

Megan Ballard

2204581

Illustration

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Gwenllian Beynon

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Postmodernism and Femininity

While postmodernism is a reaction to the realistic and hopeful ideologies of modernist art, it also indicates the period of time and art that came after modernism as a result of the progression of society and human beings (*Tate*, unknown). Postmodernism is defined by being so difficult to define. It is often ironic and critical of philosophies surrounding truth and reality (*Tate*, unknown). Inspiration for many postmodernist works can be found within previous styles, movements and techniques from throughout history (Garratt et al. 2013). This movement gave artists complete freedom to create whatever they wanted and make impactful comments on the topics they care about.

Throughout art history women have been used as a key subject in artworks. Sometimes this has been done to show their power and influence and other times women have been exploited for their beauty. This essay will explore how femininity has been used, particularly by men, as a tool in their creative expression in the postmodern age.

Grayson Perry

Grayson Perry is a British artist best known for his ceramics works and cross-dressing as his alter ego 'Claire'. Perry uses his artworks to tell stories of his experiences (particularly ones that have shaped who he is today) and to depict concerns and issues within society (*Royal Academy*, unknown). His childhood teddy, 'Alan Measles', and 'Claire' are frequently found within Perry's art as they represent two sides of himself – one his “personal metaphor for God, masculinity, care and security” (Thorpe, 2022) and the other his femininity and outrageousness.

Claire in particular is a huge part of Perry's identity, a theme found in many of his pieces as it is an ongoing question many people ask themselves and a question with a constantly changing answer. In a 2014 interview for *The Guardian*, Perry discussed his transvestitism and the evolution of Claire's look. In his youth, he dressed in a more typical woman's style but had a moment of realisation that dressing this way and passing as a woman was ungratifying. The lack of attention these outfits drew upon Perry was “boring”. After this Perry became much more flamboyant and eye-catching when dressing as Claire, with the Little Bo Peep look being a particularly famous one. When asked why he went for this kind of look, Perry replied: “It's a classic look. I used to call it the crack cocaine of femininity. It's the furthest from the male macho look you could get. It's vulnerable, it's young, it's humiliating.” (Hattenstone, 2014).

Grayson Perry's ceramics are coiled pots with very traditional forms. Perry draws inspiration from a wide variety of long-established ceramic traditions, ranging from folk art to Greek pottery. The way he decorates his pots is a shocking contrast to their simple, historical forms.

Perry uses his ceramic works to express distressing social issues such as cultural stereotypes, pedophilia, and other forms of abuse (*Ceramics Now*, unknown).

Guerrilla Girls

Guerrilla Girls is an anonymous group of female artists that spread feminist messages, focusing on the sexism and racism found in the art world, through their work. Members of the group maintain anonymity by wearing gorilla masks and using the names of famous women artists as pseudonyms (*Tate*, unknown).

In 1985 the group put out their first poster campaign, pasting them onto buildings and other structures in lower Manhattan. The posters contained facts and statistics that point out discrimination against minority artists, such as women or people of colour, in Manhattan's museums and galleries. They used humour and the same bold style of advertising that was common at the time to catch people's attention and educate them on the issues that were going on within the art world (*National Museum of Women in the Arts*, unknown).

The posters were created after many women gathered outside the Museum of Modern Art in 1984 in protest of the significant imbalance of male to female artists exhibiting in the show *An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture*. Some of the artists attending the protest realised that they were not being listened to and people didn't care about what they were standing for. The anonymous artworks plastered all over public spaces brought these issues of discrimination the attention they deserved and reached a wider audience (Sayej, N, 2020).

Over three decades later the group is still creating protest art. Their work is no longer solely focussed on the discrimination within the art world like it was at the very beginning, but now they create pieces about a wide variety of social and political problems that are happening all over the world. The group has also changed how they share their work with the public, now operating through an online presence, sharing their work and messages on social media, attending protests, and presenting lectures and performances all over the world (*National Museum of Women in the Arts*, unknown).



Figure 1. Guerrilla Girls (1989) *Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?*

Semiotics

As mentioned above, there was a specific moment in which Grayson Perry decided to change how he dresses when dressed as Claire. Dressing in normal women's clothing was too ordinary and allowed Perry to pass as a woman and attract no attention. Finding this to be boring, Perry made Claire into a character of hyper-femininity (Hattenstone, 2014). Here Claire's presence holds the same worth as a real woman's, despite being a man's alter-ego. In

the book *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger discusses how a man's presence is determined by his power and that this power is separate from the man himself. However, a woman's presence is an integral part of her and is dictated by everything she does. She has to become "the surveyor and the surveyed" (Berger. J, 2008, p. 24) of anything she does.

Perry's ultra-feminine version of Claire now dresses very child-like, almost like a child's doll, as opposed to a realistic adult woman. Claire's dresses are often covered in bows and frills, as well as having puffed sleeves and puffy skirt. In the image below, Grayson Perry is wearing the dress he wore when he collected the Turner Prize as Claire in 2003 (*National Museums Liverpool*, unknown). Perry receiving this award already caused some controversy as a ceramics artist had never won the Turner Prize, so when he went on stage as Claire it was shocking and was the beginning of his fame.

The dress he wore to accept the Turner Prize is decorated with a series appliquéd and embroidered images of things that a young girl would stereotypically enjoy: bunny rabbits, flowers and love hearts. The style of the rabbits resemble that of a stuffed toy, particularly one that is aged and has been well-loved due to the narrowness of the places where the limbs join to the body. This could be indicative of how Perry's transvestitism has always been a loved and significant part of his identity from a young age. The rabbits also have the words "Claire" and "Sissy" embroidered in them which Perry may have used as a way to show everyone that he knows who he is and how this affects how other people perceive him.



Figure 2. Perry, G. (2003) *Bo Peep Dress*

Conclusion

Femininity is remains a key theme in art. It appears that postmodernist artists, both men and women, are using femininity to express their identity in a variety of ways. Some, like Grayson Perry, are going to the extremes of gender expression to showcase different sides of themselves and to just have fun with their clothes. Others, like Guerrilla Girls, are focusing on the discrimination against women that is ever present all over the world. Art is an excellent way to get a message to many people who otherwise may not be aware of these issues.

Postmodernism allows the styles and techniques that were previously used by artists who objectified femininity within their art to be reused and repurposed to give femininity the appreciation it deserves. It also allows artists to illustrate how modern society is changing

what it means to be feminine, as well as giving them the freedom create a new definition of femininity to fit what it means to them.

Figure List

Figure 1.

Guerrilla Girls. (1989) *Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?* [poster].

Figure 2.

Perry, G. (2003) *Bo Peep Dress* [dress] Walker Art Gallery: Liverpool.

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