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Defining the Contemporary Role of the Artist:
The Relationship of the Artist to the Community as Place

The contemporary artist can take on many forms in society. Gone are the days where art need to only be created in a studio and viewed in a gallery. Art may be viewed in institutions, abandoned buildings, online or in a mobile showcase. Artists are also taking on genres beyond tradition aesthetics and process, but researching topics that are relevant to the current human condition, such as science, ethics and politics. The term “artist” can reference a number of professions and parts in society, but one such role taken on by the contemporary artist that I believe defines the culture of a current landscape is that of bridging individual realities of singular persons as well as social communities, for better understanding of our world. Since each individual demonstrates unique knowledge based upon experience and a lifestyle that is specific to his/her own, it is reasonable to conclude that we all interpret signs differently in our cultures, and therefore have our own perspective to share when both creating and viewing art work.

Language plays a key role in the production of reality as we know it. Philosophers have long theorized this relationship, and thus the concepts have continued to be defined in multiple ways: Nietzsche asserts that language does not reflect but creates reality, Heidegger claims that language was here before us and will continue to exist after we are gone, and Derrida states that language makes the world possible but is not in our control. These Post-Modern thinkers frame the question of reality – our truth, by acknowledging that there is no definite or universal code to live by, only an intertwining map of knowledge that is ever expanding.

Unlike Structuralism, which tries to define Truth through a unified core by singling out the system or function viewed as important, Post-Modern thought criticizes this rational as impossible since there is no universal truth, rather individual meanings; my truth is not your truth. If there was single objective knowledge, what reality is real and which one is false? Who decides, and how can you even weigh them? Nietzsche points out that the world is made up of illusions and representations which are useful but not truthful; therefore we lie to ourselves in order to function in our society. Building upon this theory is Heidegger who claims that we can never have absolute objective knowledge because truth is provisional upon our experiences and therefore constantly in flux. An individual person is unique due to the life for which that person lives; there are no replicas, therefore no identical truths. Even further, since an individual is constantly changing and gaining new knowledge through experience, reality is also continuing to progress with us. It is logical then, that we as a society take our individualities and claim them upon groups of like-minded people, forming relationships that dictate our interpretation of the world in order to make sense of it.

To reference Derrida, all is interpretation and the goal is not to find absolute truth since it in itself is a myth. By functioning through communities, we create a web of knowledge which we move through while developing new thought processes which then finds more meaning to reflect on. Therefore, we create our own meaning through the culture we represent by developing relationships with other individuals. Another way of looking at this idea is Rorty's theory of conversation through social networks. Rorty claims that our most important civil product is conversation, because it leads to more conversation, and therefore greater knowledge. The communities that we develop are based upon characteristics we identify with, such as gender, ethnicity, class, religion, etc.

We may identify and hold membership with multiple communities, thereby increasing the threads in our web of knowledge. In fact, since our realities are constantly in flux with new knowledge and experience, we can then be expected to identify with new communities of people, connecting us even further. This ever changing belief structure produces action, so we are no longer asking *who am I?* Our question turns into *what should I do?* A contemporary artist should be thinking about what they can do with and by their work.

Furthermore, Rorty also recognizes that not all communities are equally good. In order to have that claim, we would need to take a “god’s eye view” of all communities, but this is impossible since we only know our own societies and only see our individual realities; the reality of a Caucasian female belonging to the middle class who is married in Midwest America is an incomprehensible truth to a Hispanic man working as an illegal immigrant in the Southwest (and vice versa), and these are just different communities within the same country. It is easy to deduce that a man can never really experience what it is like being a woman, just as no two childhoods are exactly the same. Therefore knowledge is never built upon a standard foundation in people, which is where Structuralism is at fault. The way to bridge this gap of understanding is to have the conversation that Rorty suggests, and one way to introduce the dialogue is through artistic representation.

