

What Makes Art Feminist? An Interview with Ilene Sova, Room's Contest Cover Art Judge

(<https://www.addtoany.com/share?url=https%3A%2F%2Froommagazine.com%2Fblog%2Fwhat-makes-art-feminist-interview-ilene-sova-rooms-contest-cover-art-judge&title=What%20Makes%20Art%20Feminist%3F%20An%20Interview%20with%20Ilene%20Sova%2C%20Room%27s%20Contest%20Cover%20Art%20Judge>)
[\(/#facebook\)](#) [\(/#twitter\)](#)

Interview by Nailah King

Room talks to Ilene Sova, artist, founder of *The Feminist Art Conference* (<http://factoronto.org/>) (FAC), and judge of our first ever *Cover Art Contest* (<http://www.roommagazine.com/contests#ART>) about art, feminism and how the two merge to empower and unite women.

Room: What inspired you to start the feminist art conference?

Sova: I came up with the idea for FAC while working on the *Missing Women Project* (<http://ilenesova.com/missing-women-project-7/>). This was an exhibition of large portraits that I created to bring awareness to violence against women in our own local communities. The subjects were a wide range of women from various backgrounds that had disappeared between 1970 - 2000. I painted them over a four-year period. For each painting, I embarked on around three weeks of research via the library databases and missing persons websites. During the research into these women's stories, I came across many reoccurring disturbing patterns of patriarchy and misogyny that contributed to these women's disappearance. It was absolutely enraging and alarming. I wanted to deconstruct, discuss and critique, but I didn't have a community of feminist artists to talk to. I realized that as a feminist artist in Toronto, I was very isolated.



By the time I had launched the exhibition it was 2013, and if you remember, that year was a particularly devastating year for women in general. I was watching all these horrible stories come across my social media feed and I was feeling more and more disenfranchised and powerless. So about four months before the exhibition was to open, I remember sitting at my kitchen table and thinking that I couldn't simply have a traditional art exhibition around this work. I felt strongly that I also needed to bring feminist artists together to meet and discuss our work while networking to create a real community. In that moment, I wrote a Call for Submissions that I had some friends proofread, and just took a wild leap and put it online. By that afternoon, there were 45 shares on Facebook and I was getting emails from Kenya and Colombia. The response was phenomenal. I had about 20 volunteers willing to help after the first week of posting it and we started planning! Here we are 3 years later with 5 days of events, 3 satellite exhibitions, 6 countries participating, all in the wonderful venue at OCAD University! I think FAC happened at a time when a lot of people were looking for community at the same time I was, and that is why magic happened.

Room: What do you want people to take away from the event?

Sova: Our vision for FAC is very celebratory. This is a time for artists and attendees to get together, share our work, and feel a real sense of community that doesn't exist elsewhere. We want people to learn, to be inspired and feel motivated by all the people who are grinding and feel the same way you do about the importance of equity and social justice for all people. My ultimate goal is that artists meet each other across disciplines and that new collaborations and projects come out of the conference.

After the first FAC, our survey revealed 80% of the artists said they met someone they are going to work with in the future. My hope is that the participants and the attendees walk away feeling energized and that what they do has value as part of a supportive movement. We also want to model that our feminist art movement can be intersectional, can include all gender identities, all ages and a myriad of feminisms. We want to show that it's possible to listen and be respectful of a variety of voices and experiences in a supportive space and learn from one another while being inspired into new ways of thinking and being.

Room: Women artists are being added to Wikipedia as a part of edit-a-thons thanks to the efforts of volunteer feminists. How else can people better support women artists?

Sova: I love the Wikipedia edit-a-thons. It's such a great example of real impactful internet activism! It means so much to have access to knowledge about women artists and to have them included in this archive of art history that is exploding on Wikipedia. Their exclusion is a travesty.

