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“How can illustrations be used as a form of feminist activism to challenge stereotypes and promote gender equality?”

Introduction

This proposal will explore and discuss the three keywords: Empowerment, Liberation and Activism within the context of Feminism through the art of Illustration. This will be achieved by exploring important and relevant theoretical underpinnings such as: Patriarchy, Sexual violence, Empowerment, The male gaze and Societal pressures. This will allow me to develop a better understanding of real-life situations which I will then be able to use as reference for my practice. Exploring these underpinnings within the context of the three words will expand my knowledge on important topics which will allow for a more accurate and representational product. In succeeding this, I hope to compile a series of exhibition pieces that will combine these relevant theoretical underpinnings in an illustrative way.

EMPOWERMENT

“I’m a woman, phenomenally. Phenomenal woman, that’s me” (Maya Angelou, 1978).

Empowerment can be a term used for a variety of contextual purposes through the themes of economic, political, social, and psychological. “The term Empowerment generally refers to the process of gaining power, authority, or control over one’s life and circumstances. In a sociopolitical context, it involves enabling marginalised groups to participate fully in societal decisions” (Kabeer, 1999). The word empowerment can hold a central focus within feminist discourse, which summarizes the process through which particularly women gain autonomy

and control over their own lives. "Empowerment cannot be reduced to personal development alone, it must also address collective liberation, as true empowerment arises when individuals work together to challenge systemic injustices" (Hooks, 2000, p. 40).

During my own work on feminism, Empowerment serves as both a goal and critical lens, it highlights who are empowered, and under what conditions. For instance, women's Empowerment addresses not only personal but also structural barriers such as wage inequality, unpaid labor, and workplace discrimination. "Empowerment must involve the transformation of power relations, as it is through challenging the social and political systems that oppress women that genuine change occurs" (Batliwala, 1994, p. 128).

Empowerment can be seen as a tool to uplift and allow women to be their authentic selves, In a way that challenges societal norms and undermines the systems that try and oppress them. In the context of feminism, Empowerment refers to increasing women's access to a lifetime of freedom, and a lifestyle free of oppression. It is crucial to reiterate the importance of the impact on empowering women, and what this can do for the world. It is predominant now, more than ever, the significance of allowing women to be their authentic selves, whether this be taught from a young age, or self-taught, being given the gift of

Empowerment can be wonderful and glorious for oneself "it is about expanding their freedoms and capacities to lead lives they value" (Sen, A., 1999). Fortunately, throughout history there has been a successful range of Empowerment initiatives that have been a positive steppingstone for women around the world, however, there is still a long way to go. Empowerment emphasizes the importance of giving women a voice, and how it "begins with speaking for oneself in ways that challenge dominant narratives" (Spivak, G.C., 1988).

Empowerment in the context of feminism isn't just a way of teaching women to own their voices and their bodies, yet can also be a platform in educating men and suppressing their

dominant values “it is about women as well as men, it is about transforming society” (Hooks, b., 2000). Illustration has been used as a powerful tool for conveying social messages, and has been used extensively in portraying the theme of Women’s Empowerment. Through the skill of visual storytelling, Illustrations can be used for expressing the strength of women, agency, resistance and challenging the societal injustices.



Fig. 1: J. Howard Miller, ‘We Can Do It!’ 1943

In this iconic image, well known by most, also known as *Rosie the Riveter*, as pictured in Fig.1 was an illustration created during World War two as a propaganda campaign which encouraged women to join industrial jobs while men were away. As pictured in Fig.1, it features a strong, confident woman dressed masculine while wearing a red polka-dot bandana flaunting her muscly arm. This was a pivotal moment in representing the power within women whilst completely challenging the societal norms of a job traditionally dominated by men, proving their capability and resilience. The image plays a part as an enduring symbol of women’s economic independence and their ability to contribute to society on an equal footing with men, changing social norms.

