

From Object to Subject: The Agency of the Female Nude in Art

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Summary of Topic

This thesis examines how female artists in the 20th and 21st centuries have used self-representation and the nude to challenge traditional perceptions of women in art. By engaging with feminist theories, including psychoanalysis and post-structuralist perspectives from thinkers like Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, it explores how these artists subverted the male gaze and redefined female agency. The research is informed by personal artistic practice, feminist discourse, and reflections on gender equality, addressing issues such as digital censorship and the precariousness of women's rights in contemporary society.

Introduction

This thesis examines the self-representation of several female artists from the 20th and 21st centuries in the visual arts. It focuses on specific instances where female artists employed traditional 'nude' imagery to assert their agency, rather than being portrayed as objects of the male gaze. The analysis explores how these artists successfully subverted conventional perceptions of female nudity and the new possibilities for female representation that emerged from their work. Key feminist theories from the 20th century are discussed, including psychoanalytic approaches such as Lacanian theory, alongside the contrasting perspectives of post-structuralist thinkers Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray. My initial interest in this topic was sparked by Hellen Gorrill's statistical analysis of gender disparity in the art world. Critical reviews by scholars such as Rosemary Betterton and Lisa Tickner have further shaped my understanding of the subject.

The subject of female self-representation holds particular interest for me, both as a woman and as an artist. My focus on the nude in this research comes from its traditional prominence in fine art, where it is closely associated with representing sincerity, removing boundaries between viewer and subject, and portraying human vulnerability

and a natural state of being - seemingly free from the influences of fashion or culture. These principles resonate deeply with my artistic practice, even though my current subjects differ from the human figure. The many hours I have spent on observational studies from life models, a challenging yet highly rewarding task, have been formative in shaping my artistic approach and continue to inform the sensitivity and authenticity I aim to bring to all my work.

In seeking to advance my practice and address more sensitive and personal issues in my art, I have found research into how other female artists approach these subjects to be highly valuable. Examining feminist discourse on female representation and tracking the evolving definitions of gender during the third wave of feminism have also helped me develop a more nuanced perspective on these issues, positively contributing to an expanded understanding of my own self-identification.

The issues of women's rights and equal representation remain highly relevant in all areas of life, with a notable focus on the arts. Recent political developments in American and European societies reveal the precariousness of women's rights, including the right to make decisions about their own bodies, the rights that, although secured decades ago, are now the subject of debates and potential restrictions. Furthermore, during my research, I became increasingly aware of the growing evidence of digital censorship disproportionately targeting female imagery, a trend that raises significant concerns and needs to be monitored.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I provide a brief overview of the conventional perception of the female nude and analyse maternal nudes in the works of Käthe Kollwitz, Renée Cox, and Steph Wilson through the lens of post-structuralist and fetishism theories. The second chapter examines how the "otherness" of female identity is represented in the works of Alice Neel and Zanele Muholi. The third chapter explores themes of illness, trauma, and mortality in the practices of Frida Kahlo and Jo Spence. The fourth and final chapter discusses the evolution of self-representation through female nude imagery in Tracey Emin's artistic practice. This chapter also continues the exploration of trauma caused by illness and reflects on the artist's recent groundbreaking exhibition at White Cube Bermondsey, where the female nude achieves a profound equality between the concepts of "person" and "woman," inviting viewers to reflect on humanity itself through the pronoun "she."

My aim in this analysis was to demonstrate the versatility of female nude imagery and its intrinsic significance in exploring, channelling, and addressing the artistic and personal concerns of female artists. The meaning of the nude extends beyond erotic and sexual connotations; it can embody profound existential life experiences and effectively express female identity at all stages of life. Moreover, it serves as a powerful medium for reflecting the complexities and evolving modalities of female identity. I deeply value the personal freedom of expression achieved in modern Western society, and for me, the use of nude imagery in art represents a significant highlight of a liberal and democratic culture—one that should be cherished and preserved.

Chapter 1 Kathe Kollwitz, Renee Cox, Steph Wilson

From the Stone Age Venus figurines through the reclining nudes of the Renaissance to modern art, the nude female figure has remained a persistent and prominent subject of interest, primarily for male artists. John Berger highlighted the phenomenon of contrasting portrayals of men and women in visual art in his seminal book *Ways of Seeing*: "*Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.*" (Berger, 1972, p.47). The nude female was often positioned as a passive object for the male gaze - a subject of desire, erotic fantasies, and ultimately a possession, denied her own agency. This traditional objectification of the female body in art was reinforced by women's subservient position in patriarchal society, contributing further to their marginalization as artists.