The contemporary artist has a lot to say. By asking questions of not only themselves but our society, the artist in the Post-Modern world facilitates a discourse that defines the culture of the moment. Heidegger says that truth is a process by which we broaden our understanding; therefore the experience of art may provide truth. By creating art work that filters reality through an individual lens, the contemporary artist is pushing that conversation of truth by sharing their experiences to the world.

One way art has been used to develop our understanding beyond the communities we join has been by confronting and dismantling our belief systems through deconstruction. Artists may work within the terms of a system, but only to critique and use the information to claim another truth. An example of this strategy is Hannah Wilke, who uses images of the nude to reclaim the female iconography which has long been dominated by the world of men.

Wilke plays with the male art language of the female nude by reinventing the beauty of the naked figure with a declaration of her own. (Frueh) The stereotypical view of women can be rather confusing, especially for the female. On one hand, she is viewed as a sex object, yet on the flip side, she cannot publically behave in a sexual manner without some sort of negative social repercussion. Hypocritically, Art history is full of female nudes that are viewed as beautiful, often the subject of a masculine gaze. However females often feel that they are not supposed to be show off their body in public, which leads to women being ashamed of nudity. This notion allows men to take ownership of female sexuality, regulating when and where it is to be experienced, and by whom. "To be female and sexual is forbidden. If you show your body and are proud of it, it frightens people."¹ (Frueh) This view of the inferior can be psychoanalyzed by Freud's castration of women. Freud sees women as lacking and having penis envy. Women's genitals are simply absent, masked, or sewn back up inside their 'crack'.² (Frueh) In the 1979 performance *So Help Me Hannah*, Wilke displays her nude body with guns and images of Mickey Mouse, symbolizing the phallic along with iconic simplicity of commercialization. Wilke's expression in the performance does not elude to any shame or discontent of body, rather her body is open for all to see, concerning the image with "the word translated into

¹ Reference by Siegel's "*Censoring the Muse*"

² Reference by Luce Irigaray's "*This sex which is not one, in This Sex which is Not One*"

form...with creating a positive image to wipe out the prejudices, aggression and fear associated with the negative connotations of pussy, cunt, box.”³ (Frueh) By adding the words “What does this represent / What do you represent” to the photograph of the performance, Wilke is engaging the viewer in a dialogue of sexual control over the female nude, shoving it right back in our faces as nothing to gaze upon, but consider as something other than what it has stereotypically been portrayed to mean.

Language and the communities we belong to are relevant in Wilke’s declaration of claiming her own femininity. Not only does the idea of taking ownership of one’s sexuality involve the history and current discourse of women in society as viewed by men, but as dictated by women’s own gaze upon their selves. Wilke claims that she is “respecting the object-hood of the body”, defining an object as “something that is or is capable of being seen, touched, or otherwise sensed”, as opposed to being a thing observed without compassion or empathy.⁴ Many women believe that using a woman’s body in art is “problematic for feminism”⁵, but Lucy Lippard notes “when women use their own bodies in their art work, they are using their selves; a significant psychological factor converts these bodies or faces from object to subject.” Thus, by displaying her body in the open by choice, Wilke sheds the negativity associated with the female nude in reference as a pornographic image that diminishes women, and sees the cunt as beautiful. (Frueh) It is also important to note that Wilke’s use of her own body in her art work not only shows a sense of control and ownership of her sexuality, but also takes claim over the sexist stereotype of vanity in women by using her own image as a beacon of feminine strength.