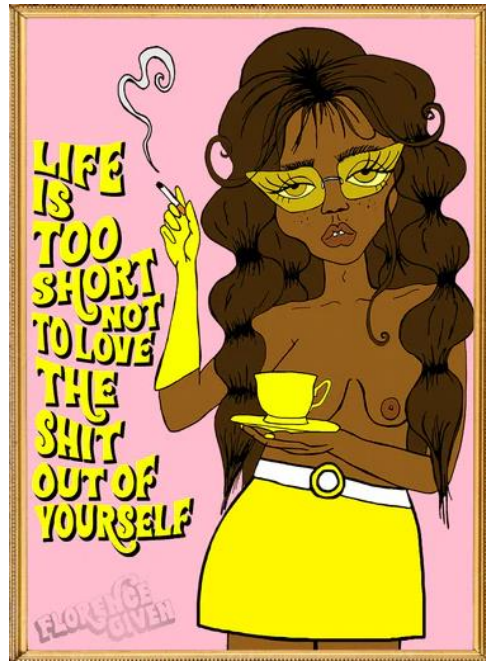


Fig. 2: Florence Given 'Women don't owe you pretty' 2020

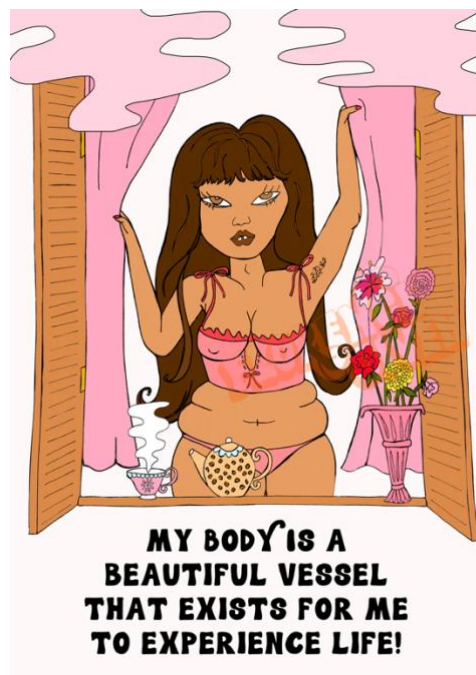


Fig. 3: Florence Given 'Women Living Deliciously' 2024

Through these images, Florence's artwork becomes synonymous in empowering women. By using vibrant and bold colours, and including simple lines, she is able to challenge societal expectations and promote self-love whilst encouraging women to embrace their strength and individuality. As seen in Fig. 2, Florence promotes the importance of self-love and

the radical act of Empowerment by choosing self-acceptance which affirms the idea that self-worth is not tied to societal approval. Florence depicts the magic of choosing a life of Empowerment and asserting their right to exist without needing to be validated. Her works are a collection of diverse body types, sexualities, and ethnicities. As pictured in Fig. 3, Florence encourages women to embrace their bodies and love themselves as they are whilst rejecting the beauty standards imposed by society.

LIBERATION

“Who knows what women can be when they are finally free to become themselves” (Betty Frieden 1963).

Liberation can be used as a term as a process of gaining freedom from oppression, restrictions, or domination. In a feminist perspective, it can relate to the process of dismantling patriarchal structures whilst achieving autonomy and equality for all women. Expanding on its meaning, we can also introduce the etymology of the word and deepen its meaning, the term is explored as an idea to movements for gender, racial and sexual justice which derives from the Latin liberatio as an act of setting free. Liberation comes through critical consciousness and dialogue “Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” (Freire, P. 1970). During my own illustration work through the theory of feminism, I am constantly seeking to explore the importance of Liberation by depicting women breaking free from these traditional roles that have been placed upon them, whilst reclaiming space in public and private spheres. Not only is Liberation a form of freedom from external control systems, it is also a freedom of expression, to be, and being able to imagine new identities. Liberation, as a whole, can be the glory of escaping the objectification that is placed upon us in these societal roles and the gift of becoming an autonomous subject, where finally we are

no longer “the other” but a full human being with rights and qualities of our own “ She must renounce the security of childhood and the protection of men if she wants to be free” (de Beauvoir, S. 1997). It is important, as a collective, that we centre Liberation through difference and solidarity. In order to be completely free, real freedom must include black, queer, and marginalized women, not just white and middle-class women.

Whilst we are living in a world where oppression and intersectionality still exists for masses of women, then we are still fighting, we are not free until every woman is free “I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own” (Lorde, A. 1984). Liberation in feminism is not only about external rights or laws, it is also explored through identity, power, voice and the transformation of society from an inside out perspective. “True resistance begins with people confronting pain and wanting to do something to change it” (hooks, b. 1994). Liberation can only emerge when people begin to acknowledge their own personal pain caused by oppression, and deciding that they need to act against it. Liberation can be a powerful tool through identity reclamation “ I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing, I will have my voice” (Anzaldúa, G. 1987). Liberation can be personal and cultural, it is of paramount importance that women reclaim their voice and identity for marginalized women.

