Hallelujah the Pill!!:

The Feminist Psychedelic Art of Mari Tepper

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By

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Abstract

Mari Tepper is an American psychedelic poster artist that not only contributed to the artistic style of psychedelia through hand drawn illustrations delivered through the medium of benefit and rock concert posters during the 1960’s to the present day but also had a social and political voice that is relevant even fifty years after her work disseminated. The major argument of this body of writing is that, like many other women throughout art history, it is consistent even in a time period that is labeled and remembered as a period of social and political reform known as the counter culture, women like Tepper are being heavily ignored, underappreciated and devalued for their contributions to their art history. Majority of the research for this writing comes from texts produced surrounding psychedelia poster art, as well as commentary from collectors of this art and an in-person interview with Mari Tepper. Through a feminist theory perspective this paper aims to not only deliver Mari Tepper’s artistic contributions, adding her to the literature around psychedelic poster art, but to also continue to open the discussion around women in art history or lack thereof.
American Feminist artist Mari Tepper uses the medium of psychedelic poster art to display her political commitment related to the social and political climate of the 1960’s counterculture. In this thesis I follow the essay “Why are There No Great Women Artists?” by art historian Linda Nochlin, who argued that women artists have historically been institutionally excluded. I argue that Mari Tepper was not just institutionally excluded, but from the beginning of her work, Tepper’s art was a raw, real version of psychedelic art that was committed to the counterculture, as well as showing the impact her work had within psychedelic poster art. Tepper was and is committed to the political agenda of the counterculture to promote change in social and political rights, such as the sexual freedom and liberation for women through her artwork and, yet she has been excluded institutionally. Through Tepper’s work, I have located the same exclusionary processes in the visual critique of psychedelic poster art.

A great example of Tepper’s unique psychedelic artistic style and feminist commitment to the counterculture politics is represented accurately through her poster “Hallelujah the Pill” created in 1967. Fig. 1. This particular poster is an offset lithograph printed on a 22-inch by 22-inch square, bordered with pink and green stripes and a contrasting bright white text stating, “Hallelujah the Pill” in all hand drawn capital letters. Tepper included a package of birth control pills in the center of the poster, where a turquoise blue circle envelops several smaller circles. Tepper includes the days of the week, which track the pills that have been taken. Rotating the outside of the birth control consists of a star arrangement of sexual partners coupling into different sexual positions against a black background. Each individual is covered in body paint consisting of swirling psychedelic colors, shapes, and patterns, surrounded by long twisted snakes. Tepper strives to illustrate not only her love for psychedelia, but also her political voice within her work and both are evident within the 1967 poster “Hallelujah the Pill.” This particular
poster of Tepper’s is dedicated visually to displaying women’s liberation both sexually and politically through the symbol of the birth control pill. Displaying couples having sex, all connected to the pill, with the bright joyful statement “Hallelujah the Pill!!” shows Tepper’s commitment to the political feminist movement of the 1960’s.

The counterculture was a radical social period that birthed the Second Wave Feminist movement in which the concept of women’s sexual rights shown in this particular lithograph are visually displayed. The pill during the counterculture provided a more affordable way to avoid pregnancy for women and a freedom within their bodies. By 1970, 12 million women were using “The Pill.” As part of women’s sexual revolution during the counterculture, the pill gave women opportunities of long term careers, and higher education without the fear of pregnancy and ultimately the control over their futures. With the right and choice to use the pill, a higher percentage of women have graduated from high school and college, making more professional careers an option. Through the medium of psychedelic poster art, Tepper shows her feminist perspective in support of equality of women through their sexual liberation. While Tepper shows her support visually in psychedelic artwork to the ideals of the counterculture, she has ultimately been institutionally forgotten as an artist of this movement.

