

Ways of Perceiving

Exhibition Essay

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Female Sex Positivity

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From a young age, the female body is stigmatised in a way that the male body is not. Women and girls are rarely taught everything that they should know about their bodies until they discover it on their own, which can cause a variety of issues, including safety issues regarding a lack of knowledge of protecting their bodies from predatory behaviour, especially as a child, due to not having an understanding of their own body parts, all because it is deemed inappropriate for them to be aware of such things. The stigma and double standards extend to sexuality also, from teenage years all the way to adulthood, where women are shamed for embracing their own sexuality, and taught that sex is something that taints their value as a woman. A woman's body and sexuality are deemed as something that exists for the pleasure of men, however when a woman takes ownership of her sexuality, she is considered to

be promiscuous and lacking in self-respect. “You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting “Vanity,” thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for you own pleasure” (Berger, 1972)

The first piece I would be exhibiting is a piece by Betty Tompkins. Tompkins is an American artist who gained attention in the early 1970s with her series of ‘Fuck paintings’, which feature closeup images portraying sex and female pleasure, as a method of challenging societal norms and confronting the traditional ‘male gaze’. The focus of her paintings stirred up large amounts of controversy among art enthusiasts, however her work has gone on to be displayed in galleries all over the world. Tompkins has always been an advocate for women’s rights, as well as utilising her platform to take a stance against censorship.



Betty Tompkins, *Women Words (Anon #18)*, 2017,

acrylic on book page, 24.8 x 19.1 cm, © Betty Tompkins / Rodolphe Janssen

In 2002, Tompkins began work on her Women Words series, for which she decided that she did not want to be the sole contributor to the pieces, and therefore requested that people sent her their own choice of words and/or phrases about women, that she would go on to incorporate into her piece. These included responses from both men and women, and included a variety of uplifting terms, as well as derogatory. When asked why the words on the images covered only the women and not the men, Tompkins replied with 'I cover the women because language defines us. The women are defined by what is written on top of them. They're obliterated' (Betty Tompkins, Gilsdorf, 2021).

Tompkins's work provoked controversial conversations about the stigma surrounding women and their sexuality,

The next piece in my exhibition is by Marilyn Minter, an American artist from Louisiana, who specialises in hyperrealist artwork portraying women using themes of sexual desire. Minter's artwork pushes boundaries by creating provocative, sensual artwork, encouraging women to find confidence and acceptance in their bodies and sexuality. Her work also challenges the traditional societal expectations of women, regarding promiscuity and character, as well as physical attributes.



"Beloved" (2022), part of Marilyn's series of photos commissioned for the New York Times Magazine article "The Joys (and Challenges) of Sex After 70."

This was a piece created by Minter for the New York Times for an article based on the sex lives of people over the age of 70. The piece, along with others in its collection, demonstrated how elderly people, particularly women, can still find confidence in embracing their sexual desires without feeling any sort of shame due to their age, gender, or body image. In an interview, Minter was questioned about this, and expressed 'It's also considered contemptible for old people to have sex. Right? It's another one of those things, taking a biased subject matter, and I guess that's my specialty.' (Marilyn Minter, Bailey, 2023).

This piece fits perfectly with the theme of the exhibition, as a representation of women of the older generation, and their relationship with their sexuality.



"I Feel It Coming" (2022), Karo Crafts, (Anya Carolyn)

The next piece would be by Anya Carolyn, an artist from New York who goes by the name 'Karo Crafts'. This artist has built a reputation for creating mixed media pieces inspired the feelings she experiences when she listens to a song for the first time. She describes the piece as being about self-love and expressed that the creative process encouraged confidence in her sensuality by using her own body to photograph for an element of the piece. For this piece, the song that inspired it was 'I Feel It Coming' by Drake, in which the lyrics are descriptive of sexual desire and lust.