The male-female and active-passive dichotomy also underpinned gender distinctions in Freudian psychoanalysis. In this phallogentric approach, women were defined not as full human beings by default but as those who lack the male anatomy, with all proactive and creative forces associated with masculinity. Within psychoanalysis, women became 'the others,' positioned in opposition to the normative male. This concept was further examined in Simone de Beauvoir's influential book *The Second Sex*, where she writes: '*... she does not act, she observes, she feels, she records; ... destiny is outside her.*' (Beauvoir, 1997, p.61)

The socio-economic changes in Western society during the 20th century, along with the advances of the feminist movement, improved women's social standing and opened artistic careers for many talented women. However, gender discrimination was far from eliminated, and a long journey toward fair representation of women in the arts remained, as demonstrated in Helen Gorrill's insightful research *Women Can't Paint* (Gorrill, 2020). Distorted concepts of gender roles continued to prevail in both mass culture and fine art institutions. Addressing these issues became a key focus for thinkers of the third wave of feminism.

One way to illustrate the evolving positions of female artists in Western society is by analysing their approaches to self-representation, especially in works involving nudity. Historically, the nude figure has been one of the most powerful embodiments of the male gaze and female objectification. Depicting the naked female body without reinforcing traditional views of it as an object of desire remains a significant challenge. According to Betterton '*to develop an iconography which avoided the conventional voyeurism of the nude and could offer a metaphor for a specifically female model of creativity*' (Betterton, 1996, p.33). Examining the varied approaches to the female nude by women artists provides an additional insight into how the concept of gender was redefined throughout the 20th century.

Käthe Kollwitz is well known for her powerful portrayals of working-class people suffering from the aftermath of the First and Second World Wars and from dysfunctional economic conditions, with a particular focus on German mothers and children. Possessing exceptional draughtsmanship, she achieved a monumentality and expressiveness comparable to Michelangelo's works, combined with the emotional impact of Goya's prints.

Käthe Kollwitz's powerful and one of the best-known etching *Woman with Dead Child* (Kollwitz, 1903) depicts both mother and child unclothed. Their nudity enhances the intimacy between the viewer and the subjects, symbolizes their vulnerability, and emphasizes the inevitability of mortality.



Figure 1 Kathe Kollwitz Woman with dead child, 1903 Etching

In *Woman with Dead Child*, the mother's nudity equates her, engulfed by grief, to an animal in a primordial, protective state. The loss of her child transcends social conditioning, stripping away all cultural norms and leaving her in her mortal flesh, crushed by enormous emotional pain.

The etching exemplifies the semiotic nature of motherhood as defined by Julia Kristeva (Kristeva, 1980) in her post-structuralist studies on gender. The connection between mother and child here is visceral, rooted in an almost unbreakable, pre-linguistic physical bond saturated with intense, all-encompassing emotion. Viewers feel the power

of the image physically - the tension in the stomach, the tightness in the chest - as the mother's grief-contorted form impacts us on a level beyond cognitive awareness. This direct, embodied response nearly eliminates the possibility of a fetishist gaze.

The maternal figure in Kollwitz's work can also be interpreted as a devouring mother, symbolizing the '*monstrous oral mother*' in psychoanalytical terms: '*In a reversal of the passage of birth, the mother absorbs the child into her own body: she possesses and is possessed by it*' (Betterton, 1996, p. 42). The typical understanding of the maternal image involves a perception of the mother as both a source of threat and an idolized love object. However, in *Woman with Dead Child*, Kollwitz focuses mainly on maternal feelings, suggesting that the loss of a child can be seen as a metaphor for losing her own artistic identity within the all-consuming state of motherhood.

The etching emphasises the female connection to nature, aligning with a post-structuralist understanding of female gender, where gender is closely linked to biological sex, reproduction, and vitality. Here, nudity highlights the raw emotional state of the woman as mother, bringing her to an animalistic, pre-civilized, pre-linguistic level of existence due to extreme physical and emotional suffering. Knowing that these works were created during a time when motherhood often meant losing or severely compromising one's social and creative standing, the etchings reveal the artist's deep personal fears.



Figure 2 Renee Cox, *Yo Mama at Home*, 1993

Nine decades later, Renee Cox also explores themes of maternity and nudity in several series of her black-and-white photographs. The African-American artist portrays herself in life-sized images that highlight the intersection of racial and sexual fetishism. In *Yo Mama at Home* (Cox, 1993), she appears in full-frontal nudity and heavily pregnant. Her appearance, nude with hair styled in a traditional African way, can be read as a reference to the historical enslavement of Black Africans in America, where Black women were often viewed solely as commodities or sexual objects. The setting, a luxurious loft with a classical painting on the wall, also may suggest “her owner’s house.” However, Cox’s quiet confidence, direct gaze at the camera, and relaxed, composed body language challenge this interpretation.

