

Jan 26, 2021, 11:04am EST | 1,231 views

Feminist As Audrey Flack



Brienne Walsh Contributor ⓘ ⊕

Arts



Audrey Flack in front of her painting "Leonardo's Lady," 1974, which is currently hanging at the ... [+]
COURTESY AUDREY FLACK

At some point during our conversation earlier this month, the 89-year-old artist Audrey Flack mentioned to me that she was wearing a t-shirt she had bought at the Museum of the City of New York. It read, "Feminist AF," she told me. "When I first saw it, I thought, 'AF, oh, that's for Audrey Flack,'" she laughed. "I couldn't believe they knew my initials!"

I already knew that I loved Audrey Flack after watching *Queen of Hearts: Audrey Flack*, a documentary about her career by Oscar award-winning director Deborah Shaffer and co-director Rachel Reichman. (The film, which was released on November 13, [is currently available online](#).) These feelings of love were only confirmed during the hour that I spent on the phone with her — me, at my desk in Savannah, Georgia, and Flack in her studio in the Hamptons where, among other things, she worried about where she would get the COVID-19 vaccine, and gave me advice about my wild 4-year-old daughter, who frequently tells me she wants to be a boy. (“Women are wonderful, but I always wanted to be a boy, too, because they had more fun,” Flack told me.)



A still from "Queen of Hearts: Audrey Flack" CREDIT: DEBORAH SHAFFER

The documentary makes clear that Flack, who was born in New York in 1931, has an innate, and long-overlooked talent that, if she had been born a man, would have vaulted her to the highest echelons of the Post-War art world. While a student at Cooper Union in the early 1950s, Flack was given the opportunity to show her work to Josef Albers, who was recruiting artists for

the Yale School of Art. He chose her for a scholarship to study at Yale, only to lessen himself in her estimation when he grabbed her crotch while visiting her studio — “like a masher on the subway,” she said in the documentary.



Audrey Flack (b. 1931), Emerald, 1950–51, Gouache on paper, 11 7/8 x 17 7/8 inches COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND HOLLIS TAGGART

MORE FOR YOU

There Will Be No Winner In ‘Godzilla Vs. Kong’

The Pseudoscience Behind The ‘Sigma Male,’ Explained

How Luciana Rozenberg Launched Accessories Brand Naissant During A Pandemic

Being in the orbit of great men, not as an esteemed contemporary, but instead, as an object of sexual desire, was the norm for Flack in her days as a student — as is it is for so many women, even half a century later. To me, she recounted a story about running into Jackson Pollock at the Cedar Tavern in Greenwich Village when she was 19. Flack worshipped his work, but as she approached her, she could see that he was very drunk. “I wanted to talk art with him, but this guy comes stumbling over with a stubble,” she recounts.

“His eyes were like burning vortexes and there were little broken blood vessels on his nose.”

Foul-smelling and unsteady, Pollock leaned over to Flack, and said, “Let’s fuck.”

She ordered him something to eat, and never went back to the Cedar Tavern again.

In order to be a woman, and fit in with the abstract expressionists, Flack told me, you had to behave more like men than the men did. “There was a reckless abandon,” she says. “You had to get drunk, and accept this violent behavior. I tried to fit in, but I couldn’t do it.”



Audrey Flack (b. 1931), *Abstract Force: Homage to Franz Kline*, 1951–52, Oil on canvas, 50 x 72 ... [+]
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND HOLLIS TAGGART

Instead, Flack, in the wake of the death of her father, got married, and had her first daughter, Melissa, in 1959, and a second daughter, Hannah, two years after. Within a year of becoming a mother, Flack had lost the will to

live. Melissa, from a young age, exhibited signs of autism and society blamed Flack — a “refrigerator mother”—for the condition. “It was brutal,” she said in the documentary.

To keep Melissa, who never slept, from crying, Flack held her while she painted throughout the night. Her husband was largely absent; even still, Flack never lost her desire to paint. Even though realism was unfashionable at the time— figurative art was considered to be a “problem”— Flack began photographing her daughters and painting from the photographs. Her investigations into realism led her to paint canvasses inspired by the news and politics of the time — for example, she painted an image of Jackie and John F. Kennedy taken in the back of an open convertible in Dallas just before he was assassinated.



