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Two Pioneering Artists Discuss Motherhood and Machismo

Phyllida Barlow and Anna Maria Maiolino, who have both received full recognition for their work late in life, sit down for a conversation about their careers.

By Tess Thackara

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The artists Phyllida Barlow and Anna Maria Maiolino grew up continents apart, but they share a language of mud and cement, life cycles and rebirths. Barlow, 74, is a British artist renowned for her often-soaring sculptures cobbled together from industrial refuse, as though an ordinary urban street had suddenly come alive and risen up into a sentient colossus. Maiolino, 76, is an Italian, São Paulo-based artist celebrated for her modeled- and rolled-clay installations and sculptures that suggest the work of "a housewife gone mad," as the curator Helen Molesworth once put it, and evoke everything from human organs, phalluses and rolls of bread to prehistoric worms. Barlow had a traditional arts education at London's Chelsea College of Arts, followed by the Slade. Maiolino had a very nontraditional upbringing and education, migrating with her family from Italy to Venezuela during World War II, and then from Venezuela to Brazil, where her performances, videos and works on paper contributed, alongside work by Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica, to the Neo-Concrete and New Objectivity movements at a time of political upheaval in Brazil. (She audited classes at an art school in Rio de Janeiro but considers herself largely self-taught.) Both artists are mothers, and both received full recognition for their pioneering work late in life — and continue to make work in their 70s as a matter of some urgency. This month, their artworks are on view in

concurrent solo exhibitions at Hauser & Wirth in New York, where we met on a brisk fall morning. There, the two artists sat down together to talk about their work and lives for the first time.

T: How does it feel to be in New York?

PHYLLIDA BARLOW: I was walking here with my husband, and we passed a steel rectangular object stuck on the wall. The wall was pale blue cement, and the steel was black but with paint coming off it. We stopped and looked at it, and I said, "This is something we pass in London every day but why, in New York, does it take on this luscious, delicious quality?" I think it's because everything's bigger in New York. The status of these everyday things becomes enhanced, as though there is a theatrical moment for these incredibly ordinary objects. They're framed by things that are in a state of disrepair and you don't know whether they are coming or going.

ANNA MARIA MAIOLINO: For me, the streets of New York are like a museum. I am always very excited coming here. My imagination is always moving, bustling, making associations. I love how the people dress. Each one is a performer. You see little boys and little girls — they know they are characters.

T: Anna Maria, you lived here in the 1960s for two and a half years. The drawings you made then show a New York that looks quite cold and impenetrable. Did the city feel different to you back then?

AMM: When I arrived in New York, I was 27 years old, with two children, 4 and 5 years old. My husband, Rubens [Gerchman], had a scholarship and very little money. I was an artist when I arrived here. I had taken part in many shows in Brazil. I knew that New York would be difficult with children, and I knew it would be very difficult to continue my work. The little scrapbook of drawings was a space for me, and I was also trying to make some illustrations to make money. When we arrived on the Bowery, the impact of the city and of organizing the children was so strong that I forgot the little book. When I remembered it, I began to use it again and to do drawing and poetry. The drawings are moved by insight and observation

of reality. Of course, after two years living in New York, everything changed in my mind. I left the figurative style and began to do mental maps — like mental, intellectual terrain or poetry.

PB: The drawings you made where the woman has no features — I find them fascinating. They're like a blank space. And for me, they're very representative of the clash between the domestic and the desire to be outside the domestic, which I am familiar with.

AMM: My work has all the memory of domestic organization, the housework. These faceless women are that way because women were experiencing difficulties in times that were dominated by men.

PB: What I am going to say sounds very negative, but it isn't. I don't think being an artist and having children is possible. I think it's not possible, but we still do it! The joy and experience is huge, but the conflict also begins at that point.

AMM: But you did it! And you have your visual language, which is strong and beautiful. It is possible.

PB: It is possible, but I think it's also *impossible*! (*Laughs*)

T: Did motherhood transform the work you were making?

AMM: It's like delivering a baby every time that I put on a show. I take care of my work the same way I do my children and my grandson.

An installation view of Phyllida Barlow's show "Tilt" at Hauser & Wirth in New York.
© Phyllida Barlow, courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Genevieve Hanson

PB: The biggest transformation for me was perhaps having to move away from a routine that was very expansive — I could begin at 7 in the morning and work til 10 at night. With a baby, that was not possible. So I began to work at night in the dark with no lights on, and because I became so fascinated by touching and feeling a baby when you're cleaning or washing it, and all the wonderful, nonverbal contact you have with this creature, I think it got into the work in the form of a real exploration of touch. And because I turned the lights off, I was using materials in a very nonvisual way.