³ Reference by Hannah Wilke’s *“Intercourse with...”* text for videotape performance

⁴ Reference by Hannah Wilke’s interview for *Hannah Wilke: A Retrospective*

⁵ Reference by Mary Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document*

Another female artist who uses her individual filter to voice her experience to society is Fiona Foley, whose art centralizes around genealogy and ethnicity while confronting the absence of a cultural history in the community she identifies with. Her work questions how one can remake an institution using the very tools that have built that institution, an institution that currently is not representing one's own views of interests? (Losche) By identifying as an Indigenous Australian, Foley belongs to a community with a living memory of colonization, and uses her art work as a discussion of history regarding her indigenous roots and the absence of it within current Australian culture. "Language is really important because it sets up ideas and notions about how we deal with people and how we look at race." (Foley, Australian Aboriginal Artist Fiona Foley) By using the formal techniques and location of an institution, Foley reflects the practice mimetically back onto itself by not only bringing attention to her lost heritage, but questioning why it isn't even known to the general public. Foley uses classifications of contemporary Aboriginal art to produce work that shows across urban and rural, art-school trained and traditional methods, young and old, female and male, there are overarching concerns in Aboriginal art today – relating to the survival and identity of that community. (Losche) A lot of her work deals directly with researching the history of her native people, like government documents including photographs and land deals, which leads to artistic expression as a way of communication to those who are not necessarily associated with her communities.

The installation work *Badtjala Woman (Two Sets of Beads)*, which was shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney in 1994, is an example of how Foley points out unspoken areas of cultural and racial classification and reflects them into a systematic arena such as a museum, which represents an institution of power not wholly unlike that

which dispersed the culture she views as reality. *Badtjala Woman* consists of three black-and-white photographs of a bare chested woman, along with a floor sand sculpture in front. The image of the topless woman mimics a photograph of a nameless “Fraser Island woman” that fell into a general category of “orientalist” representation as well as a visual documentation to be kept in museums as ethnographic records of a population in significant decline. (The University of Queensland) Foley uses the reference of the original source as a way to reclaim the history of the Badtjala people which has been largely ignored or forgotten in the contemporary world. The installation was a reinvention of pictorial imagery and the museum space by an Aboriginal artist, transforming museological practices of representation by highlighting the loss of ancestry. (Losche) The three bare chested portraits show an image of Foley wearing beads and a strong expression on her face, and look as though the subject is currently living on Fraser Island – the land of the Badtjala and other native peoples before colonization. The image could be seen as a tribute to her ethnical background as a way of remembering a lost history, but also seen as a portrait, the viewer might begin to wonder who this woman is, where she is from, what happened to her, etc. Foley’s research takes the documented injustice of a people and rearranges the information that is accessible for a general public, and therefore allows others from outside a specific culture to engage and experience her reality through art. “What I’m trying to do is reach out to you as an audience and pull you in and have a conversation with you. The problem is that none of you are aware of this history...I see my work in a broader context where it’s really educating people about their own history. I see the work I do as a footprint” (Foley, Australian Aboriginal Artist Fiona Foley) *Badtjala Woman* and Foley’s other works on the subject of racism, lost culture and displacement of identity depict a reality that would otherwise be unknown to anyone not of that specific

community or not Fiona Foley herself. By creating a visual language to share with others, Foley along with other contemporary artists are fueling conversations and thereby actively being a part of a society where action can take place on an issue that would not have otherwise been known.

By recognizing that we belong to multiple communities, we also must recognize that we do not belong to all such groups, and therefore we cannot identify with all histories or depictions of communal realities. In “Gone: An Historical Romance of Civil War as it Occurred b’tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart”, an installation at MoMA in 2010, Kara Walker patterned the white walls of the space with a narrative made up of black silhouettes depicting sexual and violent scenarios revolving around the foundation of inequality. Decoding these images requires an understanding of the artist’s references which come from her own identity as an African American woman. Key concepts in Walker’s work include representing a narrative of race and history, usually depicting images of the antebellum American South. Walker’s art uses black (and sometimes white) paper cut into large silhouettes on walls which express stories which are neither fact nor fiction, but aim to sort out history, particularly of African Americans, in an attempt to find truth. (Center) In the mentioned installation, Walker uses images that are inspired by purposefully misreading historical texts like *Gone with the Wind*, generalizing figures with a cut out shape much like race is generalized in American history. “I was really trying to explore the problematics of making art as a young black woman, when constantly barraged and faced with a host of stereotypes of about what it even means to be a black woman.” (Walker, Kara Walker. *Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred b'tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart*.) The installation starts with what appears to be a Southern belle and soldier in an intimate moment, but a

