

An investigation into representations of the female nude in contemporary photography

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Introduction

This piece aims to explore and research nudity historically in the art industry, and more specifically, within contemporary photography, I will choose 3 or 4 photographers and use them as case studies to analyse whether they are representing women fittingly, and morally. I may choose two male photographers and two female (or female-identifying) photographers/artists to ensure equality and compare views. I will also, draw comparisons between how women have been traditionally represented.

The place of nudity in photography and art at large is often debated, and the way photographers and artists alike have used the human form to communicate ideas, and inner emotions has a long and elaborate history. Nudity itself is a complex issue, it is the natural state of the human body, and yet, its morality has consistently been the subject of intense debate. It is believed that appearance in both art and photography is highly context-dependent; the way a piece is designed to be seen and how it is displayed often has a significant impact on the way the audience will receive it. It takes careful consideration by both artist and viewer to place its usage into a broader context. (Cooke, 2019)

Historically, the nude figure in Western art has been used to express the ideals of male and female beauty. It was a central preoccupation of Ancient Greek art, and following a relatively dormant period in the Middle Ages, it returned to a central position during the Renaissance period. Almost every civilization has produced some form of sexually explicit or nude artwork/imagery, often in the context of spirituality or religion relating to fertility, to express ideals of integrity and beauty, or for the express purpose of arousing the viewer. (Burk, T. n.d.)

Typical representations of the nude female form in the European artistic tradition were made by male artists, who put women on display for the pleasure of a supposed male observer. The artist transforms the naked female body to become nude to such an extent that it is viewed as an erotic object offered to the male's gaze. Consequently, as an object of contemplation that uses nudity to reference mythological or biblical themes, the nude is raised as a genuine and justifiable subject of art. Many have observed that most artwork is essentially to flatter the male spectator and to inspire his fantasy of sexual domination. John Berger once observed, "almost all post-Renaissance European sexual imagery is frontal—either literally or metaphorically—because the sexual protagonist is the spectator-owner looking at it." (Burk, T. n.d.) Therefore, a woman's nudity is not valuable for its uniqueness, but for its ability to conform and appeal to public desires. Artists in ancient Greece developed distinguishing ideals of human beauty that continues to exert a strong influence today. Just as Greek architects developed criteria for exemplary temple design that continues to influence design today, Greek sculptors sought an ideal for representing the human form that became the standard for the following representations of a figure. Studying actual human bodies and selecting qualities they considered most desirable—such as symmetrical facial features, soft skin, and particular

body proportions. (Burk, T. n.d.)

After the fall of Rome and the rise of Christianity in the fourth century, the portrayal of nudes in western art dwindled because the values and imperatives of viewers and artists changed. In Christian societies, purity and celibacy was valued, which restricted depictions of unclothed bodies in art. When nudity did appear, it occurred in the context of religious art and was used to convey ideas of shame, such as in scenes portraying the biblical tale of Adam and Eve.

Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* is a remarkable painting that signals the shift from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. In the Renaissance, interest in mythological subjects increased, and artists found new ways to depict nude figures. In *Birth of Venus*, the goddess of love is bare and embodies the Renaissance concept of "divine love," rather than evoking any religious meaning. If Botticelli's Venus marked a decisive shift away from the medieval disdain for the female nude in art, other Italian artists from the sixteenth century, such as the Venetian painter Titian, began depicting female nudes in an even bolder manner. *Venus of Urbino* presented a new vision of Venus, as a reclining figure, resting naked in a private environment. The art piece pays more attention to the seductive warmth of the subject's feminine body than to the ideal proportions of geometry. (Burk, T. n.d.)