The counterculture post World War II refers to the cultural and social movement that emerged in the United States between 1954 and 1974 with its height between 1965 and 1972. The later part of the 1960’s is viewed as “radicalization of youth politics” and culture associated with the New Left. The civil rights movement, anti-war, and anti-draft protests, and the women’s movement characterized the era. The counterculture is historically remembered as a time when

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1 Theresa Richardson, Ph.D., The Rise of Youth Counter Culture after World War II and the Popularization of Historical Knowledge: Then and Now, 8, https://www.bu.edu/historic/conf2012/Richardson.doc.
the social and political system’s definitions of what it meant to be “socially acceptable” were shifting. The civil rights movement and the women’s movement specifically targeting laws and terms around inclusion and equality of all bodies were in heavy focus at this time. Besides changing laws around voting and inclusion, the social norms around marriage, divorce, same sex relationships, and the empowerment of women and bodies were strong topics for debate and seemingly making progress in areas such as a birth control and safe sex policies.

While the New Left was more focused on radical political change and often comingled with those more associated with the counterculture, the counterculture was more of a subgroup of this larger youth and student agenda of this modern history revolution. According to Robin Altman, an undergraduate in social history at the University of Colorado, several aspects sometimes separated members of the New Left from members of the more casual counterculture. Altman states, “These aspects included the rock music, psychedelic drug use, and the infamous “Free Love” ideal that is used to characterize the era.” ²Psychedelic poster art was created through these more casual aspects of rock music, psychedelic drug use and “Free Love” associated with the radical counterculture subgroup.

The counterculture historically is remembered as a time period revolving around equality and “tearing down the system,” especially within the genre of psychedelic poster art. While psychedelia art historians would like to tell a story of peace, love and inclusion within the counter-culture, this is a mythology that does not hold up. Professor Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo and author of Daughters of Aquarius: Women of the Sixties Counterculture, states “In the

meantime, studies on the counterculture proliferate. Its origins, art, music, literature, sexual mores, philosophical and spiritual tenets, pharmacopoeia, and legacy have all received scholarly attention. It is disappointing that none focus on hippie women.” Lemke-Santangelo continues into the next paragraph with, “mainstream and counterculture representations of women and how these images obscured the complexity, agency, and creativity of their subjects… [Hippie women] mostly experienced (stereotypes) as degrading obstacles that interfered with their efforts to reinvent themselves and society.”

The history of the counterculture revolving around equality, peace and love, while attempting to recall a time period of “dismantling” the system of hierarchy, revolting against authority, was and is still historically stuck in a land regulated by male-dominance. I have located these same exclusionary, male-dominated processes throughout psychedelic poster art.

Jean-Pierre Criqui defines psychedelic poster art as, “At the very heart of the counterculture, these posters are expressions of an aesthetic in which neon colors, spinning shapes, and dense, space-filling patterns are used to translate the psychedelic experience. Bordering on illegibility, they are a deliberate contrast to the rigidity of the posters used to advertise the products of the consumer society.” Unfortunately, in order to even attempt to comprehend the possibilities of why Tepper’s work as a psychedelic poster artist has been so heavily undervalued, we must look at who is being valued as a psychedelic poster artist. Amongst the psychedelic poster world, the most notoriously known and accredited with being the “father” of psychedelia is poster artist Wes Wilson. While Wilson is a great artist who has made major contributions to the psychedelic

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poster art world, Wilson is not the reason Tepper has been excluded as an artist. My goal is not to criticize or go too deeply into his work, but rather to use him as an example for what the psychedelic art system is defining as art. I will also use Wilson’s work then to further show that everything that is attributed to being great about his work, are the very same things Tepper is artistically demonstrating and yet unrecognized for.

