

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

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Representation of women has not been in the hands of women but of men. Women have been subject to the 'male gaze' and their own representation of themselves have only just become more prevalent, as women have started to deconstruct and reconstruct how they are seen and portrayed. (Scherker, 2019) This essay will look at two female artists practising four centuries apart and how they have used their own image and experiences to make us question the male gaze, and to offer different representations of women. Both artists cover similar themes of challenging the narrative of women that is so often portrayed in visual media and demonstrate why women should be representing themselves and creating their own narrative.

Cindy Sherman (born 1954) is an American artist photographing herself in different guises. Sherman gained popularity with her *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-80) series where she was inspired by 1940s and 50s B-movies featuring heavily stereotyped female characters. (MoMA, 2021a) Sherman inhabited these stereotypes but with the backdrop of the second-wave feminist movement, the work is often read as being feminist. (Mulvey, 1991) Sherman later widened her inspiration to all forms of mass media and historic art. Her work forces us to address how women have been portrayed and to question these stereotypes through a post-modernist deconstructive lens. Sherman stated, "I wanted to imitate something out of the culture, and also make fun of the culture as I was doing it." (MoMA, 2021b)



Sherman, (1978) *Untitled film still #13*

Sherman's 'stills' make us confront how women have been represented in film with characters primarily written and directed by men. Sherman was inspired by film specifically B-movies and exploitation films that were fuelled by stereotypes. (MoMA, 2021a)

The *Film Stills* represent women as they have been imagined in hegemonic masculine culture: shallowly constructed, objects of some unseen person's action, beautiful, and/or battered. (Sprague-Jones and Sprague, 2011)

These images include sexual and violent undertones with Sherman portrayed as an object and a product of the 'male gaze.' Throughout art and media images of women have been idealised as the "spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him." (Berger, 1972) Sherman's 'stills' often show her being oblivious of the viewer, yet she is designed to be seen. We are the male viewer. Her work makes us question this relationship between the viewer and the way women are so often depicted, as well as a wider relationship between men and women.

In Western society, men have had power over women and their image through the male dominance of art and culture, with the representation of women becoming a male fantasy, which has also affected how men see women and how they see themselves. (Berger, 1972) Intrinsically women have become to see themselves through the male gaze. As John Berger states in *Ways of Seeing*,

She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life. Her own sense appreciated as herself by another. (1972)

We automatically see women differently than men and thus represent them as such. We often see these representations as normal and do not question them. However, women have started to increasingly question these images especially since the second-wave feminist movement in the 1970s, and it coinciding with the postmodern era, there has been a more deconstructive attitude to the way women have been represented in art and media. (MoMA, 2021a)

Semiotics relates to how we read images. In 1867 Theorist Charles Sanders Peirce broke down signs into three categories; iconic, indexical, and symbolic: with the iconic being what you see literally in the image; the indexical being what you know through experience; and the symbolic being something that you have learned through convention/ culture. (Berger, 2005) This works both ways as reading and when creating an image. How women are represented seem to have become 'symbols' of women, with men conventionally creating

those symbols. But we all interpret images differently through our connotations of the image. The connotes are determined by factors such as our gender, age, religion, wealth, ethnicity and cultural upbringing. This influences how we see the world. (Barthes, 1964) As a result, women are identifying the issues with how they have been represented. These factors also influence how we represent ourselves. It is important to give people the power to represent themselves and create their own narrative as the outcomes are less likely to be stereotyped.

Women have begun to reconstruct their own images and are showing the personal experience of deconstructing how women are represented as well as their feelings around the imagery.



Sherman, (2016) *Untitled #571*

Cindy Sherman has always insisted her work is not autobiographical, which has thrown into question whether her photographs could even be considered 'self-portraits.' However, in

recent years Sherman, still inhabiting different stereotyped guises admits there is a “personal aspect” to her work. With the artist quoted as saying, "I, as an older woman, am struggling with the idea of being an older woman." (Gopnik, 2016), with Sherman making a connection to the women she is portraying in her series in 2016, inspired by ageing Classic Hollywood film stars. Skelly (2020) notes, “This series seems to be a more nuanced and self-reflexive engagement with Sherman's own status as a successful artist of wealth and means.” The artist has more of a sense of empathy towards the subjects in these images as well as still playing around with certain stereotypes, there is a realness in her later work. She is depicting these women less through the male gaze; however, the characters still see themselves through the male gaze and are trying to live up to those standards. We get a sense of insecurity and a battle to come to terms with their image subject to ageing and ‘fading beauty.’

Sherman’s later more recent work features more traditional portrait posing creating staged snapshots of women. These women seem to hold more of a story but do not show it as it is all about their image. There is a desire to know more about these women’s stories.

Sherman’s act of ‘dressing-up’ and her fascination around the ideas of transformation are personal as well as they reflect many other women’s pressures to dress-up and present a certain image. (Gopnik, 2016) As Mulvey stated in 1991, “The accoutrements of the feminine that struggle to conform to a façade of desirability haunt Sherman's iconography.”

Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1653) was a prominent Italian painter inspired by her father Orazio Gentileschi and Caravaggio, who in the latter half of the 20th century has experienced a revival, with feminists claiming her as such. (The National Gallery, 2020) In 2020, The National Gallery, London, dedicated a solo show to the artist including her surviving personal letters and documents from her rape trial in 1612. (The National Gallery, 2020) Artemisia, the seventeenth-century female painter is as much of a draw if not more so as her paintings. Like Cindy Sherman, she portrayed herself in different guises and used her features in several of her paintings. Although assuming guises they are not as radical of a transformation between them as Sherman's. In contrast to Sherman, it is easier to see Artemisia personally in her own work due to us knowing her context through letters and documents. Once again there is a debate whether we can consider these paintings as being 'self-portraits,' but curator Letizia Treves (2020) argues that "her personal life was closely intertwined with her art – and our interpretation of it."

