

(Chorus)

Virgin Mary, Mother of God.

Be a feminist, we pray thee,

Be a feminist, we pray thee.

Bless our festering bastard-boss.

Let black cars parade the Cross.

The Missionary's in class for cash.

Meet him there, and pay his stash.

Patriarch Gundy believes in Putin.

Better believe in God, you vermin!

Fight for rights, forget the rite –

Join our protest, Holy Virgin.

[Pussy Riot's 'Punk Prayer' 2013]

The Renaissance Madonna; Fetishized , Feeble - Fundamental?

With the Guerilla Girls waging ‘cultural warfare’ on the current sexual landscape of the western art world, backed up with ammunition from committed feminist artists desperately trying to portray the (unfortunately still prevalent) pain of the female experience, the question of ‘how did we get here?’ arises. How, in a supposedly secular, excepting, and equal society does feminist art still have such a wide sea of subject matter to flag up to it’s audience? Why is it still such a cultural, groundbreaking shock for feminist artists such as Beth Moyses to convey the confused expectations around female sexuality (as shown in her performance piece ‘Red Bed’). Female sexuality is still a subject matter many wince at the sound of; yet it remains an unavoidable reality – and one we must learn to accept. It seems the female form is still a subject of Petrarchan devotion and enjoyable sexualization; as pointed out by the Guerilla girls who note that although 76 percent of nudes in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York are female, less than 5 percent of these artists are female. Why then, if the sexualization of women still features heavily in western art, do the nudes of female artists such as Jenny Saville make audiences squirm in discomfort? Why, when women demonstrate autonomy over their sexuality, do we step back in horror – could it simply be unfamiliarity? Are we all simply used to observing the perfection of the female form through the male eye, rather than it’s (by definition) ‘imperfect’ reality?

To deconstruct the feeling of discomfort society still experiences when a women in control of her own sexuality enters the art world , we must first examine one of the most influential portrayals of the ‘ideal woman’ in history , one than embodies the paradox of fetishizing modesty, (a concept which strikes a concerning similarity to those who wince in disgust at modern feminine sexuality) . We must not simply look over the hyper-sexualized male art, but also look at the male art which is noticeably ‘not sexual’ (at first glance). It is necessary that we examine how the patriarchal expectations of female sexuality manifested themselves in art. In order to deconstruct this cultural discomfort around the subject , it seem vital that we examine the figure that for centuries, and still for many today, represents the ‘idealized female’; a women who remains ‘untouched by man’ , and embodies the very nature of maternity, who has had the power to be recreated and re-imagined by artists across the centuries: The Madonna. ***Can a figure that represents the paradox of male expectation of female perfection be held accountable for the current stigma around female sexuality? Is she the root of why the feminist art movement is still so necessary? Or, is it possible she can be manipulated into the contemporary feminist message - as Pussy Riot brings to light in their punk prayer:***

(‘Mother of God/ be a feminist, I pray thee!’).

The nature of the Renaissance Madonna is made abundantly clear in the heavy symbolism within her many portraits. In almost all depictions of her likeness, she is presented with a submissive downward looking position, shadowed face, covered and draped in blue fabric. Such is evident in Sassoferrato's 'THE VIRGIN IN PRAYER' (1640-50).



The Madonna is given to her audience shadowed heavily by her 'virgin's blue' drapes. Such a choice of color was not an accidental choice by Sassoferrato; blue during the development of the cult of the virgin and rise of Mariology, depictions of the Madonna seemed to adopt a blue garment. Katy Kelleher ¹ notes how this color was used by figure of power such as Cleopatra, who notably smeared the color upon her eyelids. Kelleher posits the idea that such a use of the color was in order to represent a transcendence from earthly goods to something 'unreachable'. Indeed this does seem to strike parallel with ideas posed from chemist Heinz Berke, who states early humans 'had no access to blue because blue is not what you call an earth colour [...] you don't find it in the soil'. Not to mention the bluest thing in our world—the sky—is already untouchable. Blue is an elusive and earthly unachievable color, making it valued. Although when considering this, we may then see the Madonna's covering in a valued and rare transcendent color a source of feminine power, and not a source of feminine

oppression, it should be noted the unachievable nature of the color ties in with the unachievable standards the Madonna sets for actual women in society. She, although representing the idealized female qualities, is made unachievable and separate for the everyday women; almost ensuring church criticism when women gave into their natural sexual urges and failed to carry the repressive (and purposefully transcendent) purity of the Madonna. This blue appears in almost all of her Renaissance depictions; and is permeated within the many faces of Raphael's Madonna.