(Sandro Botticelli, 1486)

Modern art encompasses artistic work produced during the period extending approximately from the 1860s to the 1970s. Modern artists explored fresh ways of seeing and with new ideas about the nature of materials and functions of art—working away from the narrative, which was characteristic of the traditional arts. One of the foundational works of modern art is Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*. Its revolutionary style was integral to the development of the contemporary world. Styled using a method of cubism, both the characters and their surroundings appear fractured and angular, in a non-realistic fashion. Picasso uses primitivism to attack the tradition of depicting female nudes in private spaces by creating figures that are entirely abnormal —distorted, unnatural, and sexually intimidating. Although their arms are elevated in a traditional display of accessibility, their penetrating stares and hard mouths oppose their stance. It is considered an original work of art because Picasso had destroyed viewers' expectations of female nudity as well as traditional representation. (Burk, T. n.d.)

In the 1970s following the second wave of feminism, the legacy of the female nude in art started to be challenged. The feminist art movement promoted the notion of women as producers of art, not just its subjects. A 2012 campaign by distinguished art activists, the Guerrilla Girls, declared that fewer than 6% of artists in the Modern Art division of The Met are women. Across the museum, approximately 85% of the nudes are female. (Sullivan, K.L, 2015) Many feminist artists used their bodies and introduced performance as the form and content of their craft, contributing to the development of the postmodern practice of body art. (Burk, n.d.)

An example of this is a performance piece titled 'Cut Piece' by Yoko Ono. She sat motionless on a concert hall stage and requested the audience approach her and cut away her clothes. Ono presented a situation in which the spectator was included in the potentially aggressive and offensive act of exposing the female body, which we know historically has served as an indifferent subject for art. She scrutinized the fact that the female form was objectified. However, the way she exhibited her own body as an artist made an incredible statement, more so as she is an artist whose life and reputation was entirely overshadowed by her association with John Lennon. (Nguyen, 2017)

As seen above, the nudes, sexualisation, and objectification of women predated the camera. But, the brand-new image-capture tools of the 19th century only encouraged the movement to fluctuate, more than it had already.

The pioneers of French photography, Auguste Belloc and Felix-Jacques Moulin, for example, managed lucrative enterprises in erotic imagery. Often these images were labeled as "artistic nudes" and were enrolled at the Bibliotheque Nationale as study materials for painters. Delacroix even used Eugene Durieu's nude photographs. (Bayley, S. 2017)

It only progressed from here, though this may refer more to mainstream media rather than the art industry, when Rupert Murdoch relaunched the Sun newspaper in tabloid format on 17 November 1969, he started publishing images of scantily-clad female models on the third page in a move designed to help the paper rival its primary competitor, the Daily Mirror, which was publishing photos of women in lingerie or revealing clothing.

Within a year of publishing, The Sun's distribution doubled to 2.5 million; However, by now, they were trying to find a healthy balance between catering to its sex-obsessed readers and not offending women. They had sparked mass controversy, and nationwide anti-pornography rallies, the more popular it became, the more scrutiny it got. In 1986, Clare Short, a member of Parliament, introduced an act that would ban publications in the U.K. from printing pornographic photographs. The indictment was slow to gain support and dissolved soon after. (Roy, 2015)

However, the anonymous group of feminist activist artists once again, took the matter to their own hands; Guerrilla Girls are devoted to fighting sexism within the art world. The group was established in 1985 with the purpose of bringing gender inequality into focus within the broader arts community. The group uses culture jamming in the form of posters, photography, billboards, and public appearances to expose discrimination, exploitation, and bias. The depiction of women in the mass media and contemporary photography over the last several decades has grown increasingly sexualized, even pornified. Sex sells, but not all nudist artists work with this objective in mind. (Guerrilla Girls, 2020)