Wes Wilson’s poster typically referred to as *The Sound* is a wonderful example of Thames & Hudson’s definition of psychedelic poster art. Fig. 2 Wilson’s poster to promote the band The Sound features bright, almost neon contrasting colors of orange, lime green, purple and a bright off white or skin tone to fill in the featured nude female figure centered on the poster. While Wilson, does not offer many spinning shapes or dense space-filling patterns within this particular work, Wilson does however use the shape of the female figure to create a curvy and winding pattern that starts at the top of the poster with the large font stating the band’s name. The bright orange text contrasted against the lime green background winds down through the moving arms that are flared on either side above the tilted head and neckline of the female, down through her chest that is swaying in the opposite direction, through the hips that sway back, following the head and down to the bended knees. Wilson fills the entire background of the poster according to the curving lines of the female body. The female is laid on the lime green background, while she is outline in a dark purple and again filled with the brightest and lightest color on the poster, an off-white nude. Wilson sticks with the standard that these psychedelic posters be borderline illegible, not so much in the shape or stretching of the text, but rather through his use of color contrast. The background of the text is completely filled with the lime green that contrasts against the bright orange text, almost mudding each letter and word next to and on top of each other. This mudding and bright contrasting of colors requires the viewer to adjust their eyes to
focus several times before being able to decipher the code of text that is meant to advertise the rock show. Psychedelic poster collector and dealer, Mike Staurum, reviewed Wilson’s poster known as *The Sound* as, “it combines Wilson’s ability to fill all available space with vibrant, flowing letters together with his admiration and respect for the feminine form. It is one of a handful of posters from that era that is considered representative of the entire period. Wilson’s treatment of women and the feminine form is one of his most lasting contributions to the poster art of the sixties.”

This particular poster of Wilson’s has sold up to around $4,500 for a second printing.

Tepper’s artwork also follows the collective definition of psychedelic poster art and then also adds her feminist political commitment in for a bonus. Tepper’s “The Flying Circus” poster at the California Hall in Berkeley, falls wonderfully within the definition of psychedelic poster art. Fig. 3. Tepper’s “Flying Circus” lithograph poster is a simple white paper laid with black ink, but the expression of contrast that is experienced in other psychedelic posters is still very vibrant in this particular work. Along with the contrasting of black ink against white paper, the entire poster is dense with imaginary and character, filling the entire poster with several different bodies, genders, and beings that do not appear to even be human. The stretching of limbs, sublime characters, and movement within each being create a surreal visual experience that could translate into the optics of a drug-induced psychedelic experience. Like Wilson, Tepper illustrates stretching of letters and words throughout the entire poster, even taking the advertised event words and turning them sideways, morphing them in to the shapes of the bodies and curving them along the outside of limbs. Tepper forces the viewer to turn your head or the poster

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or both much like you would view the psychedelic experience of a kaleidoscope. In an interview with Tepper, she mentioned that she deliberately attempted to not make her work, while its purpose was for advertising and consumption, she did not want to make her work look commercialized like the graphic art of her peers. A key character, similar to Wilson’s nude female in The Sound poster, is a feminine figure Tepper has placed much larger than the other characters in her poster but yet off to the right side of the poster. Like Wilson’s nude lady, Tepper’s feminine figure shows her breasts, arms are flaring and twisted, legs juxtapose as if illustrated being consumed by the music. The difference however between these two figures is that Tepper’s female is not an idealized treatment of the feminine form compared to Wilson’s voyeuristic female. While this feminine figure has curves and breasts that are naked, Tepper’s character still has garments covering her lower sexual organs and the breasts are not even nor romanticized in their shape. While Wilson makes his feminine figure, an object of male gaze, to be consumed with the purchase of this poster, Tepper chooses to make her feminine character just another body, equally distributed throughout the characters of the entire poster. Tepper’s feminine figure, the only character appearing to be truly human, is not the main focus of this poster, she is not using sex to sell her work, rather the entire psychedelic happening illustrated on the entire poster to capture her audience. Lemke-Santangelo stated, “The counterculture generated its own images through male-dominated publications, art, and music – images that were just as shallow and distorted as those produced by external observers.” Wilson is remembered and gloried for his treatment of women within his artwork. Tepper’s “The Flying