A still from "Queen of Hearts: Audrey Flack" AUDREY FLACK, MARILYN, 1977

In 1968, newly divorced and remarried to her high school sweetheart, Flack began to gain critical attention for her photorealistic paintings, which were created by projecting photographs onto a canvas, and reproducing them in bright, deep colors. Flack suddenly found herself compared to artists such as Chuck Close and Richard Estes, although her work was always distinctly feminine, combining objects such as Chanel perfume bottles, lipsticks, butterflies, cherries and roses with family photographs and images of celebrities like Marilyn Monroe to create deeply intellectual still lives that Flack referred to as “vanitas paintings.”

Flack knew, when she was creating her vanitas, that she was making something great. “Everything was like hitting the tennis ball right in the middle of the tennis racket,” she says. But it took until 2019 for the Museum of Modern Art in New York to hang *Leonardo's Lady* (1974), one of Flack’s large-scale paintings from this era, in their permanent collection.



A still from "Queen of Hearts: Audrey Flack." COURTESY OF AUDREY FLACK

By the late 1970s, discouraged by a constant barrage of criticism from the art world elite, who thought that photorealism, and by extension, Flack’s greatest work, was nothing but mechanical reproduction, Flack stopped painting. Inspired in part by the Virgin of Hope of Macarena, a statue reputedly created by an unknown woman in Seville, Spain — “No man could have expressed these feelings that a woman has for her son,” Flack says — as well as her deep knowledge of art history, Flack turned towards sculpture, creating large public sculptures of goddesses and icons for towns like Rockville, South Carolina.



Audrey Flack (b. 1931), Maquette for Recording Angel, 2008, Patinated and gilded bronze, 16 (H) x 9 ...

[+] COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND HOLLIS TAGGART

Throughout it all, Flack continued to care for her daughters. One of the most moving passages of the documentary is when Flack goes to visit Melissa, now living in a group home in Pennsylvania, and holds her, now an adult, in her lap. “She’s an angel on earth,” Flack told me. “She doesn’t care about the art world, about money, she doesn’t know about fame. All of these things that guide the rest of us—instead, she can spot a good person or a bad person immediately.”

Even during our conversation, Flack took a call from the home where Melissa lives. “She is the perfect beauty,” she told me. While her male colleagues were holed in their studios, Flack was emerging to make dinner for her family; despite it all, she was prolific. Lately, she has returned to large-scale painting, which combines baroque subjects such as the four horsemen of the apocalypse with super-heroes and cartoon-esque figures to create apocalyptic landscapes. Yet another manifestation of the unending genius of Flack’s mental landscape.



Audrey Flack (b. 1931), *Days of Reckoning*, 2020, Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 92 inches, Private ... [+]

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND HOLLIS TAGGART

“The creativity never ends,” says Hollis Taggart, the gallerist who currently represents her work. “Flack will be known for the variety and flexibility she had throughout her career.”

Flack is the antidote to the traditional wisdom that you can't be both a great artist and a great mother. In 2021, there's a glimmer of hope that perhaps, finally, as a culture, we can begin to recognize this. At 88, there are very few things Flack still hopes to accomplish — among them, a profile in *Art in America*. She'd like to finish the book she's been working on for 35 years. She'd like to get her COVID-19 vaccine so she can go see Melissa.

Looking back over her life, the people she feels the most admiration for are not the male artists she worshipped in her youth, but instead, the women like her, who raised disabled children all by themselves, even as society blamed them. “These women were fabulous,” she told me. “They are my heroes. It's only now that I can look back and see what an incredible thing we went through.”

Climb the Career Ladder with Forbes

Land the job, get a raise and learn to lead with advice from Careers Staff Writer Kristin Stoller

You may opt out any time. [Terms and Conditions](#) and [Privacy Policy](#).

Follow me on [LinkedIn](#).



Brienne Walsh

Brienne Walsh received her BA in art history from Brown University in 2004. She has worked in the art world for over a decade, first as a gallerina, and then as an art...

Read More

Reprints & Permissions

ADVERTISEMENT