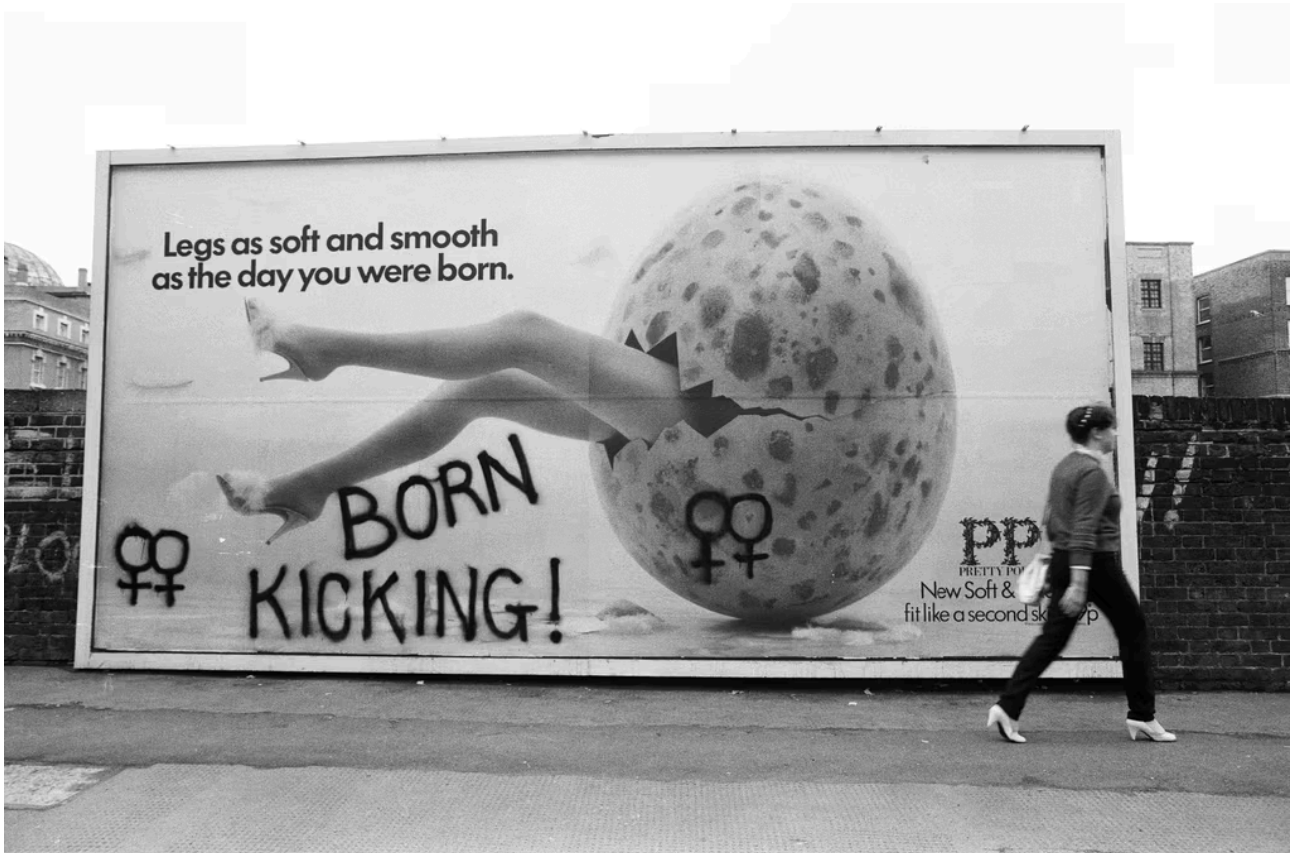


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★★★★★

Review: Women in Revolt! Art and Activism in the UK 1970-1990 review – a monumental social history



Born Kicking, London, 1983 by Jill Posener, reprinted 2023. Courtesy of the artist

Tate Britain, London

From Miss World to the Equal Pay Act to Reclaim the Night, via flyers and flour bombs, this extraordinary show celebrating two decades of British feminism deserves your full attention.

Laura Cumming
Sun 12 Nov 2023

On 20 November 1970, American comedian Bob Hope presented the annual Miss World contest at the Royal Albert Hall in London. The show was broadcast live on BBC One. “It’s quite a cattle market,” was one of his winking quips. “I’ve been back there checking calves.” Moments later, women began to throw flour bombs in his direction. The comedian was caught by the ankle as he tried to scurry from the stage.

If you feel ire (or renewed ire) at such abhorrent gags, then this is the show for you. *Women in Revolt!* begins in 1970, with protest banners against Miss World – “We’re not beautiful. We’re not ugly. We’re angry” – and the first Women’s Liberation Conference, held at Ruskin College in Oxford and photographed here by the 20-year old Chandan Fraser.

Her pictures run the gamut from serious debate to laughter, anger, friendship and maternal joy. They also feature the magnificent Sheila Hilda Walsh – Mrs Walsh – 1960s pioneer of the women’s movement, campaigning for the rights of women and children from broken homes. You will see the twin of her hand-knitted cardigan some galleries later, as worn by the exceptionally brave Jayaben Desai, who led the workforce in the two-year Grunwick strike in London from 1976. Like their subjects, these images are indelible.



