

Isabella McWilliams (2104371)

Fine Art: Studio, Site, and Context

Research In Context ADAD5003

Gwenllian Beynon

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**EXPLORE HOW ARTISTS HAVE EXPRESSED GENDER IN ART PRACTICE
PROVIDING EVIDENCE FROM AT LEAST 2 ARTISTS AND THINKERS.**

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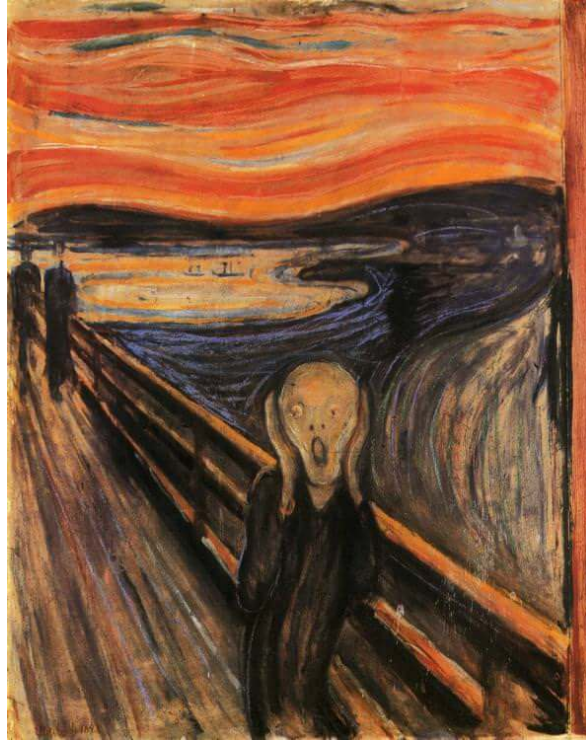
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The themes of emotion, psychosis, self-expression, and gender are all abstract concepts that are not always best represented through language or text. Expressing feelings through words can be difficult, especially when there is a lack of accurate language surrounding the experience and emotions. What all of these themes have in common is their recurring appearances in visual art throughout our history. Visual art has even played a key role in the treatment of mental disorders, with art therapy growing in popularity throughout the years- patients find it easier to confront their hallucinations when they are able to communicate them through drawing or painting (Adelphi Psych Medicine Clinic, 2019). In order to create a feeling of anxiety and stress, Edward Munch used the color red in his famous painting *The Scream* (1893). Using color to create physical and emotional reverberations, incorporating symbolic imagery, and even the movements of the artist as they were creating can elicit responses from the audience that even they might not be aware of. It is no coincidence that, as the concepts of gender and gender roles are challenged more everyday, their appearance and importance in the art world has skyrocketed as well. Gender did not used to be viewed as an abstract concept- it was a fact upheld and believed by the majority. There were men and there were women; if you were born a woman then you were a woman, if you were born a man then you were a man and all the stereotypes and expectations that went along with that designation were then placed upon you as well (Weingarten, 2015). It was an inescapable, oppressing conformity and where there is oppression and struggle and pain there is, more often than not, resistance as well- and resistance propagates art.



Ref fig 1: Edvard Munch (1893) *The Scream*

If one were to go through the historical timeline of art, the resistance and rebellion seen today is not always present or making itself known in earlier, classical works. This is not because modern people are more disaffected than those of the past- what's to blame is the context surrounding the creation of the older, more classical pieces. While men were the ones holding the paintbrushes and sitting behind the canvases, women were at the forefront, acting as the subjects and inspirations for the masterpieces (Frey, 2020). It is easy enough to think of some of these famous women; Michelangelo's *Mona Lisa* (1506), Vermeer's *Girl With A Pearl Earring* (1665), Édouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863), and the list goes on.

Despite not only their massive, but also important roles in these works, women were almost never given a voice in the art world- though there were a few that broke through these confines. Baroque artist Elisabetta Sirani had a career as a practicing

artist and teacher, specializing in teaching women. One of her most famous works, *Timoclea Killing Her Rapist* (Sirani, 1695) is a rare early depiction of a woman's rage and reaction towards her abuse. The subject of rape in art was not uncommon at this time, in fact it was very popular; the difference between Sirani's (1695) *Timoclea Killing Her Rapist* versus, for example, Sebastiano Ricci's (c.1700) *The Rape of the Sabine Women* (which was a very popular scene to paint at the time) is the portrayal of power and capability. In Ricci's work, the women are helpless against their attackers, scattered, hysterical, and with bits of clothing torn off or slipping from their chests. Sirani's *Timoclea* is the complete opposite of this- she is standing, fully clothed, above her attacker as she throws him into a well. She is depicted with an angry face and a strong and sturdy stance while her assailant is weakly flailing about. This subversion of expectations was rare for this time period and Sirani would have most likely continued teaching young women and creating pieces just like *Timoclea* if she had not died of unexplained circumstances at the age of twenty-seven.