closer look shows another person under her skirt, and quickly unravels from there into a scene that depicts a series of haunting images mostly involving an African American female; holding a dead bird by the neck, engaged in oral sex with a white boy, newborn babies falling out from between her legs, and being hoisted up uncontrollably by a white man. “Most pieces have to do with exchanges of power, attempts to steal power away from others.” (Walker, *Art21: Art in the 21st Century*) Walker’s work raises a lot of questions, especially for a viewer who cannot identify with life as an African American woman trying to sort out a tainted history that is blurred to even those within the community.

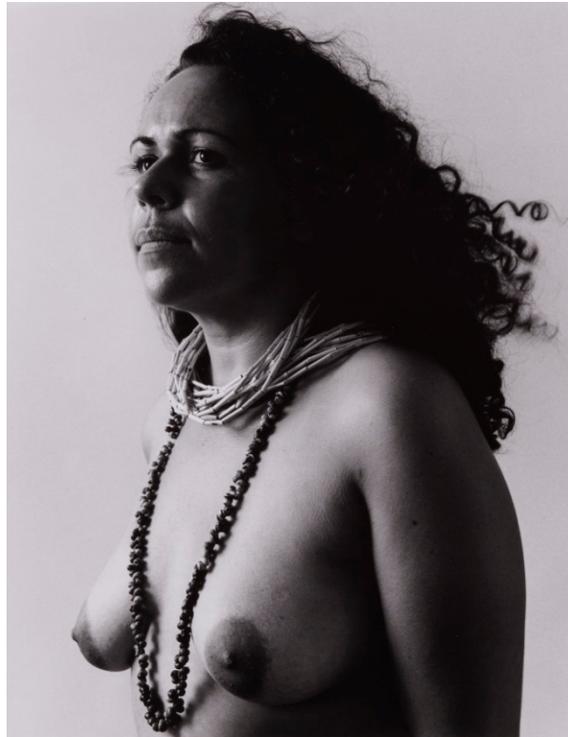
In a 2013 exhibition at the Camden Arts Centre in London, Walker created two wall samplers of racial stereotypes which range from blackface and minstrels to southern belles and soldiers. (Sherwin) Walker’s images are provocative in nature. Compositions are inspired by offensive depictions of both white and black Americans, creating caricatures of a race debate that continues in the country today. Racially charged typecasts are visually used purposefully to flip the image back at itself, questioning the history of not talked about issues such as slavery, rape, and torture. “I knew that if I was going to make work that had to deal with race issues, they were going to be full of contradictions. Because I always felt that it's really a love affair that we've got going in this country, a love affair with the idea of it [race issues], with the notion of major conflict that needs to be overcome and maybe a fear of what happens when that thing is overcome—And, of course, these issues also translate into [the] very personal: Who am I beyond this skin I'm in?” (Art)

Individual filters of reality create meaning in society by showing how history, ideologies, and power struggles are constituted and legitimated through repression for which they themselves have stake. Accessing another’s point of view can show that what

has been left out is as important as what has been included. Contemporary artists like Hannah Wilke, Fiona Foley, and Kara Walker sift their own realities through their art work, which is then handed to society with the intention to start a conversation of understanding place. The dialogue might not spark a revolution or create social change overnight, but the act of having a discourse based on individual realities and membership to different communities not only allows our own realities to change based on new knowledge and experience, but grants better understanding of differing social networks and thereby a better perception of our world.



