

The Male Gaze

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The Male Gaze exhibition contains feminist art with hidden innocence. It shows the sleaziness of voyeurism involving sex but with an emphasis on female empowerment. The women portrayed in this exhibition are comfortable in their skin and showing off their sexuality but have been ridiculed for it. The art pieces were chosen pacifically for their commentary of the perception of women. The artists are all women who create pieces that are 'on the nose' with their subject, almost mocking and exaggerating the perception of women from the male gaze perspective. This refers to idea of the pleasure men get from looking at women (Mulvey, 1975). Each piece in the exhibition appears to be sexual in nature, showing how women are often perceived in this way. However, upon closer examination it becomes clear that the underlying message or meaning goes deeper than sexuality.

The venue is the Mission Gallery in Swansea. This is appropriate for the exhibition because it is almost hidden away on the outskirts of the city centre, and it is a small venue. The set design is inspired by a sleazy 'cheap' club. "Between September 1st, 2021, and the 31st of August 2022, there were 4924 drug spiking incidences according to the National Police Chief Council and 60 percent of the incidents occurred in pubs, bars and nightclubs. Do you feel safe going out at night?" (Dutton, 2024). The nightclub-like setting will enhance the feelings of unexpected awkwardness, risk of danger and being sexualised.



Figure 1: Mission Gallery (Exterior)



Figure 2: Mission Gallery Interior

The entrance will mimic underground clubs of a 'seedy' nature, deliberately made to feel cheap. Staff will be in character, including door security, and hostesses in skimpy outfits serving drinks. In semiotic terms, the 'bouncer's' image signifies toughness and strength. To some, they indicate safety and security, and to others, violence and intimidation. They are a key part of club culture where there is risk of disorderly behaviour (Sanders, 2016). To have a bouncer at the exhibition signifies this type of rowdy culture.

When walking in, the audience will see Tracey Emin's tent and Sarah Lucas' sculptures in the middle of the room and collections of images on the walls. The main room will be dark with bright club lights, sticky floors and a boozy odour. They will then find the 'secret room' which is the round room at the back. This room will show a performance piece by a burlesque troupe. The room will be hidden away and have peep holes to look through and will be draped in red velvet to mimic Amsterdam's red-light district. The red-light district is red because red lights could hide symptoms of STIs such as skin rashes, syphilis etc (De Oliveiera Morirz, 2023).

The audience will not be directed to look at the pieces in a certain order. To enhance the discomfort and the feel of being in a busy club, they will wonder around at in any order, potentially bumping into each other or getting in each other's way. This adds to the atmosphere of the exhibitions' theme.



Figure 3 Interior of a nightclub.



Figure 4 House of Dolls nightclub (a busy dancefloor)

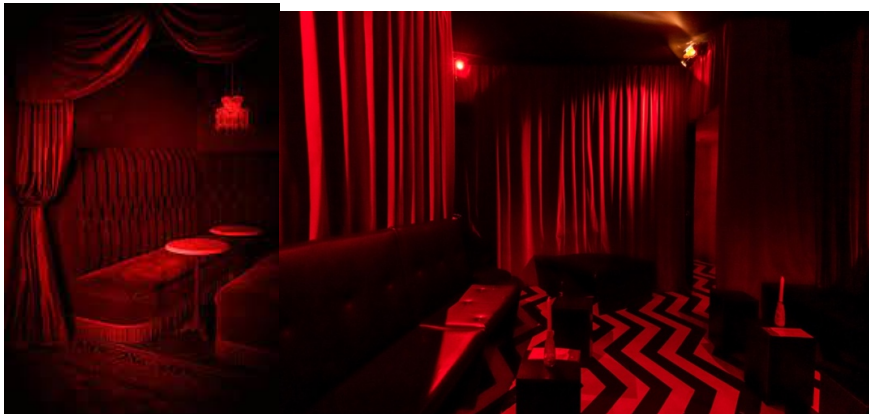


Figure 5 Private room with red lights.

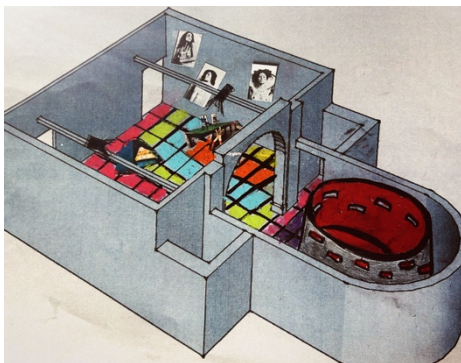


Figure 6 The design of the exhibit.

Tracey Emin 'Everyone I have ever slept with' (1963-1995)



Figure 7 Tracey Emin's Tent 'Everyone I have slept with' (1963-1995)

The title of this piece makes it sound like a sexually provocative piece, giving it the shock value that was popular at the time it was made. Emin deliberately chose the title to give people a sense of anxiety “as they are unsure of whether the artist refers to innocent or ostensibly immoral activity taking place within this tent” (Levy, 2021). The piece must be seen to understand the innocence of it. ‘To sleep with’ is usually interpreted as sex, whereas Emin’s work refers to sleep as the act of sleeping, making it a more innocent piece than it first seems.

"I got a reputation not just of being a slag but of being a devious slag" (Emin cited in BBC News 2004). Due to this, the tent received negative press. This was “partly because people thought it was just too much information about Emin's sexuality” (BBC news, 2004). The choice of tent could be because it is a private sphere, a bedroom or a temporary dwelling, giving it a sense of security and comfort. However, a tent is less safe than solid walls, and being in a tent outside exposes you to danger. Therefore, her choice of tent is a juxtaposition of security and danger. It could be argued that this related to who you sleep with as sleeping alongside a relative as a child or being in a long term, trusting relationship is

safe, whereas sleeping alongside someone new or someone who is abusive is potentially dangerous.