Yo Mama at Home series was produced at the time when the third wave of feminism started to address issues of intersectionality, class and sexual and bodily freedom for women. That allowed for artists with African-American and ethnic minorities background rise their visibility and eventually get more recognition. Significantly Cox was the first pregnant woman to attend the Whitney Independent Study Program in 1993. Her *Yo Mama at Home* (1993) was featured in the seminal exhibition *Bad Girls* curated by Marcia Tucker at the New Museum in New York in 1994, reflecting the new views of the third wave feminism. As Marcia Tucker said at the time about the curating process:

... we're not interested in reinforcing a separate category of 'women's art,' nor do we insist on women's concerns being inherently different from those of men.

(Tucker, 1994)

Cox asserts her agency within the *Yo Mama at Home* image, claiming ownership over the space she occupies, her future child, and the terms by which she is perceived. The artist deliberately employs and blends sexual, racial, and class signifiers within the image, thereby subverting their conventional interpretations. By presenting herself as Black, pregnant, nude, and confident, Cox actively makes herself visible, deploying a strategy of fetishism to challenge historical and societal attitudes that might otherwise render her objectified and invisible.

As Jones (2012) observes,

Cox inhabits fetishism, exaggerates her sexual/racial 'difference' through props, and confronts us, defiantly staring into the camera. Cox's adoption of fetishism is strategic and not a simple reversal. Through this act, she asserts herself. (Jones, 2012)

This strategic engagement with fetishism underscores Cox's conscious effort to reclaim agency and disrupt normative frameworks of representation.



Figure 3 Steph Wilson, Sonam, 2024

An unorthodox portrayal of motherhood is offered in the recent Taylor Wessing Photography Prize-winning image *Sonam* (2024) by Steph Wilson.

A psychoanalytic analysis may not be advantageous in this example, as psychoanalysis relies on a binary model of gender, which is not applicable to this image or contemporary gender discourse. Instead, examining the image through the lens of existential phenomenology - focusing on the lived experience of the body - would provide a more insightful analysis.

As in Renee Cox's photograph, Sonam is depicted as a mother in full-frontal nudity, gazing directly into the viewer's eyes with confidence and an unsmiling expression. The subject is identified as a "mother" because the image is part of a series documenting unconventional and "imperfect" representations of motherhood, as described by Wilson. While one might assume Sonam was assigned female at birth, their gender is intentionally ambiguous, blending features traditionally associated with both female and male genders.

A wig maker by trade, Sonam actually wears a false moustache, not only as a statement of her career, but also to call back to instances when she was encouraged to embrace her masculine features by friends and family. Wilson's ambition was to present sitters as more than just mothers, referring to all elements that contribute towards a whole person, capable of many achievements. (Fadmagazine, 2024)

For the purposes of the analysis I assume that Sonam identifies herself as a woman referencing the above quote.

The photograph could be a very stereotypical representation of motherhood, were it not for the sharp contrast between the distinctively feminine body and the masculine facial features, further emphasised by a direct, unsmiling gaze. Nudity plays a crucial role here, referencing the image to the common genre of post-partum photography that documents mothers with their newborn babies. It also reveals a body typically associated with a biological woman, juxtaposed against Sonam's masculine presence, which disrupts traditional notions of gender identification or expectations.

The existential-phenomenological concept of the lived body, however, can be successfully applied to identify Sonam as a woman. According to Young, female embodiment arises *'from the experience of a body with the capacity to generate another body'* (Young, p. 60). This perspective allows individuals to be recognized as women without the necessity of appearing or behaving in a stereotypically 'feminine' way. Young distinguishes femininity as a separate concept from being female, defining it as *'a set of normatively disciplined expectations imposed on female bodies by a male-dominated society'* (Young, p. 60).

These expectations are effectively challenged by Sonam as portrayed in the photograph. She embraces living in a female body, being a mother, and confidently engaging in nudity and skin-to-skin contact with her baby, all without conforming to traditional notions of femininity. Sonam's confidence is particularly striking as it defies the traditional perception of women's subservient status in South Asian cultures, a context to which the model's ethnicity alludes.

The contrast between the nude body and the confident, even confrontational gaze strongly evokes connotations of Édouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863) and may elicit a similarly shocking effect on a significant portion of the audience.

Chapter 2 Alice Neel, Zanele Muholi



Figure 4 Alice Neel Self-portrait, 1980, oil on canvas

In an interview with art historian Patricia Hills, Alice Neel stated:

People's images reflect the era in a way that nothing else could. When portraits are good art they reflect the culture, the time, and many other things... Art is a form of history... Now, a painting is [a portrait of a person], plus the fact that it is also the Zeitgeist, the spirit of the age. (Neel 1980, cited in Sheynfeld, 2024)

This perspective resonates strongly with Neel's *Self-Portrait* (1980), painted when she was 80 years old, which serves as both a personal expression and a reflection of the cultural moment. Created during a period when third-wave feminists were actively challenging traditional notions of femininity, the painting embodies the 'Zeitgeist' Neel described. Female artists and thinkers in Western society were broadening the parameters of representation, incorporating previously marginalised dimensions of identity, including race, class, and age. In doing so, they redefined the scope of subject matter considered appropriate for exploring and celebrating the multifaceted female experience, placing works like Neel's firmly within this transformative cultural and artistic movement.

