

1807876

Chloe Bennett

BA Hons Illustration

Louise Burston

Word Count- 2380

Keywords- Glamour, Perception and Empowerment

Proposal for Independent Enquiry

The aim of this independent enquiry is to investigate and debate the dilemma that artists, illustrators, comic artists and women as a whole are facing in modern times. There are many research books, manifestos and arguments that have been put forth in regard to how we should responsibly represent females in the media. As illustrators, we have an obligation to present an acceptable representation of females in our work. This brings many questions to the forefront, the main one I would ask is: Is it anti feminist to portray an archetypal glamour girl in images?. I find this subject of particular interest as it is the main focus in my work. Glamour models, Hollywood, Playboy and the like fascinate me. Many theorists, philosophers, artists and models themselves have written about this issue.

Glamour



Figure 1: Belle Wringer (Elvgren, G. 1941)

Perhaps this could be an umbrella term to some, however the definition of glamour is

‘the special, exciting and attractive quality of a person, place, or activity.’

(Cambridge Dictionary | English Dictionary, Translations & Thesaurus, 2020)

This could of course be applied to anything and any attribute someone has, but in the eyes of the western world thanks to the media and movie makers this term means a specific look and expectation for women to be attractive and successful. There have always been specific beauty trends and standards in history all over the world and in all cultures for both men and women. The difference now is the mass exposure of these ideals to the public across all cultures and also people having the ability to change themselves to suit this. Money, status and a whole new face is now accessible to everyone if that person wants it bad enough.

Considered to be the father of 'glamour art' as we know it now is the legendary Gil Elvgren, the first of my key artists. Known as the Norman Rockwell of cheesecake (Meisel 2008) in reference to the trends of that time period and popular influences. He used the process of photographing a model in a desired position and then painting them in a hyper realistic style in oil paints. Elvgren would then change the features of the women to create a fantasy image. This would be what he perceived to be 'dream girls' and put unrealistic looking women in everyday situations to create a fantasy. He made it clear to his admirers and colleagues that they were just that, a fantasy and couldn't be a realistic woman of that era. Interestingly, when one observes his

paintings in conjunction with the original photograph from a twenty first century perspective there is very little difference between the two. One could argue that Elvgren's 'tweaks' are less invasive than what someone would produce on photoshop for modern icons such as Kim Kardashian. (Kelby, 2011)

Elvgren was interviewed many times throughout his career and he was very forthcoming and sincere about his occupation. He believed that he was portraying a more natural and realistic woman in his paintings. He said "women are beautiful and smarter then they ever were before and not tying themselves in like they used too" (Modern man magazine, 1951). He grew up seeing the corseted, stiff and repressed female. So there is little wonder that he found himself progressive and liberating for women after all it was still rare for a woman to wear jeans in the 1930s. (Meisel, 2008)

A surprising revelation in the research of glamour artists is that a great amount were female, such as Zoe Mozert . They believed that they were promoting liberation for women. Showcasing the average woman and making it clear when she is a fantasy woman. Contrary to popular belief, women are thought to be the biggest appreciators of glamour art.

When asked if she thought that glamour modelling and stripping (general public nudity for money) was anti-gender and degrading for women the burlesque superstar Dita Von Teese replied:

'I've really only come under fire when it's someone who doesn't know that my audience is mainly women.' She then went on to say 'you don't get to decide for someone else what is degrading. In my opinion, we all have a right to be objectified if that's what we want.' (Archer, 2012)

This is a compelling and controversial statement from Von Teese. It is difficult to argue with but I'm sure it can be replied too with many counter arguments. Some might ask are women doing it for the right reasons? And Could this potentially be a bad example to young women? She has replied to many questions on this subject matter for different articles and could potentially be a key thinker in this enquiry as many people see her as a major representative of the glamour industry although controversially due to her surgery and advocacy of the corset.

Perception



Figure 2: The birth of Venus (Botticelli. Est.1485)

Perception is regarded to mean the way in which people generally view and understand something. This is very much true in the way women are perceived by the public, as a society we have been exposed to many different archetypal females. The archetypal female is something that is complex and could mean a slightly different thing to each individual. However, have we subconsciously learned to see women in a stereotypical way due to media and cultural influences? When considering how we represent women in art we must consider these archetypal women as they have been created from ideologies and therefore the ideologists perception of the female gender psychologically.

