

Research and Context

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Question 1: Explore how artists have expressed Gender in art practice providing evidence from at least 2 artists and thinkers.

The purpose of this essay is to explore gender expression with a focus on the works of Jenny Saville and Silvia Sleigh. In addition to the ongoing lack of female representation in the art world and how this issue can be solved.

Curator and activist Maura Riley poses the question “How can we get people in the art world to think about gender, race and sexuality, to understand that these are persistent concerns that require action?” (M Riley 2018 p.7). This will be the central question of this essay. Set in conjunction with a famous 1963 quote by musician Nina Simone titled ‘*An Artist’s Duty*’ in which she asserts that it is a creator’s obligation to “reflect the times” . “When everyday is a matter of survival, I don’t think you can help but be involved.” (Simone, 1963) These questions shall be explored through research of selected artists Sylvia Sleigh and Jenny Saville. In addition Sleigh’s 1974 *Paul Rosano Reclining* and Saville’s 1992 *Propped* will be used as relevant pieces of work which support this topic.

Author of *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Art and Artists* Ian Chilvers, writes that Feminist Art is “A term applied to art that deals with issues specifically relating to women’s identity and experience” He goes on to write “The imagery often focuses on sexuality, both in celebrating female eroticism and in attacking male sexual violence.” (Chilvers, 2003 p. 210) It can be argued that no artist better exemplifies this criteria of feminist art than Sylvia Sleigh.



Figure 1

Sylvia Sleigh's 1974 painting, *Paul Rosano Reclining* can be seen in Figure 1. Sleigh's most notable works reverse long standing gender stereotypes that are associated with nude paintings. She achieves this by "presenting males as the subject for female erotic delectation" (Chilvers, 2003, p.210). Sleigh was a prominent figure in the surging *Feminist Art Movement* and is acclaimed for "turning traditional portraiture on its head." (Cary Whittier) In a blog post titled *A Love Letter to Paul Rosano*, author Kate Geha states that work like Sleigh's introduces a "meta Male Gaze", In which young women artists ``cast the male gaze, back onto the male"(Geha, 2012)

What is the Male Gaze? Janice Loreck, Teaching Associate in the School of Media, Film and Journalism, Monash University writes in a 2016 article for The Conversation.com

In the male gaze, woman is visually positioned as an “object” of heterosexual male desire. Her feelings, thoughts and her own sexual drives are less important than her being “framed” by male desire. It is important to underline the male gaze is not just at work and obvious in hyper-sexualised examples. But is instead the default way that women are portrayed in our society.

(Loreck, 2016,)

A link could be made between Sleight’s work and a famous artwork made by the Gorilla Girls titled, *Do Women Have To Be Naked To Get Into the Met. Museum?* (1989) in which the discrepancy of female nudes in museums compared to males takes centre stage. It states that “Less than 5% of the artists in the modern art section are women but 85% of the nudes are female” (Tate, 2020). In the same article, The Tate explains that the image within the poster is based on a famous work *La Grande Odalisque* 1814, painted by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres.

This consolidation of old artworks in our modern day context has become a running theme in many feminist art pieces. It is so wonderful to see that classic artworks are not being forgotten. But are instead being repurposed with a modern twist. This perfectly encapsulates Simone’s belief in ‘reflecting the times’ (1963).

Additionally, links can be made to the writings of cultural critic Bell Hooks. In her 1989 Book. In her 1989 book, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*; she states that artists must look inwards and encourage themselves to self-critique. She declares that we must:

produce work that opposes structures of domination, that presents possibilities for a transformed future by willingly interrogating our own work on aesthetic or political grounds. This interrogation itself becomes an act of critical intervention, fundamentally fostering an attitude of vigilance rather than denial.

(Hooks, 1989, p.20)

This piece perfectly serves as a subversive and radical take on the female gaze and gender as a whole. Particularly the subjectivity of male contemporary identity. In her own words Sleigh states:

I wanted to give my perspective, portraying both sexes with dignity and humanism,” she once said. “It was very necessary to do this because women had often been painted as objects of desire in humiliating poses. I don’t mind the ‘desire’ part, it’s the ‘object’ that’s not very nice.