Liberation is about truth telling, and the power of speaking out in what is believed in, it is crucial to embrace the power of this, even when it threatens the status quo “They said, ‘You are a savage and dangerous woman’..” (El Saadawi, N. 2007). While Feminist Liberation seeks systematic change, it must also address internalised oppression, it is time for individuals to begin unlearning these social conditions and begin challenging them.

Ultimately, Liberation within feminist theory is a continuous process, the reimagining of freedom, equality, and most importantly the empowerment of radical care, resistance and

solidarity. Illustration can be used as a predominant tool on the theme of Liberation. It can be used as unique visual strategies such as empowering marginalized voices, reclaiming bodies and resisting systemic control.

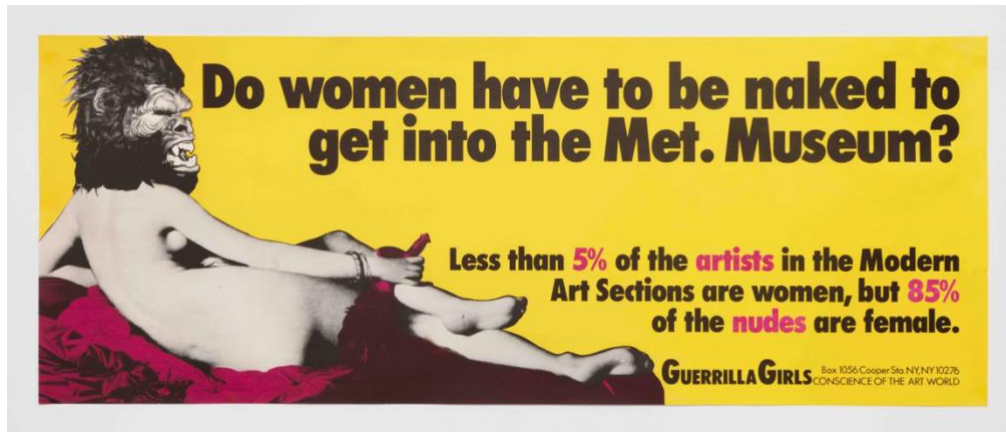


Fig. 4: Guerrilla Girls 'Do women have to be naked to get into the met. Museum?' (1989)

Through this Poster/Illustration the Guerrilla Girls expose systems of oppression by liberating truth and revealing data and inequality that institutions try to hide. As seen in Fig. 4 the image features a nude woman wearing a gorilla mask, alongside statistics proving that women are underrepresented as artists in museums, yet overrepresented as naked subjects. As a result of this, they tackle and confront patriarchal control over female bodies in art and reclaim through critique, satire, and facts. The guerrilla mask acts as a symbol of resistance, and removes individual identity, this liberates the message away from ego, which allows their work to speak for itself, and all marginalized artists. The Guerrilla Girls use illustration as a form of protest which promotes a feminist Liberation that is inclusive and evolving, breaking free from stereotypical norms and pushing for a structural change. It is a significant way in liberating identities from silence and invisibility.

ACTIVISM

"Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (Bell Hooks, 2000).

Activism can be used as a term for implementing direct action to bring political or social change. Activism can be achieved when performing a range of activities that include protests, advocacy, public education and creative expression that “challenge dominant power structures” (Martin, B. 2007). When speaking in context within Feminism, Activism historically has functioned as a tool for combating patriarchal systems and advocating for gender justice. During suffrage campaigns from the early 20th century and movements like #MeToo, feminist activism has been a crucial role in reshaping societal norms and amplifying marginalized voices. Within my own illustration work and the context of Activism, I am constantly inspired by feminist protest art, and always searching for ways of challenging objectification of women and patriarchal communities while celebrating autonomy, self worth and intersectionality through bold visual art. Feminism defines a collective political movement, ultimately feminism is the act of Activism and the opportunity of being able to speak up for our beliefs whilst challenging patriarchal systems. It is important to emphasize that Activism is not only reactionary, it is a proactive struggle against structural systems of domination. Activism is continuous and rooted in everyday resistance, it is a process and not a single moment “Revolution is not a one-time event” (Lorde, A. 1984, p 140). Feminist Activism is not only a public choice it begins with the personal and the intimate, but also resisting oppression in everyday spaces and allowing ourselves to challenge dominated views sometimes in private spaces and with individuals that surround our lives “Feminism is homework, it is about making the home a site of political struggle” (Ahmed, S. 2017, p. 27). Activism is powered by hope, in the hope that we as women can live a life of resistance and be freed from oppressive and patriarchal views, it is a belief in change and future liberation “Hope is an axe you break down doors within an emergency... Hope calls for action, action is Impossible without hope” (Solnit, R. 2004, p. 4). It is crucial to re iterate the importance of

