

RAVELIN

“Maiden Form” At Andrew Edlin Underground

Heather Benjamin tells us about her first foray into curation.



[ART](#)

Interview: Alec Coiro

Photo: Olimpia Dior

We've spoken to [Heather Benjamin the artist](#), and now we're thrilled for the chance at a conversation with Heather Benjamin the curator. The first show she put together took place at Andrew Edlin Underground; entitled, *Maiden Form*, her organizing principle according to her curatorial statement was "meditations on contemporary notions of femininity." Fittingly, the artists involved bring a depth and variety of perspectives to the subject, and the fact that the word maidenform is broken in two hints at both the complexities and the play involved in the show she put together. In Benjamin's words, the title, "alludes to the fact that much of the work in the show is figural work by, for, and depicting all kinds of women, and using that vehicle of figurative, representational work to articulate our different experiences as well as the common threads that run between them."

As an artist, there is much to recommend Benjamin as a curator, and it should be no surprise that she approaches the task with a crystal clear voice. Known for her DIY aesthetic, she makes the show her own with an ethos that I won't call punk just because that description has become overused, so maybe "underground" would be more appropriate (given the venue). Less obvious but no less relevant is her background in bookmaking, and we discuss the crafts relationship to curating below in depth.

As for the artists involved, I'll let Benjamin touch on that aspect in her comments in our interview. Both the work and the mood of the show are captured in Olimpia Dior's photographs from the opening.



This is your first time curating a show; how was the experience?

Curating was a very very new and foreign, at times very overwhelming, but ultimately amazing experience for me. It's something that I had always thought I'd like to do, but never really pursued – half because I wasn't sure where to start, and half because I spend so much time on my own art practice that it felt like kind of a distant idea that I wasn't sure how to approach without what felt like it would be sacrificing a lot of time and energy spent on my work to something new and different. So it kind of took someone offering me an opportunity like this one for me to take the plunge, and I'm really glad I did. Andrew Edlin gallery approached me to organize a show in their basement space, which they're calling AEG Underground – it's right underneath their main gallery space, at [212 Bowery](#). This is only their second show in the underground space, which used to just be part of their storage basement that they cleared out to start using essentially as a project room, but already their track record down there is pretty unconventional, very different from what they show in their main space upstairs. I think it's so awesome that a gallery of their stature and reputation is branching out and being experimental in the way that they have been so far with their underground space and I'm honored to be a part of it. Working with them was an amazing experience, definitely the best I could ask for for my first curatorial effort! I felt so humbled and excited to be given control of that space, and I'm so psyched to have been able to use that opportunity to lift up the work of a bunch of artists who I admire.

You have a background in bookmaking. Do you think there's a connection between organizing work into book form and curating?

Definitely! The experience of putting together a book of drawings is similar to the experience I had putting together my first group show, in a few ways. In a logistical sense, there is just so much preparatory work that goes into both efforts – planning, measuring, busywork. I love art books and self publishing my work, but still after years, numbers and measurements make my head spin – so that's still always challenging for me with putting a book together, and it was challenging for me with the show as well! But I think the more interesting parallel is that of considering how different works relate to each other. Putting a book together, I will agonize for hours over which drawings should be facing pages, which drawings work better as a left page or a right, how does the overall progression of images read.. there is so much to think about in order to make sure you do each individual work justice and put it into the right context. Installing the group show was just like that same struggle, but on a much, much larger scale – and to me, much higher stakes, because I wasn't just considering how my own works looked anymore and whether I was doing my own drawings justice, but taking responsibility for the works of over 20 different artists who I admire and respect – I would be lying if I said I didn't get a little panicky at times during install, I was really stressing hoping that I was hanging things in a way that didn't just look great and make sense to my eyes, and to a third party viewer, but that would make the artists whose labors of love these works are feel like they have been done justice and given an adequate platform to shine! I've had a couple of experiences where I've participated in a group show and then seen

how my work was installed at the opening or in photographs afterwards, and felt sad or angry about where or how my piece was installed. Sometimes that's been something as simple as me thinking the lighting was bad, other times it's had to do with the context it was hung in, the pieces it's next to, whatever it is. You work so hard on a piece and if you're going to let it out into the world and have it be hung on a wall, you really hope that at the very least the install makes you feel kind of neutral – like it doesn't hurt or detract from the piece's impact – and at the very best, it does the piece justice and is extremely well considered. I was really freaking out for a while hoping that I could get it right with every single piece, that no artist was going to feel upset about how their work was hung in this pretty unconventional space I was working with! (Which I made even more unconventional by painting fully pink!) So I just left myself a lot of time to consider everything – I spent five days up until the opening in the gallery, just sitting with the work every day and moving it around. I'm not sure if that's how you usually do things as a curator since I've never done it before, but to me that made the most sense, just give myself about a week to be physically in the space, move things around, sleep on it, move things around again. By the time the opening rolled around, I had reached an install that I felt really good about, where I felt like all the pieces related to each other and to the space in ways I felt confident about.

