figure has been outfitted as a different iconic superhero. A deliveryman is Superman; a window washer, Spiderman; and Maria Luisa Romero from the state of Puebla, Mexico, who tends a Laundromat in Brooklyn, is Wonder Woman. Like the others, she is photographed in her workplace. Stockier than the standard-issue Wonder Woman, she looks up resignedly as she pulls clothes out of a commercial washing machine.

"The principal objective of this series," Pinzón explained, "is to pay homage to these brave and determined men and women who somehow manage, without the help of any supernatural power, to withstand extreme conditions of labor in order to help their families and communities survive and prosper."

Mexican-born artist Blanka Amezkua performs a

different kind of rehabilitation in her “Sensacionales” series of embroidered images. Not based strictly on Wonder Woman, the works are often a discomfiting blend of the raunchy sexuality and power that lie at the heart of the heroine’s appeal. Amezkua’s “Sensacionales” are embroidered images appropriated from soft-core Mexican comic books that offer a cheap form of entertainment for working-class Mexican men. Like the comic books that presented Wonder Woman to the world, these have a disreputable, lowbrow status.

Amezkua described her source materials as very sexualized narratives framed around women as erotic objects. For her characters, she pulls out poses that suggest a very different narrative from the violent and sexist stories that rivet readers of traditional Mexican comics. She isolates moments of female rebellion and empowerment within those tales. The figures remain sexualized and erotic, but like Wonder Woman, whose spirit they share, they are freed from the world of men to redefine themselves. Thus, for instance, in *La Lutxona* (2007), the enraged, bubble-breasted heroine almost explodes out of the taco-warming cloth on which she is embroidered. In *Karnalitas (Sisters)*, 2005, a pair of women entwine in Amazonian sisterhood as they stare challengingly out of the picture plane. As Amezkua remarked, “I felt there was a strength in them, in their gestures or posture, and through them I felt I was getting stronger.”

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Reflecting on their American counterpart, Amezkua addressed the role of costume in the controversies that periodically envelop Wonder Woman: “She could have been dressed differently,” the artist said. “If you remove the outfit, the narrative changes completely. She is power, justice, and love—what could be wrong with that?”

That is the question that will no doubt be coming to the fore again soon. While Batman and Superman—the other key figures in the DC Comics pantheon—have been realized in countless big-budget television and movie productions, up to now, Wonder Woman’s only significant escape to the screen came with her ’70s TV series. But that is about to change with the upcoming release of a pair of Warner Bros. blockbusters: in May 2016, she will be included in *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*, and the following year she will finally get her own movie, currently just titled *Wonder Woman*. Once again, her fate lies in the hands of a group of largely male creators. And once again, the question is: which Wonder Woman will make it to the big screen? ■

OPPOSITE *La Lutxona*, 2007, an embroidery-on-fabric work from Blanka Amezkua’s series “Sensacionales.”

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