Chapter 1

Jock Sturges is renowned for his series titled 'Absence of Shame', of families captured at communes in Northern California and naturist resorts in France. The photographer's rise to fame was hampered by controversy. The age of a few of his models attracted the attention of a conservative federal task force that stormed his studio and seized his files and equipment. The investigation that followed lasted two years, after which all his prints and belongings were recovered, and no charges brought. Three years later, his work was attacked again by radical activists from American Christian communities who raided bookshops aiming to seize and destroy his books. Once again, his work was eventually discovered to be innocent of all pornographic content or intent, though many still believe that his images are perpetuating the stereotypical male gaze. (Golonka, D. 2017) Last year his show had to be closed within a fortnight, despite the objections from photography enthusiasts who had not yet succeeded in getting acquainted with the project. The reason for this was an appeal by Deputy Elena Mizulina, who saw indications of child indecency in the works and issued a harassment claim. There was mass support of Mizulina's point of view, by politicians and federal bodies, and petitions to the procurator's office and the Investigation Committee. This led to further attacks, threats directed at employees, and vandalism – under those circumstances, organizers were forced to end the exhibition ahead of schedule. Eventually, neither the 13 lawsuits filed by civilians or the positions held by Mizulina and child ombudsman Kuznetsova's, both of whom have never actually seen the images, could convince the investigating committee of the illegality of the exhibition. Experts acknowledged the complete absence of crime and recognized the high artistic levels of the displayed works. . (Golonka, D. 2017)

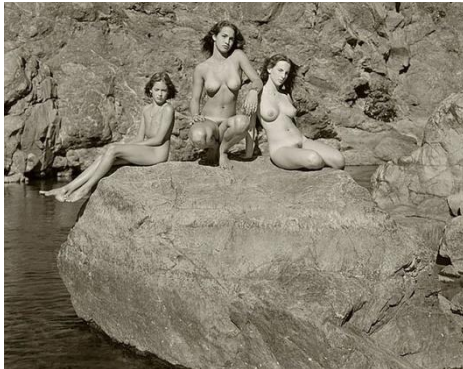
In my opinion, his photographs are lacking exploitive or harmful characteristics. There is beauty there, and honesty, though no filth. His models never strip for the artist – they were nude before he visited and will be again as he leaves. Sturges captures his models, girls, and adolescent women from nudist communities, in surroundings that are natural to them personally.

"Nudity means nothing to anybody here...People are naked...because they are naturists and spend their summers in a resort dedicated to the absence of shame."

However, as mentioned, these images were taken within the privacy of a commune, a safe, secure space for nudists, away from the prying eyes of the public; Sturges has violated this trust, published and displayed their nude bodies in books and galleries.

And although he denies any paedophilic intent, the immortalization of a nude child in an image, can surely only contribute to the mass issue of paedophilia.

"The images I like best are parts of series that I have started, in some cases, with the pregnancies of the mothers of the children in question, and I continue that series right on through the birth of children to the child that resulted from that first pregnancy." (Monovisions, 2017)



(Jock Sturges, 1979)

A hope that Sturges had throughout his career is that his work was, somehow, counter-pinup, which typically involves nudity. "A pinup asks you to suspend interest in who the person is and occupy yourself entirely with looking at the body, fantasizing about what you could do with that body, completely ignoring how the person might feel about it." (Sturges, n.d.)

It seems that, as an artist, he instead aims to display the female body as a commodity, whose beauty is to be admired, which brings into question his stance on objectification, though it is evident also in his work that the awkward grace of just being human is what interests him the most.

Taken with a large-format camera, his photographs often refer to early paintings and the traditional style photography of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Jock's ability to capture spontaneous, un-posed, innocent gestures is exceptional. (Golonka, D. 2017)

Paris-based photographer Dani Olivier is another male artist who likes to shoot multiple nude portraits. He started experimenting with light projections almost eight years ago, and dresses his models in absolutely nothing but light, using their bodies as a canvas per se. He blends the light with a range of geometric designs to 'celebrate the beauty of the female form.'

He favours working with dancers and women who like to 'move to the beat of their own drums, whose bodies can ripple through space alongside the projected motif.' (Olivares, J. 2016)

"The female body is beautiful, and I am working to produce beautiful images of it," said Olivier. This may be an example however of perpetuating the female body as objects; an item

to be admired and scrutinized. And although he, as an artist claims that objectification is not an element present in his work, it may be a personal belief he has as an individual, which is evident in a few pieces. It should also be taken into consideration, that Olivier may be presenting a standard of beauty that is unobtainable to most women; many people have noted that sexuality and sensuality are prominent features in most pieces, is this something he is forcing on his female viewers, an expectation to be upheld? Was this a passion project for the artist? Perhaps an attempt to tell the opposite sex to improve?

