

Artist study:

In the Tate St. Ives standing in front of an expanse of pink, stretched over a canvas. Your eyes skim over the coated surface, not quite comprehending what they are seeing. Something catches your eye and you only just notice a small white triangle piercing the ocean of pink at the bottom of the painting; your brow quirks in confusion. Suddenly, the corners of your mouth twitch, curling into a smile. A bottom. Wait; really? It truly is a painting of a bottom. More specifically Huguette Caland's bottom. Huguette Caland's landscape of the body providing a delicate balance between suggestive and explicit. The work is celebratory of the female form and sexuality; not objectifying like many pieces previously seen throughout history. How did we find ourselves here? A female artist reclaiming her sexuality and body through her work. When in history did this develop? Is it only women who are able to portray the female body without creating ideals or forming images to elicit sexual desire? Let's travel back. How has the depiction of the female form changed over the years?

21st century

100 BC



It's hard to imagine a world today that doesn't have naked women depicted in art, but when did it all begin? We have to go back to c. 330BC, in ancient Greece. Up until this time only men had ever been shown naked in art. But Praxiteles was commissioned to celebrate the female body in three dimensions with his representation of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love and beauty.

He set about creating a man's "perfect" woman, a Goddess in human form, taking the most beautiful features from different women and mixing them together to create the sculpture. Would this have affected women in that society like it would now? Well, in Ancient Greece women were celebrated for their beauty. Praxiteles, created a role model for the women of that century by designing a male interpretation that arguably sexualised women. Aphrodite's nakedness was only one aspect of the work. Her stance and placement of her hands teased and seduced the onlooker - there are reports that the sculpture drove men mad with desire to the point that the sculpture was "raped" by a sailor. And the work inspired artists for centuries to come.

There was no change in how society viewed women from the Ancient Greek times to the Height of the Renaissance (1480s). Women were a legal object of the man in their lives. Many artists tried to recreate the idea of the Greek and Roman goddesses in all their perfection, whilst embodying lust and erotic pleasure. The artwork which was created was to help define and symbolise the society and culture. Much like in Ancient Greece, it was characterised by a search for an ideal. The way women were depicted in the art depended on whether they were married or single. Single women were painted nude, whereas married women were clothed. Women needed to be arousing in order to find a husband. Once married they became the property of the husband. Marriage removed the woman's right to consent to sexual intercourse, her husband had "ownership" over her body. Thus, making a woman's body purely to please and titillate to a man's need. They were not allowed to know another man, yet the men were allowed mistresses. One artist wrote during the Renaissance period, 'Could female flesh be depicted as beautiful, for attractiveness was immediately equated with unchastity; there was always the danger of the triumph of physical beauty over the spirit of the man being tempted into the pleasure of carnal love.'" This shows the view of women during the era; as a temptress who was to

blame for man's temptation into lust.



The painting *Venus of Urbino* by Titian 1538 (As seen on the left), was the first of a reclining nude. Her body mimics that of a Greek sculpture, but turned on the side. The painting was commissioned as a gift from a Duke to his young wife. It was a reminder of a woman's marital obligations of eroticism, fidelity and motherhood. The painting is very sexually erotic, as the woman in the painting looks as though she is

waiting for someone. And the light and warm colour of her body is in contrast to the dark background. The placement of her hand has been the subject of many discussions. What is the hand doing? Some argue that it was her covering herself up, but others have suggested she is pleasuring herself. Whatever you think that the hand is doing, it cannot be overlooked that the painting is depicting a passive naked woman, who is the object of male desire. This is especially true if the hand in question is being used to pleasure the woman.

The Pre-Raphaelite movement which was founded in 1848, saw changes in the depictions of women in art. The Pre-Raphaelites, were a secret society of young artists who opposed the Royal Academy's promotion of the ideal. They started to put women at the centre of their work, showing them as sexual creatures capable of sensuality, lust and passion. They were shown as powerful women, drawn from real life. And, above all, the women were given control. Most of the works placed women into medieval or literary settings to explore the anxiety of the society they lived in. These included adultery, motherhood, love, sex and death.