Women’s Liberation Conference (Sue Crockford and Juliet Mitchell), 1970 by Chandan Fraser. Courtesy of the artist and Four Corners

This is the largest show ever mounted at Tate Britain by some way, the curators say, with more than 100 artists and collectives represented in countless exhibits. Anyone visiting should give it as much time as they possibly can as there is so much to see, read and absorb in what is effectively a colossal manifestation of social history in this country.

It ranges in all directions – Grunwick, Greenham Common, Orgreave and the miners’ strike, protests against the closures of nurseries that had barely opened, attempts to get the Equal Pay Act of 1970 duly enacted (not for another five years), through to the anti-pornography, pro-choice and Reclaim the Night marches of the 70s.

It goes deep into the most ingenious use of photocopy, collage, intervention and performance, into art on billboards and library walls, via flyers and zines, as well as canvas and sculpture.

It even extends right out into the museum gardens, where the fabulous Bobby Baker is serving tea to visitors in a full recreation of her famous 1976 period piece *An Edible Family in a Mobile Home*. This tiny prefab house, in which the artist was then living, is papered floor to ceiling with the 70s press, from *Jackie* magazine spreads in the daughter’s bedroom, telling girls how to get over a boy’s rejection, to shockers from the *Daily Mail* in the living room (“She’s the filly to watch!” of a woman jockey on the sports page). All the other members of the family, from the father relaxing in his chair, to the son in the bath, are made of cake and biscuits. Only the mother is mobile, a plastic mannequin that can be run all over the place, snacks available from compartments in her stomach – a poor dummy, a lifesize dispenser.



A full recreation at Tate Britain of Bobby Baker’s *An Edible Family in a Mobile Home*, 1976, the prefab house in which the artist was then living, papered with everything from *Jackie* magazine to the *Daily Mail*. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

The medium was both necessity and message. So many of these artists could not get their work shown anywhere, or were forced to work from home. They used slides, which could be posted round Britain and projected on any scale. They wove, embroidered and knitted. Rita McGurn's trio of women, lovely and lifesize, hanging out on a crocheted rug, are themselves a work of crochet using whatever scraps of wool she could come by.

One of the most affecting works here is just an eggbox, tiny emblems of a terrible marriage in each compartment, from a doll's arm to a toy police helmet. Another, by Marlene Smith, recalls the moment that Dorothy "Cherry" Groce moved from her Brixton kitchen in south London at 7am to answer the door, where she was shot by police. A lifesize sculpture in plaster, chipboard and J cloths, it stands beneath the legend "She is not bulletproof."



Untitled Rug and Figures, 1974-1985 by Rita McGurn. Photograph: Courtesy of the McGurn family; photograph by Keith Hunter

Art and protest become indivisible. Even just the magazine titles carry their own epigrammatic wit – *Shrew*, *Spare Rib*, *Red Rag*, Ireland's *Banshee*. I loved Alexis Hunter's *The Marxist's Wife (still does the housework)*, where the title is as potent as the image of a woman's hand attempting to clean the face of Karl Marx through 20 prints, the dirt simply getting thicker.

Marx's refusal to equate labour inside and outside the home might stand as a theme. You see it in the desperate daily lives at a London toy factory recorded in an installation by Mary Kelly, Margaret Harrison and Kay Hunt, with women rising at five to make breakfast for their husbands and children, before cleaning the house then going to work, only to return to childcare and dinner. You see it in Maureen Scott's strong painting *Mother and Child at Breaking Point*, where the infant howls while the woman, rigid, exhausted, tries to keep going.

A section on motherhood features Susan Hiller's documentation of her own pregnancy in grainy photos of her growing stomach as a strange topography. And Robina Rose's remarkable film of a home birth in 1977, full of awe and joy, is not at all what visitors will have been expecting to see from its soundtrack, flooding through to the show's entrance from a later gallery.



Spirit Impressions – 5, 1974 by Penny Slinger. © Penny Slinger/ARS, New York; courtesy of Richard Saltoun Gallery London and Rome, and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2023

An even stronger section shows marvellous paintings by Claudette Johnson, Lubaina Himid, Sonia Boyce and other artists associated with the Blk Art Group. Especially mordant is Himid's *Dog Years*, painted on wood, in which a white man stands erect, his phallus a vicious dog. Young men, as she says in the accompanying text, using their animals as weapons. What's changed?

There are many other classics here. Format Photographers's celebrated images of women's unstinting protests at Greenham Common over almost two decades; Linder's devastating collage of a nude with an iron for a head and smiling mouths for nipples, used on a Buzzcocks single; Penny Slinger's self-portrait, nude, jammed inside her own wedding cake. Though it is grievous to consider how many of the great artists represented here – Slinger, the conceptual artist Rose Finn-Kelcey, the painter Monica Sjöö – did not get their gallery due until *after* they had died.

Humorous, trenchant, furious, messy, visionary, riotous – as full of words as images, bursting right out of the gallery, this show has no obvious high point or end. Which feels faithful to the state of our nation even now, where women still bear the greater burden of labour in both respects, are still lower-paid in the workplace, still assaulted by men every day; a country that still broadcasts Miss World. Look closely at this extraordinary exhibition, ask yourself what has changed and be newly inspired.

- Women in Revolt! Art and Activism in the UK 1970-1990 is at Tate Britain, London, until 7 April 2024. It will then transfer to National Galleries Scotland: Modern, Edinburgh, 25 May 2024 to 26 January 2025 and the Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, 7 March to 1 June 2025

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