We can support women artists by purchasing their work! If you are a writer, feature them! If you love an artists work, share that work with others on social media! FAC supports these artists by creating opportunities for professional development – providing space for them to show their work, bringing an audience for them to share it with, and creating opportunities for them to speak and present their work to the community.

Room: What is a myth about women artists you'd like to debunk most?

Sova: If I could debunk a myth it would be this: There is still the prevalent view of the male genius in the art world. This crosses all the arts, music, theatre, dance, writing, and visual art. In real terms this means primarily that a woman's art is worth less and therefore shown less because art collectors and major cultural centers don't want to take a financial risk on art made by women. A woman's art has as much value as a man's art, and we can't look at the historical cannon, which was made and written by men as an indication of gender determining talent.

Room: What advice do you have for emerging artists?

Sova: With the internet, we live in a new world in terms of art, art promotions and messaging. I think this is a very exciting time for feminist artists. The internet is exploding with phenomenal feminist art. I don't go through a week without seeing an example of a super talented feminist artist going viral and their work getting out and affecting people – creating unbelievable online dialogue. The capitalist structure around art is completely changing before our eyes. It's not the galleries promoting them. It's not the mainstream media that's choosing to feature their work. Now it's Tumblr, Instagram, and blogging that is blasting their work out. This is a very exciting and powerful time for feminist artists. They can literally skip over the patriarchal old fashioned contemporary art system and get their work out to so many more people.

So my advice to emerging artists is to see that power they have now and harness it. Forget the old system – it isn't working for them and it never has. Take control of your own work and create your own gallery online – if you want to sell your work – have the customer come directly to you. This means being super organized, posting every day and becoming your own manager. It also means that you control your messaging and you have your own autonomy and political agency over your practice, which is unbelievably powerful! Also, when we make the work we do it's not necessarily going to be accepted by the mainstream structures of contemporary art. You need to be prepared to be resourceful and come up with alternative ways, spaces, and ideas about how to get your work seen and appreciated.

Are there any books you recommend that artist's read?

Sova: My favourite feminist book of all time is bell hooks' *All About Love*. This book completely changed my life. It transformed the way I see partnerships and community as place of radical action and support. I love her critique of capitalism and her outline of its negative effect on our interpersonal relationships and family units.

Also, as a feminist artist in particular, Judy Chicago's *Into the Flower* has amazing insight into the struggle of women artists. It was published in 1978, but I recently re-read it and it's still so relevant! She outlines every aspect of how patriarchy affects her art career, starting in art school and working through her romantic relationships and into her teaching career. It's a fascinating and necessary read for feminist artists that really want to understand the structures around them that are working to prevent their success. It's a narrative book, a kind of autobiography with critical analysis mixed in and it documents her life as she goes through a process of self-discovery. It's a very dynamic read.

Room: You're part of the 3mw collective, where you and two other artists use visual art to deconstruct mixed race. Can you tell us more about the collective? How it got started and how art can be used to reclaim identity?

Sova: We are three mixed-race women artists using portraiture in both painting and photography to address ideas of mixed-race identity. The collective includes Rema Tavares, Jordan Clarke and myself. Rema's family originates from Jamaica, Jordan's from Barbados and mine is from the Bahamas. The subjects in our work are people who have parents, grandparents, and ancestors from different cultural backgrounds. The faces of our "models" do not conform to society's outdated notions of human classification. These faces are loaded with issues of colonialism, racism, shadeism, as well as questions of history and identity.

That collective started because we were all separately introduced to one another by mutual friends and we realized not only were we tackling similar issues with portraiture, but we also had the similar politics about how we were doing it. After our first meeting we realized we had great chemistry and decided to curate a show together. It was very successful and we kept going.

In terms of reclaiming, identity, in Canada, although we have a policy of multiculturalism, people are generally not comfortable talking about race.

Our work aims to highlight the experiences of mixed people. These are the people whose “race” is not clear and who are often faced with questions such as, “What are you?” or “What is your ethnic background?” These persistent questions clearly reflect our society’s discomfort with an inability to classify people by racialized norms. In the work we aim to create a dialogue around that breaking apart of racialization and instigate people to really think about these issues in a deeper more critical way.