"A woman's body is timeless. For ten thousand years, it has had the same curves, the same shape, and the same rhythm".

This fascination is evident throughout his 'Women of Light' series. The models sway in front of a black backdrop while intricate digital light designs are projected onto their bodies.



(Dani Olivier, 2019)

Olivier does not alter or edit the original photograph at all. (Olivier, D. 2020)

The images are almost reminiscent of Heinrich Heidersberger, the renowned German photographer, who produced prints with garments constructed of light back in the 1940s. Heidersberger's project, *Dress of Light*, is still viewed as a classic in the realm of photo art.

I believe this work is mesmerising, it explores colour and shape using a new and intriguing method. Another artist who uses this technique, whom I have intently researched in past projects, is Lee Kirby, whose models appear to be absorbing the projected image, it is astounding.

Chapter 2

Brittany Markert is a conventional black and white photographer, darkroom printer, bookmaker & educator. Her work is kept in private collections in 20 countries around the world. Her work is influenced primarily by psychoanalysis, Jungian shadow work, and the surrealist art movement. (Markert, B. 2020)

Markert worked as a model for six years before attempting photography, having been a candidate on America's Next Top Model and toured for a year as a fashion model. The expectations of the female figure, the modifications in Photoshop, and the shallowness she

observed in the fashion trade traumatized her perception of the female body. And so, Brittany's urge to begin shooting images came from a particularly negative point in her history and the fashion industry alike in which a woman had to keep reminding themselves that a woman's worth is her mind, not her appearance or beauty.

The photographer intends to create timeless work and to battle objectification.

Nudity first appeared in Markert's images out of convenience and practicality. And almost, it is thought, as an attempt to run from the fashion industry.

'I've never been someone that has a lot of clothing I love – I wear the same outfits repeatedly. The props I select in my images have a lot of meaning, and I never felt most of my clothing communicated anything worth capturing.'



(Brittany Markert, 2014)

Most of the portraits in her collection cover the face intentionally; this is usually a fundamental part of portraiture. However, Brittany states that during her time working in the fashion trade, the face was vital, and although she claims it was not a conscious idea, hiding faces may be a result of her feelings at the time; that 'the face' does not represent the mind nor the human experience. It also assists in producing a timeless and universal aesthetic.

Here, the photographer exposes the self, bare and nude, the ladies in the images are 'stripped down to their truths and essence, then there are faded faces as if hiding from a voyeuristic audience while they confront, play and try to conquer the demons.' (Lomography Magazine, 2017)

'She is a pioneer of the feminine wild - rarely has an artist gone so nakedly into dark places.' (Rowland, S. 2002)

Her work is intense and heartfelt and illustrates how gender can damage and disfigure the mind. Her images reflect both the power that all women possess while also portraying the vulnerability that most women feel at being photographed and exposed. I think it is extraordinarily beautiful and remarkably compelling. It is a profound statement that very few people will realise.

I find that she is an artist that digs deep into emotions and perceptions that many, if not all, share but rarely address in public; and almost verbalizes them in a very intimate and graphically pleasing way.

She works strictly in black and white, and her aesthetic is reminiscent of Francesca Woodman, a photographer whose black and white imagery starred herself and other female subjects. Similar to Woodman, Markert's images portray figures warped, obscured, and exposed in various ways. Much of her work includes nudity, which she favors over a clothed body, as it could signify both vulnerability and invincibility. Contrary to when she was a model, Markert now has complete control over how she appears in her images. (Vasquez, J. 2019)

One of the most original messages in her recent series 'shadow work' is its title. In Sigmund Freud's structural model of the psyche, the shadow self, also referred to as the 'Id,' is the part of our personality that is repressed and locked in our unconscious mind. Thus, it pushes not only the artist but onlookers to embrace the darker aspects of our identities. (Vasquez, J. 2019)

Lana Prins is a 23 years old Dutch photographer originally from Rotterdam, South Holland. She has been photographing women since she was fifteen years old, with romance, sensuality, youth, and the female body being the primary theme of her work.