Basia Sliwinska is a practice led researcher and theorist who has written a book named 'The female body in the looking glass'. This book discusses the female body in art and how we see it. She explains her theories and research

through the metaphor of 'the looking glass' in reference to the book Alice's Adventures in wonderland. She proposes a concept of what she calls gender-land, a place where no binary rules apply. This is an eccentric proposal that seems very far away from the way we live now, but before she gets to this proposal she analyses and compares archetypal women in history and religion created by the patriarchy, which is of course essential to understand in aid of this enquiry.

The most poignant chapter of her book is the comparison of two well known archetypal women in history, Venus vs. Medusa. The perceived 'good girl' vs. the ultimate 'bad girl' of mythology.

Sliwinska has a unique perspective on gender issues. She analyses this as a Catholic Eastern European woman, which interests me greatly as this is my own heritage. In the UK we have the privilege of having more freedom, democracy and rights for our women. It is easy to forget how far we have come in comparison to our sisters in Europe where Catholic rules are given priority and autonomy of your own body as a woman is limited.

Sliwinska stresses how the portrayal of Venus (fig.2) a Goddess of purity, chastity and innocence is ardently portrayed as a role model to women and girls by the church, as her legend embodies what every good girl should be. In

the opposite direction we have the persona of Medusa, an evil temptress who's sexual desires can kill you with just one look.

'Original sin is concerned with dualism and juxtaposes beauty and the holy birth with monstrosity, lust and filthy labour' (Zebrowska 1993)

One artist Sliwinska analyses is Alicja Zebrowska. She is an ardent feminist who grew up in communist Poland and then experienced the re-introduction of Catholic dominance which was shortly followed by the abortion ban.

To address the issue Zebrowska created a jaw dropping piece named 'original sin' in 1993. This was a video installation of a woman pleasuring herself and then atmospherically giving birth to a barbie doll. The aim of this was to show that the female anatomy is looked at as disgusting, sinful and women are not meant to have sexual organs for pleasure but for the sole purpose of creating children. The myth of Medusa illustrates that 'female sexuality is the origin of all evil'. The reaction of people not being able to look and turning away to the video was designed to prove the artists theory that we have an inherent belief that this behaviour is disgusting and that women should not be doing things like that. The woman then births a doll that represents Venus. A beautiful little doll, the perception of what women should be.

Some people may find this piece 'unnecessary' or 'anti-male' but it is important in understanding the opinions of others and how female art can be perceived across the globe. Sliwinska analyses a number of different artists, theories and ideologies. Some of these are definitely controversial in my opinion and will help challenge other theorists and artists I will research within this enquiry and hopefully help me form a fully fledged response to my question.

Empowerment



Fig 3: we can do it! (J. Howard Miller, 1943)

Maria Elena Buszek is a professor and researcher with a passion for pin up that led her to write a book 'Pin up Grrrls' defending the 'feminist pin up' this term meaning the empowerment of women through the use of pin up glamour.

This is some what of an oxymoron and perfectly illustrates the dilemma that we face as illustrators and also as women perfectly. Her research is very informative and includes analysis from feminists with contradictory opinions on the way that we are seen as women. She quotes the feminist writer

Nochlin:

'As a child I marvelled at the grotesque beauties within the Esquire Magazine, those endless legs! Those bowed feet! Absolute freaks of nature! (Nochlin, 2000)

Buszek then goes on to write how young feminists are still fascinated by pin up. Pin up designs have beauty, rebellion, attitude and also are unapologetic about being that way.



Fig. 4 : Janeane Garfalo, Laws of the Bandit Queens (Smith.A, 2000)

Buszek goes into great depth on the subject and with one brilliantly illustrated example of the power of the pin up is when photographer Ali Smith took a portrait shot of feminist comedian and militant anti-glamour girl Janeane Garfalo. When asked about the photo she had taken Playboy photographer Smith said:

"I envisioned that she had perhaps knocked the playboy bunny down, stolen her ears, and was then smoking a cigarette in victory" (Smith.A, 2000)

This shot then became popular in a way that Smith and Garfalo may not have expected. Buszek states that people viewed this as a sexy, confident and intimidating shot and argues that Garfalo has never come across quite as beautiful as she does here.

