

# The New York Times

## An Artist Who Champions and Channels Female Voices

[nytimes.com/2018/09/13/arts/design/petah-coyne-guerrilla-girls.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/13/arts/design/petah-coyne-guerrilla-girls.html)

By Hilarie M. Sheets

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WEST NEW YORK, N.J. — Two shrouded female figures rise from a sumptuous landscape of dark velvet and wax-dipped silk flowers. One is imperious in posture, the other turns away in stubborn resistance. Their tense standoff seems to charge the roiling swells and eddies of material between them.

This just-completed piece by Petah Coyne stretched across the artist's expansive studio here during a late-summer visit — one of her many extravagant and psychologically complex sculptures. Several Neo-Baroque chandeliers dangled from the ceiling, laden with wax flowers, taxidermy birds, religious statuary, tassels, bows and thickets of chicken wire coated with black sand. Silver peacocks, like ladies in waiting, were poised to be pressed into service on future works.

The new velvet work, "Untitled #1379 (The Doctor's Wife)," has become the centerpiece of Ms. Coyne's exhibition, "Having Gone I Will Return," through Oct. 27 at [Galerie Lelong & Co.](#) It's her first solo show in New York in a decade.

Petah Coyne: "This is such a great time for women but if we don't evolve, we're just going to keep going around and around." Credit George Etheredge for The New York Times



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It's also a change of gears for Ms. Coyne, 64, known for championing and channeling female voices. With work already in the permanent collections of dozens of museums, including the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, she has turned to sewing for the

first time. She found couture seamstresses to teach her techniques that she manipulated to create waves of lush black and blue fabric between the two figures.

Ms. Coyne said she first cast the figures in 1997, thinking about the push and pull that can happen between sisters, mothers and daughters, feminists. She returned to the piece two years ago, using as her touchstone a 1966 novel about bitter female competition by Sawako Ariyoshi. Ms. Ariyoshi's book, "The Doctor's Wife," is in turn based on the real-life tale of the Japanese surgeon Hanaoka Seishu, whose wife and mother vied with each other to be subjects in his groundbreaking experiments with anesthesia, resulting in his wife's blindness.

"The battle that goes on is just horrific," said Ms. Coyne, who sees in the original story something tragically eternal in how women can undermine one another — and how such conflict usually works to the advantage of men. "This is such a great time for women, but if we don't evolve we're just going to keep going around and around. I want to see my generation help the next generation."

A detail from "Untitled #1379 (The Doctor's Wife)." Credit George Etheredge for The New York Times



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A firsthand witness to how tensions can fracture a group of women, Ms. Coyne has spent five years photographing the early members of the Guerrilla Girls, the secret society of female

artists that has been calling out art world sexism since 1985. After 2000, two of the Guerrilla Girls brought a lawsuit against some of the others, eventually walking away with the copyrights to the group's early posters, and the Guerrilla Girls splintered.

"It was such an interesting group of women and we wanted to make sure that everyone got credit for their work through the ages after they pass on," said Ms. Coyne, who proposed that she and Kathy Grove, a conceptual photographer, become the group's art historians. All 50-some current and former members of the Guerrilla Girls signed on. The work reflects Ms. Coyne's own belief in the power of women to bring about change when they collaborate effectively – which she sees now bearing fruit culturally with #MeToo.

Titled "The Real Guerrillas: The Early Years." the project will include diptychs by Ms. Coyne and Ms. Grove of every woman who took part during the group's heyday, from 1985 to 2000. Each woman chose the pseudonym of a dead, overlooked female artist and each portrait shows her in a gorilla mask, in a setting that recalls the alias she assumed (Hilma Af Klint, Artemisia Gentileschi, and others). A companion portrait of each member without her disguise will be unveiled after her death.

Ms. Coyne and Kathy Grove's "The Real Guerrillas: The Early Years, AKA Lyubov Popova." Credit Petah Coyne and Kathy Grove



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Ms. Coyne admires how the anonymity of the group kept the focus on the issues facing female artists rather than on individuals. She and Ms. Grove have completed 35 portraits so far.

In an interview, the Guerrilla Girl known as Lyubov Popova said that the long-term scope of the project was fundamental to how Ms. Coyne thinks. "It's about reaching younger generations of women and giving them support and knowledge – not only of the history of women's art but also of feminist radicalism in art," she said. She sees Ms. Coyne's own art as "strongly feminist but not in a didactic way," adding that her sculptures have become more unabashedly "girlish" over time.