Upon revealing this piece to her social media audience, she stated 'Don't rely on anyone else for love. It has to start with you, how are you supposed to know what you like without loving yourself first?' (karocrafts, 2022). This piece is the original inspiration behind my chosen theme, as it inspires women to love themselves and embrace their sensual side.

Also displayed would be a piece by Nahui Olin, also known as Carmen Mondragón, an artist, model and poet, born in 1893 in Mexico City. Olin changed her name as a symbol of what she considered to be her rebirth, stating “My name is like that of all things: without beginning or end, and yet without isolating myself from wholeness by my distinct evolution in that infinite set, the closest words to name me are NAHUI-OLIN’ (Nahui Olin, 1893-1978). Olin was renowned for her nude self-portraits which at the time sparked backlash and controversy for being too provocative and scandalous.



Museo Nacional de Arte MUNAL, Carmen Mondragón

Olin chose to paint self-portrait nudes as a way to challenge the conventional norms of society's vision of an ideal woman. She saw the female body as a powerful work of art for exploration, that allowed her to demonstrate her skill, as well as express her sensuality. By painting promiscuous images, she was claiming autonomy and agency over her own body, rather than simply becoming an unwilling object of male desire.

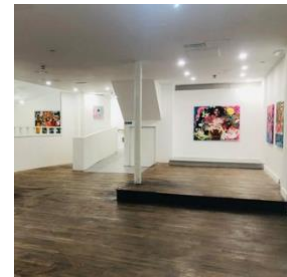
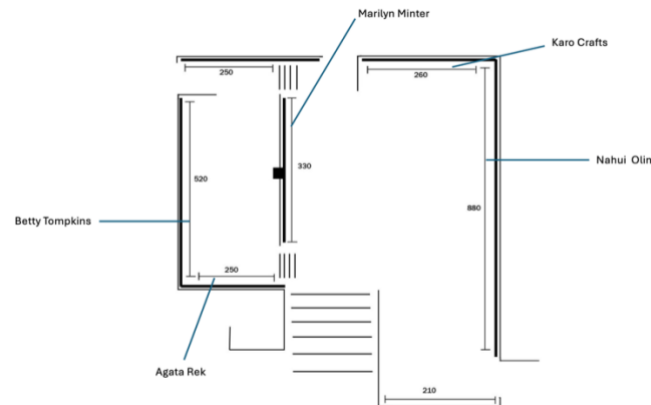
The final piece in my exhibition is by Agata Rek, a Polish American interdisciplinary artist. Rek displays a range of art styles, often experimenting with new mediums and composition.



Piece from 'Radically Vulnerable' series (2022), Agata Rek

'I view "Radical Vulnerability" as an act of bravery and honesty, both towards myself and others' (Rek, 2022). This collection, created by Rek in 2022, differs from her other collections, and is an expression of a person's vulnerability through nudity and sensuality. The vulnerability allows the viewer to make a connection with the piece, as well as the deeper meaning of the piece, thus encouraging vulnerability within themselves. "We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves" (Berger, 1972).

The location for my exhibition would be Elysium Gallery in Swansea.



I have chosen this venue as it is a classic, white wall gallery, that will display the exhibition boldly, without distracting from the theme and the message. The gallery is also non-profit organisations run by artists and runs nude life drawing sessions on a weekly basis, therefore they represent the theme well as a venue, and the exhibition would likely attract the regular life-drawing artists, who may be interested in viewing work from and art category that they have a clear interest in, by successful artists in that field.

I feel that this combination of art pieces, as well as their backstories, perfectly bring together the vision for my exhibition. Each artist boldly stands out against societal norms and encourages a forward-thinking view on women's relationship with sexuality. This collection of art, while all very different from one another, all achieve a common goal; desensitising society to women's bodies and allowing women to feel confident in their own sexual desires without shame, in the way they would be able to if they were a man. When society has normalised the female body, women and girls won't be forced to discover their changing bodies on their own, as they will be taught about it as they grow up, without shame or stigma, creating a healthier and safer environment for women and girls.

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