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Iconologia

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Thesis submitted
to the College of Creative Arts
at West Virginia University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
In Painting

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Abstract

Heather Rios

The ideas and images presented in this paper, and the accompanying exhibition represent a portion of my research in the subjects of the Female Nude in Art History, as well as my exploration of related subjects including female self portraits, the *male gaze* in art, and the psychological impact of self-made, self-representations by women both in art history, and in contemporary American social media (i.e. “selfies”).

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The Female Nude

One of the most powerful rallying cries of contemporary feminism is “My body, my choice”. Though feminism in its entirety does not consist exclusively of corporeal rights, the female body has been a focus of much contemporary feminist art. Feminists, especially after the mid-twentieth century, often focus on issues pertaining to the objectification of women, women’s reproductive rights, and violence against women. Contemporary feminists often seek to show how all of these issues are interrelated and many psychologists agree that “Culturally common and often condoned in the U.S., the sexual objectification of women is a driving and perpetuating component of gender oppression, systemic sexism, sexual harassment, and violence against women.”¹

If the objectification of women is indeed a driving force in oppression and violence against women, then what role does the feminist artist have in helping change the culture of objectification? Though there are endless possibilities, one powerful method is through women reclaiming the female nude in art.

¹ Emma Rooney, The Effects of Sexual Objectification on Women’s Mental Health.
<https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/appsyh/opus/issues/2016/spring/rooney>

Female; *Bodies*

As art is almost always manifested in some type of physical reality, so the body is the woman's only physical manifestation of herself which is always fully and only hers. Though the human being is certainly much more than a physical entity, it is at the same time, an object in the most real sense. Yet it is only after death that we refer to the body as a *mere* thing, detached somewhat from the essence of the person. Phrases such as "he's in a better place", "where did they place the body" etc. show the linguistic concept ascribed to the Western idea of the separation of personhood from the body upon death.

When a woman is objectified, her personhood is being murdered through language. The body, though animated, living, breathing, is separated from its personhood by the objectifier, thus destroying their humanity. Examples are abundant in popular culture. Actions such as catcalling, extreme photoshopping of fashion magazines, using pet names in a condescending manner, exploitative pornography, etc. These actions all serve to disembody the female victim. The male gaze is not inherently

objectifying. Neither is it objectifying for women to celebrate their bodies or sexuality. Objectification of women does not occur from women appearing nude in paintings, movies or photographs. Objectification occurs when our value is reduced to only our bodies, and our value as human beings is diminished or eliminated. Much of this objectification occurs within the realm of language.

In their famous *Do Women Have To Be Naked To Get Into the Met. Museum?*² the Guerilla Girls were not protesting nude art, but rather the social and institutional structures that have made art, museums and galleries misogynistic. The history of painting is filled with hundreds of examples of nude women. But it is not the nudity itself that is objectifying. It is rather, the cultural, linguistic and contextual narratives that correspond with those nude paintings and it is difficult to free these women from their contexts because art itself has been birthed through these same narratives.

² <https://www.nga.gov/Collection/art-object-page.139856.html>

In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger argues that the language of visual representation which began in Western Civilization with oil painting is still the visual language and framework for how all imagery is conceived in our culture.³ From cinema to advertising, our ways of image-making are deeply rooted in the history of painting. In the middle of the sixteenth century, Cesare Ripa produced his famous *Iconologia*, which was a compilation of “moral emblems” or personifications of specific moral attributes. His work influenced allegorical and figurative painting and became a type of reference book for writers, artists, poets and more.⁴ The ways in which women became personifications of moral attributes and the meaning applied to specific poses, gestures, objects, and placements in art history reflects the ideas of those artists who created the works as well as the desires of their audience. Overwhelmingly, the audience was male and the creators were male. Women were the objects of these works, and as moral allegories, also the bearers of cultural meaning or simply the object of visual pleasure for the male viewer. Individuality and personhood is irrelevant when objectification occurs.

³ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*. (London: BBC, 1973), 84-87.

⁴ Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia* (London: Printed by Benj. Motte, 1709.)

