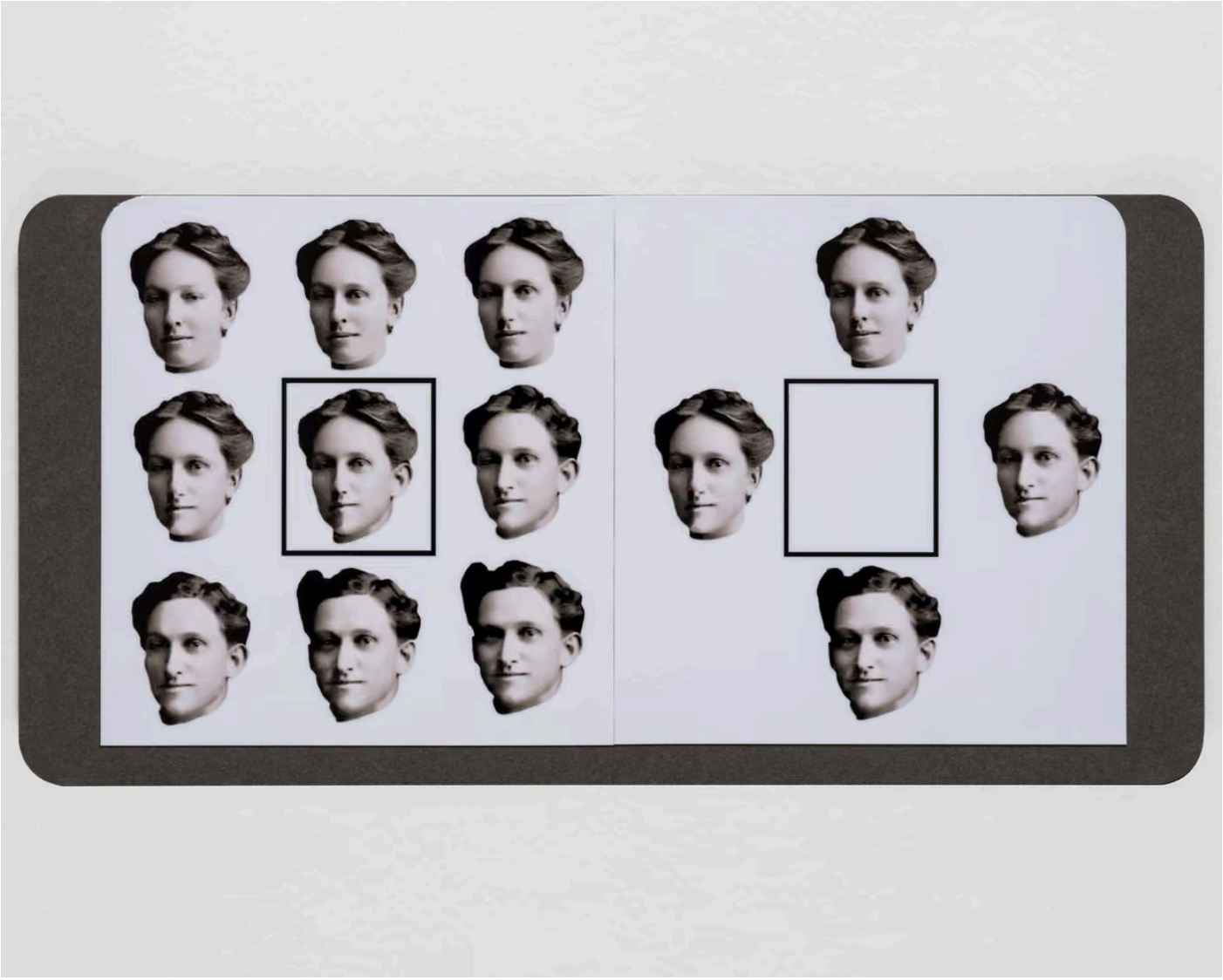
Art

Lesbian artists celebrated in three new California exhibitions: 'long overdue'

Monica Majoli, Millie Wilson and Susan Silton gain visibility in LA after decades of queer women's artistic erasure



Susan Silton's 1994 work Mutation #6 (Somewhere in the Middle) is from the series mutatis mutandis. Photograph: Photo: Ruben Diaz

Emma Madden

Wed 23 Sep 2026 05.00 EDT

Prefer the Guardian on Google

n the late seventies, when the LA-based artist Monica Majoli was 12, she began spending her afternoons at Sisterhood Bookstore, a feminist bookstore

in Los Angeles that has long since closed. She would stay all afternoon "searching for my tribe", she says. One day, she found a photograph of the Ovulars, a group of feminists who held photography workshops at a lesbian commune in rural Oregon between 1979 and 1983. Through photography, the Ovulars were documenting and self-fashioning a vision of lesbian life in real time.

They are at the center of Monica Majoli: Countervision, which brings her new drawings into the June L Mazer Lesbian Archives, presented by Los Angeles Nomadic Division (LAND), alongside material from Sisterhood and the Ovulars. Some of Majoli's drawings sit in a five-drawer flat file for visitors to handle; others are embedded within the Mazer's holdings.