Due to several of Artemisia's letters surviving as well as documents from her rape trial we put her work in the context of her and her experiences. This can influence how we look at her work and we try to see her in it. Artemisia's work is not necessarily personal in the way we would think about it today, but her experiences would have influenced how she portrayed women.

Garrard asserted that 'women's art is inescapably, if unconsciously, different from men's, because the sexes have been socialised to different experiences in the world,' arguing that Artemisia's highly original interpretations of traditional themes were predicted on her gender and, more specifically, on her experiences as a young woman. (Treves, *et al.* 2020)



Gentileschi, (1615-17) *Self-Portrait as Saint Catherine of Alexandria*

Artemisia's choice of depicting Saint Catherine of Alexandria was not unique but her interpretation was. Saint Catherine was tortured but survived which is at this point of the story Artemisia chose to depict her. (Treves, *et al.* 2020) Artemisia choosing herself as the model for Catherine was significant as she has also been tortured during her trial. (The National Gallery, 2020) The painting shows a broken wheel with spikes as if she has defeated her torture and overcome it. It shows resilience and quiet determination. Artemisia most likely related to Catherine and so used herself to help depict her or related to the subject's narrative.



Caravaggio, (1599) *Judith Beheading Holofernes*



Gentileschi, (1612-20) *Judith Beheading Holofernes*

The women she painted are full of emotion and have a real presence. Artemisia gave a new take on how women could be painted and challenged stereotypes of women in biblical stories, such as *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (1612-13). Caravaggio's interpretation painted 20 years prior is far from believable representing Judith as being timid and hesitant, but Artemisia's representation shows confidence and the aggression and strength that would be

needed to overpower Holofernes. (Treves, *et al.* 2020) Artemisia depicted strong women that are rooted in reality. The painting has often been described as her “revenge in paint” (Treves *et al.* 2020) against the man who assaulted her and some see the likeness between the artist and Judith. (Jones, 2016) It is easy to see a resemblance between the artist and subject knowing her experiences but even without knowing the painting is still striking and offers something different from what her male contemporaries were creating. Artemisia found success due to her interpretations of women that she brought to life. “Artemisia’s female heroes are real women, with all their nuanced emotions”, “She brought a different perspective – a female sensibility – to her subjects”. (Treves, *et al.*, 2020)

In the book *Ways of Seeing* (1972), John Berger dissects the popular story of *Susannah and the Elders* and uses depictions by Tintoretto as examples.



Tintoretto, (1555-56) *Susannah and the Elders*

Here we can see the comparison between how Tintoretto has painted from the 'male gaze' making her an object to be looked at. Susannah is also seen looking into a mirror further perpetuating her to see herself through the male gaze, and "treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight." (Berger, 1972)



Gentileschi, (1622) *Susannah and the Elders*

Artemisia's interpretation offers a different approach and relationship between Susannah and the Elders but also offers something slightly different in the way in which we view the painting. John Berger (1972) states that "Men survey women before treating them. Consequently, how women appear to men can determine how she will be treated." Susannah treats the men differently and is seen as feeling uncomfortable with their advances, thus we as the viewer through the male gaze treat her differently. It makes us feel uneasy to see her through the male gaze as she is seen less as an object for us to look at and more real with real emotions. In Artemisia's interpretation Susannah shows clear discomfort

and fear and with her twisted position attempting to hide her body shows she does not want to be on display. This kind of emotion is something that has come from Artemisia's own experience. We do not want to sensationalise Artemisia's experience and for her to be known solely through her experiences as well as her being a women painter, but we must acknowledge that her context is important to her work. (Treves, *et al*, 2020) "No male artist could have created such potent paintings of female fury, fear, ecstasy, pride, bewilderment and cunning." (Wullschläger, 2020) As Wullschläger notes, Artemisia creates varying complex emotions throughout her work that greater represent women. Women creating their own narrative and portraying their own experiences is important in creating meaningful emotions and educating others not alike.

We learn how to read images from an early age so images can skew our perception of people, therefore representation is important. (Berger, 1972) Women portrayed through the male gaze has been damaging to both women and men. Images can be just as telling as words. We can develop preconceived ideas of what someone is like through how they have been represented.

The term 'intertextuality' first used by Julia Kristeva in 1966, refers to one thing's meaning being shaped by another's that already exists, with John Berger (1972) stating that "The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe." Our context plays a huge role in how we see and how we continue to see other things as a result. Intertextuality can also be beneficial when exposed to good representations. However the cultural and social context cannot be separated from how we see things, thus more accurate representations

are needed to change our perception for the better, and to encourage us to continue to create them. (Alfaro, 1996)

Both artists discussed in this essay hold a distant approach to portraying themselves exactly but hold connections to their own narrative. Due to women's positions in society and culture, women's experiences are different from men, (Berger, 1972) therefore giving women the power and opportunity to depict those own experiences themselves is crucial to prevent stereotypes and to be more focused on the individual. Here only two white female artists have been discussed but the diversity of gender, race, sexuality, religion, and class is vital and more relevant than ever to be celebrating and exhibiting. Rebuilding an image and sense of oneself in all its complexities is individual and important for our society. We are the only ones that can tell our story.

When reviewing the National Gallery's *Artemisia* exhibition Jackie Wullschläger wrote:

It's impossible to stand before them without wondering: if art history had been different, if more female artists had painted and had depicted women, could women's position in history itself have been different? (2020)

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