¹ <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/03/06/marian-blue-color-angels-virgins-untouchable-things/>



It is not merely the unachievable nature of the Madonna that impacts our understanding of femininity and its idealistic state, but also her general submissive nature which is made particularly apparent within the composition of the figure itself. Always downward facing, always implying a submission, it seems undeniable that the Madonna solidifies the idea of the power balance of heterosexual relationships (the male element being dominant whilst the female element remaining submissive). Although some, such as Anna Jameson (a Victorian art historian), rejoice in the supposed 'power' the Madonna brings depictions of the female figure, which Jameson suggests is exercised when she is presented separately to her son. Jameson goes so far to describe such works as 'emblems of almighty power'. Such pieces could be interpreted as a celebration of purely female power, as the figure dominates the work and therefore assumes the viewers full appreciation, however, more modern feminist critiques evaluate the position of the re-occurring composition and reach a very different conclusion. It seems the submission of the Madonna is an inescapable fact in Renaissance art. Contemporary feminist theologian Mary Daly (described as 'the gold standard of absolute feminism') observes the problematic influence the slight downward facing composition has over our modern understanding of femininity. The 'idealised women' represented via the Madonna remains submissive in nature to Daly, and her presentation in art is 'exploited and developed in patriarchal culture through the ages to oppress women, deny them equal rights and brainwash them into a dependent state'.

It seems even the smallest details in composition and colour choice surrounding the Madonna become capable of morphing femininity into an unachievable state. Have we, as people living in a supposedly equal society, been able to rid ourselves of such ideas? Or does a continuation of worshipping such art show an ignorance on our part of the Madonna's role in aiding a society in which women remain purely defined by men?

“Chastity ... has, even now, a religious importance in a woman's life, and has so wrapped itself round with nerves and instincts that to cut it free and bring it to the light of day demands courage of the rarest.”

— Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own

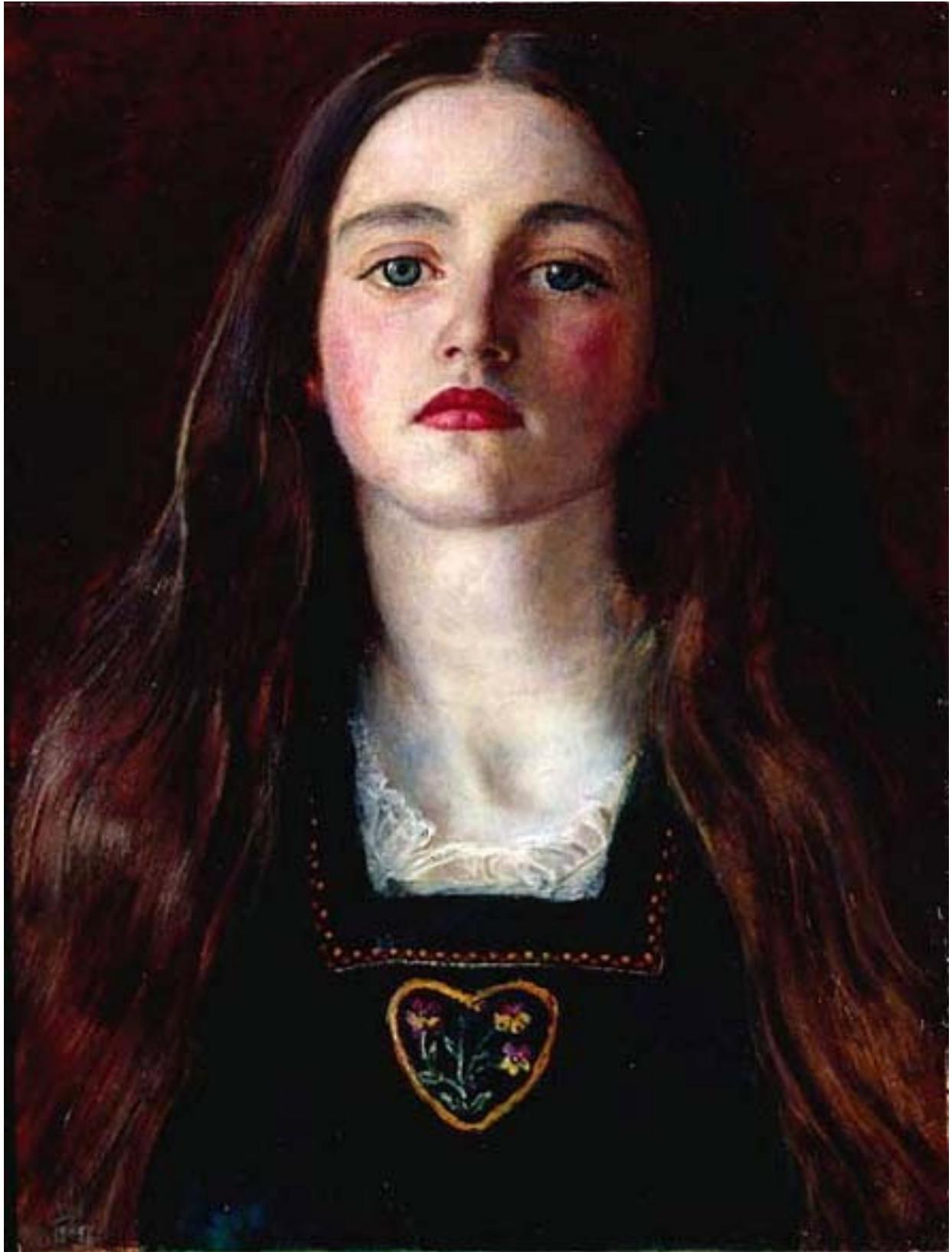
AN INEVITABLE REBELLION:

The time of the early Victorian era brought with it beginnings of new freedom against the dogma of the Madonna. With the era itself functioning as a revolt against the triviality of painting styles of the time, it seems unsurprising woman gained new recognition in terms of character in their portrayal in portraiture.² Although artists such as Millais and Hunt (as noted by Marion Boddy-Evans³) applied thin glazes on a white found to give a certain luminosity to their works that seems indeed reminiscent of the divinity of classical Madonna's (observable through even the subtlety of light falling on their subjects functioning on many occasion to give the Renaissance effect of chiaroscuro) , the composition of the depiction of women facially seemed to have gained a certain rebellious streak.

With Millais' portrayal of women such as Sophie Grey revealing an up-turned aggression that had been hidden behind virginal grace, women gained a depth of character in art that had (in broad terms) previously been lacking. Women of Pre-Raphaelite seem to embrace the sexuality of Eve in classical art, but rid themselves of sexual shame through establishing a direct eye with the viewer; sexuality seems to burst forward in portraits such as Monna Vanna and The Bridesmaid, as women seem to gain a certain autonomy (or at least pride) by transcending the plainness of virginity.

² <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/dec/19/sensuality-lust-and-passion-how-the-pre-raphaelites-changed-the-way-the-world-sees-women>

³ <https://www.liveabout.com/pre-raphaelite-painters-palettes-and-techniques-2578612>



Variety of model also began to be explored, as the female body became less defined by either sexualization or purity and more assessed in terms of character. Looking beyond the canvases to the models themselves, we can observe that the brotherhood was not shy in representing women of different body shape for inspiration. Although our modern consideration of the 'Pre-Raphaelite woman' may contain certain specific tropes, Sephanie Pina on 'What is the 'Pre-Raphaelite Woman''⁴ notes how this is simply a result of our modern disposition to merge each character into one.

