

# Nigel Hurst on Women Artists and the “Champagne Life” Show

BY NICHOLAS FORREST | JANUARY 20, 2016



Portrait of Nigel Hurst by Maxime Dufour.



The Saatchi Gallery’s “Champagne Life” exhibition has caused quite a bit of stir. Electing to mark its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary with its first all-women exhibition is a bold move for the institution, but one that has paid dividends. Not only does it emphasize the important contribution of women artists to contemporary art, but it has got people talking about the issue of gender imbalance in the art world.

Through the work of 14 emerging, international female artists, “Champagne Life” reflects on what it means to be a female artist working today and approaches the issue of the art world glass ceiling, while at the same time pays tribute to the Saatchi Gallery’s ongoing commitment to supporting emerging women artists.

The exhibition features works by: Mequitta Ahuja (USA), Alice Anderson (UK), Maria Angeletti (France), Jelena Bulajic (Serbia), Julia Dault (Canada), Mia Feuer (Canada), Sigrid Holmwood (Australia), Virgile Ittah (Paris), Maha Malluh (Saudi Arabia), Suzanne McClelland (USA), Seung Ah Paik (Korea), Stephanie Quayle (UK), Soheila Sokhanvari (Iran), and Julia Wachtel (USA).

BLOUIN ARTINFO's Nicholas Forrest recently spoke to Nigel Hurst, Saatchi Gallery Director & Chief Executive, to find out more about the significance of the "Champagne Life" exhibition and what it reveals about the current status and role of women in the global contemporary art scene. See what he had to say below and **click the slideshow** (<http://uk.blouinartinfo.com/photo-galleries/champagne-life-at-saatchi-gallery>) to see images of the works in "Champagne Life"

### **Champagne Life is the Saatchi Gallery's first all-women exhibition. What was the inspiration and motivation behind the development of an all-women exhibition?**

The Saatchi Gallery has a long history of supporting the work of emerging women artists and by choosing to celebrate its 30th anniversary year with its first ever all-women show, pays tribute to their commitment and important contribution to contemporary art, whilst also highlighting that there still remains a huge amount to be done in addressing the glass ceiling in the art world. Although women artists are now better represented in the commercial galleries, this is yet to filter through to museum exhibitions and at auction where the work of contemporary women artists commands far less than that of their male counterparts. For example in 2012, of the 100 highest grossing lots sold at auction, not a single work was by a female artist.

### **What is the significance of the title of the exhibition and what does it reveal about the exhibition and the artists and artworks it features?**

'Champagne Life' takes its title from one of the works on display by the artist Julia Wachtel. The title used by Julia is originally taken from a song by the R&B artist Ne-Yo. It suggests prestige and affluence, qualities that have led to champagne being appropriated into Hip-Hop culture as a gauge of success. But when applied to this exhibition which showcases the work of 14 emerging women artists, the irony becomes apparent, throwing into contrast the many long, lonely hours these artists spend in their studios with the perceived glamour of the art world.

### **The exhibition includes 14 emerging, international female artists. How were the participating artists chosen and what links their practices?**



The exhibition doesn't offer an overarching vista of 'female' artistic practice and doesn't presume that there even is such a thing. Each of the 14 artists included in the show are at various stages in their careers and have their own individual voices. Their work has been included in the exhibition more so for its diversity than what necessarily links them together. These artists all make visually arresting work that provides an insight into their varied artistic practice as well as give visitors an engaging experience.

**Champagne Life reflects on what it means to be a female artist working today. What does it mean to be a female artist today and why is it important to reflect on this now?**

All these contemporary women artists make work that provokes dialogue and asks questions that respond to the times in which we live. The selection of work was deliberately international and broad because we wanted to celebrate the strength and diversity of art made by women today and show the important contribution they make to contemporary art worldwide.

**What does the exhibition reveal about the unique contribution that women artists are making to the global art scene?**

It's probably worth making the point that 'Champagne Life' isn't a women's art show but an exhibition of contemporary art made by women. So there's nothing unique that unifies their practice or view of the world because their experience, outlook and cultural backgrounds are as individual and varied as those of their male peers. However the majority of women artists do have to keep more plates spinning. The art world isn't alone in treating people who juggle family and professional commitments less seriously. For decades more than half the people attending art college, particularly in Europe and the USA, have been women, yet in 2015 only three women artists featured in the top 50 contemporary auction lots sold worldwide. So although the situation is getting much better in terms new art by women being represented in commercial and independent galleries, there need to be far more museum-scale exhibitions of contemporary art made by women in order to encourage collectors with all pocket sizes to buy their work.

**What are some of the standout works in the exhibition and what do they reveal about the nature and character of the work of women artists of the current era?**

It's a group exhibition, so we don't single out pieces for special attention, however much of the work in "Champagne Life" seems very grounded. For example Alice Anderson's work is deliberately very labor intensive in the way it's made; Julia Dault transforms mundane industrial materials; Jelena Bulajic, Virgile Ittah and Seung Ah Paik all refer to the transience and frailty of the human body in very detailed but different ways; Stephanie Quayle explores our relationship with the land and its livestock; Maha Mulluh's giant installation is made entirely from used cooking pots and Julia Wachtel humorously juxtaposes images trawled from the Internet with cartoon characters to highlight the empty nature of celebrity culture that surrounds us.