speaking on intersectional Activism, intersectionality demands a feminist activism that addresses the multiple overlapping systems that shape women's lives differently, and should always include race, class, sexuality, disability, and more to be fully liberatory. Feminist Activism is both political and personal, it is not only a position of protest but also a space of collective healing and empowerment. Through visual storytelling, Illustration can be a powerful form of feminist Activism, which challenges dominant narratives, amplifies marginalized voices whilst making political messages accessible and emotionally resonant.



Fig. 5: Molly Crabapple 'We will Stand Together' (2017)

Molly Crabapple's poster is a powerful example of feminist visual activism. As seen in Fig. 5 The poster features a woman surrounded by bold lines and flowing hair, symbolising strength, defiance and beauty. This poster was part of a campaign in celebrating resistance, community and intersectional solidarity, targeting women, immigrants and marginalized groups. The artwork does not depict a single identity yet stands for a collective of women

seeking to resist oppression based on gender, race, immigration status or sexuality, reflecting a shift in how women are represented, not as symbols, but as subjects of action and change. By using the phrase 'We will stand together' it affirms unity, intersectional resistance and collective action, symbolising that solidarity will not break.

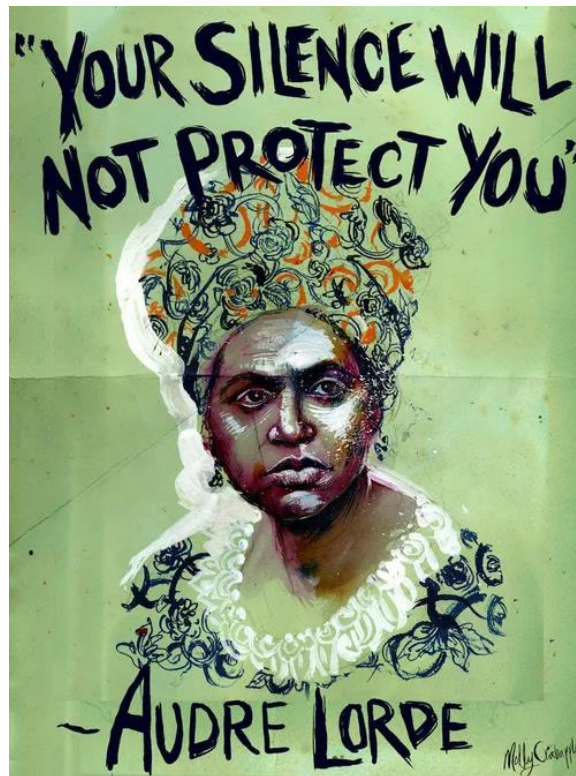


Fig. 6: Molly Crabapple 'Your Silence Will Not Protect You' (2017)

Molly Crabapple's poster is the perfect example of a compelling piece of feminist art, used as a call to action and confrontation urging, particularly women and marginalized people not to remain silent in the face of injustice. As seen in Fig. 6 this poster features a woman framed by intense bold text with a fierce expression suggesting courage and power. The image conveys both beauty and defiance, placing feminine expression art at the centre of political resistance. This image emphasizes the importance of speaking out and how this is a core feminist principle, it is the role that fights back against erasure, censorship and fear. Molly's poster adapts Audre Lorde's radical words "your silence will not protect you" (Lorde, A., 1984) into a visual call to action, transforming silence into protest, Crabapple amplifies a

politics of voice and visibility, asserting that feminist resistance begins with speaking truth, even when it may be dangerous.

