

Auckland's Women Artists: 1980s

*In the last few years, more and more women have been writing on art and taking the role as facilitator or teacher*¹

The 1980s was a pivotal time for women artists in Auckland. Following the progress made in the 1970s with newly established feminist and women-led journals as well as artists such as Jaqueline Fahey speaking out about the women's liberation movement, artists in the 80s used that momentum to keep putting out artworks dedicated to these social issues. Juliet Batten and Carole Shephard are two examples of women who continued to play a leading role in the Auckland art scene from a feminist perspective. These women were prolific in producing art works that often centred around feminism and women-centric motifs. This article will explore how Juliet and Carole attempted to address the discourse between women artist and feminist artist and how they challenged this system. It will also examine how these women continued to build communities to foster support for women artists to try equalising the power in the art world.

Juliet Batten in *Broadsheet*

Juliet Batten played an influential role in Auckland's feminist art movement, and many of her contributions were publicised through her writings in *Broadsheet*. A good example was in 1983, where she examined how 35 women artists described themselves and their relationship with the term "feminist artist."² Juliet mused in her conclusion that many women were afraid to be labelled as a "feminist artist," and some would rather keep the concepts of being an artist and being a feminist separate.³ Juliet's analysis demonstrated how the 1980s were a decade marked by discussions that aimed to clarify the true meaning of feminism, its various connotations, and how to apply it to the art world in a way that would enable other women artists and the broader public to comprehend the feminist discourse without viewing it as "too" political or dangerous.

Not all women in the 1980s Auckland art scene experienced tension in being identified with feminism. There were women who wanted their social and political orientations to be clearly

¹ Anne Kirker, *New Zealand Women Artists*, (Auckland: Reed Methuen, 1986), 4.

² Juliet Batten, "Juliet Batten: What is a Feminist Artist?" *Broadsheet*, no.110 (1983): 20.

³ Batten, "What is a Feminist Artist?" 20.

understood. Hariata May Ropata of Ngāti Toa, Ngāti Raukawa and Te Atiawa descent, known nowadays as Hariata Ropata-Tangahoe, was one woman who was not concerned about being labelled as a feminist artist. According to Hariata, her goal was to define what it meant to be a Māori woman by examining intersectionality in her works.⁴



Image 1: Two examples of Hariata May Ropata’s works: *Self-Portrait*, 1982, Oil on hessian overboard, (left) and *Mother & Child*, 1987, Acrylic on canvas (right), (Images from MutualArt <https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/Mother---Child/13F6E32B82CCB297> and BNZ Heritage <https://www.bnzheritage.co.nz/collection/artist/hariata-ropata-tangahoe>).

Hariata explained that political activity allowed her to analyse a deeper part of herself and, therefore, she wanted to transmit social crisis to her audience.⁵ She also suggested that black women were leading these modern struggles through their own histories and personal experiences.⁶ The Māori land struggles, Springbok Tour, Waitangi and Bastion Point all further cemented her resolve to investigate political concepts.⁷ Hariata’s interests reflected different forms of oppression that intersected and affected individuals, and part of this exploration was how the feminist movement could protect and expand women’s freedom.⁸

⁴ Batten, “What is a Feminist Artist?,” 25-26.

⁵ Batten, “What is a Feminist Artist?,” 26.

⁶ Batten, “What is a Feminist Artist?,” 26.

⁷ Batten, “What is a Feminist Artist?,” 26.

⁸ Batten, “What is a Feminist Artist?,” 26.



Image 2: Photograph of Hariata May Ropata

(Photograph from *Broadsheet* no.110 (1983): 26. Hariata May Ropata, *Hapu Wahine*, 1982, Rimu).

Among the 35 artists Juliet interviewed, Carole Shephard was also proud to identify as a feminist artist. She strongly advocated for promoting feminism in art, as will be discussed later in this article, believing it would unite women artists and facilitate power. Carole made clear in her interview with Juliet that feminist artists produce new images that do not perpetuate outdated preconceptions created by males.⁹ Carole explained that a woman who engages with politics in her art "is ensuring a position of visibility and, with the help of a supportive feminist network, will build a new reality for women."¹⁰ Supporting women in the arts was Carole's biggest priority. She saw feminism as a means of inclusion and encouragement to fortify a network of women who deserved to be taken seriously in their artistic careers.