The exhibition is one of three currently giving lesbian artists a more prominent institutional presence in Los Angeles, alongside The Museum of Lesbian Dreams, the first retrospective of Millie Wilson's four-decade project, and Diving into the Wreck, Susan Silton's first major survey, which takes its name from a 1972 Adrienne Rich poem of the same name.



As a child, Monica Majoli spent afternoons at Sisterhood Bookstore, a feminist bookstore in Los Angeles that has long since closed, 'searching' for her 'tribe'. Photograph: Monica Majoli

All three artists have spent decades working in relative isolation from the institutional recognition now being afforded them. Wilson exhibited frequently in the 1990s and taught at CalArts for nearly three decades, yet

curator David Evans Frantz describes her as “underrecognized”. Silton’s survey, comprising more than 150 works across photography, performance, text, sound, design and participation, has been described by its curators as “long overdue”. Majoli, meanwhile, has spent decades making paintings that examine sex, power and queer history, while her work has also become a record of lesbian life and its disappearing histories.

Taken together, the three exhibitions are responding with some mischief to the question: what happens when an institution finally recognizes artists whose work has, for decades, questioned the institutions that failed to recognize them in the first place?



Millie Wilson’s work Red Top from 1992. Photograph: Millie Wilson, courtesy of the artist

Lesbian artists have, in part, been seldom canonized in art history through the sheer fact of their being women. They, too, have often fallen awkwardly between neat categories: feminism and queer art, sexuality and identity, art and activism. Lesbianism could be treated as too specific to represent anything universal, or too politically charged to be taken as an aesthetic subject. Even when it was recovered, certain versions of lesbian history proved more acceptable than others.

Through their exhibitions, the artists resist visibility for visibility’s sake, instead challenging the flattened, institutional version of lesbianism and expanding it into something as varied and contradictory as lesbian life itself. “We aren’t all just out playing golf,” says Silton.

In 1989, Wilson invented The Museum of Lesbian Dreams, an fabricated institution that exists through her paintings, photographs, sculptures, and installations, and at least one critic believed was real. Its foundational work, Fauve Semblant: Peter (A Young English Girl), imagines a retrospective for a fictional lesbian artist whose work has supposedly been lost. Inspired by

Romaine Brooks's portrait of the real lesbian artist Gluck, Wilson creates the remains of an artist who never existed.

The word "museum" holds a particularly charged meaning in this case, with its almost alchemical ability to grant objects immediate legitimacy. With Wilson's winning sense of humor, she made those objects lesbian pulp and lowbrow literature.

"That was frowned upon very actively by some more snooty lesbian art historians as well," says Frantz. They questioned why, Frantz says, "Wilson was bringing out a tawdry part of our community history."



Susan 'Silton's survey, comprising more than 150 works across photography, performance, text, sound, design and participation, has been described by its curators as 'long overdue'.' Photograph: Courtesy of Metro Art (Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority)

Silton has spent decades resisting precisely that kind of packaging through her work. "Institutions, I think, really fail us in their being so simplified about identity," she said. If you "box people and things up into neat little packages", she added, they become easier to "convey as a package. ."It's like golden for the corporate sponsors."

In her 1994 work mutatis mutandis, she examined “the perception of lesbian as mutant; mutation being both anomalous and often necessary to the survival of a species”. In one iteration, participants look through a stereoscope at two images that become three-dimensional but never perfectly coalesce into a single image. It offers a fitting metaphor for how Silton sees lesbianism. She thinks “narratively and in layers”, she told me, rather than through the “literalisation of an idea”.

Mutatis mutandis was on loan to the survey by Gillian Anderson, who came to Silton’s house herself to collect it in the early 2000s. Silton is pleased to be regarded, then or now. “I haven’t really quite felt that,” she says.



Monica Majoli's work Ovular (couple) 3 from 2026. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and Los Angeles Nomadic Division (LAND)

Her, Majoli, and Wilson’s exhibitions go beyond correcting their underexposure, but make plain the difficulty of correction itself. These lesbian artists are now being given something resembling institutional space, but they have already spent decades questioning what that space means, whom it serves, and what it asks them to become.

Looking back at the photographs of the Ovulars, Majoli says, feels like trying to recover “a kind of courage to seize the moment”. She contrasted that spirit with the “fatigue and fear” she sees governing so much of contemporary life. The Ovulars were constructing an image of lesbian life before it could be

comfortably contained by an institution; decades later, Majoli, Wilson, and Silton continue to work in that space between self-definition and representation, producing forms of lesbian history that resist settling into a single image. They insist on keeping sexuality and identity unruly.

Millie Wilson: The Museum of Lesbian Dreams is on display at The Luckman Fine Arts Complex at Cal State LA from 24 October to 10 April. Susan Silton: Diving into the Wreck is on display at the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery until 22 November. Monica Majoli: Countervision is on display at June L Mazer Lesbian Archives until 22 November

Most viewed