The gender difference in representation is easily noticed in American culture when comparing something as simple as historically significant statues. Male statues are almost always specific men, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, etc. They represent virtues, such as heroism, and bravery, but the greater meaning is their representation of specific people. Statues of women, when they do exist, are often anonymous women who are only allegories for specific virtues. The most famous in the United States is the Statue of Liberty or Lady Liberty. Individual women are rarely celebrated or given visual representation of themselves. Rather they are bearers of meaning, bearers of culture, allegories and objects and not creators of culture.⁵

A particularly poignant moment in the history of female objectification is Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*. When approaching the painting with the knowledge that Picasso was a serial womanizer and said such things as "For me, there are only two kinds of women, goddesses and doormats"⁶ a feminist may rightly see the work as both a deconstruction of form and an ingenious way to more fully strip women of their personhood. The disembodiment of the women from their personhood seems irrelevant to Picasso, their corpses become no different than the wooden masks donned by some of the figures. The deconstruction of the female form into planes,

⁵ Laura Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*(Screen, 1975), 19.

⁶ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/jacqueline-roque-picassos-wife-love-muse-1412090662>

geometric shapes, and other motifs welded together by supposedly masterful and violent brushwork, turned women's bodies into a hybrid. Not only empty and soulless, exploited for titillation, but now the lines between bodily forms and 'mere objects' were completely blurred.

Picasso's most common subject, the female nude, was also a favorite of many artists throughout history. But it is not just the grotesque and mutilated figures that are problematic for the feminist, but also the robust, cheery, idealized portraits of the *Master* artists. Peter Paul Rubens is often celebrated for painting what some people feel are more *real* and less idealized figures, but Rubens certainly had no agenda to raise any woman's self-esteem. In fact, he said, "I paint a woman's big rounded buttocks so that I want to reach out and stroke the dimpled flesh."⁷ The women were clearly created for male viewing pleasure. They were again, mere bodies, a hollow shell. He seemed to have no interest in the actual lives or experiences of the models, but only in their "dimpled flesh."

Although it may be easy to place these artists in the past and excuse them due to being in a different era, the effect that their presence has, both in art history books,

⁷ <http://www.historyofpainters.com/rubens.htm>

in museums and even in popular culture imbue them with a sense of authority and force their viewers to acquiesce to their position.

If the female nude has served to degrade and objectify women, then what role, if any should this subject have in feminist art? Wouldn't it be better to simply scrap the subject entirely? They exist, and we've been forced to accept their existence. The Art World has accepted and continues to accept these works with no foreseeable change to come, and rightly so. Iconoclasm has no place in any conversation about art.

Self-Made Women

But perhaps these images can be *displaced* by images which portray females in non-objectified roles. In *The Art of Reflection: Women Artists' Self-portraiture in the Twentieth Century*, Marsha Meskimmon argues that;

The power of the artist (usually male) over the nude female model was multiple; he had economic control, 'aesthetic' or representational control and social control within the economy of the studio. When women artists approached the subject of the nude female in representation, they frequently subverted these power politics by representing themselves. This confounds simple constructions of the difference between the subject and

the object of the work (the woman artist is both) and forecloses on the traditional disempowerment of the female nude.⁸

Interestingly, one of the first women who sought to do this was a contemporary of Picasso. German modernist painter Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876-1907). “With her bold experiments in subject matter, color, modeling, and brushwork, Modersohn-Becker was among the painters, along with Picasso and Matisse, who created modernism in the first years of the twentieth century.”⁹ Though virtually unknown to most people, Modersohn-Becker was very influential in early modernism and is considered to be the first woman in art to create nude self-portraits. Perhaps her work didn’t have the erotic appeal that (male) collectors sought after in works like Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger*. Or maybe other reasons led to her being mostly forgotten by art historians, but her work was certainly unprecedented. Her works, such as *Reclining Mother and Child* (1906) show an empathy towards her subjects which would have been impossible for any of her male predecessors to convey. Here, the woman is neither objectified, nor idealized, but simply is. Tragically, Modersohn-Becker’s life ended less than three weeks after the birth of her child, at the age of 31.¹⁰

⁸ Marsha Meskimmon, *The Art of Reflection: Women Artists' Self-portraiture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 2.

⁹ John Colapinto, *Paula Modersohn-Becker: Modern Painting's Missing Piece* (The New Yorker: October 29, 2013).

¹⁰ Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art and Society*, (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd. 2012), 290.

