

Research in Context (ADAD5003)

Explore how artists have approached the concepts around 'gender' in art practice, providing evidence from at least 2 artists and thinkers.

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Introduction

Art has historically highlighted the binary opposition of gender, reflected the gender roles and expectations, societal norms and patriarchal values of the time period. Women were often depicted as passive objects to be desired, whereas men were usually shown in powerful stances or actions (Coates, 2024). Since at least the early Renaissance, women have been drawn and painted in sexualised nudes and erotic poses, in contrast to fully clothed, authoritative men (Hammer-Tugendhat & Zanchi, 2012).

Gender roles in art changed in the 20th century. This was partly in response to the feminist movements of the 1960s and 70s which challenged patriarchal structures and opened up new discussions around gender (National Women's History Museum, 2020). A further change occurred in the 1990s when several artists deliberately subverted the previously held assumption that strength and intelligence belonged to men, and sexuality and passiveness was held by women (Hammer-Tugendhat & Zanchi, 2012). Jenny Saville is an example of an artist who has depicted both men and women in ways that are contrary to previous gender depictions. She shows vulnerability in her male figures, particularly the child male that she has depicted in many different versions. Her adult women are usually positioned in unflattering angles, going against the sexualisation of women in traditional painting and instead just showing women existing in their realistic form. She also depicts disabled women, who were previously hidden from art unless it was an anatomy study such as in the works of Leonardo Da Vinci, or in the background.

The overarching concept within this essay is pain, and how pain is portrayed in the works of two artists. The two artists subvert gender expectations by going against what was done historically. Tracey Emin is an artist who is very transparent in how she deals with illness and brings this part of herself that other would want to hide, into her art. Her depictions of herself as a woman go against the traditional passive, desirable depiction of woman and instead show the real woman, and the real pain she experiences. Francis Bacon was an artist who uses a lot of dark themes in an often bizarre way. His work rejects the strong, powerful male figure by showing inner turmoil, using a prominent male figure to depict male pain and vulnerability. In both cases, pain is the lens used to explore gender in a way that resonates with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which suggests that identity is not an inherent essence but is shaped by cultural norms (Jagger, 2008).

Artist one: Tracey Emin

Tracey Emin is a British Artist born July 3rd 1963. She grew up in London and is best known for her confessional and autobiographical works. She uses a various mediums to create her installations such as drawing and photography. Emin's work explores the themes of love, loss and trauma. Emin's work also is influenced by her emotional vulnerability. She has also worked with other mixed medias such as sculpting and painting (Kokoli & Cherry, 2020). This quality of emotion is evident throughout her works. Emin is perhaps best known for her installation 'My Bed' (1998). 'My Bed' was displayed as a very chaotic and untidy bedroom, signifying her downward spiral into depression (Meis, 2026) and a metaphor for her imprisonment in her room, where she locked herself in, unable to get out of bed for days (VanDeWeghe, 2009). The unmade bed was surrounded by very personal items such as used underwear, used condoms, stained bedsheets, and empty alcohol bottles. Like with much of her art, 'My Bed' exposed personal aspects of her when she was at her most vulnerable. Emin was nicknamed the "bad girl of British art" due to her unapologetic exploration and artworks of contemporary art continues to push boundaries and to provoke thought from the public. She provokes these thoughts through her vulnerable and deeply personal extractions of her life. She targets themes of chronic illness, mental health and abortion.

'Fortnight of Tears' is an installation piece exhibited at White Cube Bermondsey, London in February to April 2019. It included a series of photographs, paintings, sculptures and film chronicling her ill health. It has been described as "stemming from deeply personal memories and emotions ranging from loss, grief, longing, and spiritual love" (Metro Imaging, 2019). The photographic project that formed part of this exhibition, called 'The Insomnia Room' [fig. 1], is a selection of thousands of selfies taken on her iPhone, showing her prolonged restlessness and inner turmoil caused by her insomnia. This shows the reality of her situation, simply captured in the moment on her phone, taken in a moment of frustration, rather than staged with professional photography equipment (Bown, 2019).