Many see this powerful portrayal of woman as a feminist movement; women were depicted as damsels in distress or femme fatales luring men into their dangerous world that they controlled.

A famous Pre-Raphaelite artist is Dante Gabriel Rossetti, in the image on the right, you can see Rossetti's *Lady Lilith*. Within the painting you can see Lilith front and centre, now this may seem like just another objectifying painting, yet it has sparked a great debate on whether Lilith is passive or holding the power. In the painting Lilith is not wearing a corset and the angle of her body is one which draws attention to her breasts, and the dress is also slipping off of her shoulder exposing more of her flesh. So, the question is, is the subject (Lilith) aware of her position in the painting or are we just seeing a yet another figure that Rossetti has arranged to please the viewer? Lilith within the painting is seemingly absorbed by her own image in a mirror, one critic wrote that she is, "completely engrossed in her own image... it does not reduce her power... she exercises fascination."



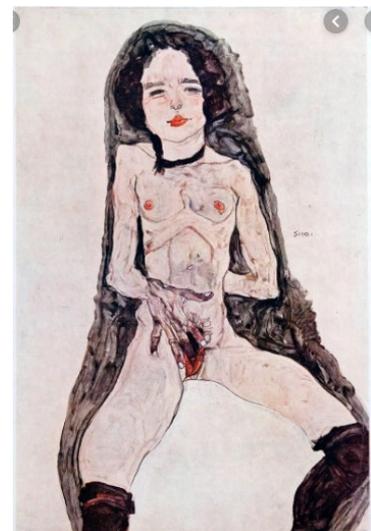
From just looking at the painting itself it is hard to decipher who holds the power within the painting - the viewer or Lilith. However, to accompany the painting is a poem which paints Lilith as the femme fatale. The poem, *Body's Beauty*, portrays Lilith as a seductive, dangerous and controlling woman, "Draws men to watch the bright web she can weave/ Till heart and body, and life are in its hold." This portrayal of women being a temptress can be seen as quite problematic. It creates the idea women who are in touch with their sexuality are dangerous to men. This brings us back to the idea which was present during the Renaissance, that women are to blame for men being tempted into lust and carnal desire. Although in the context of the objectification of the female form within art, it is also quite a big step forward. As Lilith holds the power and is claiming her own sexuality, it is hard for the viewer to objectify her due to her being aware of her alluring ways and purposely using them for her own agenda.

At first glance, *Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe* (The Luncheon on the Grass), by Edouard Manet, painted over 100 years later, c1862, looks like yet another degrading and objectifying painting of women. However, when studied further it isn't like any previous paintings. It famously depicts two fully dressed men, a scantily clad woman bathing in a lake and a naked woman picnicking with the men. This, again, is a first in the history of art - up until this painting, nude women represented figures



from mythology or allegory; and not from real life. It introduced the acceptance of naked women in art. Historically it was the male artist who would have control over the representation of the subject. However, in this painting Manet has given over the control to the model, allowing her to have power over the presentation of herself. The model Meurant, at the forefront of the painting, can be seen to hold a challenging stare which meets the gaze of the viewer. The model is not passive, like women were normally presented, but powerful and seems to own her sexuality. Theophile Thore-Burger, a French art critic described the nude as ugly and a risqué subject, this could be because Meurant's body wasn't that of a goddess or some mythical being, but her own, something with flaws and imperfections. This to a 19th century male may not have been appealing, as she wasn't being portrayed as this virginal goddess. But is it the start of women taking control of how they are represented and taking control of their own sexuality? By reversing the power dynamics can we start to see women as more than just an object of desire?

An artist which causes conflicting ideas is Egon Schiele (1890-1918). Schiele presented women in a way that subverted the established conventions of the society in which he lived in. He drew women who were skinny, their flesh taut over their bones and their skin mottled- they were anything but ideal. Schiele's drawings were erotic and sexually explicit, depicting young girls pleasuring themselves. Many might see the women being receptacles for masculine desire, however, one art critic, Jane Killir wrote that his, "drawings grant women an uncommon degree of sexual agency." Some may argue that the unlike the artists of his time who seemed to live in fear of female sexuality, for example Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, which depicts five women with angular, jagged bodies, which some have said portrays the fear and



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uncomfortability men had with female sexuality in those time, Schiele celebrated womens sexuality. Again, unlike previous depictions of women as being mythical, and goddess like, Schiele portrayed real women with often crude drawings. Although, just because Schiele was seen to be celebrating female sexuality does it mean that they weren't objectifying pieces of work? Although it is a liberation for women, it is one of the first times their sexuality hasn't been demonized or made to appear wrong. Can a woman have control over her sexuality if it is being depicted through the male gaze? Does it not end up just becoming a type of pornographic art?