(Sleigh, 1974,)

This discrepancy of females to males in the art world is further compounded by Sleigh herself; in a 2007 interview for Myartspace, she discusses gender equality issues in the mainstream art world and had this to say:

I do think things have improved for women in general. There are many more women in government, in law and corporate jobs, but it's very difficult in the art world for women to find a gallery." According to Sleigh, there is still more that needs to be done in order for men and women to be treated as equals in the art world.

(Sleigh, 2007)

That being said it could be argued that Sleigh's work can be seen as less progressive than previously thought. In our modern context, her work can be viewed as simply flipping this objectifying gaze onto men. Therefore It is not necessarily changing the ways of looking, just the subject in view. It could instead be considered as keeping the spirit of objectification and dehumanisation alive. "Reducing things to two types of gaze doesn't make much sense to me" (Braier, 2016). That is before even considering the other dehumanising gazes that are still pervasive in our modern society such as the Orientalist gaze, the rich gaze, the straight gaze and a white gaze.

Creatives who are tempted to follow in Sleigh's work should take caution. To flip the script and objectify the objectifier, permits this behaviour of subordination and hierarchy to prevail in our society. When all is said and done, an unhealthy power dynamic between genders is still taking centre stage. Feminist literary theorist Elaine Showalter put it best in her 1989 book titled, *Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness*:

The feminist obsession with correcting, modifying, supplementing, revising, humanising, or even attacking male critical theory keeps us dependent upon it and retards our progress in solving our own theoretical problems.

(Showalter, 1989, p.260)

So should one discount Sleigh's work as nothing more than a shallow flipping of the script? Absolutely not. Nina Simone wrote of "reflecting the times" and that is exactly what this piece does. It serves to show how our collective view is always changing as it should be. Of course the content and the messaging of art is always shifting and evolving. It is important that we continue to maintain this trajectory towards self improvement. By critiquing such works of the past we are laying the groundwork for how we can continue to make such thought provoking and subversive pieces of art for the future.

Andrew-Graham Dixons 2008 book *Art The Definitive Visual Guide* states that, Feminist "Imagery is necessarily often sexual, but challenges the stereotype of women as an object of male erotic desire or fantasy".(AG Dixon, 2008 p.572) No one better exemplifies this than Jenny Saville. Her work strives to embrace what is considered as grotesque and challenges societies perception of the female body and acts as a counter to the male gaze, by painting nude obese women.



Figure 2

Figure 2 depicts Jenny Saville's 1992 *Propped* painting. Described as a "self-portrait in which the artist sits naked (albeit wearing pointy white flats on her feet) atop a phallic black post. Her nails dig into her legs, pushing her ample breasts together." (Cohen, 2018) .

What is interesting about *Propped* is the faint text inscribed backwards onto the painting. Specifically sprawled across the canvas and the skin of the figure. As Alina Cohen explains, the text is a quote from Belgium born feminist writer Luce Irigaray. The text reads:

If we continue to speak in this sameness—speak as men have spoken for centuries, we will fail each other. Again, words will pass through our bodies, above our heads—disappear, make us disappear.

(Saville, 1992)

It serves as almost a mantra to herself. It can be easy to deduce that the objective of Saville's is carving her own path. Everything she makes, she makes for herself. Her work can be viewed as an inspiring message of independence and agency in her work. She is not concerned with whether or not her viewers can read these words. So long as she can read it that's all that matters. Emma Baker, Head of Research at Sotheby's, explains the quote:

"Women perform a narcissistic function for men. What Irigaray is positing is that female representation, female expression, should be a celebration of otherness, not a celebration of sameness."

(Barker, 2018)

It is clear to see that Saville chooses to be subversive and not speak in the "sameness" of men. This links back to the work of Sleigh in which the lens of objectification is reversed onto the objectifier. But Saville instead, challenges such conventional renditions of the female nude and form in art by presenting the female through the unflinching understanding and perspective of a woman.

This again harkens back to Bell Hooks (1989) encouraging creatives to look inward and be self critical of their works and their own personal biases. This sentiment is extremely apparent in Saville's Propped piece. One might wonder if she had read the works of Hooks to come to this conclusion herself. It is clear that the objective she set out with has been followed very closely.