Since Modersohn-Becker, many other female artists have painted both female nudes, and nude self-portraits. In the second wave feminism of the 1960's and 70's, artists such as Hannah Wilke and Carolee Schneemann used their bodies as subjects and confronted both the male gaze and the idealization of the female form in art. Ana Mendieta, in her *Siluetas Series* (1973-77) placed herself within manipulated scenes of nature, with mud, plants, trees and other elements.¹¹ Her work connected the female body with nature in a way that highlighted the creative powers of the female body; though not in an idealized fashion of the goddesses of the past, but in a naturalistic way which women can relate to. She removed the objectification of the female body, by removing herself from the context of modern society and placing herself directly in nature. In this way, she had complete freedom to control the content of her work, and also the context.

¹¹ Ibid., 233.

Self-Reflecting Female Artists

As women were finally becoming more accepted in the art world, they also began to reclaim the subject of the female nude. Curator Indira Cesarine states:

One might ask - are nudes of women by women really any different than those by men? When viewing the work of these artists it is clear that not only do women have a very different voice and treatment of the nude, but also are breaking boundaries with work that often reveals details only a women can understand....an intimacy between women, between artist and subject that is fearless and empowering.¹²

Other female artists since the 1970's have been exploring issues related to body image, violence against women, and including their own narratives in their work.

Among those, Tracey Emin stands out as someone who became naked both in a figurative sense through her vulnerability, but also literally in some of her works. In her famous work *My Bed*(1998) her body is not physically in the work. But yet her body is very much *implied*.¹³ From the messy sheets, to the random discarded items on the floor, the viewer may not see her body, but they experience her body through the record of her body movements on the objects.

¹² *In the Raw: The Female Gaze on the Nude*. Juxtapoz.

<https://www.juxtapoz.com/news/painting/in-the-raw-the-female-gaze-on-the-nude>

¹³ <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/emin-my-bed-l03662>

In Emin's *CV (Cunt Vernacular)* piece, a similar self-portrait is created by Emin as she records video of her belongings, her papers, clothes, and random objects. The camera shows her life's surroundings as Emin's voice describes traumas and abuse she had endured in her life. There is no image of the artist until the very end when she appears nude and folded up on the ground into almost a fetal position. In Emin's *Exorcism of the Last Painting I Ever Made* (1996) She locked herself in a gallery for two weeks and painted while nude. Again she parallels the nakedness of her physical body, with the exposing her innermost thoughts and fears to the viewer.

By confusing the roles of artist and model, Emin transforms the seductive object into an active subject and, by seizing the initiative, issues a challenge as well as a promise. She still opens herself to our gaze, but there is a condition attached; we have to acknowledge that her sexuality is hers to offer, not ours to take.... When she was a student at Maidstone College of Art, Emin exhibited a series of female nudes influenced by the German Expressionists. The poses were explicit, and she was asked to remove the work on the grounds of obscenity. Why, though, did images that are on display in museums and are considered an important part of art history become offensive when represented by a woman artist? The issue is one of propriety, a word that refers both to ownership and to decency and thereby, indicates the links that unite the two concepts. Seemly behaviour is a sign of subservience, an indication that a

woman's, sexuality is not hers to explore as she pleases but is subject to rules that it is unwise to disobey. Disdain for decorum marks you out as a slut and a threat - as someone who asserts the right to employ her sexuality as she chooses rather than as society sees fit.¹⁴

“Selfies” and the Democratization of Self-Portraits

“When women use their own bodies in their artwork, they are using their *selves*; a significant psychological factor converts these bodies or faces from object to subject”¹⁵

Many argue that the explosion of photographic self-portraiture (or *selfies*) is a symptom of a vain and shallow culture, often using female celebrities as a focus of their accusations. I view the phenomenon as something positive, especially for women. The fight for bodily autonomy is at the root of many feminist struggles. Media that is becoming more and more accessible to most American women and allows women to produce images of themselves means that women become the makers of their own meaning instead of being forced be bearers of meaning for men. Though

¹⁴ Sarah Kent, *Tracey Emin: Flying High*, (White Cube, 2017).

http://whitecube.com/artists/tracey_emin/text/tracey_emin_tracey_emin_flying_high/

¹⁵ Lucy Lippard, *The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: European and American Women's Body Art*, (Art in America, 1976), 73.

many accessibility issues remain, the democratization of the self-portrait has created an entirely new visual culture.

