

How Has the Feminist Movement Been Represented Within The Art World?

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Introduction

The motivation of this thesis came from being a photographer in this day and age I wanted to understand where female artists really began, what historical artworks really stand out in the historical canon. Also, it was inspired by my final major project and the subject of that being my mother, I wanted to be sure of representation and the theory surrounding the representation of women in the history of the feminist movement and in the art media today.

The feminist movement started in the 1800s which is also known as the women's movement which started as a series of social movements and political protests to better the way women were treated and to stop the sheer abuse women had to endure day to day life.

The art world and cannon took too long to catch up with what was going on in the outside world and didn't come into play until the 1960's to the 1970s, and this is finally when female artists were motivated by the feminist theory. Feminist art defined a transformation away from modernism, where artwork by women was put into a contrasting class compared to artwork created by men. Finally, women had the freedom to respond to what was happening to them in a creative way, work of substance was finally coming into the art world but the battle didn't stop there and carries on until this day.

In chapter one I will go over feminist art history in more detail and discuss some points made by feminist artists and curators of the discipline, I will acknowledge the feminist artist

that really started the movement up. In chapter 2 I will discuss some very important artwork to the movement while analysing them for my understanding with the theory John Berger discusses in ways of seeing using his theory and also the theory Susan Sontag discusses in her book on photography. I will discuss things like the male gaze and the sexualisation of women and their anatomy, I want to try to understand the reasoning for some of the decision-making in creating the pieces of art that set the foundations in the feminist art movement.

Chapter 1

The feminist movement has been around since the mid-1800s, it has gained great strides in the last century and achieving what the original group of women set out to achieve. Being challenged at every corner, women have inserted themselves into the spotlight to shine a light on the inequality women have to deal with most days of their life simply because of the anatomy they were born with. Women still to this day struggle in pretty much every aspect of life work, home, and social. Having to decide what kind of woman you want to be at an early age, understanding that if you want a career in anything there will always be a man waiting to cut you down in this man's world. The art world took its time catching up to the outside world.

The movement of feminism has been around for centuries, with women fighting for their right to have equality in all aspects of life. Although the movement has achieved a lot from where it started, women have more equal opportunities and prospects now than ever before yet there is still discrimination against the female especially in the art world where the female form has been exploited in every way possible for the '*superior*' sex. Women are still at a great disadvantage when it comes to having their work shown in significant museums and galleries and when they do have the chance the ratio to male artists is just appalling. Post-2000 the art

industry has had a change quite drastically where feminist art exhibitions have been far more frequent, one women museum shows also on the rise.

'Do you see art as a man's world? Yes, it is a world where men and women are continually trying to satisfy the power of men.' (Bourgeois, 2018).

Now female artists are exhibited in esteemed museums and distinguished private collections, they are the subjects of monographs and now even defined in art-history books and are depicted a lot more in the art world itself. Proving to be an asset women have fought for every step for the progression that's been seen, from the 1970s there have been an array of women's and feminist art exhibitions that have served as a countermeasure to the exclusion of women artists from art-historical records. Female-led exhibitions all over the western world have attracted the recognition of women artists as paramount cultural makers deserving of consideration, some of these shows rediscovered and separated these artists from history and inserted them into the historical canon from which they hadn't even been considered for although the actual outreach of their work.

"A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. Whilst she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisaging herself walking or weeping. From earliest childhood, she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually. And so she comes to consider the surveyor and the surveyed within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman. She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life. Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another...." (Berger, 1972. pp)

Using theorists such as Berger and Sontag I will be analysing work that is considered to be important to the feminist movement and the art world to create an understanding of what is

needed in art activism. Using these theorists are important Berger is world-famous for his theories and ideas of seeing in his publication *ways of seeing*. Sontag is no different being one of the main theorists in photography on the authority photographs have in our lives and how they change our opinions on the world around us using them. "Despite the illusion of giving understanding, what seeing through photographs really invites is an acquisitive relation to the world that nourishes aesthetic awareness and promotes emotional detachment." (Sontag,1997)

The work that'll be discussed in this essay will be the work of renowned artists such as Judy Chicago, Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, Frida Kahlo, and Georgia O'Keeffe gained the majority of the territory that activists within the art world have today. Understanding why their work was so effective will help artists today carry on taking the necessary steps for equality within the art world. 'Maybe, today, we're planting the seeds of a more honest relationship between women and men'(Michals, 1977). An honest relationship is an understanding that the majority of creative work with the female form or the female anatomy without the need to sexualise an artist every time you see a breast. Sexism is a form of prejudice that doesn't necessarily get passed on, but social identity is important for a person's reputation "psychological consequences of simply being a member of a group." (levy,2017. pp101). Teaching an audience why a piece of art is important, trying to understand all points of view is beneficial although not all of them are correct but being understanding toward someone is an easy way to convey your story to them. Having a strong point that is backed up is really important to convey your feelings toward a situation and realistically a big majority of the artwork isn't statistically backed up as it is creative work, but all art is a reaction to the world around us. "Photographs can abet desire in the most direct, utilitarian way" (Sontag, 1977) The power an image can carry is incredible that needs to be used to the advantage of the artist. A feminist-orientated piece of art needs the have authority and power over their audience it needs the power to antagonise the viewer and their opinion of the matter to gain a reaction to then understand what perhaps needs to be adapted or what works. If the aim is to create a piece that can change the way women are perceived and represented in