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6 "Personal Interview with Mari Tepper," interview by Emma C. Roper, transcript, November 9, 2017.
“Circus” poster is described by art collector and dealer Mike Starum as, “…features somewhat crude, but interesting graphics.”\(^8\) Two poster artists, working at the same time frame, producing similar and yet different work, in a moment in history that is remembered as valuing equality and destroying a male-dominated system of social norms through graphic psychedelic artwork, and yet the only artist to receive recognition is the white male who continues to portray women in a sexualized manner. Again, this not Wilson’s fault or a result of the work Wilson has created, this is an institutional weakness that Wilson is idealized and Tepper is degraded. This refers me back to the conclusion of Nochlin’s paper, where she ends with, “art is not a free, autonomous activity… but rather, that the total situation of art making, both in terms of development of the art maker and in the nature and quality of the work of art itself, occur in a social situation… are mediated and determined by specific and definable social institutions, be they art academies, systems of patronage, mythologies…”\(^9\) I am still wondering though, how after fifty years we continue to believe the myth that the counterculture, its history and art were as inclusive, loving, and equal as the experience that Tepper displays in her work, and yet she is not represented within her own history.

Typically seen throughout art history is not that there have not been female artists but rather they just have not been discussed or collected, and when they are historically documented, it is often the case that their efforts, talent or skill are attributed to the closest male figure in their life; i.e. their fathers or husbands. The counterculture is remembered as a time of radical pressure to change these outdated rules against women, gender, and sexuality, and overall a period

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concerned with equality. While the music and happenings of the counterculture sometimes reflected these ideals, this did not trickle down to the systems within the art world of the psychedelic posters. Lemke-Satangelo states in her comparison of the commix art that follows the psychedelic poster art era, “Like unground press graphics and poster art, commix production was a mostly male enterprise. Some women… tried to break in but with limited success… waged an on-going struggle for credibility with male cartoonists and editorial staff.”\textsuperscript{10} I am not certain Tepper wanted to wage war or be considered a founder of psychedelia, as the great Wilson, but like Lemke-Stanagelo I feel ethically compelled to wage that war for her and discontinue the silence of women within psychedelia poster art.

Bonnie MacLean began creating posters for Bill Graham shortly after Wilson stopped working because of money related differences in 1968. MacLean’s posters often focus around the face and possibly down to the chest area of some sort of human figure. Like many other posters defined within the psychedelic style, MacLean’s work included dense patterns and elusive lettering as well as two or more bright contrasting colors. Discussing MacLean’s poster for the May 19\textsuperscript{th} and 20\textsuperscript{th} event of 1967, showing at the Fillmore Auditorium, visually you see in a dark blue ink on a yellowish brown almost mustard color background, the outline of three female faces, one facing toward the viewer, and the two other female faces facing opposite directions towards the poster’s edge. Fig. 4. The way that the figure’s hair is flowing and twisting together, makes it seems as though these three faces belong to one body potentially like a mystical creature. The central female faces are surrounded by a seemingly gothic style carved looking motif border, in the same dark blue that the females are outlined in. To add more

contrast to the visual experience, MacLean uses a bright orange ink to print the text that informs
the viewer that Martha and The Vandellas are headlining, literally placing the text above the
heads and in the hair of the three female faces. Under the triple headed female and her non-
exexisting neckline, text show cases in bright orange text the other bands, location and date of the
event. MacLean, like the men she worked among, had no formal training in the arts. In fact, little
schooling and sort of a free spirit to design and express your interpersonal experiences was part
of the definition of psychedelic art. Mostly during 1967, MacLean created a total of thirty posters
for the Bill Graham series. MacLean, being essentially the first female artist of the Fillmore
posters for Graham, while often mentioned when in discussion of this series of poster art, her
presence is often silenced or subdued to the fact that shortly after meeting Graham, Maclean and
Graham wed. This institutional tradition, dismisses MacLean’s artwork and reverts her back to
stereotypes about successful women and the ideas that she had to have some sort connection or
be exclusive with the white male in charge in order to “earn” her success. The only sentence
mentioned about MacLean in “The Graphic Underground: A Countercultural History” by Ian
Lowey and Suzy Prince states, “Bonnie MacLean, one of the few female artists of note, who also
happened to be Bill Graham’s girlfriend.”[11] Is she only being mentioned because of her
connection to Graham, being that the other few female artists who are not Graham’s girlfriend
are not mentioned at all through the entirety of this book? If that is not a distasteful enough way
to silence MacLean’s talent as a psychedelic poster artist, other readers of this genre of art such
as, “High Art; A History of the Psychedelic Poster” by Ted Owen and Denise Dickson state,
“With few exceptions, (MacLean) her designs were largely derived from Wilson’s art. She was