While the young, appealing female body has often been the focus of artistic interest throughout the centuries, the aged female body has rarely been depicted and, when it has, it has typically carried negative connotations. In her notable work, *The Witch as Muse: Art, Gender, and Power in Early Modern Europe*, Hults (2011) presents compelling arguments about how imagery of nude aged women contributed to the vilification of the witch archetype. This representation marginalised traditional female connections to nature and devalued wisdom rooted in life experience and knowledge outside the academic sphere. Prominent male artists such as Albrecht Dürer and Hans Baldung Grien were among those who contributed to the negative portrayal of nude post-menopausal women as evil witches.

Neel's *Self-portrait* (1980) does a remarkable job of reclaiming the nude depiction in the new way. Holding a brush and a rag in her hands, and adorned only with her glasses, the artist presents herself in the later stage of her career as a professional painter, fully confident in her abilities. Her body, marked by the aging process, slumps in the chair, but her grip on the brush is strong, and her gaze is filled with focus and contemplation.

The image commands strength of spirit; her femininity is unrestricted by traditional beauty standards, reflecting an inner freedom achieved through full self-acceptance. Here, Neel's nudity communicates sincerity, confidence, and defiance against discrimination in the arts based on gender and age. Her nudity also makes her especially noticeable in a society that typically values only youthful, beautiful nude bodies. A woman of her age would otherwise be practically invisible and deemed unworthy of the male gaze.

In *The body politic Female sexuality & women artists since 1970* Lisa Tickner argues that women art today should be helping to de-eroticizing and de-colonizing of the woman body.

Living in a female body is different from looking at it, as a man...The colonized territory (the meaning of female nude in art) must be reclaimed from masculine fantasy, the 'lost' aspects of female body experience authenticated and reintegrated in opposition to its more familiar and seductive artistic role as a raw material for the men. (Tickner,1978, p.239)

According to Tickner, such a portrayal of 'self as object' parodies the conventional stereotype of the female nude and should be recognized as 'a political, rather than a

directly erotic gesture’ (Tickner, 1978, p. 242). Neel is also known for often painting many of her sitters nude. By painting herself nude, she may be seen as equating the roles of artist and model, collapsing the distinction between active and passive, and reclaiming agency in the representation of the female nude.

The self-portrait of the artist in her advanced age continues the tradition established by Rembrandt and Leonardo da Vinci. The painting captures the complexity of an artist’s personality, embracing the entirety of her experiences and the challenges of an artistic career, inseparable from the reality of living in the body of an 80-year-old woman.



Figure 5 Zanele Muholi, *Manzi I*, West Coast, Cape Town, 2022. Gelatin silver print

While Alice Neel’s work presents an older woman’s self-representation, which could be considered unconventional, Zanele Muholi, a contemporary African lesbian artist, engages with a different aspect of womanhood as ‘the other.’

As Muholi described the motivation driving their artistic practice: *'The lack of queer visual history compelled me to produce what was missing.'* (Muholi 2024, cited in Woodcock, 2024). *Manzi I, West Coast, Cape Town* (2022) is part of the ongoing *Somnyama Ngonyama* series, which features the artist's fictionalised self-representation. Muholi's photograph depicts an African woman making direct eye contact with the viewer, her gaze unwavering and filled with confidence, determination, and self-awareness. *Manzi I, West Coast, Cape Town* (Muholi, 2022) redefines Black identity in ways that are intensely personal yet unavoidably political. The self-portrait challenges stereotypes and confronts the oppressive beauty standards that marginalise people of colour, particularly Black lesbians, in both African and Western cultures.

On one hand, the figure in the image could be viewed as fictionalised, amplifying qualities of 'otherness,' such as intensely dark skin, a tough, unsmiling gaze, and an ambiguous gender identity. On the other hand, Muholi's photograph can be interpreted as representing the experience of being a woman rather than conforming to traditional ideals of femininity. There is no attempt to charm the viewer; there is no fetishist fixation or adoration of the Black nude body. Instead, the nudity symbolises the character's unrestrained freedom. The sea water surrounding the figure enhances the archetypal and mythological connotations of the image, adding layers of symbolic meaning.

Chapter 3 Frieda Kahlo, Jo Spence

Another poignant example in which nudity conveys the artist's lived experience, rather than serving as a fetish symbol, is found in depictions of mental or physical pain and suffering caused by sudden or chronic illness. In such cases, the nude body represents human vulnerability and mortality, with the negative emotions associated with the individual's suffering counteracting any potential erotic connotations.