Figure 1: The Insomnia Room (2019) Tracey Emin

Emin's 'The Insomnia Room' [figure 1] shows a brutal depiction on how her body gets depleted by insomnia. She shows the pain and despair through over a series of images of her lying in bed during the early hours of the morning after yet another night of no sleep. Each individual photo is from her bed, showing her face quite close up. In most of them, her eyes are puffy and dark, and in some, they are closed because she is so tired. Her face in all of them looks exhausted with her illness, and fed up with another sleepless night. Some of the photos are taken at night, whereas others look to be early in the morning as the sun can be seen shining through. There is no attempt to hide her natural state. She is not posing her body or making a face. If parts of her body were exposed, she did not try to hide it before taking the photo. She captured a real and natural moment each time she took one of these photos.

Emin stated that she took the photographs spontaneously to document and express the soul-destroying experience of crippling insomnia. She found the act of taking the photos therapeutic and it allowed her to take control and discover her personal healing and transform her suffering into art. It could be argued that through doing this, she communicated the injustices that women face in being silenced when trying to get medical help, through communicating the need for documentary evidence.



Figure 2: A photo from the Insomnia Room (2019) Tracey Emin

Another way that this work relates to female pain is the treatment of women in medical settings. Tracy Emin has been brutally open and honest many endless times she has been rushed to hospital for being chronically ill. (Nozari, 2023) explains that Emin's small intestine nearly exploded when in Thailand and was rushed to hospital. In 2020, she was diagnosed with an aggressive bladder cancer and was admitted to a medical centre as she had complications from her previous cancer surgeries including an infection and scar tissue (Nozari, 2023). Emin has told the press that there was no guarantee that the surgery would remove her cancer, and she feared that she would not live to Christmas of that year. That said, she claimed that she "totally accepted death" (Lewis, 2023). Despite Emin going to doctors before her diagnosis complaining of ill health, her cancer was not caught early enough. With the amount of emergency surgeries she underwent she was still told that she could die.

It was not disclosed why Emin was not diagnosed with bladder cancer sooner, but in some cases bladder cancer is constantly misdiagnosed in women. It is instead diagnosed as a UTI and painful irregular periods. It is also possible that bladder cancer may not be detected for months or in some case even years. This could have very much

been the case with Emin (CXBladder, 2025). In Emin's case, late diagnosis could have been that she was not taken seriously and medical gaslighting. In the United States of America, more than 19,000 women are diagnosed with bladder cancer each year, but it is thought that the number of women who have bladder cancer is higher because of misdiagnosing women's early symptoms of bladder cancer (Bladder Cancer Advocay Network, 2025). This is likely to be the case for other parts of the world. It is well documented that when it comes to seeking medical treatment for conditions such as insomnia and bladder cancer women are not always believed (Werner & Malterud, 2003); (Turney, 2003);(Dundas, 2016). This means that women and girls can go months and years without the right medical treatment and medication or dosage put in place. Emin depicts the hardships of battling through a chronic condition and how the face slowly changed over time due to the lack of sleep.

Bladder cancer can also add to the symptoms of insomnia due to hormone changes. In a study conducted 2006 to 2010 with 1414 participants diagnosed with bladder cancer, it was revealed that "daytime napping and insomnia are associated with an increased risk of bladder cancer" (Chen, et al., 2025). Interestingly, Emin created 'Insomnia Room' in 2019 just a year before being diagnosed with bladder cancer in 2020, which leads to the question of if the insomnia symptoms getting worse in 2019 were an underlying side effect of her bladder cancer before she was diagnosed. Creating art was a way of dealing with her pain and what she has dealt with as a chronically ill woman.

Artist two: Francis Bacon

Francis Bacon was an Irish born artist and British figurative painter. He is known for his raw, unnerving and unsettling imagery. Bacon's work often deals with emotion, which is not often portrayed in imagery depicting males, or a topic much touched on by male artists. He is known for his triptych piece; Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion (1944), which was seen as a cry of anguish (Peppiatt, 2021). Francis Bacon normally used the media of oil paint on canvas or fibre board. He would also use household paints spray paints and raw pigments. He heavily referenced photography and film stills and found imagery as his source a material for his unsettling works. He did all this while surrounded by his chaotic studio environment. He also liked to dive into art history for inspiration.