Sarah Lucas - Bunny gets snookered (1997).



Figure 8 Sarah Lucas - Bunny gets Snookered / Pauline Bunny (1997).

Pauline Bunny is one of eight soft sculpture bunny girls. The bunnies are made with stuffed tights and cotton to represent object femininity within the male setting of a snooker hall. The black stockings worn by Pauline Bunny are not only the most alluring colour of stocking, but the colour is also the highest value snooker ball. The power that comes from this is subverted by the passiveness of the soft body and the empty head. The piece hints at sexuality with the stockings and poses, but the slump and emptiness changes this. It is instead a challenge of gender stereotypes and comment on pop culture. At first this piece is seen as sexual, but it is a comment on the male gaze and objectivity of females in popular culture. Journalist Lynn Barber described Luca's work as "not scary, exactly because it was too witty for that – but fuelled by anger; anger against pornography and men's casual denigration of women while Luca's responded saying she was more 'annoyed than angry'" (Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary 2024).

Hannah Wilkes- S.O.S (Scarification Object Series) (1974-82)



Figure 9 Hannah Wilkes- S.O.S Scarification Object Series (1974-1982) some Individual shots and from the distance.

Wilkes' art focuses on feminism, sexuality and femininity. The work displayed in this exhibition is called 'SOS Scarification Object Series' (1974). To create the piece, visitors were given gum and asked to chew and give back to the artist who then placed it, stretched into tiny labia shaped sculptures, onto her topless body. The outcome was then photographed and displayed in 28 photos sized 40x27ins. The discarded gum was also displayed in 7x5ins frames as part of the display (Gale, 2023). The pose and quality of the photographs are link commercial glamour magazines, ruined by the gum. This can be seen as a critique of the perfect female body and face. The artist chose gum as a "perfect metaphor for an American Woman" (Wilkes cited in Long, 2024). She goes on to explain how chewing gum get used up, discarded and replaced with a new piece. Other peoples chewed up gum also brings about feelings of disgust. This fit into the exhibition because the photographs appear at first to be glamour shots until the message behind the images is revealed to be a critique of how people see women.

The photos will display on one wall above eye level, so the audience must look up. The arrangement will be in a sporadic placement to make the audience feel less comfortable than images that are aligned. Our brains are wired to seek order and familiarity, so when things are placed in unexpected way in can create a sense of comfort and unease. Our brains try to make sense of the situation and when things do not fit our expectation it can throw us off balance (Raghunathan, 2012). The gum will be placed in a row at eye level for people to see it directly.

Cindy Sherman- Untitled Film Still (1977-80)



Figure 10 Cindy Sherman - Untitled Film Still (1977-1980)

Cindy Sherman is interested in the grotesque, strange and ugly aspects of humanity. “I’m disgusted at how people get themselves to look beautiful, I’m much more interested in the other side” (Sherman 1986). Her work ‘Untitled Film Stills (1970-1980s)’ is a series of over 70 black & white photographs inspired by the portrayal of women in popular culture. Her work is a comment on the image of femininity as projected through media and film, mostly directed by males, such as ‘jaded seductress’, ‘unhappy housewife’, ‘vulnerable naive’, and ‘jilted lover’. These stereotypes pushed through TV screens “had a hold of American collective imagination at the time” (Katzman & Milke 1985). Within her work, Sherman deliberately shows the beautification process in her images by showing wigs slipping off and make-up flaking. This is a comment on the fabrication and construction of beauty.

Sherman comments that in her process she looks in the mirror for inspiration. “I’m really just using the mirror to summon something I don’t even know until I see it” (Sherman cited

in Berne, 2003). This reflects the self-exploration and discovery through her self-portraits. She then uses the camera as a tool to delve into different character and challenge societal norms.

Her work fits into the theme of the exhibition because upon first look it seems as though she is a typical female 'sex symbol' seen in TV. It is only upon seeing the details in her work that it is clear she is challenging these expectations.

Her work will be displayed on the work in a sporadic placement on the opposite wall to Hannah Wilkes but not directly facing, so there is a disjointed pattern.

Burlesque Dance Performance in the round room.



Figure 11: Burlesque dance troupe by Evolve Entertainment (2024)

Burlesque dance was it first created in humour, to mock high class entertainment. It was a form of pastiche developed as a result of a clash between high and low brow culture in the Victoria Era. The word itself means 'joke' or 'mockery' (Burlexe, 2024). This fits in with the theme of the exhibition as it is seen as provocative and sexual, even though this is not its true meaning.

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Figure 1: Misson Gallery (Exterior)	2
Figure 2: Mission Gallery Interior	3
Figure 3 Interior of a nightclub.	4
Figure 4 House of Dolls nightclub (a busy dancefloor)	4
Figure 5 Private room with red lights.	4
Figure 6 The design of the exhibit.	4
Figure 7 Tracey Emin's Tent 'Everyone I have slept with' (1963-1995)	5
Figure 8 Sarah Lucas - Bunny gets Snookered / Pauline Bunny (1997).	6
Figure 9 Hannah Wilkes- S.O.S Scarification Object Series (1974-1982) some Individual shots and from the distance.	7
Figure 10 Cindy Sherman - Untitled Film Still (1977-1980)	8
Figure 11:Burlesque dance troupe by Evolve Entertainment (2024).....	9