many aspects of this social era, then it needs to be hard-hitting no room for mistakes especially in this fight for equality every inch that is gained needs to be protected.

chapter 2



Figure 1.

The Dinner Party an influential icon of the 1970's feminist art and a landmark in twentieth-century art, shown in several exhibitions over the years there is one particular show Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's '*Dinner Party*' In Feminist Art History curated by Amelia Jones exhibited in The Hammer Museum, University of California, Los Angeles. This being a feminist orientated show there was plenty of outrage by majority male critics particularly the massive instillation

piece that is '*The Dinner Party*' by Judy Chicago. Chicago throughout developing her installation wanted to show how she felt as if her visual language brought life back into the feminist art world and inspired others while still looking for inspiration herself through other feminist artists.

Chicago understood what would create such reaction creating her piece and achieved what she wanted through it. That being a spotlight for the intense things women have had to endure through the inequality of the world. Also showcasing the influential women that have created the changes we have seen in the last centuries of the position in life. "You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting 'Vanity,' thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure." (Berger, 1972. Pp51) here Berger depicts using the female anatomy and how it is accepted when painted or used for the male gaze and when it is used for the pleasure of men but that men find the same anatomy just used in a different less sexualised way to be disconcerting and inappropriate. Chicago has represented women by using motifs that are based on vulvar and butterfly forms representing the female anatomy within 39 place settings dedicated to important women in history.

Chicago uses many symbols throughout this piece including what material, colour, and what process she used, every tiny detail has a meaning around it. 'The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe' (Berger, 1972). Stating that the belief system that a subject has been brought up around affects how they see, subjects with high achieving women in their surroundings would be able to see a piece of feminism inspired work by combining their knowledge of the issue and what represents that issue better than a subject brought up around masculinism and sexism. Chicago has used this theory through the medium of material and process like the animal skins (calfskin, snakeskin, and deerskin) are used in the Primordial Goddess, Amazon, and Sacajawea runners to communicate the origin of some of the women

showcased in her work. Making Judy Chicago's work a stage for many women who have spent a long time in the dark out of the spotlight despite their contribution to society.



Figure 2.

Figure 2 is an image taken by Cindy Sherman, famous for creating work using her own body in her image making creating different identities and characters for each individual still shot. Reflecting the hostile environment that women endured especially in the 1970s, the way women are presented as submissive objects and that they are simply there for male objectification and pleasure. "Women constantly meet glances which act like mirrors reminding them of how they look or how they should look. Behind every glance there is judgment." (Berger, 1972) using that judgment to her own advantage Sherman lures in her audience by using poses and body language

that entice the male gaze. Getting close enough to see her facial expressions, the makeup, her eyeshadow it all adds to the effect. In fig 2 the subject is there but the absence of eye contact really makes the image feel empty as if no one's really there. That's what makes her images work so well using all the stereotypical themes placed on creative women and using them in an ironic way to try and point out the sheer sexist nature of those brackets and how anyone especially women can use that for their own advantage.

"Photographs cannot create a moral position, but they can reinforce one- and can help build a nascent one." (Sontag, 1997) here Sontag defines images as having the power to show that a creator of an image can show there 'moral position' but they can't completely create one just by using one image, showing support in whichever way is what fuels that fire whatever position you have in whatever moral conflict you want to engage in you need to show your side. Being the oppressed, being the woman the subject herself Sherman definitely shows her stance on the inequality issue against women by mocking those very implements of the male gaze and using the way men and male creators, directors have used women in their image making and films to gain sexualising a woman's body because it gives men pleasure without considering the kind of dent it can do to women's reputation.

Here in fig 2, Sherman takes all that on in one still shot of herself, directed by herself. Sherman uses body language that has added to the male gaze, making herself look like something that can be objectified by men but doing it herself balances out the power problem. Women can and will look desirable if they decide it. It is a decision made by the subject, if they want to look sexy and desirable by posing a certain way then so be it but if women want to look powerful and strong too, they can, that's what Sherman states by taking that power into her hands and presenting herself however she sees fits. "Photographs were seen as a way of giving information to people who do not take easily to reading" (Sontag,1997). Sherman gives people the knowledge of

the codified rules of Hollywood for women by doing what women were forced to with free will creating a massive juxtaposition of power.