Around 1983, when my youngest children were 2 years old, I was in quite a chaotic state, and I was asked by a very successful artist — Richard Wentworth, who was teaching at Goldsmiths — to come in and do a lecture on my work, and it came up that I was working very late at night, turning all the lights off in the studio and working in the dark. At the end, there were questions from the students, and this was the Young British Artists years, and there was one student at the back who has since become a really famous artist. She was there, at the back, yawning, and she said, "What's more important, being a mum or your art?" And I just said, "Being a mother." And the whole back row walked out! (*Laughs*)

AMM: You did a revolutionary act! In this statement, you are actually protesting and claiming the right to existence, and this is revolutionary. The everyday can be revolutionary.

PB: This is so British, to take two things together and make them opposite.

AMM: When I left New York, I separated from the father of my children. I was so tired; my husband was doing art, and I was taking care of everything with the children. He had felt guilty and showed my prints to the Uruguayan artist Luis Camnitzer, who was teaching in the graphic arts center in New York at the time, and Camnitzer said, "What is she doing, she is an artist — I will ask for a scholarship for her in the graphic center." He gave me back my desire to be an artist. Some of the drawings I made then are quite perverted. The husband with the buried head, for instance. He is buried alive. But they are very contradictory because close by you can see a couple of birds chirping.

PB: That paradox, the joy of the birds singing, and the pain —

AMM: Life is a paradox!

PB: For me, my struggle — and it's a joyous struggle — is that I don't have a subject. I have to find the subject through the process of making. And I still don't know what it is at the end of making it. When I look at your clay that's folded, the thing that really makes me want to cry is this sense of time. Not much sculpture captures time and turns it into a physical thing.

AMM: Clay is an incredible material because it puts you in the beginning. I think what's important to me is the order of the material. The hand is the first tool.

T: The hand may bring order, but there is instability in both of your work, too. I'm thinking of unbaked clay and objects teetering on the edge of collapse.

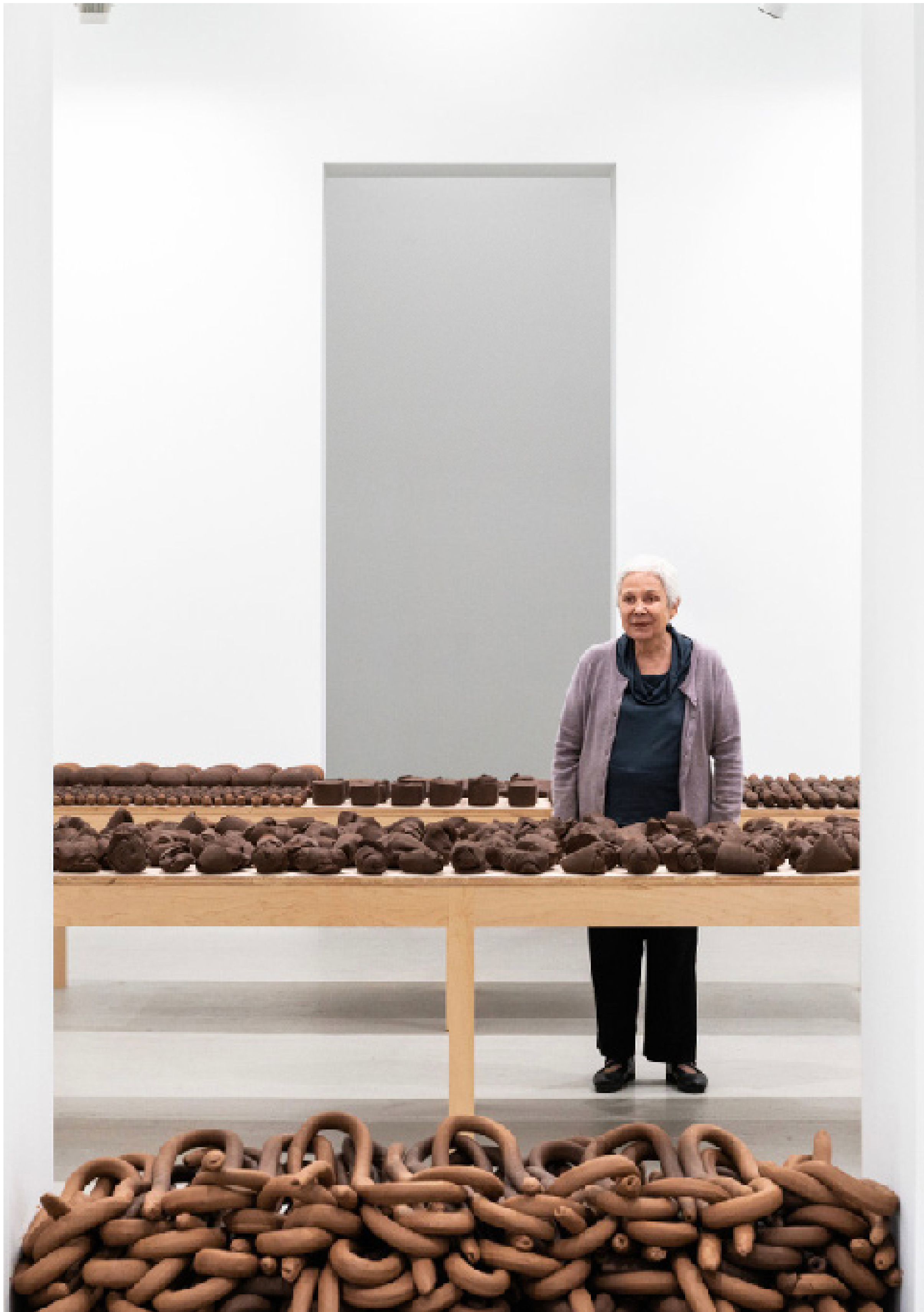
AMM: It's important that a work of art remains in time, but even pyramids will collapse one day. Art is made of matter. Matter is just like our bodies, it perishes at some point. When I work with clay, I know that it will go back to its first state of powder. The objects that Phyllida makes are also temporary. This is true of contemporary art in general. The clay piece — it's a statement of the entropy within the work itself. The action within the work is endless.