Three years later, in 1986, Juliet again touched on concerns with feminist art in an article for *Broadsheet* where she analysed the 'The Women's Art Movement.' She described the challenges of feminist art, observing that they were still under the power of narrow-minded, biased reviewing.¹¹ Juliet suggested that feminists should work together to give all women visibility, including Māori and lesbian artists.¹² Connecting and giving a voice to artists

⁹ Batten, "What is a Feminist Artist?," 25.

¹⁰ Batten, "What is a Feminist Artist?," 25.

¹¹ "The Women's Art Movement," *Broadsheet*, no.136 (1986): 40.

¹² "The Women's Art Movement," 40.

focussing on intersectionality would help increase the number of women fighting for change in the art world. Carole Shepherd would be someone to pursue such concepts.

Carole was a founder of the Women Artists' Association in Auckland. This association was established to support women artists in developing and exhibiting their works in an environment in which they could flourish.¹³ Carole exhibited in and curated numerous art exhibitions with a focus on women, contributing significantly to the rapidly developing landscape of promoting the successes of women in the arts.



Image 3: Photograph of Carole Shepherd

(Photograph from Louise Beale Gallery Newsletter, no.98 (1987), Carole Shepherd's Artist File. University of Auckland Special Collections).

Carole Shepherd: An Artist and Feminist

It is no surprise that Carole, like Juliet, frequently appeared in *Broadsheet*. In the 1982 edition, Pat Wernham wrote on the development of Carole's latest project 'Full Circle: a co-operative project.' In her insightful exploration, she explained how this initiative brought women from all over the country together, regardless of their proficiency in art.¹⁴ She noted that 'Full Circle' aimed to celebrate women's experiences, skills and creativity whilst

¹³ "Unruly Practices: Carole Shepherd," Pamphlet, (1993), Carole Shepherd's Artist File. University of Auckland Special Collections.

¹⁴ Pat Wernham, "Full Circle," *Broadsheet*, no.101 (1982): 78.

expressing a range of feelings.¹⁵ It is important to note that ‘Full Circle’ never eventuated, in part because Carole became deeply aware that those interested were not the diverse group she imagined.¹⁶ Projects dedicated to celebrating and connecting women enhanced the feminist movement nonetheless, feminist artists such as Carole were working tirelessly to provide women more opportunities outside the domestic sphere, and this gave women the opportunity to establish friendships in a supportive, caring environment.

In a letter to her friend, Valerie Richards, Carole emphasised that ‘Full Circle’ was all about working together towards a single goal, of sharing feelings ideas and experiences of being a woman – because “Unless women work together, we will not progress.”¹⁷ Such passion in her letter’s cements how closely her artistic career and personal life intertwined – she dedicated her time to encouraging women to work together to be seen and heard, and through her artistic creativity she was able to do so.