Through the process of researching the three words Empowerment, Liberation and Activism, I have been able to explore and develop a contextual range of theoretical perspectives of the words, which has helped in guiding me to a direction of my writing and practice for next year. I have had the opportunity to explore the range of successful illustrations that approach these topics, and how it can be used as a wonderful tool in tackling important themes within the context of feminism. There is power in illustration and how we as artists can use our skills and creativity to approach and challenge these societal issues, and how art can be a magical thing in standing up for our beliefs. Florence Given has been the perfect example in portraying the importance of self-love and Empowerment, and the way in which we can use illustration as a form of teaching women to know their worth whilst challenging societal pressures, including all body types, ethnicities, sexualities etc. Ultimately, this has undoubtably inspired my passion for creating pieces that can inspire women to love themselves no matter what, through the power of Empowerment, whilst feeling liberated and inspired to have a voice and speak up against toxic patriarchal views and dominant narratives.

PROPOSED QUESTION

“How can illustrations be used as a form of feminist activism to challenge stereotypes and promote gender equality?”

PROPOSED PRACTICE

To conclude, the exploration of these topics has inspired my proposed practice next year and has allowed for an accurate and representational product that will be relatable, inspirational and liberating for women.

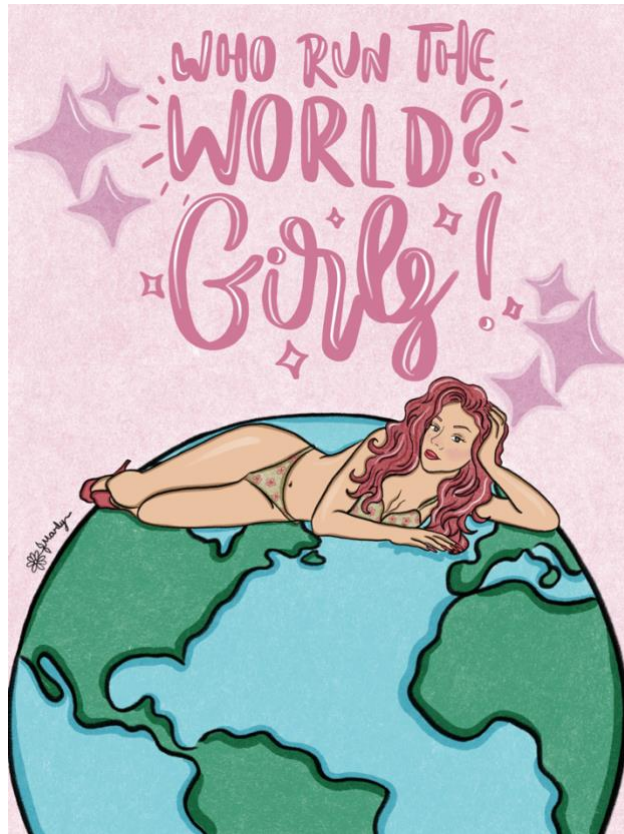


Fig. 7

In producing these final exhibition pieces, as seen in Fig.7 I will be developing this established style of mine to design a selection of exhibition pieces that will portray and inspire the importance of self-love and empowerment, whilst being unapologetic and creating a mockery of patriarchal and dominant narratives, including subjects such as sexual violence, the male gaze and societal pressures.

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List of figures

Fig. 1:

Miller, J.H. (1943) *We Can Do It!* [Online image] Available at: https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/object/nmah_538122 (Accessed 8 April 2025).

Fig. 2:

Given. F. (2020) *Women don't owe you pretty.* [Online image] Available at: <https://www.florencegiven.com/password> (Accessed 8 April 2025).

Fig. 3:

Given. F. (2024) *Women Living Deliciously.* [Online image] Available at: <https://www.florencegiven.com/password> (Accessed 8 April 2025).

Fig. 4:

Guerrilla Girls. (1989) *Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?* [Online image] Available at: <https://www.guerrillagirls.com/projects> (Accessed: 14 April 2025).

Fig. 5:

Crabapple, M. (2017) *We Will Stand Together* [Online image] Available at: <https://www.mollycrabapple.com/illustration/posters> (Accessed: 18 April 2025).

Fig. 6:

Crabapple, M. (2017) *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* [Online image] Available at: <https://www.mollycrabapple.com/illustration/posters> (Accessed: 18 April 2025).