A key series of works his is Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X. As part of this study, Bacon painted around 50 versions of Velázquez's *Portrait of Pope Innocent X* inspired by a painting by Diego Velázquez [fig 3.] in 1650. It is said that Bacon had not seen original *Portrait of Pope Innocent X* even though it inspired a large series of his works (Doyle, 2022).

One iteration of the series is the *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X* which was painted in 1953 [fig. 4]. What is immediately striking about the painting is the form of the subject. Usually, kings and other high-status males are standing, and are depicted as demure, stern and powerful, sometimes with a woman located lower in the painting. For non-royals, sitting on a chair in portraits denoted authority, as the chair is a symbolic of status. This is because only those with a high status had a chair before the 18th century, with those with a lower social position only have access to stools or benches (Rybczynski, 1986). Within this painting, the figure looks almost as though he is being electrocuted, with the smears in the painting signifying electrical volts and the painful expression on the figure's face. This along with the seated position and the arms resting on the chair, looking almost as though they are strapped down adds to this impression. Arya (2009) describes it as "a mirror-image or photographic negative of Velázquez's" (p.33).

Whilst Pope Innocent X was pope at the age of 70 until he died at 80 (Williams, 2024), he does not appear to be frail or elderly in Velázquez' original painting. He appears serene, inquisitive and almost regal. However, Bacon has transformed him into a ghostly looking, thin, husk of himself, as an exploration of "the isolation conferred by his authority" (Acevedo, 2011, p. 27). The portrait in full length, but his feet cannot be seen, even though the robes he wears seem to be transparent, making him look as though he is floating, arguable like a spirit. A figure like a pope would usually be shown in a serene way, signifying a pure soul. Instead, Bacon depicted the figure with screaming anguish. It could be argued that this is how Bacon himself felt about the catholic church as an atheist and an outspoken critic of the church (Arya, 2009). Furthermore, as a homosexual the views of the Catholic church (and the pope as head of the Catholic church) on same-sex relationships, did not align with Bacon's own orientation and lifestyle. It is possible that he was presenting his own emotions and frustrations onto the face of a pope to draw attention to the issues with the Catholic church. The controversy of depicting a pope in this way would have drawn more attention than if Bacon had depicted himself as screaming. Instead, he 'reappropriated' and deconstructed an image of the Pope from Velázquez's painting for his own message (Arya, 2008). This, like many of Bacon's paintings shows his criticism of the church. However, whilst being disparaging about religion, he often uses symbolism from it. Arya (2008) describes Bacon as having an "obsession with the image of the Pope" (p. 33). It is also possible that Bacon was trying to capture how power and status may become "transfigured, challenged and contorted" (Acevedo, 2011, p. 27). This was a concern for leaders during Bacon's time. The public image of leaders was called into question, threatening their social status, resulting in a leadership crisis.

Another interesting detail of the painting is that it looks like the pope is caged in or roped off. Some theories as to why Bacon used space frames in this way was as a form of psychological entrapment. This could have been to deliberately change the way powerful figures like the pope are depicted, showing the more emotionally and mentally vulnerable side of men and maleness. This is representative of a psychological collapse in the human condition. It could be argued that the rope signifies being off limits, which signifies the Pope's power and authority. Bacon likes to put powerful male figures in confinement and emotional turmoil in his art.



Figure 3: Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X by Diego Velázquez (1650)



Figure 4: Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X by Francis Bacon (1953)

Conclusion

Both Tracey Emin and Francis Bacon use the language of pain as a lens to explore gender. Emin's work depicts pain in an autobiographical way, showing vulnerability and the lived experience of femininity. In contrast, Bacon's figures embody a more universal, existential anguish, whilst their distorted forms evoke questions of masculinity and power. By framing gender through suffering, both artists challenge traditional representations of gender. Emin exposes the rawness of female subjectivity, whereas Bacon presents the instability of the male body. Emin exposes the rawness of female subjectivity, whereas Bacon presents the instability of the male body and men's mental

health and inner turmoil. Both their works suggest that pain is not only a physical and emotional, but also a cultural construct that shapes and contests gender identity.

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