sufficiently skilled for a novice poster designer, but her work does not appear to have been based in a strong artistic identity.”\textsuperscript{12} Throughout the full half sheet that is written to discuss MacLean as an artist, Wilson is given credit a total of five times, “Everything is essentially Wilson-derived”\textsuperscript{13} Amazingly enough, while they do mention MacLean as “a Fillmore staff member” the three paragraphs MacLean is illustrated in does not mention that she married Graham shortly after working for him. MacLean was essentially an artist that happened to be following all the “rules” of what classified as psychedelic poster art. Instead of talking about her work and possibly mentioning her influences or her background, today’s readers on psychedelic art chose to silence her as an artist by using oppressive and discriminatory tactics. Institutionally, readers are dismissing MacLean by linking her to either a white male that is her superior in the way of marriage or by explaining that she is simply copying a white male artist that her art appears to have some sort of connection to.

Beginning their introduction in “The Graphic Art of the Underground. A Countercultural History,” the authors explain that their lectures, given just over five years ago “explored the visual legacy of a series of iconoclastic underground youth movements which have risen to prominence Western pop culture since the 1950’s and which challenged the perceived social and cultural complacency of the establishment.”\textsuperscript{14} Interestingly enough though, while this book attempts to showcase the individuals going against the establishment, setting themselves apart and focusing on subcultural individuals that were seemingly forgotten once the subculture was surpassed by another, they failed to properly introduce and even included the women of the

\textsuperscript{13} Ted Owen, \textit{High Art}: 96.
1960’s Psychedelic posters. As you reach the end of the section transitioning from psychedelia poster art in to its development of the comic strip scene, the reader sees Mari Tepper’s 1968 Bill Graham series poster illustrated for a Moby Grape dance concert. Fig. 5. Besides the image of Tepper’s poster, throughout the entire text of this book there is no mention of Tepper’s work as an artist, her involvement in psychedelic poster art or any other text attributed to the visual experience of her artwork. There is however a sentence, just before the image of Tepper’s poster that states, “Soon afterwards, the quality of the posters began to deteriorate, both because of the rapid expansion of the artistic pool resulting from an influx of new faces seeking to grab a piece of the action and as a result of many of the original artists seeking new ways to deploy their talents.”

The very poster in which is used as example for Lowey and Prince to show a degrade in graphic art of the counterculture of the 1960’s is Tepper’s. Tepper’s work not only challenged the establishment of the bigger governmental system and social and political norms that the nation was battling as a whole, but she also challenged the subculture of the counterculture. Not only was she one of two females that are featured in the Bill Graham poster series, but she did not focus her work around commercialized ideals of the sexualized feminine body. Tepper’s artwork was inclusive in her genders and attempted to illustrate a raw and real visual experience of the mind opening drug, LSD in which most of the art work within psychedelia poster art was created towards. This particular poster is an elusive blending of purples and blues, and bodies that not only are ambiguously gendered but hard to believe they are even human. Tepper uses her hand drawn illustrations to not only to advertise for the dance concerts held at the Fillmore in San Francisco, but to give a viewer a taste of the surrealist, dream like state of a LSD “trip.”

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Looking through the rest of the many posters within Tepper’s portfolio it is evident that her work embodies the ideals not only the counterculture but of the subculture of psychedelic poster art. Still, institutionally fifty years later we are misinformed, if informed at all of Tepper as an artist. Out of six books I found that discuss in detail the artists and posters of the Bill Graham series, three had examples of Tepper’s artwork, but did not discuss who she is at all. The other three books have no mention of Tepper or her work. This is an institutional weakness that has been occurring in art history well before the counterculture and is unfortunately still continuing fifty years after the radical movement for equality of women.