Post First World War, a shift in the gender roles occurred. This could have been due to the women having to take on the roles and jobs of men when they had been at war (factories and farm work). Women started to change the way they dressed, opting for shorter hair, shorter skirts or even trousers over corsets which were previously worn. This doesn't mean that the depictions of women or even the social conventions changed much. Willem De Kooning (Born 1904), was an abstract expressionist artist, famous for his 'Women 1 (1950-52)' painting. De Kooning painted the woman using lascivious pinks, which created a loud and vulgar painting. The woman had a glaring smile, huge breasts and gaping eyes, a critic wrote that she had, 'a carnivalesque sense of sexual power and volatility.' The harsh brush strokes created a painting that could be seen as objectifying and violent. Although, De Kooning said that, 'beauty becomes petulant to me. I like the grotesque. It's more joyous.' But, just because the painting isn't beautiful doesn't mean the objectification of the woman isn't happening. The sexual promiscuity of the woman instantly causes the painting to be an image for desire and perversion.



Ironically, Elaine De Kooning's (the wife of Willem De Kooning) art work were the antithesis of her husband's. Like her husband, De Kooning created paintings with an abstract expressionist style to create sexually-charged images of men rather than women. Her goal was to reverse the standard of male artists and a female model dynamic. De Kooning wrote, 'women painted women; Vigee- Lebrun, Mary Cassatt etc and I thought, men always paint the opposite sex, and I wanted to paint men as sex objects.' Many of her portraits captured the sexual power of her subject, to challenge the male privilege of looking and the female role of being the object that is looked at. Yes, this is a woman artist claiming the power which for so long women never had the opportunity to possess, however, it just creates this cycle of objectification. It is no feminist feat doing the exact same to men as has been done to women, reducing them, taking away their power and identity. Some may argue that it's fair, that if men were able to objectify and reduce women for so long

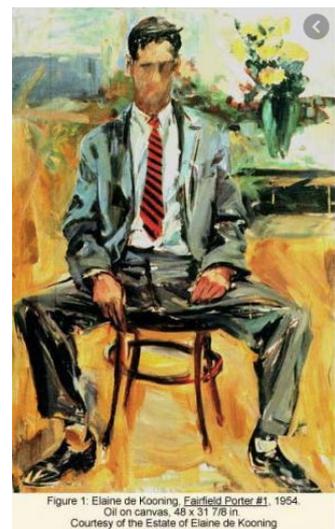
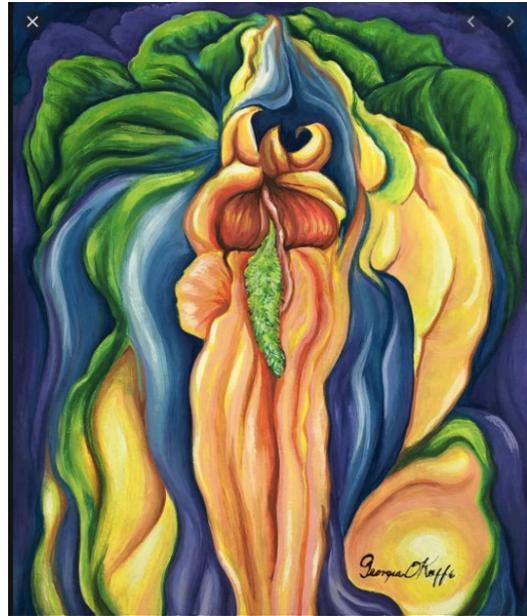


Figure 1: Elaine de Kooning, *Fairfield Porter #1*, 1964. Oil on canvas, 49 x 31 7/8 in. Courtesy of the Estate of Elaine de Kooning

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then why can't women artists do that to men? Well, it doesn't solve the issue, which is taking away people's identity, and presenting them as purely sexual objects.