Can you tell us a little about how you put the group together? Did you know all the artists previously or were some that you discovered as you went?

The first permutation of my putting this show together was that I just made a list of all the artists I could think of off the top of my head whose work I love and who I thought might have work, or want to make work, that fit with the concepts I was reaching for with this show – different experiences of and meditations on/subversions of femininity. The initial list included a lot of artists who I already knew – some were close friends, some I went to school with – as well as a handful of artists who I knew sort of peripherally but had mutual friends with, and whose work I just admired a lot. Some of those people I had met once or twice, others I had been following on the internet for a while and admiring their work from afar. The final lineup ended up essentially still being comprised of artists who fell on that spectrum, from close friend to someone I have a lot of mutual friends with but who I had maybe just met once or twice and had been following their work – with the exception of a couple of artists who were recommended to me as I was putting the show together, whose work I was not familiar with before the show, but who ended up being perfect fits! Gogo Graham and Alina Perez are the two artists whose work I was not previously aware of who were recommended to me by other artists in the show, and I am so thrilled that they both ended up being part of it, both of their work is amazing!





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The last time we spoke, you talked to Jillian Billard about your investment in Punk and DIY culture. Was that a consideration when you put this show together?

Definitely. My roots as an artist and as a human are firmly rooted in DIY culture and I don't think I could leave that behind if I wanted to.. which I don't! The ethics and aesthetics I hold closest to me are grown from my background in that way of thinking and making and conducting oneself, and I don't really want to operate any other way, when it comes down to it. I am excited about opportunities to present things in more polished ways, or to reach wider audiences than those that are immediately accessible through underground venues – which is one of the reasons why working with a more established gallery like Andrew Edlin was so exciting to me. They are so reputable and respectable, but they simultaneously appreciate actual experimentation and unconventional thinking about artwork and curation – hence their involvement in the Outsider Art Fair, or their creation of AEG Underground, where “Maiden Form” is taking place. I don't see a lot of other bigger galleries doing things like deciding, let's clear out part of our basement and have experimental art shows down there, where we don't know how much work is going to sell and we have no guarantee of what kind of, if any, material gain

will come from this – but they are down to give people like me a platform to try things out and lift up artists who have not been shown in that kind of a context before, and I think that’s incredible. Working in their underground space was kind of the perfect happy medium for me – getting to level up by working with a gallery that I know and admire, in a beautiful space on Bowery, and having this show publicized to their crowd who I’m going to bet are mostly unfamiliar with many of the artists in my show – but still getting to play around in a very DIY way with this literal basement show, which is reminiscent in many ways of the kind of thing I grew up going to – punk shows and art shows in people’s basements. This one is just a bit more sparkly and polished, which I am so thrilled about getting to access, striking that balance between the two. I think the aesthetics of the install, now that I can look back on it, reference my background in DIY culture as well – I packed the room, the install feels dense and immersive, and I think that in a more conventional group show install works might have a bit more breathing room. But it was important to me to pack the room full of great content and for viewers to step into an environment that felt energizing and immersive, and I think my gravitation towards wanting to create that kind of a vibe comes from my background in punk and DIY as well. I gravitate more towards inclusive and welcoming spaces that are chock full of imagery, content, words, emotions, honesty, and rawness than spaces that hold anything back just for the sake of ... I don’t know, an aesthetic of sparseness, which has just never been my thing. I think about all the punk houses I grew up going to that have been around for years and there’s layers upon layers of art hanging on the walls, nothing ever taken down, just more and more tacked up. Honestly, I felt like I actually did hold myself back from going THAT far with “Maiden Form”, because that is my instinct – to go all in in that way – but I left a bit more open space than that, I think because I wasn’t sure how to reconcile that level of density with still doing everyone’s work justice and giving larger pieces breathing room. I think the next time I curate, I’m going to try going all in, even further into the realm of intense density and immersion, and see how that goes.. I’m curious about how it would be received!