Not only did Tepper’s artwork start out as a raw visual experience of the psychedelic experience while maintaining a commitment to the counterculture politics, her work also influenced a shift with psychedelic poster art. Tepper’s first poster within the Bill Graham series which is advertising for Albert King and The Electric Flag appears in late April of 1968. Fig. 6. This poster, which Tepper intergrades her commitment to the counterculture through visually displaying the psychedelic experience of abstract and creative imagery helps to motivate a shift within the entire series. Tepper’s Albert King lithograph is a striking contrast of two white bodily figures, dense with swirling patterns, stretched limbs, crude and distorted facial features, against a vibrant magenta background, and framed with text and patterns in a variation of blues. After Tepper’s arrival into the Bill Graham poster series there is a noticeable shift from the commercialized work exemplified by Wes Wilson, which features sexualized female bodies, towards a more dream like state of surrealism. While Tepper and artist Lee Conklin arrive at similar times within this particular psychedelic poster series, the influences between the two artists are extremely apparent. Conklin, like Tepper, also serves his audience a surrealist psychedelic visual with the bright yellow poster of flying ears who have chicken legs. Fig. 7.
This shift even begins to entice Wilson into attempting to turn away from the heterosexual male gaze towards a visual experience less focused on the female form as an object. Fig. 8. While Lowry and Prince describe this shift in psychedelia as a deterioration, Tepper is in fact adjusting the social standard of psychedelic counterculture poster art to a more natural display of psychedelia and in which I will argue it is not a true derail of psychedelia or the counterculture. Mari Tepper’s work is valuable to the history of the counterculture psychedelic poster art movement. Since the early 1960’s, Tepper’s illustrations have embodied the counterculture ideals of sexual freedom, especially for women, through her work such as Hallelujah the Pill!! Tepper has also been committed to displaying a raw version of a psychedelic drug experience. Psychedelics were a major contribution to the mind expanding social change of the counterculture, and through her visual and formal choices that were displayed in works for the dance concerts of Moby Grape and Albert King, Tepper continues to hold true to her feminist counterculture political values. Tepper also shows commitment to the psychedelic counterculture experience through her hand drawn bodies of inclusion whom seem to be enjoying the psychedelic experience in the Flying Circus lithograph. While Tepper’s work differed from that of the individuals who are glorified within psychedelic poster art, I believe Tepper helped to usher in a new more raw and creative display of the counterculture psychedelic visual experience as she arrives in the late 1960’s into the infamous Bill Graham series of posters. Much like the birth control pill that Tepper rejoices by making a psychedelic visual and political commitment to, my thesis is about the issue of equality for women. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore’s essay titled “Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism” states, “As feminist critics our task is to prevent the patriarchs from getting away with their habitual trick of silencing the opposition. It is up to us to make the struggle over the meaning of the sign – the meaning of the
text – an explicit and inevitable item on the cultural agenda.”¹⁶ It is one step to simply discuss Tepper’s and somehow insert her work more appropriately in to the history of art, psychedelia and the counterculture. As feminist critics though, our task is much more than to simply add these forgotten, undervalued female artists, our task also includes challenging the institutional literature around these female and feminist artists and to also continue the conversation regarding institutional weaknesses derived from male-dominance. It is not that there are no great women psychedelic poster artists, it is that they are being institutionally excluded.

Fig. 1. Tepper, Mari. *Hallelujah the Pill!!*, 1967, Offset Lithograph
Fig. 2. Wilson, Wes. *The Sound*, 1967, Offset Lithograph, San Francisco, Bill Graham Poster Series.
Fig. 3. Tepper, Mari, *The Flying Circus*, 1967, Offset Lithograph
Fig. 4. MacLean, Bonnie, *Martha and the Vandellas*, 1967, Offset Lithograph
Fig. 5. Tepper, Mari, *Moby Grape*, 1968, Offset Lithograph
Fig. 6. Tepper, Mari, *Albert King*, 1968, Offset Lithograph
Fig. 7. Conklin, Lee, *The Who*, 1968, Offset Lithograph
Fig. 8. Wilson, Wes, *Santana*, 1968, Offset Lithograph
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In-Person Interview


https://www.classicposters.com/Mari_Tepper.