Ms. Coyne herself has long called her sculptures "the girls," terminology an artist less comfortable in her own skin might be embarrassed to use. "I feel awkward about it sometimes, but they are my girls, I feel them so deeply," said Ms. Coyne, like a teacher voicing unflinching encouragement for her pupils.

"Untitled #1410 (Mishima's Spring Snow)," with wax, pigment, ribbons, candles, chicken-wire fencing and Duchesse satin. Credit Petah Coyne/Galerie Lelong & Co., New York



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Ms. Coyne describes herself as a “war horse.” She moved in 1977 with her husband, Lamar Hall, from Ohio to Broome Street in New York, where they still live. She said he can check the security camera in the studio from home “to make sure I’m still alive” and he knows not to break the spell when she’s working through the night, listening to books and rapt in a kind dance.

The writings of Flannery O’Connor, Zora Neale Hurston and Joan Didion, among others, have long infiltrated her work. “Untitled #1408 (Lost Landscape),” a chandelier sculpture hanging here, is lavishly adorned with dark purple flowers, branches and two wax-covered owls. It was named for the memoir by Joyce Carol Oates chronicling the author’s childhood obsession with a troubled girl.

“I’m listening to this book about a life that’s gone out of control as I’m working and this lopsided shape starts to emerge without my realizing it,” said Ms. Coyne, pointing to a protruding mound formed from hundreds of red roses. It could be read as a heart, or a tumor. She was dismayed when the weight caused the sculpture to list horribly to one side and credits one of her assistants for the idea of attaching 100-pound dumbbells as counterweights.

“Untitled #1408 (The Lost Landscape).” The work, named for a memoir by Joyce Carol Oates, is made of wax, pigment, silk flowers, waxed taxidermy, tree branches and synthetic feathers. Credit Petah Coyne/Galerie Lelong & Co., New York





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Ms. Coyne's references to writers will be the focus of an exhibition in 2021 at the [Chazen Museum of Art](#) at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. Amy Gilman, director of the Chazen, finds the sculptures "evocative in the way that great literature stays with you," she said. "Petah's work exposes private things without being explicit, these deep wells of memory and meaning and relationship."

Raised in a religious Irish Catholic family, Ms. Coyne moved 15 times with her father's job in the military before settling in Ohio. She acknowledges her debt to church pageantry — the draping of statues during Lent, the profusion of flowers at Easter.

Her use of wax as a core material came in 1994 after she took a dejected artist friend to a church in Rome, where the women lit candles and prayed for work. It apparently worked. After the friend received a show, she mailed Ms. Coyne a box of candles blessed by the Pope in appreciation. Ms. Coyne made the candles into a hat for another friend. When she lit it, the whole thing caught on fire — including the friend's hair.

A view of Ms. Coyne's studio in West New York, N.J. Credit George Etheredge for The New York Times



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The near disaster looked spectacular, though, and it prompted Ms. Coyne to stage a series of dance performances on swinging chandeliers with lit candles. She worked with a chemist she knew, from her former day job as a graphic designer for Chanel, to patent an archival wax formula that she uses in melted form, like a pigment. It has become her signature.

"It's my action painting," said Ms. Coyne, who described how she climbed a ladder and threw the molten wax — at 227 degrees — onto a chandelier. "I have been told that it cools about five to seven degrees as it is flying through the air," she said, adding "Don't try this!" The special wax bonds at 220 degrees, burns the layer below and attaches forever.

The result, "Untitled #1410 (Mishima's Spring Snow)," a confection of curled ribbons and drips of white wax, chicken-wire fencing and Duchesse satin, is on view at Lelong. (The artist also applies wax in a more targeted way with turkey basters, an idea she got after seeing the kitchen tool at Jackson Pollock's studio on Long Island.)

While Ms. Coyne's work has always intermingled ideas of beauty and death, the current exhibition has taken a more elegiac turn. In the last few years she has weathered personal illness, as well as the deaths of her brother and both parents.

Looking at a chandelier laden with black candles and tassels and crowned by a majestic peacock, she described the piece, "Untitled #1242 (Black Snowflake)," as a tribute to her father, who died of Alzheimer's at age 97.

"Peacocks take the soul to heaven in Irish mythology," said Ms. Coyne, who added handblown blue glass bulbs the color of his eyes. "I wondered what it was like behind his eyes."

Ms. Gilman, the Chazen's director, has seen people in tears before the artist's work and heard others say it was too disturbing to be in the same room with it.

"Those are really strong emotional responses that not every artist achieves," she said. "Or wants to achieve."