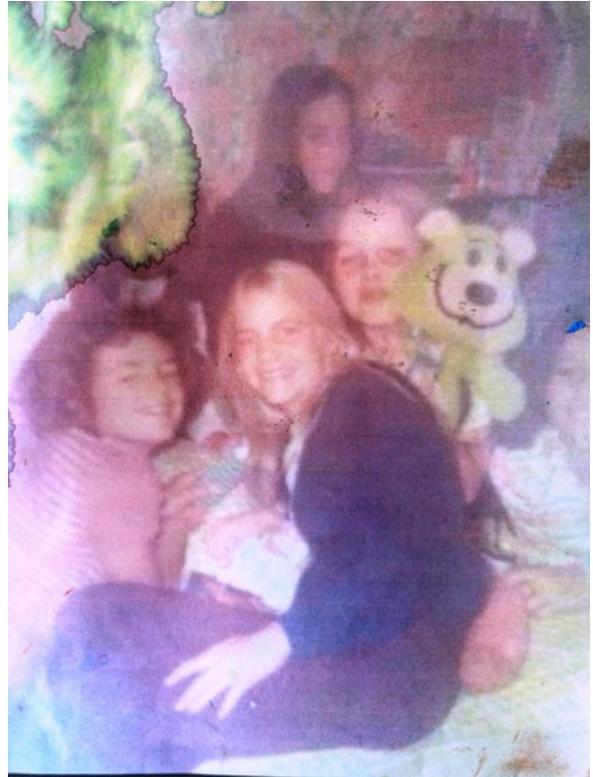


## Hahn alters how we see women in art

By Tal Zamir / Banner Correspondent  
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*Heidi Hahn in her Fine Arts Work Center studio.  
Photo Tal Zamir*



*Hahn's paintings show the inner lives of women.  
Photo Tal Zamir*

An old picture is taped unassumingly on the wall of Heidi Hahn's studio. A faded image, blotched in parts by overexposure and water stains, it shows her mother as a young teenager in the company of female friends, all huddled together. They wear pajamas. One holds a teddy bear. All look at the camera, but appear somehow to be in different places. None appears bothered by the camera's gaze.

"When my mother looks at this picture," Hahn says, "she remembers it as the happiest time of her life."

"They all seem so innocent," I say. "And happy."

"Some of the girls didn't end up having happy endings," she says. "They had very hard lives."

A painting hangs on a nearby wall, where Hahn has recreated the moment. Hahn, a visual arts fellow at the Fine Arts Work Center, recently debuted her first solo show, "Bent Idle," at the Jack Hanley Gallery in New York, which displayed this painting and other works.

"The show is all about women's identities, and about how they interact or don't interact," she says. "I group women in settings where they're just hanging out, reveling in their own personalities."

Hahn wants to change not only the way women are depicted, but the way they are seen.

"It's the reversal of the male gaze," she says. "I wanted to paint these women in a way that normalized them. It wasn't about sexualizing them, it wasn't about the classical nude, it wasn't about them being represented through their sexuality. It was about being represented by their personalities. For me that was important. A lot of times the way women are still portrayed, even by other female painters, is nude, or highly sexualized or feminized, in a way that doesn't speak of normal existence. So I wanted to normalize this classical painting structure of women."

Hahn contends that the inner life of women is never depicted.

"It's always the outside, the façade," she says. "As human beings, there are different emotional states that we go through, and whether good or bad, I wanted to explore that. Boredom. The banality of an afternoon. You feel listless but also restless. You're not sure what you should be doing, so you do nothing. Some figures hang out in bed, not active in any way, but the colors are vibrant, and you feel that tension. I didn't want the paintings to be dark, because I didn't want to exclude the light in there."

Hahn proudly calls herself a feminist, but realized over time that this was a state of mind rather than a series of actions. She laughs as she recalls how she used to paint men looking dumb in ridiculous situations, as a way to protest how she had been treated as a "female painter."

"I'm never just a painter," she says, "but always a female painter. The default perspective is the male perspective. I always rejected that. So I would paint these men in protest. But then I thought, I don't want to just react to how I feel. I want to paint women having these feelings that I have, and maybe that's a better conversation."

But Hahn says that it is difficult to produce this kind of women-centered work and be taken seriously, if only for the fact that it is about women.

"People think they can just write it off," she says. "If it was a man painting this, then it would be revolutionary, just as how men appropriate these folk arts. Men making quilts: how progressive! I see it all the time, men appropriating these feminine arts and suddenly 'revolutionizing' them. Women aren't allowed that same kind of freedom. We're objectified. Everything is how we appear. So if we have an internal thought that doesn't conform to what we are doing, then we are not conforming to being an object that performs an object's purpose of being seen. So you can't have your internal revolutionary thoughts and be a housewife. That's not allowed. I'm trying to open that up with my work. We don't have to be the façade, we can be many things."

I ask her if she believes people are ready, and able, to see the inner lives of women.

“I don’t know,” says Hahn. “It’s a scary thing. But it’s important for me not to shy away from that. Painting women is political. I don’t have to put a slogan on it to make it powerful, and the woman doesn’t have to be doing anything, she doesn’t have to exploit herself on the page. The image of the woman in her own life is enough.”