When Prins first began photographing, it was mainly out of interest towards the human body, and therefore also her own body. She captured her first professional images when around 16 years old. By this time, Lara's body had begun developing, as well as her sexuality, and so recording herself and close friends was a means of exploring these still undiscovered territories. (Sullivan, K.L. 2015)

Having been raised in a small seaside village, Prins spent her childhood dreaming and romanticising the world around her, and so created dreamlike, alternate realities for herself through imagery.

'I want to convey my feelings through pictures. I also love to romanticize the images. Romance can be as sweet as honey, but incredibly exciting too. By combining these two aspects, I create a sense of tension between sensuality and innocence.' (Sullivan, K.L. 2015)

As an artist, Prins is proud of the images that she demands of herself. We live in an environment in which women are supposed to be more modest than men when it comes to expressing their sexuality, and that is why her work is considered so enlightening.

Every single detail in the images of Prins radiates an almost forbidden sensuality that we, as viewers, are lucky to see. Her images are light and fresh, with an aspect of innocence, as she enjoys investigating the sensual and feminine side of a personality.

'For me, photography is (one of) the most natural and logical ways to express myself. My work is a reflection of the beauty I find in daily life and a translation of my emotions and thoughts. I want to show the viewer pieces of my life.' (Lomography Magazine, 2017)

Lana has always been very fascinated by the nude form, and so, shooting people in the nude seemed to be a natural progression.

Prins uses an analog camera to capture her images, and I feel that the working process of analog photography is a lot more intimate, which contributes to the aesthetic of her final pieces. (Lomography Magazine, 2017)

In her images, she also exhibits a natural talent for capturing the grace and eroticism of the female figure away from trivial poses, going beyond the traditional.

Chapter 3

Conclusion

Having researched this subject thoroughly and evaluated the differences between the male and female artists approach towards nudity, I have formed an opinion and concluded the following.

Women's brains react to pornography or Pornographic Images, including works involving nude scenes just as much as men's, disputing the widespread belief that men get more turned on by visual stimuli. This verdict comes from a study of 61 brain scans that showed both male and female participants pornographic photographs as they lay in a scanner. (Wilson, C. 2019)

In later questionnaire-based research, the answers imply that men find suggestive pictures more appealing than ladies do; This is often explained as women expecting more of an emotional bond before they become aroused.

Other theories and existing statistics also support this claim, as the number of men visiting porn sites accounts for roughly 80% of all consumers, 'Women seem to watch less pornography because it is more stigmatized,' states David Ley, a writer and sex therapist at an outpatient department in New Mexico. He maintains that the study explains that "women can be just as visual as men if they are allowed to be." (Wilson, C. 2019)

I agree that it is definitely more socially acceptable for men to admire physical appearance. For example, male nudity on film is often used to generate laughter, while men are treated to the stereotypical underdressed often nude, blonde bombshell.

It's important also to acknowledge that generally, the nudes I have referred to as examples depict slim, western women. This is not bias on my behalf; it merely highlights the lack of body diversity within art, photography, and mainstream media as a whole, a conscious choice. Perhaps artists such as Jenny Saville or Jo Spence would have been a useful counterpoint. Jenny Saville is famously known for her large scale oil portraits of overweight, stout female forms. Saville's work appeals to a profound fascination in the palpability of flesh and the limits of biology. However, even with this view of women, as an artist, Jenny could be

accused of objectification, using these models solely for their more substantial figure to 'make a statement.' This argument it seems can be applied to all body types.

One thing I have noticed while analysing the work of feminist female artists who explore this subject is that they are confusing nudity with liberation. This is further promoted by the number of celebrities who like to prove how "empowered" they are as feminists by removing their clothes and posting naked portraits for the world to view and admire.