In a recent video essay The Take explains today's "cultural conversations are making big strides in addressing a number of long entrenched prejudices. So why do many people still act like it's okay to mock lecture or belittle fat people?"(The Take, 2021)

Even Ian Chilver's described Saville's subjects as "Mountainously obese nude women". (Chilver's, 2003 p.649) This book was released during the early 2000s. A period described as Postfeminism. However, tabloid culture and gossip blogs cultivated an environment of an immense and accepted misogynistic treatment of women such as Britney Spears, Paris Hilton and Megan Fox.

Maura Riley writes in a 2017 Art News article that this "Western male viewpoint, which has been unconsciously accepted as the prevailing viewpoint, "may—and does—prove to be inadequate" (Riley, 2017) A post by Artsy.net explains that Saville proclaims herself as "Anti Beauty".(Saville, 2017) Her work instead focuses on "exaggerating bodily elements that society generally deemed unsightly." (Artsy.net, 2018) Saville herself has stated: "I'm not painting disgusting, big women. I'm painting women who've been made to think they're big and disgusting." She is essentially calling out these sexist ideals and giving the floor to all the women who do not comfortably fit into this standard.

The Take's video essay continues to explain that "One of the main drivers behind fat phobia is the fear of becoming sexually undesirable. Which stems from unattainable beauty standards westerners have been exposed to for generations" (The Take, 2021) Perhaps the reason why Saville's work still prevails is because viewing these pieces provide viewers of all body-types with a sense of camaraderie. "Saville portrayed her figures not as idealised Madonnas and Christs, but as harried contemporary humans" (Cohen, 2018) When a female artist is taking centre stage it is more than likely that something considered grotesque, unpleasant or just imperfect about the body is going to be discussed.

In addition, Saville expertly records the female experience in her artworks. In part through her studies and reference of many famous male artists which came before her. Such as Henri Matisse, Leonardo da Vinci, Willem DeKooning, Peter Paul Ruben and Pablo Picasso. Her pieces centring on motherhood and children serve as a reference to the works of Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci "albeit from the perspective of a person who's actually experienced childbirth." (Cohan, 2018) experience.

This revisionism can be viewed as a form of resistance against the prevailing perspective of men throughout history. By revisiting and re-writing these works of the past, female artists are shifting the narrative onto themselves and creating their own historical arc. Maura Riley explains "the canon itself is re-written, the principal aim being to include those who had hitherto been refused, forgotten, or hidden." (Riley, 2018, p. 23) It is here yet again we see a dialogue taking place between the old art and the new.

Early on in her book, *Curatorial Activism*, Riley asserts to her readers that:

It is important not to be seduced by what appear to be signs of equality-women and nonwhites have never been, nor are they yet, treated on a par with white men. The existence of a few superstars or token achievers does not mean that Other artists have attained equality.

(Riley, 2018, p. 20)

It is very important to bear this message in mind and not lose sight that we still have a very long way to go in achieving equality. Both Silvia Sleight and Jenny Saville's work serve as more than adequate examples of gender expression and examples of the progress of gender expression in the art-world over the years. While it goes without saying, there is a lot more work that needs to be done in terms of reaching a future where everyone is granted equal opportunity and exposure regardless of gender, race or sexuality. It is important to acknowledge the strides we have made so far and to continue being self critical of our work and with that our steps towards change. We must be steady, realistic and maintain (as Hook puts it) "an attitude of vigilance rather than denial." (Hooks, 1989, p.20)

After considering all of the information discussed it is clear to see that Nina Simone's call to arms for artists to "reflect the times" (Tate, 2020) is not enough. It can be argued that simply listening and recording the times we are living is not enough. Upon considering all the previous points made, reflecting the times now reads as somewhat shallow and passive. Of course reflecting the times is an inevitable thing all creators must do. After all, these are the times we live in. Efforts still must be made to better ourselves, or else we are just simply marking time. We must no longer be passive and continue to examine our own personal biases and how we can overcome them. Only then will we enrich our individual crafts and prosper as a collective of artists. Therefore, Instead of reflecting on the times we are in, reflect upon ourselves and take affirmative action to change the times we are in.

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