It seems however, these positive conclusions we have reached about the brotherhood's treatment of femininity have been reached without a crucial and pivotal focus of what is an unescapable fact their artistic portrayals ; the male gaze.



The male gaze seems to exist subtly as a wash over women in art, and the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood appears to be no exception. Although sexuality is a point of emphasis within the work; such sexuality doesn't belong to the women of the art, but rather their male creators. Just as the Madonna of Renaissance art existed to appease a fetishization of purity, the women of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood exist to appease the new found allure towards bold and shamelessly apparent female sexuality. Any autonomy direct-eye contact provided seems to be ripped away by the simple fact that such an eye contact was painted in the direction of the male creator; and subsequently for the male creator. Even without the artist establishing such a bold pose, sexuality for male satisfaction becomes

apparent. Millais's 1852 tragic heroine Ophelia (as noted by Clarissa Sebag-Montefiore) who exists with 'lips parted, grasping hands, eyes half open, as if in sublime submission'. It seems undeniable that even with the compositional revolt instigated by the Pre-Raphaelite era, the strings of virginal submission the Madonna released into women in art still persists. In many a sense in fact, the women of the era could be argued to be no more progressive than their Renaissance counterparts. Ophelia exists as a fictional artistic translation of popular sexual fantasies of the time, just as the Madonna upheld the popular dotting of purity in the Renaissance era. While nature swarms around Ophelia, her hair is loose, and she is unrestricted by a corset, states of the female body that would have only been observable in the Victorian bedroom. Despite Nick Mitzevick noting the power of the women stemming from 'their centrality of assuming the role of the seductress' this seems to be a view formed through the modern eye , the intention of their portrayal within their own cultural context evidently is one that serves the male eye.

⁴ <http://preraphaelitesisterhood.com/what-is-the-pre-raphaelite-woman/>

Is it the influence of the Madonna that has encouraged such art serving the specific fetishizations of it's cultural contexts? Or, alternatively, should we view the root cause in a more holistic manner. It seems any art, with religious purpose or otherwise, assumes a reflection of the painter's desire. As patriarchy dominated through the centuries, it seems unsurprising that male desire was more prominent in art and culture. Perhaps, rather than pinning blame of the influence of the Madonna, we should regard it's influence as stemming out of a patriarchal cycle that allows traditional misogyny to influence misogyny in the modern day.

NEW FREEDOM

“a simple question like "Why have there been no great women artists?" can, if answered adequately, create a sort of chain reaction, expanding not merely to encompass the accepted assumptions of the single field, but outward to embrace history and the social sciences, or even psychology and literature, and thereby, from the outset, can challenge the assumption”

WHY HAVE THERE BEEN NO GREAT WOMEN ARTISTS? - LINDA NOCHLIN

The only reliable and seemingly pure rebellion we can observe against the Madonna figure seems to align with the wider recognition of female artists in the 1970's.

Unlike previous artistic revolts surrounding the idealistic female figure, this period for the first notable time (on a large scale) that saw women conveyed by women, or in fact, women conveyed by themselves. The male gaze that compromised so many depictions of woman in the Pre-Raphaelite era was diminished by women gaining a certain autonomy over how they want to be seen by their own audience. Perhaps the sexually charged power balance between painter and subject originating from the Madonna's blatant fetishization, can be cured by introducing female autonomy over their own bodies.

Some of the most notable feminist critiques of patriarchy seem to be most observable in traditional art; Simone De'Beauvoir in 'The Second Sex' famously noted how 'man is defined as a human being, whereas a woman as female'. Indeed it does follow (as seen through the previous discussion of the female figure in art functioning purely for male pleasure rather than as autonomous beings) that women in traditional art exist purely by their male influenced femininity; the definition of which is formulated to serve male needs. Such is supported by Freudian Psychoanalytic theory; Laura Mulvey's essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' focuses on Freud's concept of scopophilia to deduce that the gaze of the viewer is, in essence, a sexually charged instinct.. If this logic of women-painted-by-men being unable to escape sexualization, it follows that the only way to escape such a fate and create a realistic, flawed female character, they must be the creation of women artists.