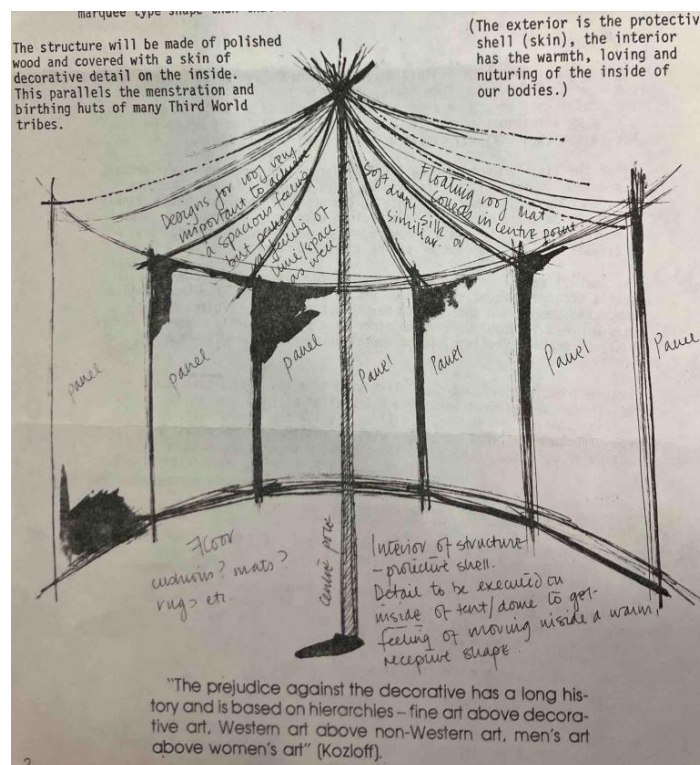


Image 4: Preparatory sketch of what ‘Full Circle’ would look like by Carole Shepherd

¹⁵ Wernham, “Full Circle,” 78.

¹⁶ Carole Shepherd, email correspondence with the author, [April 3, 2024].

¹⁷ Carole Shepherd to Valerie Richards, 1982, Carole Shepherd Artist File. University of Auckland Special Collections.

(Photograph of a letter from Carole Shepherd to Valerie Richards detailing the plan of 'Full Circle,' 1982, Carole Shepherd Artist File. University of Auckland Special Collections).

As the decade progressed there was a continued increase in women expressing discontent with the inequality that they faced in art spaces. For example, Carole wrote a letter to the Dean of Elam School of fine arts in 1987 on behalf of the Women's Art Movement. Carole informed the Dean of the restlessness among women artists and even more so among women art students.¹⁸ She explained that this restlessness was due to women feeling alienated, invisible and distressed over the subtle dismissal of their female heritage.¹⁹

Carole urged the Dean to consider employing more women tutors. She stated that "the lack of strong female representation on the staff of Elam is of great concern... We as women, have a great deal to offer and it may well be that people's lives will be affected and perhaps changed by a positive supportive stance."²⁰ She did not stop there but then called out the institution for the lack of women in higher educational teaching positions, which she said "is not by chance, it is by ignorance and in some cases by design."²¹ This letter provides much-needed context into the challenges women artists were still facing well into the 80s. Evidently, she was keen to get to the point of the issue, and would call out anyone with power for their lack of effort to support women artists.

A final quote from this letter which encapsulates the thoughts of feminist women at the time, reads:

*"Women want equal opportunities, equal educational rights, equal representation... not more than, not better than, not separate from. We can provide our colleagues with insight, humour, new definitions, interpretations and an extrinsic of ideas and information. If we can do these things then why on earth are we being ignored! I would suggest the gains are great."*²²

¹⁸ Carole Shepherd to Professor Saunders and Staff at Auckland School of Art, September 11, 1987, Carole Shepherd Artist File. University of Auckland Special Collections.

¹⁹ Shepherd to Saunders, September 11, 1987.

²⁰ Shepherd to Saunders, September 11, 1987.

²¹ Shepherd to Saunders, September 11, 1987.

²² Shepherd to Saunders, September 11, 1987.

By emphasising the need for women to be treated equally to men, Carole summarised the true spirit of the second-wave feminist movement, and in doing so, she represented all women artists with a level of dignity that had been so often omitted. Her articulation across many written mediums served as a rallying call for gender equality but also stood as a testament to women's resilience, significance and undeniable value in the artistic sphere. Carole challenged the Dean to consider the benefits of giving women more opportunities in art circles because it would benefit *everyone*. She clearly set out her intentions, emphasising that she was not attempting to get women to advance the roles of men – an issue that was too commonly assumed to be feminist motivations. She was firm in her wishes to be heard and respected by the institution and for everyone to be treated equally.