These two works, *Timoclea Killing Her Rapist* (Sirani, 1695) and *The Rape of the Sabine Women* (Ricci, c.1700) highlight the vast disparities in the portrayal of women from male artists and female artists, demonstrating that, due to a scarcity of female artists, there was a severe lack of accurate, in-depth depictions of women as people rather than scenery or objects. Because of this, the traditions carried on; men were represented as symbols of power, status, and strength while women were to be seen as virtues of gentleness, submission, and obedience. These were obviously very two-dimensional representations of people, whether they were men or women. The stereotypes did not allow room for growth nor abatement, and this distinctive adverse

pattern can be seen recurring throughout history again and again. The stronger, more dominant ruling group can decide how they themselves are depicted as well as the ones they oppress. Ruinous ideals and beliefs that are cemented as reality through persistent imagery. The artworks created did not depict human nature in an accurate way at all. This is demonstrated through the progression of art over the years; as more and more people acquire voices, rights, recognition, and power, more perspectives and experiences were documented through visual imagery and creative outlets. People were exposed to ways of life that they either deeply resonated with or had never even considered. Those old, classical, black and white binary representations of gender were not accurate because, as women gained a platform, they were finally able to give their point of view, their experiences, their feelings. A surge of defining works can be seen in the 1960s and 70s when women's rights to their bodies were being disputed in government. These artworks were not gentle, submissive, and obedient, they were angry, scared, strong, brave, and powerful- representations of women that would rarely appear when male artists dominated the art world.



Ref fig 2: Elisabetta Sirani (1695) *Timoclea Killing Her Rapist*



Ref fig 3: Sebastiano Ricci (c.1700) *The Rape of the Sabine Women*

The hollow and inaccurate view of women portrayed by the likes of Ricci and other male artists of the time can be summed up nicely by the modern-day concept of the male gaze. It is not uncommon for men to depict women as sexual objects that exist purely for their enjoyment and amusement; this approach has only enforced harmful behavior towards women because some men only see them as they see the characters on their screen- existing at their disposal. This accentuates the need for a female perspective- who better to represent women than other women? As female artists have gained more and more traction over the years, exceptional, brave, capable, and intelligent women have been given the spotlight and the ability to reach out to others- changing the public's view of women and gender all together.

On the opposite end of the male gaze spectrum is the photographer Nan Goldin. Goldin's career in photography has spanned nearly half a century, starting with her first solo show in 1973. Nan Goldin's work captures elements that can elude most photographers. They carry with them a certain texture of sorts; they are rough, scratchy, raw, amorous, and hazy, not necessarily in physical quality but in the reality of the moments and subjects that they capture. When photographing a friend, stranger, or even herself, Goldin provides the audience with an authentic, fully-realized person with a story and a life beyond the lens. In this one simple way, Goldin's work creates an antithesis to the male gaze- a phrase coined at the same time as the start of her career.

The inherent issue with the male gaze is the sexualizing of any woman who happens to pass through it, and even though Nan Goldin's early work plays in themes of sex, intimacy, and relationships, they never screech to a halt at them. It is a different kind of sex than the romanticised kind that is shown in movies, advertisements, books,

and television shows. Goldin's work demonstrates a realistic side, a double-edged sword; where there are extreme highs there are also extreme lows. In one of her most famous works, Nan utilizes herself as the subject. *Nan one month after being battered* (Goldin, 1984) is a self portrait taken one month after being attacked by her then-partner. These risky motifs might be what draws the audience in, but it is the story behind them that keeps the viewer intrigued. It does not show sex and relationships through rose-tinted romanticised glasses, but instead bares a harsh, violent reality to a world that, historically, overlooks these aspects. What is interesting is how the perception, context, and reaction change when you are to view this photograph from a male point of view. How would your opinion of the work change if it were taken by a man? The raw authenticity would surely be lost, as well as Goldin's original intention. The power dynamic would certainly be brought into question, but not in the way Nan Goldin hoped. The message would read more as, "look what a man could do to a woman."