Such a fact seemed to come into light in the 70's, ignited by essays by art historians such as Linda Nochlin, who noted how the fact there have been no female artists, implies the view of society that 'women are incapable of greatness'. The response was a feminist artistic revolt and restructuring of assumption that the audience of art is purely male. It was not just the rise of women artists and a wider recognition of their work that achieved this, but rather the close examination of all variables that bolstered misogyny in art. Feminist historians such as Pollock and Parker pulled apart the gender-loaded terms of the art world; 'old-master' and 'masterpiece' became a point of reference to demonstrate the lack of female input in history, and further encourage the revolution that was snowballing into the modern age.

Why can't one find syllabi and bibliographies covering issues of women, art, and feminism? What is the meaning of the almost complete lack of feminist studio and art history courses in the schools?

LISE VOGEL

Notable feminist artists of the period seem to directly address the passivity prevalent in misogynistic archetypes of women, which ultimately hold their roots in the passivity of the Madonna. Artists such as Martha Rosler in her feminist parody single channel video 'Semiotics of the Kitchen'⁵ (1975) features the artist as a generic cooking show host, who demonstrates with deadpan humor the uselessness of her kitchen utensils. Rosler notes how women's role in the production of food in the home transforms women into their submissive state, reminiscent of what is encouraged by the Madonna figure. Cindy Sherman



similarly challenged the restrictive dimension of feminist put forward by Madonna-esque notions through the expansive variety of her self portraits. Her series of 70 black and white self portraits show herself assuming the many roles of women in performance media, exposing the archetypes we offer as the only forms of character for women.

Despite these radical outbursts of the 70's, it seems that women created by women remains a source of controversy. Within contemporary art, a stronger focus on the feminine form and bodily ownership seems to have replaced the 70's focus on female archetypes. Artists such as Jenny Saville openly revert the purity of modesty from traditional religious art into a form of striking, self owned nudity. The female body still seems to be in need of ridding itself of male tropes of fetishization, whether that be of modesty (such of that of the Madonna) or hyper-sexualization (observable in Pre-Raphaelite work) , both of which assume male ownership over women's body.



It seems therefore that even in the 21st century, we as a collective are still required to strip away the mask of false, unrealistic femininity the Madonna helped to place on women throughout history. The fact feminist art is still very much of political importance within society, along with it still being widely criticized, we can assume it still draws upon restraints on women which are indeed present in even modern society



⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/womens-blog/2016/oct/03/feminist-art-of-the-1970s-knives-nudity-and-terrified-men>

THE REJECTION OF THE RENAISSANCE?

Indeed the feminist revolt seems like a necessary and justified response to the archetypes forced on women, which, in most cases can easily be traced back to some degree the implications the Renaissance Madonna imposed on femininity.

It seems undeniable that phases of patriarchal suppression such as the sexualization of bold femininity, to the passivity of the role of the housewife are derived by the influence of the idealized female of the pure virgin.

We must note however that this lies not at the fault of the femininity of the figure herself, but rather at the reactions to such a figure by its largely male audience. The Madonna, although responsible for a degree of female suppression emerged as a result of patriarchy, not faulty femininity.

With this fact in mind, the possibility of the figure being re-worked with a contemporary slant arises; perhaps, with a modern feminist mindset, we can rework the figure and reclaim her femininity that until now has functioned purely to appease male needs. Could the 70's idea of women by women allow the Madonna to merge into the modern feminist message? Could she, in feminist satire, become the new symbol of freedom? Observing that the 'female gaze' had in the 70's on women in art as a whole, it does seem like the next stage of revolt.

/‘JOIN OUR PROTEST, HOLY VIRGIN!’/