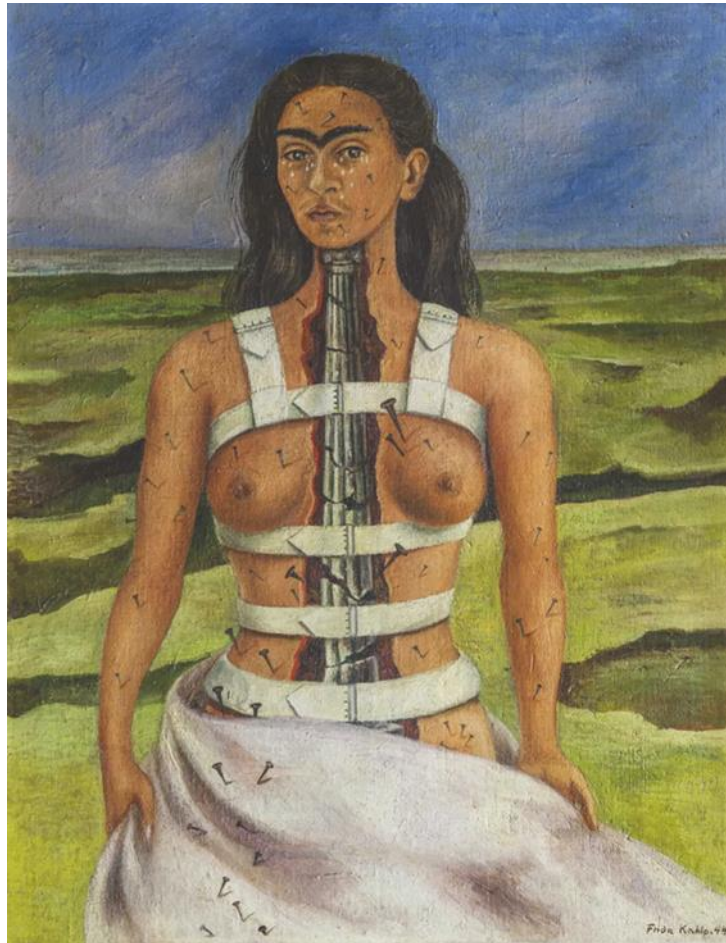


Figure 6 Frida Kahlo, The Broken Column, 1944. Oil on canvas

A remarkable struggle of strong spirit and body in pain is depicted in *The Broken Column* (1944) by Frida Kahlo. Kahlo's suffering stemmed from a catastrophic accident in her youth, leaving her to endure constant, unresolvable pain throughout her life. In this painting, Kahlo portrays herself in a style reminiscent of the Catholic saint St. Sebastian. The nails piercing her body and the white sheet covering her lower torso evoke Christian iconography, underscoring the theme of martyrdom and relentless suffering.

Her young, beautiful body is depicted as ruptured in the middle, supported by a crumbling column, and held together by artificial elements - a medical corset. The artist gazes directly into the viewer's eyes, but her stare is not confrontational; it seeks to evoke sympathy for her suffering. While the nude body carries an erotic connotation, this is literally disrupted by the horrifying gap in her torso and the nails embedded in her flesh.

The image powerfully manifests Frida's pain, which negates the traditional interpretation of the nude. It is not meant to seduce but to elicit empathy. The nude body represents Frida's natural, healthy state before it was irrevocably damaged by trauma - a symbol of the innocent joy of life that was lost forever. By painting herself nude, she focuses on her vulnerability in the face of physical devastation and the painful yet unavoidable medical interventions.

The painting also challenges the viewer to confront the intersection of beauty and suffering, illustrating how the body can simultaneously embody strength and fragility. Kahlo's depiction of her nude form, scarred and fragmented, subverts conventional

ideals of the female body by presenting it as both a site of trauma and resilience. Through this, she transforms her physical pain into a universal symbol of endurance, inviting viewers to reflect on the shared human experience of vulnerability and the struggle for dignity in the face of suffering.

Pain, physical discomfort, and humiliation resulting from medical examinations disproportionately affect women compared to men. Even a healthy woman is likely to experience menstrual pain regularly for several decades of reproductive activity and to undergo routine cervical and breast cancer screenings. While these procedures are crucial for cancer prevention, they are often accompanied by pain and psychological discomfort and, for some women, may result in humiliation or psychological trauma. Additionally, experiences such as childbirth, miscarriage, abortion, IVF treatments, endometriosis, and menopause can profoundly impact a woman's life, subjecting her to physical pain that her male partner may never encounter.



Figure 7 Jo Spence *A Picture of Health: Heroine or Medical Victim?* 1982

Addressing the role of illness and the experience of being a patient within medical institutions is a crucial aspect of representing women's lives. Jo Spence's photographic series *A Picture of Health* (1980-1982) documenting her fight with breast cancer is a powerful example of this approach. Beyond capturing the brutality of the cancer process and its treatments, the self-portrait series served as a psychological therapeutic tool to help the artist come to terms with the stress of facing mutilation and helplessness.



