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Los Angeles Times



Power, feminism and giant, knitted balaclavas: artist Maureen Selwood's Pussy Riot tribute



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NOVEMBER 13, 2015, 1:30 PM

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Los Angeles artist and animator Maureen Selwood watched with the rest of the world as the Russian feminist punk band [Pussy Riot](#) became famous for the unauthorized concerts it staged in locations all around Moscow, from a prison garage to Red Square.

After the activist musicians took to the altar of Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior in early 2012 for an impromptu punk jam — with the refrain "Mother of God, drive Putin away!" — some of the band members were convicted of hooliganism and served time in prison. But the [video](#) of the young women, decked out in bright dresses, colored tights and a rainbow's worth of balaclavas, prancing maniacally before the Cathedral's gold-leaf altarpiece, turned the band members into global activist-celebrities practically overnight.

The whole display, along with its ensuing legal drama, engrossed Selwood, who was intrigued not just by the performance, but by the sight of a group of young women thrashing about before the church's ornate [reredos](#), delivering their "punk prayer."

"It was like a current telling of women being sacrificed on the altar," she explains. "It was such a powerful image. The women were so smart."

Selwood was so moved by that scene that it inspired her to produce a suite of works that are on view at [Rosamund Felsen Gallery](#) in Los Angeles through Saturday. "[Sounding the Note of A](#)," as the show is called, includes 26 prints and five sculptures that take Pussy Riot iconography as a starting point for exploring various bright, mythological worlds.

Certainly, it is the sculptures that will grab the viewer's attention first: a series of 3-1/2-foot tall reinventions of Pussy Riot's colorful headgear that stand both whimsically and menacingly on the gallery floor. Selwood knitted them herself — an action that generated some interesting reaction from people who saw her making the balaclavas in public.

"They were *a lot* of work," she explains. "So I would take the knitting with me everywhere. People always thought I was knitting baby clothes or a sweater for a man. It was never what it was. There was a woman at a museum who told me, 'I can't sit with you until you put that knitting away.'"

Ironic, given that she was creating a tribute to punk-feminist activists.

But the show isn't simply a series of renderings in honor of the band. Selwood is highly intrigued by questions of faith, religion, mythology and iconography —

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especially in connection to women. In 2003, as a fellow at the American Academy in Rome, she explored the language, story and imagery behind the Catholic prayer "Hail Mary," along with other depictions of women in the Bible. (Some of these themes have appeared in her work in the past, such as the 1998 animation "[Hail Mary.](#)")

"The passivity of the Virgin Mary in Renaissance painting became propaganda for how we viewed women in society and in art," she explains. "It's about power and submission."

The Pussy Riot action at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow took her back to those studies. "I didn't know them until they were arrested," she says. "But the gold leaf on the altar — how gold entered the Church as a symbol of seduction and power — I saw that image of them and I felt like I knew the whole background story of how those things came together."

For more than a year, Selwood dedicated herself to producing a series of ink transfer prints that riffed on this imagery. One image, "Come to the Edge," shows a Pussy Riot mask linked to a piece of improvised armor. Another, titled "Pitch Perfect," connects with the legend of the Roman goddess Diana, associated with hunting. Others don't show the Pussy Riot masks at all, instead depicting spectral female figures that exude power and authority.

"It's not mean to be Pussy Riot in every image," she says. "It's this starting point to trigger history and iconography."

Gold leaf, in all of the printed pieces, is what serves as the visual link — between the works but also to the decorous altars of some Christian churches.

"If you come from less economic means," Selwood says, "the altar becomes this altered state where you can fantasize a life filled with gold and colors and woven cloths and flowers and incense."

The whole exercise required Selwood to put a toe into a new art-making medium: print-making. A professional animator who also teaches the subject at the California Institute of the Arts, Selwood says she had to do a lot of studying to learn the process — including a two-month apprenticeship with a former student.

But animation — a sense of movement and active poses — nonetheless informs the buoyant and dynamic women that currently grace the walls at Rosamund Felsen. Nothing, in other words, like those passive Virgins she studied in art history.

Maureen Selwood, "[Sounding the Note of A](#)", is on view at the [Rosamund Felsen Gallery](#) through Saturday. 1923 S. Santa Fe Ave., downtown Los Angeles, [rosamundfelsen.com](#).