As Michel Foucault has shown, in the modern period the body has become a highly political object, a crucial site for the exercise and regulation of power. In this context, power is constituted both through the production of knowledge concerning the body and through self-regulation, through the individual exercising control over the self. The operations of power are thus not simply coercive, exercised from elsewhere over the individual, but are also self-regulatory and organized from within the subject.¹⁶

Medium and Process

All of the imagery used in my exhibition is derived from photographic self-portraits of women. My cross-stitched pieces all originated from studying poses of nude females in famous paintings from art history. I analyzed the nature of the pose and summarized each pose using key descriptive words. For example, “Nude woman reclining on sofa” I then used my keywords in a google image search, so that the

¹⁶ Lynda Nead, *Female nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*. (Routledge), 10.

imagery would be random and would place these traditional painting poses into a more contemporary context. Not surprisingly some of the results returned images that would be considered pornography by some people, but my goal was to find the most similar image to the specific painting I was studying, or a common pose repeated in art history. After finding an image that I wanted, I then edited and translated it using an online pattern making program for cross stitch.

When creating these patterns, I found that the process of editing and translating the image from a photograph to a pattern and then into a textile seemed to completely change the psychological aura of the original photograph. My desire was to for the images to be displaced from their original context and translated into a medium which has a deep history of gender associations. During the same period when the language of oil painting was developing, women were almost entirely excluded from public life, including art. “In the Renaissance, creative pursuits became gendered and “the ‘male’ art of painting was elevated above the ‘female’ art of embroidery...embroidery and needlework came to signify domesticity and ‘femininity’.”¹⁷ These gender norms certainly have exceptions, but the stereotypes and associations have persisted. I have admittedly relied on these associations as another layer of contextual meaning in my

¹⁷ Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art and Society*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 2015), 74-75.

work. It is my hope that the viewer will associate the medium of these works (cross-stitch embroidery) with domesticity, femininity and assume a female creator. By using a medium that has a specific cultural history but also referencing a male dominated history of oil painting, I sought to create a hybridity and ambiguity that is open-ended and asks more questions than it answers.

Iconologia

I have referenced the history of painting in several ways. By using selfies that have similar poses to famous artworks, I intended to create an identification of myself as someone who has a knowledge of the language of painting. I have also chosen the title *Iconologia* as a direct reference to not only Cesare Ripa's work but also the language of allegorical and figural painting. My desire was to offer a different perspective of the female nude in the context of art. These women are anonymous, but they are not passive objects. They exist as themselves, as active participants in the creation process. By associating them with *Iconologia*, and with many troupes of oil painting, the viewer may seek to place meaning on them. But they are emblems of only

themselves. Acting, doing, being, and refusing labels of virtue or vice. The titles for these works are taken directly from *Iconologia* as well. I searched for phrases within the book that contained the word “she” followed directly by a verb (*she leans, she makes, she is* etc). I wanted the titles to show an active female presence rather than a passive object.

By using a medium that was traditionally viewed as primarily a feminine activity, it allows me to define the boundaries of the medium myself instead of being compared to “Old Masters” and the male-dominated art of the past. Whereas a female painter will be compared to only a very few female artists, someone who works with textiles is compared to the mostly anonymous women of the past and to contemporary feminists artists. It bypasses the attempt to fit into a man’s world and instead expands on the world that women have already been living in for hundreds of years. There is not a specific meaning that I am trying to convey to the viewer, but instead, the viewer’s background, knowledge of art and/or craft and possibly their gender will affect how the work is perceived.

Figures

Guerrilla Girls, from the *Guerrilla Girls Talk Back Series*, 1989, Screenprint on paper

Titian, *The Venus of Urbino*, 1538, Oil on canvas

Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O Version O)*, 1935, Oil on canvas

Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Reclining Mother and Baby*, 1906, oil on canvas

Ana Mendieta, *Tree of Life* from the *Siluetas* Series, 1976

Tracey Emin, CV (*Cunt Vernacular*), 1987, Video, projection, color and sound (stereo)

Tracey Emin, *Exorcism of the Last Painting I Ever Made*, 1996, Video, projection, colour and sound (stereo)

Heather Rios, *She Gazes*, 2017. Handmade Cross-stitched embroidery.

Heather Rios, *She Stretches*, 2017, Handmade Cross-stitched embroidery.

Heather Rios, *She Leans*, 2017, Handmade Cross-stitched embroidery.

Heather Rios, *She Holds*, 2017, Handmade Cross-stitched embroidery.

Heather Rios, *She Makes*, 2017, Handmade Cross-stitched embroidery.

Heather Rios, *She Is*, 2017, Handmade Cross-stitched embroidery.

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