Hannah Wilke
So Help Me Hannah
Photo of performance
1979



Fiona Foley
Part of installation: Badtjala Woman (Two Sets of Beads)
Photographs and Sand Sculpture
1994



Kara Walker
Gone: An Historical Romance of Civil War as it Occurred b'tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart
Installation
1994

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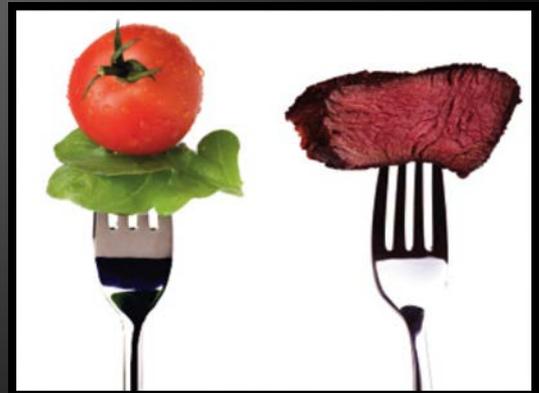
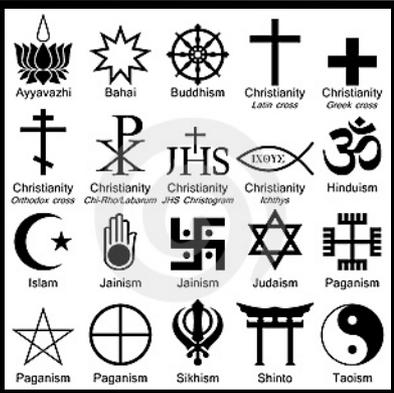
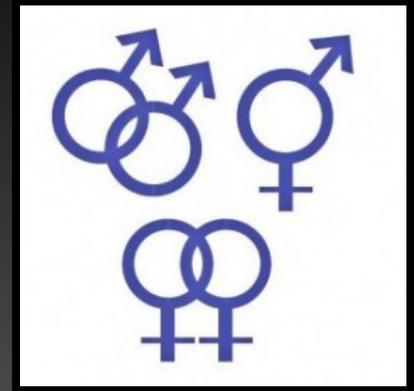
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Artist and Community: A Relationship Pertaining to Place

A Look At Three Artists

By Aj Cooke



- Hannah Wilke (1940-1993)
 - American; New York
- Fiona Foley (1964 - present)
 - Indigenous Australian; Badtjala, Fraser Island, Queensland
- Kara Walker (1969 – present)
 - American; California and Georgia