Room: What makes an art work compelling? Or feminist?

Sova: Personally, I think a compelling work of art, tells a story about our time. It reflects back at us the society and environment that we live in. It should make us think and consider how things are and how they could be. Feminist art is broad and varied, and covers many feminisms, but for FAC we are looking for art that reflects the struggles women face in their every day lives – strong work focused on social justice and equity. Work that is very intersectional. We are also looking for art that is accessible to the general public, that is not convoluted or esoteric but direct and clear in it’s messaging. This is the type of feminist art that excites me. Art for the people – not art for ‘some people’.

TAGS: [ILENE SOVA \(/TAGS/ILENE-SOVA363\)](/TAGS/ILENE-SOVA363), [NAILAH KING \(/TAGS/NAILAH-KING39\)](/TAGS/NAILAH-KING39), [CONTEST \(/TAGS/CONTEST148\)](/TAGS/CONTEST148), [COVER ART \(/TAGS/COVER-ART222\)](/TAGS/COVER-ART222)

“It’s Canadian, feminist, and one of my favourite things ever.”

—bucketofrhymes, "29 Amazing Literary Magazines You Need To Be Reading", BuzzFeed Books

Room relies on subscriptions from readers like you. Help us continue to promote and support diverse women and genderqueer authors and artists by subscribing today.

[SUBSCRIBE \(/SUBSCRIBE\)](/SUBSCRIBE)

MORE FROM THE INTERVIEW ROOM



[\(/interview/selina-boan-emerging-writer-award-winner-2018\)](/interview/selina-boan-emerging-writer-award-winner-2018)

[Selina Boan: Emerging Writer Award Winner 2018 \(/interview/selina-boan-emerging-writer-award-winner-2018\)](/interview/selina-boan-emerging-writer-award-winner-2018)



[\(/interview/conversation-jane-eaton-hamilton\)](/interview/conversation-jane-eaton-hamilton)

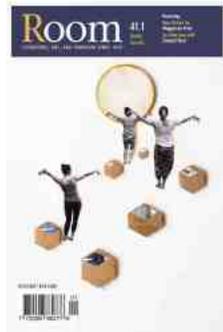
[In Conversation with Jane Eaton Hamilton \(/interview/conversation-jane-eaton-hamilton\)](/interview/conversation-jane-eaton-hamilton)



[\(/interview/interview-rooms-creative-non-fiction-judge-stacey-may-fowles\)](#)

[An Interview with Room's Creative Non-Fiction Judge Stacey May Fowles \(/interview/interview-rooms-creative-non-fiction-judge-stacey-may-fowles\)](#)

CURRENTLY ON NEWSSTANDS



[\(/issues/family-secrets\)](#)

[ROOM 41.1. \(/ISSUES/FAMILY-SECRETS\) FAMILY SECRETS \(/ISSUES/FAMILY-SECRETS\)](#)

EDITED BY RACHEL THOMPSON

In this issue:

Jennifer Amos, Fenn Archdekin-Leung, Jenn Ashton, Jamelie Bachaalani, Colleen Baran, Jenny Bartoy, Alexandra Chang, Kristina Corre, Maggie de Vries, Shirley Harshenin, Jia Hwang, Sharon Jinkerson-Brass, Elizabeth Johnston, Tamara Jong, Manal Kamran, Carrienne Leung, Lily Leung, Mary MacDonald, Alissa McArthur, Cossi Nayovitz, Margaret Nowaczyk, Deanna Partridge-David, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, Rebekah Rempel

Room is published with the generous support of:



BRITISH COLUMBIA



BRITISH COLUMBIA ARTS COUNCIL
An agency of the Province of British Columbia



Canada Council for the Arts
Conseil des arts du Canada

Funded by the Government of Canada

Financé par le gouvernement du Canada