PB: To trap the action is a kind of reflection on labor. At the beginning of a work, I don't know what I'm going to trap. I think I have two processes — one where there is an image, like what I saw on the street today. The blue-and-black box — so beautiful. I think I'll probably go back and do a drawing of that. Then the drawing begins to change in my head and something will happen where there is a metamorphosis from the original. It's like a phantom. It begins to be a ghost of its original state. The objects are kind of fakes of something that already exists — they are pretending.

AMM: This image is very beautiful.

PB: Then there are the works that are on the walls. I like to use the rubbish in the studio, and clay was my first material, so I try to make everything be like clay. It's an action — pressing or throwing on the floor.

AMM: This is true of my work, too. Especially my cement works — everything is pressed, with holes in it. They are like a portrait of soil.



Anna Maria Maiolino with a work from her show "Errância Poética (Poetic Wanderings)." Nicholas Calcott

PB: What I love about these works is that there is no sight. They are not about the visual, they are about digging deep into the body and into the earth, maybe.

AMM: You are incredible! You talk with images. We artists are always rescued by poetic wanderings.

PB: I think that what your works do — it's not that they're feminine, it's that they are fearless. When I think of our modernist history through the 20th century, and I think of maybe Giacometti, and I think of Joseph Beuys — I think their obsessions are very macho. To me, Beuys and Giacometti are always frightened.

AMM: Do you know Medardo Rosso?

PB: Yes, Medardo Rosso for me is —

AMM: I love him.

PB: But he is very complicated.

T: Which other artists have been important to you?

AMM: Until very recently, when a Brazilian or Latino artist was just beginning to garner visibility, American and European critics always had to make some sort of associations with an artist who was big in their countries. It was a way to legalize the work of these Latin American artists and make it acceptable. This has changed now. In my case, artists like Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica were not visual inspirations of mine — it was their ideas that were inspiring. Ideas of immanence, the nostalgia of the body. When Lygia did the Möbius ribbon — it's an endless movement. When I began to make repetitions, I was inspired by the endlessness of the Möbius ribbon, the utopia of endlessness.

PB: I think my history as an artist is very, very traditional, so it was important to take those traditions and subvert them. What I looked at — and this is the paradox — I loved the phallic object, which is the male symbol. To me, the problem with feminism was trying to push the phallic object!

AMM: The phallic object was actually the first object that was made — and those objects were both feminine and masculine.

PB: Yes, like the Willendorf Venus.

AMM: Both of us actually combine the feminine and the masculine together.

PB: Absolutely, because I am an aggressive maker — I like cutting. But I also like to stroke. For me, in the early years, in the '60s, I was learning to be a very traditional sculptor. I hated carving, but clay — fantastic.

AMM: You have to know the material and technique first, before you can subvert it.

PB: Before you can learn to abuse it! For me, the work is about a human relationship with this thing that is coming into being.

T: Is there something political in that? Do you consider yourselves political artists?

PB: I will answer the question sideways. I think all artists are political because they put out into the world their emotional response, however intellectualized it is. They put out into the world an opinion about being alive, and that is political. To me, the nonverbal experiences, how the public can be given confidence to say, "I don't know, I don't know what this is doing to me." That's a very strong point of departure, but everyone wants an explanation. Human beings are *terrified* of uncertainty, hence these politicians that we have now.

AMM: Your work gives you a sense of uncertainty, because it's not finished. There is a possibility of change in your work. You make the viewer feel the uncertainty of the world, and that's political.

PB: Have you read Hannah Arendt? In her account of the Eichmann trial, she describes how she thinks the tyrant dictator emerges through emotional appeal to the people, rather than political appeal. You could say artists do the same, but the

political tyrant is about the self; the artist is more specific about putting forth an individual view of their circumstance in the world, so the artist I hope I can be is generous.

AMM: The conversation we're having is like a spiral. Female pleasure is like a spiral, it's never ending. Women can hold pleasure and maintain it longer than a man, if she has a good lover. This ability is also about the ability to always be present. Women are multitaskers. I never did hierarchies — everything is a circle.

What Does It Mean to Be an Artist and a Mother? Aug. 29, 2018

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