Figure 8 Jo Spence, A Picture of Health: Property of Jo Spence, 1982

In these photographs, the nude body is neither a symbol nor an object of desire but rather a battleground in the artist's effort to preserve her identity. Spence asserts her agency through two distinct acts: documenting the unpleasant and often humiliating medical procedures performed on her during treatment, and writing on her body, mutilated by cancer, before photographing it. Through these acts, she rebels against the passive role of being treated as an object of medical procedures, as a patient, and as a victim of cancer.

I determined to document for myself what was happening to me. Not to be merely the object of their medical discourse but to be active subject of my own investigation. (Spence, 1988, cited in Evans, 2000, p.153)

The images are Spence's efforts to reclaim her body which became '*the site where others have made their mark*' (Evans 2000 p.114).

During my thesis research, I discovered that numerous images of the artworks of Jo Spence and Renee Cox depicting their nude bodies or parts of their nude bodies were inaccessible via search engines. These images, however, were readily available in books about the artists published in the early 2000s. Conversely, photographic works by the same artists featuring male nude models, including full frontal nudity, remained accessible in online searches. This discrepancy suggests the emergence of subtle yet powerful trends that erase the legacy of female artists under the pretence of safety concerns or, perhaps, the arbitrary application of AI-driven censorship.

The implications of such selective visibility are significant. It reflects not only an uneven application of censorship criteria but also a broader cultural shift that disproportionately affects the representation of female artists. By restricting access to these works, there is a risk of distorting the historical and artistic narratives surrounding their contributions.

The works of Renee Cox and Jo Spence are groundbreaking explorations of identity, body politics, and gender often featured nudity as a central theme. Yet, the disparity in how their works are treated online compared to male-centred imagery raises critical questions about the motivations and mechanisms driving such censorship.

Chapter 4 Tracey Emin Evolution of Self-Representation

Emin's most enduring contribution to contemporary art may be defined as her refiguring of feminine corporeality, her summoning of feminine desire, pain and resilience, in all its psychic and physical complexity. (Kokoli and Cherry, 2020, p.3)

Tracey Emin is renowned for addressing themes of sex, gender, and intimacy, often using her own body as a medium across painting, drawing, and printmaking. The female nude, a recurring motif in her work, serves as an alter ego and a way to explore vulnerability, intimacy, and the complexities of human sexuality - what some critics have called her 'performative self.' As Camila Jalving notes: '*Emin's subject matter is herself: her life story is the source of her pain and her pride.*' (Jalving, 2020, p. 32)



Figure 9 Tracey Emin, The Last Thing I Said to You was Don't Leave Me Here I, 2000

In some of her earlier works, Emin's agency over her self-representation is conflated with the traditional erotic depiction of a young, attractive female model in art, as seen in the Polaroid *Sometimes I Feel Beautiful* (Emin, 2000). In many other works, such as the photograph *The Last Thing I Said to You was Don't Leave Me Here I* (Emin, 2000), the traditional interpretation of the nude model is intentionally presented in an ambiguous context, subverting the model's passive role. The artist consciously uses the

...well-known hierarchy of painter and model...which Emin destabilizes by making herself into both painter and model-occupying both positions at one and the same time. (Jalving, 2020, p.31)



Figure 10 Tracey Emin, *Sometimes I feel beautiful*, 2000

The meaning of the female nude shifts significantly in Tracey Emin's later works, particularly in her paintings, drawings, and monoprints. These media demand a greater degree of physicality in their execution, engaging the artist in a more visceral and intimate creative process. In her later drawings and prints, such as *And then you left me...* (2008) Emin often employs a fluid, gestural line that oscillates between precision and abstraction, producing female figures that are simultaneously suggestive and incomplete.



Figure 11 Tracey Emin, *And then you left me...*, 2008, etching

Tracey Emin's raw, expressive painting style is marked by bold, gestural brushstrokes and a loose approach to form and colour, emphasising texture and composition over detailed realism, underscoring the connection between the act of painting and the artist's internal emotional landscape. Her works explore themes of love, loss, and vulnerability, with fragmented, suggestive figures that convey a sense of immediacy and emotional authenticity.