"She is a beautiful woman in a very real, cool, un-Hollywood way, who has managed to punch a hole in standards of Hollywood beauty... her sexuality in this picture is based on her exuding confidence, which is more traditionally why men are considered sexy. Her sexuality comes across to me like she is totally in control and that is key" (Smith.A , 2000)

This definitely makes a great argument for feminist pin ups. It exposes the public to a different kind of beauty like that of J.Howell Millers 'We can do it!' (Fig.4) which demonstrates how responsible representation of women can bring empowerment to women. This piece was used in a campaign to get women to help in the war effort of World War Two, getting jobs in health care and factories to keep the nation strong and of course greatly helped defeat the

opposition and keep the economy as stable as it could be. In creating this image J.Howell Miller challenged the perception of women, therefore making women feel empowered and like they don't have to be a little woman at home anymore. (Young and Young, 2010)

Throughout this research Buszek discusses The many feminist waves there have been. It is important to understand these movements in order to form a valid response in this enquiry. Most importantly she discusses more modern movements, especially that of the 1980's where there was a great response the anti-pornography movement that had been started by feminists some years before. She believes that this movement potentially subverted the reputation of 'the feminist'. The right wing and conservatives praised this movement as it would create a more wholesome image of the women. This then went on to actually set women back in the eyes of many, actually limiting what a woman can or can't do with her body. This led to the response of many feminists 'coming out' as it was said in the 80's and doing something about it. In some cases, radically. The artist and former sex worker Annie Sprinkle created an art work called 'The Anatomy of a pin up photo' which was a stance to gain recognition of sexual self expression for women. Which certainly represents empowerment in the eyes of many.

In conclusion

Studying key artists such as Gil Elvgren, Zoe Mozert and Dita Von Teese will give me great insight into the field of glamour and what the perceived problem is with this genre. Is it the media media's representation of glamour, meaning the ideal beauty standards that young people should look up too.

My next point of research will be the anti glamour feminist, Basia Sliwinska has formed an interesting analysis that will help to understand different points of view to my own and people such as Dita Von Teese. She talks of the perception of women being nothing but patriarchal dogma and that we should make a stance against this system.

This will conclude with the balanced, but a critical and honest evaluation by Maria Elena Buszek. She truly believes that glamour and pin-up is empowerment and that it must continue to encourage young women into being whatever they want.

Using the the key words of Glamour, Perception and Empowerment I have come to decide the question of my independent enquiry which is:

Is it responsible to create glamourised and sexual images of women in twenty first century art and illustration?

My intention is to research this question as thoroughly as possible as this is an important issue in both my practice and the practice of others.

Bibliography

Americanartarchives.com. 2020. Zoe Mozert, Zoe Mozert. [online] Available at: <<http://www.americanartarchives.com/mozert,z.htm>> [Accessed 13 May 2020].

Apollodorus. and Hard, R., 2008. Apollodorus. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Archer, L., 2012. The Rumpus Interview With Dita Von Teese. [online] The Rumpus.net. Available at: <<https://therumpus.net/2012/05/the-rumpus-interview-with-dita-von-teese/>> [Accessed 1 May 2020].

Berger, J., 2012. Ways Of Seeing. London: British Broadcasting Corp.

Buszek, M., 2006. Pin-Up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture. Durham: Duke University Press.

Carroll, L., 1998. Alice's Adventures In Wonderland & Through The Looking-Glass. London: Penguin.

Censorpedia. 2020. Original Sin (Video Installation) - Censorpedia. [online]
Available at: <[http://www.wiki.ncac.org/Original_Sin_\(video_installation\)](http://www.wiki.ncac.org/Original_Sin_(video_installation))>
[Accessed 7 May 2020].

Doyle, S., Grove, J. and Sherman, W., n.d. The History Of Illustration.

Elvgren, G., Meisel, L. and Martignette, C., 2008. Gil Elvgren. Hong Kong:
Taschen.

Hughes, B., 2019. Venus & Aphrodite.

Kelby, S., 2011. Professional Portrait Retouching Techniques For Photographers
With Photoshop. [Berkeley, Calif.]: New Riders.

Marcus, S., 2010. Girls To The Front: The True Story Of The Riot Grrrl
Revolution. New York: HarperPerennial.

Nochlin, L., 1989. Women, Art, And Power And Other Essays.

Sliwinska, B., 2018. The Female Body In The Looking-Glass.

Smith, Ali., 2002. Laws of the Bandit Queens. New York: Three Rivers.

Sprinkle, Annie [Ellen F. Steinberg]., 1991. Post Porn Modernist. Amsterdam:
Art Unlimited

Young, W. and Young, N., 2010. World War II And The Postwar Years In
America. Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO.

Artmuseum.pl. 2020. Filmoteka - Alicja Żebrowska - Muzeum Sztuki
Nowoczesnej W Warszawie. [online] Available at:
<<http://artmuseum.pl/pl/filmoteka/artysci/alicja-zebrowska>> [Accessed 13
May 2020].