Kim Kardashian, for example, took a topless 'selfie' for International Women's Day 2019. Emily Ratajkowski regularly writes for Lena Dunham's newsletter based solely on the fact that she is a 'nudity pioneer.' (Riley, S, N. 2017)

Feminists claim that all women are objectified; this phrase is often applied to describe an emphasis on physical beauty and a dismissal of the objectified individual's personality and quirks. They have critiqued how objectification rejects the humanity of the individual, for example, images that treat women as sexual objects. A 'sex object' seems to only exist for the viewer's satisfaction, without consideration for any other mental, physical, or spiritual aspect of the person.

Male photographers, however, despite this, I believe, seem to be creating nude pieces solely for the purpose of artistic expression. I have always been fascinated artistically by the nude form, and so it is unusual to see how nudity and sexuality can still be so widely offensive. There are many taboos concerning the female figure and female sexuality. People seem to be easily insulted by the most ordinary, innocent thing.

The male artist or photographer, also seems to be receiving far more criticism and backlash in the publishing of their work than women. For example, acclaimed nudist photographer Spencer Tunick has been arrested five times since 1992 for his work. His collection investigates and expands the social, political, and statutory issues surrounding art in the public sphere, through using numerous nude models in public spaces. (Tunick, S. 2020)



(Spencer Tunick, 2004)

Some people believe that the nude body is something that should be covered and hidden away both in art and in life. Such people often strive to prevent others from observing or learning from the human figure, thereby violating their rights to produce and consume art as they wish.

It has gotten to the point that a fine art gallery in New Jersey was issued a summons by City officials and a code enforcement officer to remove a painting by local 41-year-old painter Tom Dash, of a woman's buttocks that was visible from the galleries window.

Laura Borghi, the owner of Borghi fine art gallery, refused to remove the painting and was penalized upwards of \$1,250 per day and threatened with jail time. Walter Deptuch, who issued the summons, quoted an out-dated 1992 code 'that nude images have to be kept inside and not visible to public areas.'

Borghi maintains that artists have a right to express themselves; the public has a right to view the work, and that she, as a gallery owner, has a right to display her trade, as a self-proclaimed artist myself, I am inclined to agree.

Nude figures also offer valuable expressive means to the artists themselves. They can show human beings in uniquely valuable ways. Using nudity, the artist can present individuals in ways that focus the attention on the models figure and not separate elements such as their clothing, which can offer a completely different narrative than intended. The ability to focus attention on the essential aspects of what is arising and to eliminate distractions is a big reason for the preference of nude figures as well.

There is a broader concern here too. In a free society, we should be able to appreciate the highest level of 'freedom of expression' in the arts, whether as producers or consumers of it. To set a cap on this creativity reduces our range of appreciation for the human condition and causes us to continually adapt our interpretations and expressions in ways, perhaps in such ways that totalitarian societies do. What benefit does the right to fully express our ideas have if, for irrational reasons, we hold back on doing so entirely? (Yoder, B. n.d.)

Another argument that must be addressed is the preconception that nudity and sex are related, or specifically, that a painting or a photograph with nudity present is always exhibiting a sexual message. Nudity absolutely can be utilized in such a way as to highlight sexual behaviour; however, it need not do so at all or may do so to a limited extent. There is a stark contrast between artistic nudes and pornography, and it is wrong to attribute one's properties to the other. Pornography involves the depiction of graphic sexual material solely to stimulate a sexual thrill. Not all artworks that involve nude personalities have anything to do with sex, and not all images that address intimate topics approach the topic from a prurient point of view. (Yoder, B. n.d.)

If one were to look at situations where nudity is commonplace, such as showers in gyms, nudist beaches, and naturist societies, they are not hyper-sexualized environments at all.

Quite to the opposite, in these circumstances, nudity loses its sexual connotation completely, why is it then that it redevelops when captured and placed on a canvas?

Thus, I have determined that it is not how women are represented in their nudity that needs to be reconsidered; the most important element is the context of the nudity, and whether it is a valuable artistic contribution.

“Art can never exist without naked beauty displayed.” William Blake

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