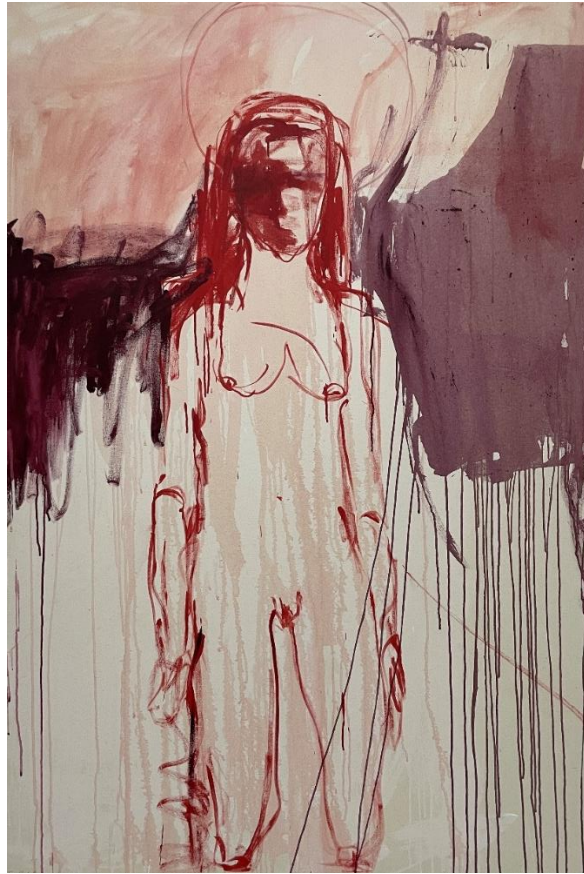


Figure 12 Tracey Emin, *I did nothing wrong*, 2024, oil on canvas

As demonstrated in her recent exhibition, *I Followed You to the End* (2024) at White Cube Bermondsey, 'painting has become increasingly central to Emin's practice in recent years' (Gayford, 2024). Following her diagnosis in 2020 with advanced-stage bladder cancer, Emin confronted the challenges of a painful and difficult treatment. Her experience of facing her own mortality, helplessness, and lack of control over her future has profoundly elevated her art, resulting in works that powerfully reflect on the human condition.

As Kieran Cashell eloquently put it:

Emin's art is redemptive, an ethical practice of reflection on and understanding of the traumatic events of her life...it is the result of a difficult yet ultimately affirmative process of retroactive self-investigation. Making art for Emin has a definite existential and moral purpose: through the creative process she hopes to come to some understanding of her life. (Cashell, 2009, p.121)

Most of the monumental paintings in *I Followed You to the End* (2024) depict a solitary nude female figure set in ambiguous environments that suggest domestic, hospital, or undefined interior spaces. The figure is often shown reclining on a bed or situated in a bath. However, a few exceptions exist, such as *I Did Nothing Wrong* (Emin, 2024), where a young girl is depicted in a vaguely described landscape. This work appears to evoke memories of the past rather than reflecting the recent events that have profoundly impacted the artist.

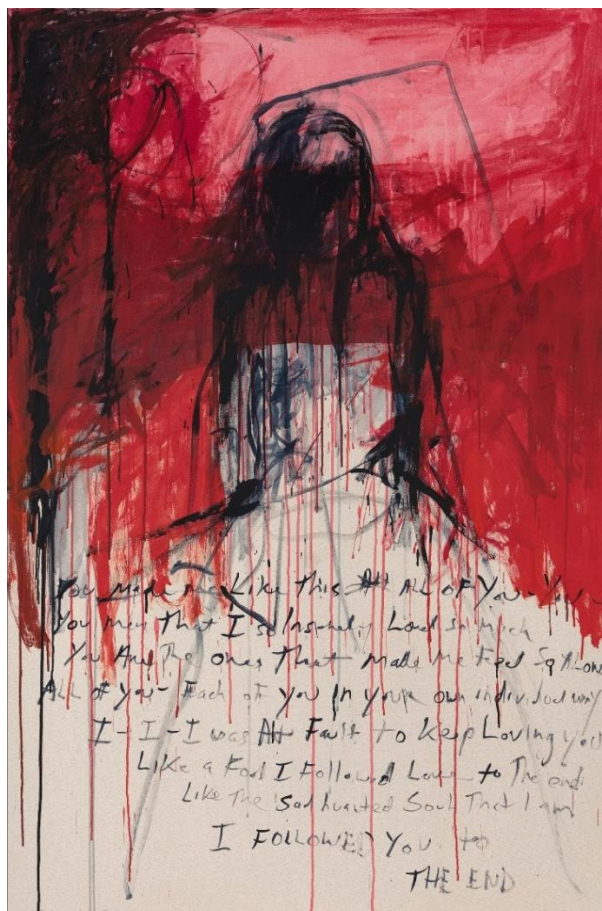


Figure 13 Tracey Emin, I followed you to the end, 2024, oil on canvas

In this body of work, references to the sexual aspects of women's lives, so typical of Emin's earlier oeuvre, are notably absent. This shift is poignantly expressed in one of her striking text-based canvases, which declares: *'I don't want to have sex because my body feels dead.'* (Emin, 2024) Such a transformation is entirely comprehensible, as the intense focus on the struggle between life and death leaves no room for eroticism.