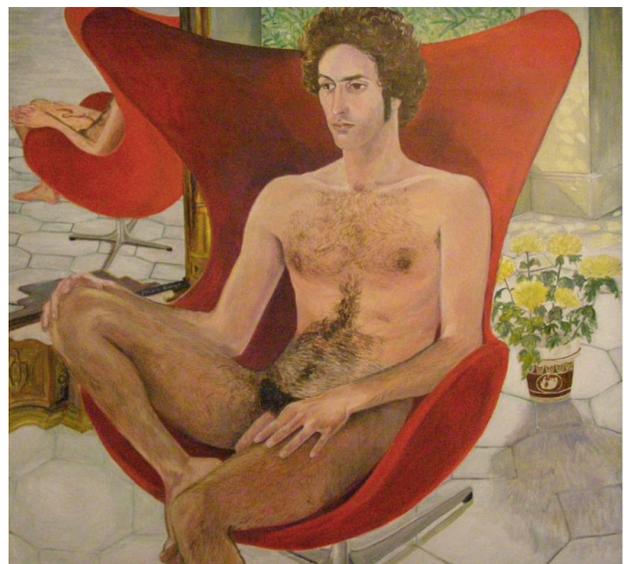
An artist who was working during the time of the De Kooning's was Georgia O'Keeffe, whose career spanned throughout the 20th century. O'Keeffe was very much against the gender divide which was present in the avant-garde world. Most people know O'Keeffe for her flower paintings, which bring to mind the image of the vagina. The paintings are very yonic in nature. However, O'Keeffe found herself being placed into a box by critics of her time; they treated her paintings one dimensionally as flower paintings and that was all. Whereas white, male artists had the privilege of having numerous, contrasting and layered interpretations of their work. O'Keeffe lived in a time where there was unspoken assumptions of woman being inherently inferior, and in the word of art, to be a "good woman artist", was actually being, "good for a woman." Her work now in



the context of the 21st Century can be celebrated, finally it can be given the interpretations they deserve. The abstraction of the vagina, creating paintings that both represent, celebrate but also abstract it, allows for little objectification. To some it is inherently obvious what the flowers actually depict, but for many who are less observant might only see them at face value. This instantly decreases the number of people able to objectify the images.

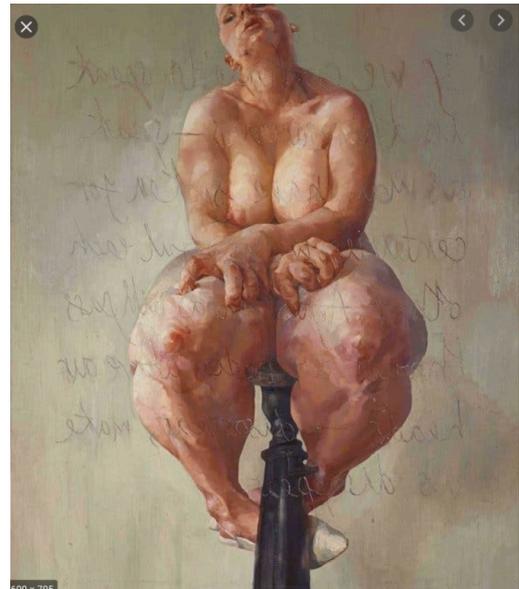
Sylvia Sleigh, was a feminist artist very prevalent in the 1970s. Her paintings predominantly focused on the male figure but she did, sometimes, paint women. Her goal was to create paintings which didn't reduce the subject in the painting to a sexualised muse, which then makes it the subject of a "voyeuristic gaze" (Magda Michalska). Sleigh wrote that she