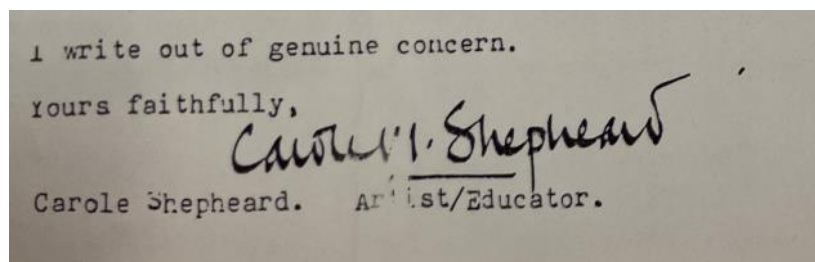


Image 5: Carole signing off the letter to the Elam Dean
(Photograph from Carole Shepheard's Artist File. University of Auckland Special Collections).

In 1986, Carole created a work entitled *Who will be left?*²³ She had painted over two photographs; the top one of herself, where she blocked out her hair with thick, quick brushstrokes and her eyes with thin, directional brushes. The bottom photograph shows Carole with some of her close artist friends – a thin, red cross is painted over them. The border reads: *Who will be left to make art? Not Glenda. Not Agnes. Not Mariette. Not Margaret. No Jill. Not Ruby. Not Doris. Not Me. Who will be left to record the lives of women? Not Margaret. Not Jill. Not Agnes. Not Glenda. Not Ruby. Not Doris. And not me...* "Who will be left?"

²³ Carole Shepheard, *Who will be left?*, c.1986, Carole Shepheard's Artist File. University of Auckland Special Collections.

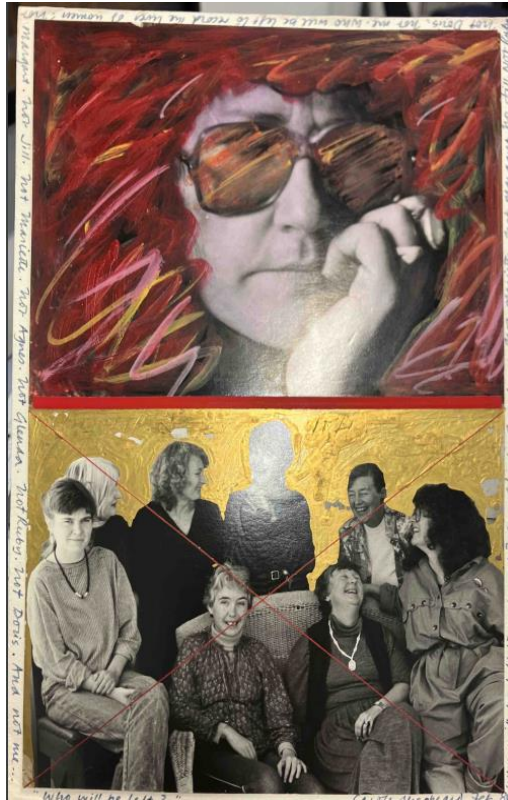


Image 6: Carole Shephard, *Who Will Be Left?* c.1986

(Photograph from Carole Shephard’s Artist File. University of Auckland Special Collections).

Evidently, Carole had a profound concern that the lack of women being represented in art and the lack of support of feminist artists could result in the fight for representation fizzling out once her circle of friends was gone. We know, of course, that this is not the case, as there is still a profusion of prolific women artists in Auckland to this day, but her worries were not unfeasible. Anti-feminist sentiments were still rife in the 80s, men as well as some women were vocal in their opposition of feminist ideas – attempting to delegitimise the movement. An article entitled ‘The feminists are wrong, women need blokes for sex’ published in the *Sunday Star* by Frank Haden cements this point.²⁴

Haden expressed his anti-feminist stance in the piece – stating “men are the innovators, the leaders, the inventors...Girls can indeed Do Everything. As long as men have shown them the way.”²⁵ After solidifying his sexist views by stating “The bottom line is that women will

²⁴ Frank Haden, “The feminists are wrong, women need blokes for sex,” *Sunday Star*, (n.d.), Carole Shephard’s Artist File. University of Auckland Special Collections.

