

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

TAMMY RAE CARLAND: "Art in the Grip of Riot Grrrl"

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SAN FRANCISCO – What would a "Revolution Grrrl Style Now!" look like *now*, some 20 years after the punk Riot Grrrl movement blasted onto the cultural landscape? How can one do justice to both the creativity and the complications of the many artists, activists, and regular girls who made the zines, played in the bands, took back the night, and otherwise raged against the misogyny and violence endemic to capitalist American culture? Co-curators Astria Suparak and Ceci Moss take up these questions with their touring show *Alien She*, now on view at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (YBCA). As the "first exhibition to examine the lasting impact of Riot Grrrl on artists and cultural producers working today," *Alien She* attempts the difficult task of memorializing a movement while also making a case for its continued relevance to women and the arts. Although visually enticing, the show dilutes the political potency of and contradictions within Riot Grrrl – perhaps inevitable once a movement has been divorced from its living, breathing, countercultural context and is mounted on gallery walls.

Alien She separates the historical archive of zines, cassette tapes, and posters made by riot grrrls in the 1990s from the show's seven featured artists: **Tammy Rae Carland**, Miranda July, Faythe Levine, Allyson Mitchell, L.J. Roberts, Stephanie Syjuco, and Ginger Brooks Takahashi. This layout temporalizes Riot Grrrl as a moment in radical feminism long past, even as the show itself wants to acknowledge the movement's ongoing impact in the present. In the front archival room, most satisfying are the listening stations featuring iPods loaded with songs by Riot Grrrl bands from LA to the UK, and coupled with local ephemera. Together these stations sonically remap riot grrrl's reach, extending its imagined and material geographies beyond the usual cities and suspects.

While the music opens doors to new worlds, zines with tantalizing names like *Independent Pussy* are, frustratingly, for the most part locked behind plexiglass-covered shelves that line three walls. The curators' desire for us to understand Riot Grrrl as having "a living history, not a sealed past" is largely and ironically undone by their preserving as precious what could easily have been copied and left out for perusal. As a green college kid, I remember having my mind blown by the at-home gynecological tips found within the pages of *Hot Pantz*, one of the featured zines; it's a shame that visitors to YBCA will have much more limited possibilities for similar awakenings, especially with landmark queer feminist of color zines like Margarita Alcantara Tan's *Bamboo Girl* and Mimi Thi Nguyen's *Slander* so within reach.

Inside the main galleries, standout pieces by Tammy Rae Carland and Ginger Brooks Takahashi illuminate the power of the feminist and queer intimacies that were fostered within Riot Grrrl. Carland's *Lesbian Beds* (2002) is a series of photographs of just-slept-in beds, the traces of bodily imprints and the mussed sheets hinting at the most private articulations of that radical feminist adage "the personal is political." Clearly inspired by Felix González-Torres's solitary and empty bed ("Untitled," 1991), Carland's multiplicity of beds transforms González-Torres's mournful site into a place where queer life proliferates into the future. If the goal of lesbian feminism is to create and live in a world not defined by the normative timelines and spaces of white, middle-class heterosexuality, these photographs memorialize forever a fleeting moment when that dream has been realized. The *Lesbian Beds* are a sanctuary from the violent, misogynistic society we live in; they are a utopian alternative to the real world, to those beds, symbolized in "Carry That Weight," one of 2014's best protests/performance art pieces by rape survivor and Columbia University student Emma Sulkowicz. Likewise, Brooks Takahashi's collaborative projects – the art journal LTRR and the traveling project MOBILIVRE-BOOKMOBILE – give life to the empowering slogans

found on her "Feminist Body Pillow" (2013) sculpture, and disseminate Riot Grrrl's legacy of collective education made by and for young women in ways a museum exhibit could never do.

And who were these young women bringing Riot Grrrl to the world? "Every girl is a riot grrrl" the saying goes, and *Alien She* supports this universalizing narrative. Besides the documentaries looping in the archival room, the curators' preference for non-figurative artwork makes it hard to actually envision *who* the riot grrrls were, outside of key musicians like Kathleen Hanna and Carrie Brownstein. Allyson Mitchell's illustrated *Lesbian Herstory Archives* and L.J. Roberts's knit and woven militant banners most clearly demonstrate the strength and pitfalls of this open-ended representational strategy. Powerfully, these works symbolize collective desires for a world without rape, AIDS, eating disorders, and other forms of sexualized violence. They necessarily reclaim "girl power" from the popular media's sanitized renderings of it, and define Riot Grrrl through a shared set of political concerns rather than the physical appearances of the women involved. On the other hand, the fissures around racism, transphobia, and class privilege present within Riot Grrrl are smoothed over in these pieces, and in the exhibition as a whole; what's here corroborates an idealized image of unity that does not match up to the experiences of transfolks and women of color in the movement. It's hard to imagine what a show that better reflected these contradictions would look like. As it is, *Alien She* is a structurally flawed but visually stimulating introduction to a movement that dared to dream grrrls could run the world.