

# FT Weekend



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6 March/7 March 2021

**T**his past week we hit 11C in New York. It's not exactly spring yet, but after what feels like an incredibly long winter, the slight rise in temperature was enough to get me scouring the internet for exhibitions welcoming masked visitors. I've been so cautious and homebound the past few months, and I've missed venturing out to see art in real life, up close and personal.

The Brooklyn Museum reopens its long-term installation, "The Dinner Party," this weekend – a timely nod to Women's History Month. Created by Judy Chicago between 1974 and 1979, this seminal feminist artwork includes several elements of what is considered women's craft: sewing, embroidery, ceramics, needlework and china painting. It is made up primarily of a triangle-shaped dining table, with each wing running 48ft long. There are 39 table settings, each representing a woman in history. The table sits on a floor of 2,300 tiles bearing the names of 999 historical and mythological women, whose lives and stories support and contextualise those at the table. For Chicago, these names point to "how many women had struggled into prominence or been able to make their ideas known – sometimes in the face of overwhelming obstacles – only (like the women on the table) to have their hard-earned achievements marginalised or erased."

I have always been drawn to narratives about women's lives, stories that depict not only their external realities but also give a sense of how they navigate their interior worlds. During lockdown, with time to think about my own life and next steps, I've picked up memoirs and personal essay collections by Alice Walker, Zadie Smith, Sue Monk Kidd, bell hooks, Elizabeth Alexander and Toni Morrison. I read these women perhaps because I have always had an active interior life, a mind constantly engaging the world, all the while thinking about my place in it.

I've long recognised that my subjective understanding of myself as a woman, a black woman, a black woman thinker and writer, does not often match how the world sees and understands me, and what it expects from me. This general awareness is not singular to me. It is what every woman knows to some extent: the myriad ways we are assessed by our external appearances and by our willingness to nurture others, without much significance afforded to the realm of our interiority, and the value of it.

This past month I meandered my way through two books about women's lives. A biography of the 14th-century anchoress, Julian of Norwich, and an autobiography by designer Diane von Furstenberg, born in the 20th century. Despite the distance of more than 600 years, I was struck by similarities. Both women's stories were essentially about searching for autonomy, trying to honour the reality of their interior lives in a world that has historically struggled to fully appreciate and celebrate them.

For Julian, her longing was for a safe and acceptable place to reflect and write about her mystical visions and her relationship with God. So she became an anchoress, living in isolation from the



## Rooms of our own

As a masterpiece of feminist art reopens in New York, *Enuma Okoro* finds inspiration in the artists who have illuminated the inner lives of women

Above: 'The Cacophony of Silence' by Wangari Mathenge (2019)

Below: 'At Breakfast' by Laurits Andersen Ring (1898)  
Courtesy the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, Albany



world for most of her adult life, and spending her time praying, writing and giving counsel to people who would visit her through a window. For von Furstenberg, daughter of a Holocaust survivor, her desire from an early age was to be a financially independent woman who could provide for herself and her children, and pursue her dreams, however they revealed themselves. The most significant factor being that she could remain in charge of her own life.

As I imagine all the social media posts and articles that will come this month celebrating women, I can't help but think about how we applaud women who have proved themselves of use to society by their public contributions, yet often fail to acknowledge the value of the interior lives of women we actually know. Women whose external lives may not bear witness to the richness of their interior lives because of access to education or equitable resources, lack of mentors or opportunities, the responsibilities of raising children and maintaining homes, sometimes alone, sometimes as sole breadwinners. I wonder about how much societies lose when women's interior lives are neither nurtured nor taken seriously.

Though I often abhor generalisations, I do believe it is the experience of many women to have been expected or encouraged at some point to minimise themselves, to make their very exist-

ence more palatable to others. There often seems to be a cost for any woman who wants her thoughts, ideas, and self-estimations to be acknowledged and taken seriously.

One of the reasons I seek out written narratives by women is because I can recognise some sense of myself in other women across time, despite location, despite class, race, ethnicity or cultural heritage. I know how, despite what a patriarchal world might think, the inner life of a woman can be a sanctuary, an entire world safe from intrusion, expectation and manipulation.

I have found this timeless sense of solidarity in paintings as well. One of the most memorable experiences in this regard occurred many years ago now, while I was antiquing through a small town in North Carolina. I came across a framed print of the 1898 painting, "At Breakfast," by Danish painter Laurits Andersen Ring. In the painting, housed at the National Museum of Sweden, the artist's wife sits at an unclear breakfast table. We see condiments and remnants of the morning meal on the white tablecloth, which she will eventually have to clear. But in this moment, she sits in a peacock blue ladderback chair with woven straw seating, part of the matching blue dining table and sideboard and hutch. Her back is towards us, and her elbows rest on the table as she leans forward. She is engrossed in the morning paper, Politiken: a woman

interested in, and reflecting on, what is happening in the external world, a world traditionally reserved for men.

We have no idea what the woman looks like beyond her auburn hair packed in a messy bun, and the slim silhouette of her body, dressed ankle to high neckline in a light peach dress, cinched at the waist. We see the plants in the room to which she will at some point have to tend. The light that streams in from the open door reminds me of a similar shade of golden sunlight that pours into my own dining room between 7:30am and 8am. I always think of it as a magical, peaceful time of morning. I fell in love with this painting as soon as I saw it because I know exactly what it feels like to have a full, buzzing house suddenly empty out in the morning, leaving you with a silence you can sink into with a deep sense of gratitude and relief. Time to think and engage your mind, if only for a brief while.

The fascinating thing about this woman is that she, too, is an artist. Her name is Sigrid Kähler. Once she got married in 1896, she mostly put aside ceramics and painting to raise her family and be a housewife. We have several beautiful paintings of her, by her husband, many of which show her in reflective solitary moments. There is very little of her own work available. I bought the framed print and hung it in my own dining room.

The 2019 contemporary figurative work, "The Cacophony of Silence," by Kenyan artist Wangari Mathenge, offers another look at the theme of women's interiority. Mathenge is known for her focus on black female identity and using her work to address issues of their visibility. The woman in this painting sits squarely on the edge of an oversized,

In the lives of a 14th-century anchoress and a 20th-century designer, we see the struggle for autonomy

throne-like grey armchair, staring at the viewer from an elevated vantage point. Her chin resting firmly on her clasped hands, she is neither smiling nor frowning. Rather, her face conveys a strong sense of self and inner knowing. She's dressed in a vibrant red trouser suit, with all that colour's implications of passion, power, life blood, agency.

This woman gazes at us with an almost daring invitation to not take her seriously. What she is thinking is anyone's guess but there is no doubt that her mind is active and engaged. Just as surely, we get the impression that no societal expectations can deter her from being the woman she already knows herself to be.

For most of history, women's spheres were interior or enclosed spaces: kitchens, compounds, classrooms, bedrooms, libraries, hospitals. Yet despite the injustice of this, to me there still remains a beauty in thinking about the uncharted freedom women have in cultivating their own interior lives: vibrant, boundless rooms of their own.

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