²⁵ Haden, “The feminists are wrong.”

always compete with one another for the best men,” he ended the article with “Sorry about that girls. You’ll have to stop chasing us.”²⁶

The fact that misogynists were voicing such detrimental and harmful opinions to the public exemplifies why Carole was anxious about the future of feminism. It would be deeply troubling to see that newspapers provided men like Frank Haden a platform to write such pieces. It is likely that Carole asked, “*Who will be left?*” because she feared that if people kept attacking feminists with such hate, women would shy away from embracing feminist approaches in their art. This could result in a future where there would be a scarcity of voices addressing these critical issues in their work. Carole made it her mission to bring women together to make sure that this would never be the case.

Numerous exhibitions in Auckland that were led or co-led by Carole had the purpose of bringing women artists together. *Women in The Arts - a multi-media exhibition* was held in 1980. Carole was the coordinator of this exhibition and believed it was an important contribution to the arts in Auckland.²⁷ This was because the exhibition's purpose was to support and encourage women artists who had been isolated from "the general stream of communication and exposure" and to show a broad audience the quality and strength of women in the artistic world.²⁸ Carole did indeed make an important contribution to the art scene by creating such an exhibition. It allowed both 'newcomers' and known artists to come together in a “cohesive cross-section of women working in the Auckland area.”²⁹ Not only did it give a platform for women artists, but the specific focus on Auckland women artists meant more locals had the opportunity to have their art displayed to the public.

²⁶ Haden, “The feminists are wrong.”

²⁷ “Women in the Arts: a multi-media exhibition,” Pamphlet, Carole Shephard’s Artist File. University of Auckland Special Collections.

²⁸ “Women in the Arts: a multi-media exhibition.”

²⁹ “Women in the Arts: a multi-media exhibition.”

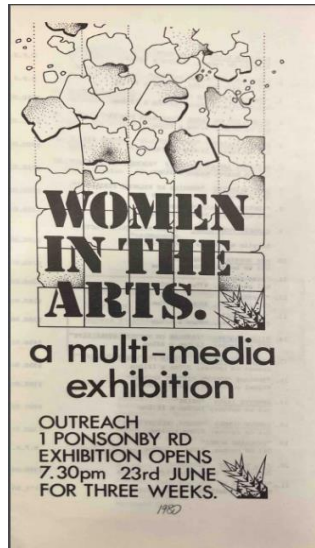


Image 7: Pamphlet for *Women in the Arts: a multi-media exhibition*
(Photograph from Carole Shephard's Artist File. University of Auckland Special Collections).

Concluding remarks

The 1980s was a growth decade for women artists, with Carole Shephard and Juliet Batten being two members at the forefront of the second wave feminist movement in Auckland's art scene. Both Carole and Juliet were using their platforms to connect women, celebrate them, and foster mutual relationships so that women could feel supported as artists. They were also outspoken in calling out anyone that held too much power who was harming the development of women in the arts.

These articles have seen where women were situated in Auckland's art scene from the end of the 1920's through to the 1980's. Evidently, there were a range of women elevating the art scene in the 20th century, but their achievements were often overshadowed by a male-dominated society who did not believe women were at the same professional standard as men. Another issue that many of the women faced was that they did not receive substantial critical and public acclaim in their era, making it even more difficult for them to be recognised for their contributions to art. Despite this, one thing that all of these women had in common was their continuous efforts to provide their services to the art scene in an abundance of ways.

Women were vital for helping keep Auckland's art scene lively and innovative, regardless of how well known or not well known they were or are to this day. Whether it was actively engaging in social issues, exposing new concepts and techniques to other artists, or women continuing to present the nationalist agenda with their excellently created works, all were important. Auckland women persisted in their journeys as artists, often challenging and grappling with misogynistic beliefs. These women banded together to encourage each other and uplift the quality of the art each created. These articles join the revisionist writings on women's positionality in our art history. Women in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland were a large and vital part of our art community: ever-changing and ever-growing in their pursuit as artists.

Please note: Every effort has been made to locate the artists or copyright holders and obtain permission to use the relevant works, we welcome any contact information on the current status of artists or copyright holders.

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