Figure 3

Kathe Burkhart an artist in many disciplines working with loads of different materials all in the name of, in her words “to articulate a radical female subject.” Burkhart having the aim of pronouncing profound female presence in the art world, let us discuss her *Liz Taylor* series of large scale abundantly saturated perfectly applicable paintings of the actress Elizabeth Taylor with language that some would dub coarse or vulgar especially coming from a woman.

Fig 3 absolutely shatters female stereotypes of being this quiet and tame entity who wait for the approval of men to say something as profound as it does, treating Elizabeth Taylor as a proxy for all feminine Burkhart really create an effect on the art world with this series the contrast in the

image with the subject and the language used it reflects the issue of the male gaze and the sexualisation of any women seen in mainstream media. "Women constantly meet glances which act like mirrors reminding them of how they look or how they should look. Behind every glance there is judgment." (Berger, 1972) Berger actively demonstrates the constant judgement women feel doing anything they do, Burkhart reflects this in her painting with the language that she uses it really sets the tone of her having enough of the same narrative. The dark colour palette Burkhart uses for fig 3 indicates the feminist nature she wants to bring through with the lipstick and colour on eyelids but the power behind the contrast between the teal and the black brings out the constant battle of wanting to embrace our feminine side but needing to hide it because of the misconception of being feminine as being weak. "Today in the developed countries it is being achieved by imposing a false standard of what is and is not desirable" (Berger, 1972).

The language of this piece is what hit the most with critics calling it vulgar and un-ladylike it shook the men who would see this piece, using Elizabeth Taylor as her proxy for all women was smart as there would always be a contrast in her *Liz Taylor* series with the vocabulary Burkhart would use against the beautiful silhouette Taylor gave creating a constant contrast of the truth. A contrast of what was presented as the truth to what was really the truth. Using red in the type really gives off the feeling of taboo, the red making it seem almost more offensive it being in red standing out against the teal making it one of the boldest elements of the piece before you even read it also the placing of the type makes it seem like the foundation of that piece as if it began with those words before the subject Taylor was introduced with the black illustration also the red in the lip of the subject makes it seem as if those big ugly words came out of that petit mouth.



Figure 4

Barbara Kruger being one of the most famous artists in this movement within the art world known for her combination of type and image that communicates a direct feminist activist point of view. Her work investigates the stereotypes and the attitude of consumerism with text layered over mass-produced media images. Fig 4 consists of the image of Marilyn Monroe a standard still image of the subject with text in the middle of the subject's face stating, "not stupid enough".

"I'm fascinated with the difference between supposedly private and supposedly public and I try to engage the issue of what it means to live in a society that's seemingly shock-proof, yet still compelled to exercise secrecy," (Kruger,2020)

Using mass-produced images gives the implication the subject isn't what's important it's the words she uses, the words "not stupid enough" in fig 4 resonates with me and I believe it is the

word 'enough'. She's stupid just not stupid 'enough' to go along with whatever opinion you have of her. Kruger wanted the female audience that saw her images to interact with whatever form they saw of said image. She invites women into an active relationship with the text and encourages them to respond critically and freely that would create great effect in the feminism movement getting more and more people involved women and men creating an environment everybody feel included.

Chapter 3

My practical work consists of the portraiture of my mother, recently I have spent a fair amount of time with her, and I have learned of her individual struggles with inequality. I also started to understand why as a daughter I really hadn't heard my mother talk about the feminism movement because she wasn't exposed to much of anything in the media that she saw day to day.

Within my work and my portraits, I want to show the individual struggles she has had to endure over her life in the decision making she had to go through to become a mother what that meant for her career and what it meant for her personal life. Understanding influential feminist artwork is something I need. By understanding I mean what made it work and perhaps what didn't work for certain narratives, appreciating the way an audience will perceive certain pieces helps with creating work that says what you want it to say.

"To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body must be seen as an object in order to become a nude. (The sight of it as an object stimulates the use of it as an object.) Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display." (Berger, 1972. Pp54). Here Berger analyses what makes a nude a nude using this theory against historical paintings of women, depicting that it is dependent on how and why the painting was painted and who it was painted for, when taking my photographs, I will consider what Berger says here, I will be sure if there is any skin on show it doesn't take from anything else from the photograph and I especially don't want my work depicted as a nude.

"Glamour cannot exist without personal social envy being a common and widespread emotion. The industrial society which has moved towards democracy and then stopped halfway is the

ideal society for generating such an emotion." (Berger,1972.Pp148). This part of Berger's theory intimidates me a little, I believe it's a thin line waiting to be crossed, I will be considering what Berger says here as I will be using costume to show the decision making of my subject and you will see that perhaps the costume that is foreign to my subject will be a little on the high-end compared to what they usually wear and it won't be on the account that my subject regrets nor do I want to communicate that she could've made better decisions with her life it will be a piece of work that simply describes what she wears day to day with no opinion.