wanted to, 'portray both man and woman as intelligent and thoughtful people with dignity and humanism that emphasises love and joy.' Unlike many paintings of the nude, which normally painted them for the viewers pleasure rather than trying to convey something about the model, she wanted to have the person's inner self as the main focus, rather than it being the external image. Sleigh was very against the idea of the model being portrayed as an object, like they have previously been. Women have been, 'portrayed as objects of desire in humiliating poses. I don't mind the 'desire' part, it's the 'object' that's not very nice.' (Sleigh). Desire is



a natural instinct, one that no one can control. When it comes to the idea of desire and the human body, there is instantly negative connotations towards it. However, as Sleight wrote, desire isn't the enemy. It is when we strip people of their inner self and only see them as an object. An object is something that is owned, something that doesn't have rights or any control over itself. With the objectification of a human, we are essentially removing their identity and human rights. Although it could be argued that the people within the paintings can still be objectified, as many would just see a nude form and without truly observing and knowing the concept behind them could just see them as a sexual object.

A modern day artist who creates huge paintings with nude women with their features exaggerated and enlarged, is Jenny Saville. When studying Saville's paintings, parallels can be seen in the portrayal of the nudes with Sleight's. We are able to see these powerful women on canvas that seem to loom over the viewer. Unlike many depictions of the nude throughout history, the women in Saville's paintings are not passive but, instead, dominant. It seems like there is a reversal; the nude shifting from the observed and objectified to the observer, almost daring you to objectify them. Yes, the paintings are depicting nude women, but the power and control that they hold is undeniable. They are allowing you to see their flesh, whilst controlling the prerogative.



So now, standing here in front of such unapologetically erotic paintings by Huguette Caland, the progression of the nude from what is originally was is evident. It seems less now about the physical and visual representation of the female form, but more on expressing the inner self of the individual in the painting. It has become an empowering reclamation of our bodies as women. Huguette Caland for instance, creates paintings derived off of her own body. Her paintings are vast blocks of colour, full of eroticism but also humour. As one critic stated that her, 'works offer liberated depictions of the female physique at a time when the prevailing fashion was all about being tall and thin.'



Huguette Caland lived in a time where her physique which was more voluptuous was not something to be admired, to be beautiful you needed to be tall and thin. What is truly inspiring and something that has influenced my work so much is her ability to take her body something that wasn't considered "beautiful" and create pieces of art which celebrate and present her body in such a humorous and undeniably eye catching way. Her use of colour when depicting her body also presents Caland's humour and personality. It is hard to objectify her body or even judge it when her work is so playful and witty. The raw eroticism within her work shows her comfortability and love for her own sexuality and when going and viewing her work in an exhibition it feels like a privilege to be able to see her body but most importantly her exuberant personality. Some may argue that having large canvases with her literal bottom on it could be subject to objectification especially to people who may

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not be as inclined to understand her work fully. However, when at one of her exhibitions you feel so immersed in her personality and life that it seems to just make sense and not be some kind of crude or objectifying exhibition. For many women her work feels so liberating and celebratory, it makes you look at your own body and fall in love with it because you've seen a woman show the true power of a not "perfect" body and how amazing and beautiful it can be, sometimes you have to just look at it in a different way.

In conclusion, it is clear that as we go through history, the portrayal of women has changed greatly. Many artists have made huge strides in how women are depicted and tried to get rid of the stigma involving both women's sexuality and body. It is interesting to see how we have gone from women's bodies being demonized and stripped down to only its naked form, to the celebration and reclaiming of it. However, throughout this it is clear that even with all of these big strides towards the de-objectification of the female form, it is hard to say that it has truly happened. Even with works from Jenny Saville and Huguette Caland, objectification can still occur, this is due to the sheer explicitness of their work. They are unapologetically sexual, which is great and should be celebrated. However, we mustn't forget that many viewers of these works will look at them at face value and won't take the time to understand the meaning and agenda behind them. To the artists they are reclaiming the power and their sexuality. However, to many it will be simply overly explicit pieces of work with nude figures that are an easy object of desire. This is what really spurred my direction of work. I wanted to celebrate the female form and sexuality, but with little to no possibility of them being judged or objectified, hence the completed abstraction. Blocks of colour and simple line make it hard to decipher what the shapes came from. Many may not be able to see the female form making the paintings up, meaning that many could just appreciate them as pieces of beautiful art without the objectification.