Similarly to the themes of resilience and the reclamation of agency depicted in the works of Frida Kahlo and Jo Spence, who address health struggles resulting from illness or injury, Tracey Emin's *I Followed You to the End* (2024) employs powerful yet seemingly chaotic brushstrokes to transcend the position of victimhood imposed by

circumstance. This active position is reinforced both by the text embedded within the paintings themselves and by the handwritten titles found in pencil in the lower-left corners. The titles - *I Did Nothing Wrong*, *I Waited So Long - Too Long*, *I Followed You to the End*, and *More Love Than I Can Remember* - function as statements, adding layers of meaning to her work (Emin, 2024).

The removal of the erotic dimension from Emin's work grants her nudes a profound and all-encompassing significance. Her personal experiences of emotional and physical pain, loneliness, and human fragility transcend individual suffering, achieving a universality symbolically aligned with the figure of Christ. This is particularly evident in *I Did Nothing Wrong* (Emin, 2024), where the innocent-looking figure of a young girl is depicted with a halo over her head.



Figure 14 Tracey Emin, *Deep tears*, 2024, oil on canvas

Similar references to Christian iconography can be observed in *Deep Tears* (Emin, 2004), where a reclining female figure on a landscape-oriented canvas strongly evokes the imagery of Christ being taken down from the cross after the crucifixion. Furthermore, the colour palette used in the *I Followed You to the End* (2024) series - red, blue, and white - carries significant Christian symbolism.

While these soul-wrenching paintings convey a universal meditation on human mortality, they do not lose their connection to the female experience. Instead, they establish a profound equality between the concepts of "person" and "woman," encouraging viewers to consider humanity itself through the pronoun "she". As Joanne Heath writing in her essay:

Tracey Emin's drawings of the female nude do not coalesce into a singular or fixed image of Woman, but rather constitute an ongoing interrogation of femininity as it is constituted in and through time (Heath, 2020 cited in Kokoli 2020, p.114)

Conclusion

The exploration of female artists and feminism stresses the enduring need for female equity, representation, and complexity in the art world. Historically marginalised, women have often struggled to have their voices heard within patriarchal structures that undervalue their work or confine their creative expression to reductive stereotypes. The examples of artists examined in the thesis demonstrate that feminist art of the 20th and 21st centuries actively challenge these constraints, providing a platform to reshape traditional narratives, such as female nude.

Feminism, especially the third and the fourth waves have brought forth a dynamic tapestry of voices, each reflecting diverse identities and experiences, dismantling monolithic portrayals of womanhood. Artists like Kath Kollwitz, Frieda Kahla and Alice Neel pioneered paths that continue to inspire contemporary practitioners. The contemporary female artists like Tracey Emin, Zanele Muholi and Steph Wilson continue the process addressing complexity of female identity, intersectionality, gender fluidity, and socio-political realities. In the discussed examples art created by women not only critiques but also proposes: it envisions spaces where women are subjects rather than objects, creators rather than muses, and narrators of their own stories.

At its core, female art aims to reflect humanity in its fullness, with all its contradictions, vulnerabilities, and strengths, as demonstrated by Tracey Emin's recent body of work. Female artists today continue to push boundaries, embodying resilience and creativity as they challenge norms and innovate new forms of expression.

Modern society has undeniably improved the position of women as individuals and creators compared to the late 19th century, yet significant inequalities remain. Women today have greater access to education, opportunities, and platforms for artistic and personal expression. In the arts, women are no longer relegated solely to the roles of muses or assistants but are recognised as creators in their own right, contributing to a richer, more diverse cultural landscape.

However, many areas still demand further progress. Women's rights are far from universally respected, and oppressive societal and political pressures continue to impact their autonomy and freedom. The ongoing struggle for abortion rights exemplifies this. In numerous U.S. states, as well as countries like Poland, debates over abortion laws reflect a troubling lack of respect for women's autonomy, with appallingly unjust and restrictive legislation forcing many to fight for the basic right to make decisions about their own bodies.

During my research I encountered surprising evidence of growing censorship affecting the representation of women in the public sphere during my thesis research, particularly in visual arts. The implications are profound, as such selective visibility risks distorting historical and artistic narratives. For example, the works of Renee Cox and Jo Spence, which explore identity, body politics, and gender through nudity, face these inequities. Meanwhile, male-centred imagery by the same artists remains visible. This disparity highlights the need for scrutiny and advocacy to prevent digital platforms from perpetuating gender biases and to ensure equitable representation of artistic legacies.

While the journey toward true equality in modern society is still ongoing, the analysed examples demonstrate that the traditional portrayal of the female nude can be used to convey new dimensions of the complex personalities of female artists, remaining a versatile and relevant form of human representation.

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