WHAT DOES THIS REPRESENT

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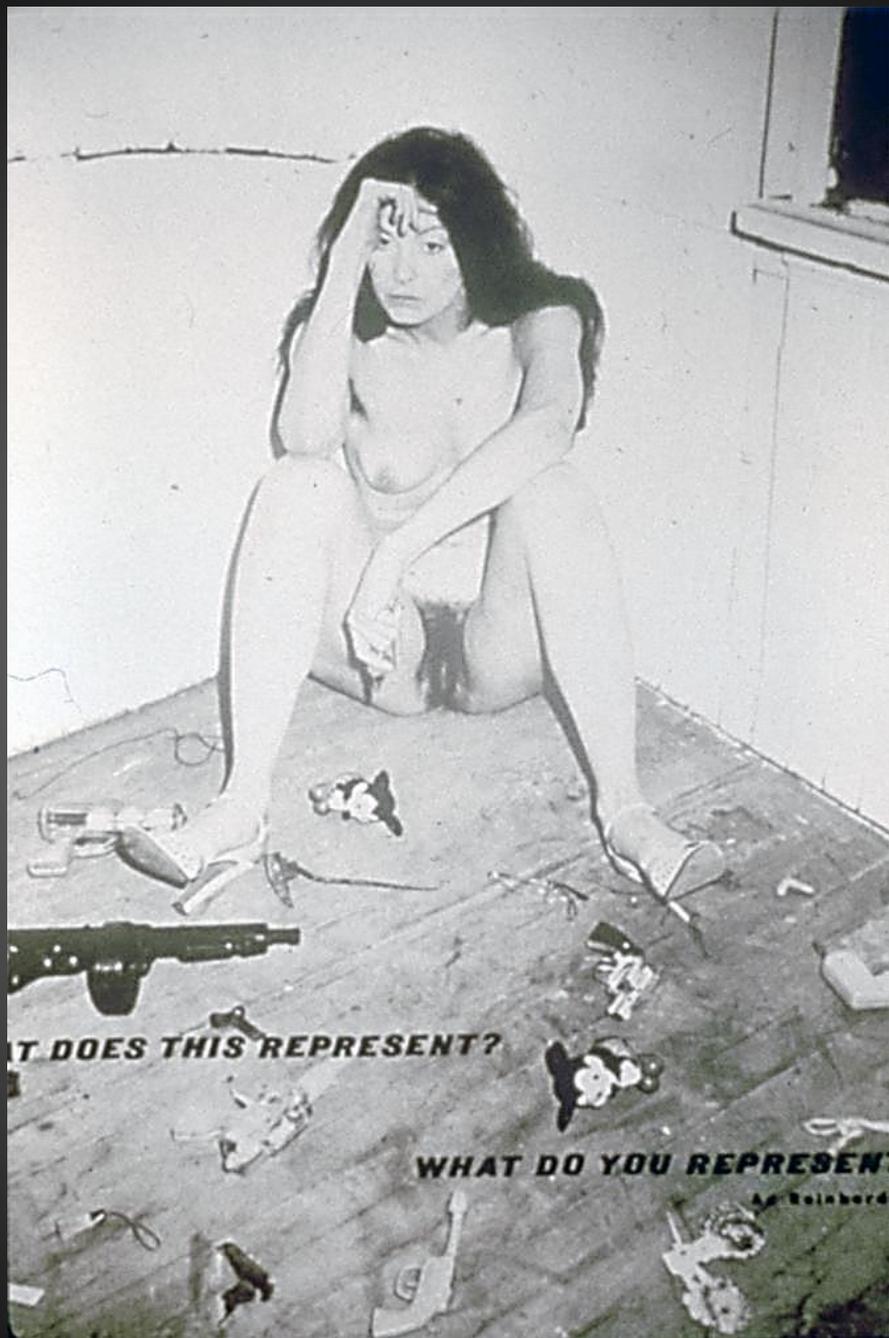
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WHAT DOES THIS REPRESENT?