This is why the world needs more female artists, although there is no shortage of female imagery in art, there is always the looming presence of the male artist that created it. It is claustrophobic and sometimes suffocating, and we need those female artists as a breath of fresh air. Another of Goldin's works, *Geno by the lake, Bavaria, Germany 1994* (1994), provides another case for male versus female views. The piece itself is very quiet and peaceful, with the viewer being allowed to sample serenity of the scene unfolding behind the lens. Goldin has a fantastic way of giving her subjects the reverence, respect, and dignity they deserve even though the photographs are vulnerable and compromising. There is never an intrusion of privacy and despite the

scenes she captures, Nan Goldin never takes the power away from the subject. If *Geno by the lake, Bavaria, Germany 1994* were to be taken by a man, the perception and context would change. All of the sudden the moment would feel voyeuristic and intrusive- a destruction of the peace and content established by Goldin. There is a delicate difference in the male and female approaches to art, but it can bear powerful and damaging results.



Ref fig 4: Nan Goldin (1984) *Nan one month after being battered*



Fig ref 5: Nan Goldin (1994) *Geno by the lake, Bavaria, Germany 1994*

There is a brave authenticity to Goldin's catalog that requires a rare talent to capture. Part of it may be the fact that she is willing to share aspects of her personal life that would be considered by many to be embarrassing and extremely intimate. This sensation of malaise goes along with the pattern of silencing those who are unfortunate enough to have gone through similar traumas; because the public is used to brushing these issues under the rug in order to keep peace-of-mind and to spare others the discomfort, it is shocking when they are discussed so publicly and unabashedly. To avoid future unease around these topics, we need to be able to have an open and honest dialogue about these concerns, bringing them into the light and allowing those afflicted with them to be able to speak in a tolerant and supportive environment.

The term 'male gaze' has become quite popular in recent years, possibly due to the fact that more people have become aware of the problem and themes surrounding it. Its rise in popularity could also be attributed to the fact that, while many were

conscious of the concept, there was no adequate language to voice their concerns. The term was coined in 1975 by Laura Mulvey. Mulvey (1975) stated that:

The presentation of women in visual arts and literature from a male, heterosexual perspective where women are depicted as sexual objects for the pleasure of the male viewer. Men have agency; women are passive and dehumanized.

(Mulvey, 1975,

<https://www.panmacmillan.com/blogs/literary/the-doll-factory-the-effects-of-the-male-gaze>
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The term was originally conceived for films, Laura Mulvey was a film critic after all, and it was brought up by the fact that almost all female characters in popular media were represented as an object or a sexual prize for the male main characters to either fight over or win. This actually goes hand in hand with Allison Bechdel's *Bechdel Test*, which was created as a measurement of the representation of women in film and was established in 1985, ten years after the coining of the term male gaze.

Although it was first born on the silver screen, the concept of the male gaze is applicable to almost all forms of art, especially to that of the traditional and classical fine art world. The male gaze breaches through the arts and into our everyday lives. Possibly the greatest effects are the expectations that have been placed on women through advertisements, beauty standards, movies, television, and all other sorts of popularly consumed media. Now that the term has become mainstream, partially thanks to the wide-reaching capabilities of the internet and social media, a lot has changed, particularly in the art world. In 1989 an anonymous group of female artists named the Guerilla Girls plastered their now famous poster *Do Women Have To Be*

Naked To Get Into The Met. Museum? all over the buses of New York, earning them artistic immortality while simultaneously alerting the public to the Met.'s severe lack of female artists and abundance of female nudes.



Ref fig 5: The Guerrilla Girls (1989) *Do Women Have To Be Naked To Get Into The Met. Museum?*

Even before Sirani's (1695) *Timoclea Killing Her Rapist* and after Nan Goldin's (1994) *Geno by the lake, Bavaria, Germany 1994*, artists have been breaking through the glass ceiling- not just in the art world, but also by defining cultural moments. These artworks created at very different points in history commemorate the time periods that they were made in- glimpses into the past and how the human race has fluctuated and advanced throughout the centuries. As the perception and idea of gender has changed it has been reflected in art. As women gained more rights their voices became louder- becoming historic staples of the art world, not just as the muses, but as the artists. "Gender presentations in art are the outcomes of the cultural process of defining sexual and social identity." As our outlooks, beliefs, and ways of living change, so does our art, leaving behind it a trail of clues to how we've fought, grown, and adapted.

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