Figure 5

"The portrait-photograph is a closed field of forces. Four image-repertoires intersect here, oppose, and distort each other. In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art." (Barthes,1980.Pp13) what Barthes demonstrates here is that there are

multiple interpretations of the subject that you chose so being careful in using anything that would make the audience look at the subject differently like a pose, a closeup, what surrounds the subject what's in their background? By Analysing the great work that has been created in the name of feminism, I understand more now what could possibly cause the male gaze and how to avoid that type of audience with my work as well I understand how to use the sexualisation of my subject as an advantage for my work but I also understand how to not have that effect.



Figure 6

'...there is something predatory in the act of taking a picture. To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them that they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed.' (Sontag, 1977) Sontag states the power of taking an image of someone and I believe in documentary style photographs what she says here defiantly comes through, you have the power to tear somebody down

with one photograph but you can also build a subject's reputation with a photograph. With both fig 5 and 6, you can see the kind of character that can come through a photograph being sure to not have anything that could return a male gaze or anything that could make it sexualised as that's not what I want to show the strength of the character herself.

"But the very question of whether photography is or is not an art is essentially a misleading one. Although photography generates works that can be called art --it requires subjectivity, it can lie, it gives aesthetic pleasure-- photography is not, to begin with, an art form at all. Like language, it is a medium in which works of art (among other things) are made. Out of language, one can make scientific discourse, bureaucratic memoranda, love letters, grocery lists, and Balzac's Paris. Out of photography, one can make passport pictures, weather photographs, pornographic pictures, X-rays, wedding pictures, and Atget's Paris" (Sontag, 1977) Sontag compares photography to another language of some sorts pointing out photography isn't just used as an art form anymore and although that's true I don't believe it affects the artwork that brought through the medium of photography I think it even helps with the communication of this language for consumers that aren't quick to understand peoples art.

Conclusion

To conclude the women that set the foundations for future generations did an amazing job in shocking and leaving their audience speechless. Chapter one is an insight into the feminist movement listing some very important historical women like Judy Chicago and Cindy Sherman, it goes to explain the struggle in being able to show work and how it took the better part of the twentieth century for women artists to be included in exhibition and shows in certain galleries. Chapter one also predicts what a good piece of feminist artwork would be using theorists John Berger and Susan Sontag on the authority of an image and the use of the female form in the art world.

Judy Chicago's instillation piece being the first of the artwork to be analysed and discussed as it is probably the most memorable instillation piece created by a woman in the 20th century, the discussion goes on to her using the female anatomy like the vulvar to represent the individual women within her work. Knowing the sexualisation of the female anatomy Chicago used this to her advantage and definitely shocking the male audience/critics using the female body in a way they hadn't seen before.

Then going onto the likes of Cindy Sherman and discussing her still's that incorporate poses and body language that was forced by men onto women in the Hollywood era, using herself as her own subject and posing in that way she has given the power back the female subject as she is directing herself therefor removing the male superior role and give back that power to the female. Also discussing Kathe Burkhart and Barbara Kruger who both use mixed media and text in their work, they too use different colour pallets which shows emotions within itself, that work is very good at the representation of the anger women have towards the current situation of inequality.

This essay has helped my understanding of feminist work and how it affects the movement that is still helping advance women in the world. Understanding the work that has come before has helped me understand what I need within my own practice to support the movement of feminism. I now understand what entices the male gaze and the objectification of women and plan to avoid that within my own practices. Discussing the work I have has also given me more of an appreciation for the struggle women and women artists have needed to endure for their sisters and their daughters to be able to be in the position they are in today, objectification is defiantly still an issue although a lesser one than in the 70's it is still an issue women and men need to tackle in the name of equality.

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Illustration list

Figure 1

Judy Chicago (American, born 1939). *The Dinner Party*, 1974–79. Ceramic, porcelain, textile, 576 × 576 in. (1463 × 1463 cm). Brooklyn Museum; Gift of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Foundation, 2002.10. © Judy Chicago. (Photo: Donald Woodman) [Brooklyn Museum: The Dinner Party by Judy Chicago](#)

Figure 2

Cindy Sherman
Untitled (Madonna), 1997
michael lisi/contemporary art
[Cindy Sherman | Artnet](#)

Figure 3

Fuck You: from the Liz Taylor Series
[Fuck You: from the Liz Taylor Series \(after Bert Stern\) | The Art Institute of Chicago \(art.edu\)](#)

Figure 4

Barbara Kruger
Untitled (Not Stupid Enough), 1997
[Untitled Not Stupid Enough by Barbara Kruger on artnet](#)