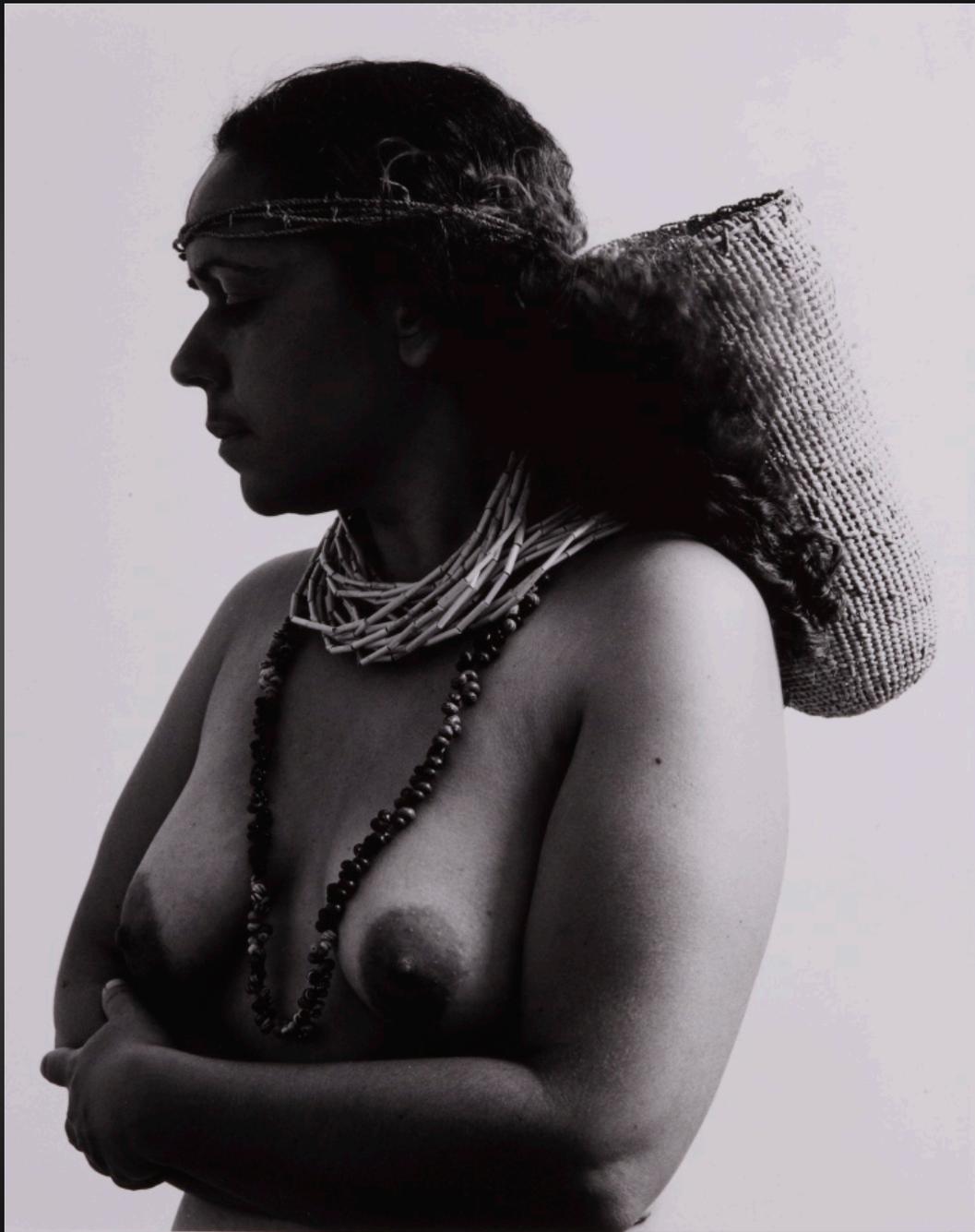
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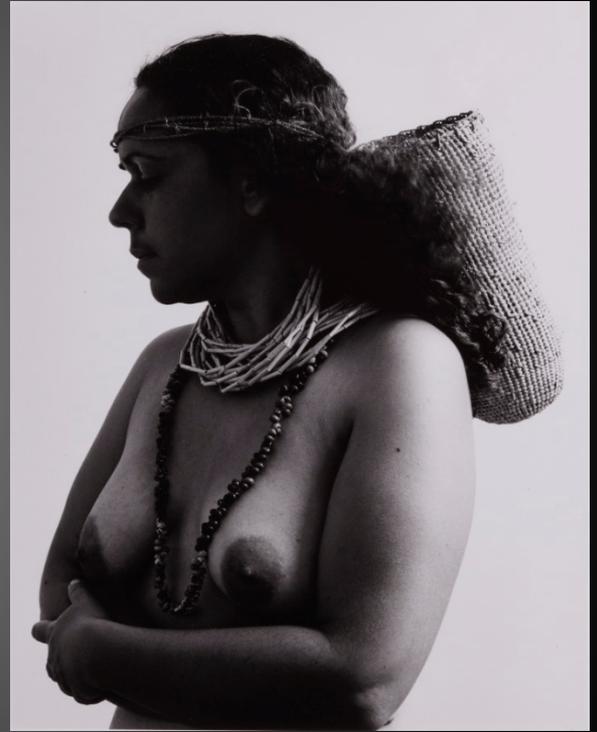
By Reinhold





















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