

Title: Is The Sexualisation Of The Female Form Truly Empowering? An Exploration Into American Pin-Up Art And Female Liberation.

Student Number: 2403626

Course Title: BA HONS Illustration

Word Count: 2268

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An Exploration Into American Pin-Up Art And Female Liberation.

Feminism, Objectification, and Pin-Up Art are the three key-words I chose for this project, as they are things that already find themselves the focus of many of my works, as well as what I hope to include going further into my years of study. My dissertation proposal aims to link these three words in a cohesive, concise manner to ultimately form a question for my further research in my final year of study. My key-words will relate to visual artists including The *Guerilla Girls*, (Objectification), Gil Elvgren, (Pin-Up Art), and Duane Bryers. (Pin-Up Art and Feminism). As well as these visual artists, I will use key theorists to back up my points and provide supporting evidence. These will include Laura Mulvaney's theory of The Male Gaze, (Objectification), David Gauntlett's theory of Identity, (Feminism), and bell hooks' theory of Intersectionality, (Feminism). All of these will come together to aid me in my final year of study, and will culminate in a cohesive portfolio.

Feminism.

"Women will only be truly sexually liberated when we arrive at a place where we can see ourselves as having sexual value and agency irrespective of whether or not we are the objects of male desire."

(bell hooks, 2000).

Sexual liberation and its ties to feminism is a long debated topic with thousands of differing opinions from woman to woman. bell hooks' *Feminism Is For Everybody* explores this in detail, as well as whether women can ever truly have sexual liberation under patriarchy. She touches on this in detail, claiming:

‘This interrogation was useful for the movement. It not only forced straight women to engage in ongoing critical vigilance about heterosexual practice, it highlighted lesbians in ways that positively exposed their strength while also revealing weaknesses.’

hooks speaks on feminists turning to lesbianism to avoid persecution by radical lesbian feminists who claimed there was no female sexual liberation under a patriarchal rule, prompting the slogan, ‘feminism is the theory, lesbianism the practice.’ (Atkinson). This introduces the concept of *Political Lesbianism* and subsequently, *Lesbian Separatism*. The concept of heterosexual relationships and sex being ‘anti-feminist’ places women in the position of the ‘feminist traitor,’ and applies a phallogentric point of view to a female-oriented movement. These ideologies in modern times receive much scrutiny under the guise of shifting lesbianism into an active choice, rather than an attraction assigned at birth. (Fouweather, 2024). The idea that the only sexual liberation women will ever experience is celibacy or with other women strips lesbianism of its complex emotional and sexual dynamics, and whittles it down to a reactionary choice in the face of heterosexuality and patriarchal violence. (Fouweather, 2024). Whilst also implying women cannot have agency over their own bodies, and whom they choose to share their bodies with.

‘Publicly the feminist women who continued to talk the most about sexuality tended to be conservative, at times puritanical and anti-sex.’ (hooks, 2000).

hooks goes on to discuss how the rising popularity of celibacy, the same politics found in Political Lesbianism, marred the feminist movement and contributed to the rise of patriarchal archetypes, namely ‘madonna’ versus ‘the whore.’ (hooks, 2000). hooks suggests a need for a renewed dialogue in regards to sexual freedom and liberation, articulating how mutual respect is necessary for female sexual liberation, directly contradicting the Political Lesbian ideology that heterosexual sex is a tool for humiliation and oppression. (Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group, 1981). Additionally, the notion that being a lesbian

automatically makes one political is denied by hooks, who goes on to say 'Being a member of an exploited group does not make anyone more inclined to resist.', also pointing out that if true, all women on the planet would be politically incentivised to stand up against their oppression.

Linking back to hook's first quote about:

'Women will only be truly sexually liberated when we arrive at a place where we can see ourselves as having sexual value and agency irrespective of whether or not we are the objects of male desire.'

(hooks, 2000).

hooks decentres the male as the focus point of female sexuality, and instead chooses to centre the female. This directly opposes the Political Lesbian viewpoint that centres men and shames women for their sexuality. It does not work towards a destigmatisation of sex, nor does it strive to create equality between the sexes. Instead, it creates infighting between women, as well as putting more blame on the oppressed (females), than the oppressor, (males).

Objectification.

'The presence of a woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of the story line.'

(Mulvey, 2016).

Mulvey and hooks share a belief that women's sexualisation in media serves as a visual pleasure for a male audience, and hooks' concept of removing the male from a

woman's peripheral in order to achieve true sexual liberation serves to prove this by claiming that by removing the male as the audience, the female purely exists for herself.



Fig. 1 (The Rokeby Venus).

The Rokeby Venus depicts the titular goddess, Venus, languishing on a bed of blue silks. The male gaze can clearly be seen through the sloping pink flesh of the nude model, leading the eye towards the figure and encouraging the spectator to linger on the woman. The subject is looking in a mirror, which shows a distorted reflection of what should be her face. Additionally, her son, Cupid, holds the mirror whilst a pink satin ribbon is tied around his hands. His far leg and face are hastily painted, once again drawing the viewers' eye to the nude, faceless figure. (Loxton, 2022). In 1914, the painting was slashed by Suffragette activist turned fascist Mary Richardson, who claimed

'I have tried to destroy the picture of the most beautiful woman in mythological history as a protest against the government for destroying Mrs. Pankhurst, who is the most beautiful character in modern history.'

(Mary Richardson, 1914).

Richardson was later imprisoned for six months over the attack, and later admitted that it wasn't the price of the painting that spurred on the frantic attack, but "the way men visitors gaped at it all day long". Despite the female form not being sexual by nature, male visitors still found a way to contort a depiction of nudity into something that granted personal pleasure. It should also be noted that the figure is completely hairless, a popular trend in female nudes.

On the basis of its reality, Andrea Dworkin and I have proposed a law against pornography that defines it as graphic sexually explicit materials that subordinate women through pictures or words.

(Catherine Mackinnon, 1993).

Applying this quote to Pin-Up art, one would find that the salacious images of ordinary women put ordinary men in a position to believe their maids, wives, or employees were sexually available, as well as being a vessel to dehumanise and objectify women. Far removed from its history of spurring on WWII soldiers, Pin Up art became just another form of female exploitation.

Pin-Up Art.

'When pornography is... normal, a whole population of men is primed to dehumanise women and to enjoy inflicting assault sexually'

(Catherine Mackinnon, 1993).

With this viewpoint, Pin-Up art can be seen through a different, perhaps more sinister lens. Though not overtly pornographic, Pin-Up art paints the American woman as coy, a little sexy, and unobtainable. The women are often dressed in sheer or silk slips or alternatively,

sensually doing household chores in a picture of 'domestic bliss', as seen in many of Gil Elvgren's works.



Fig. 2 (Elvgren, 1958).

This piece depicts a house maid sweeping underneath a pink rug with a feather duster. Her head is turned towards the viewer suggestively, and her dress rides up at the back to show the garters holding up her stockings. The domestic notion of the maid outfit, as well as the feather duster holding connotations to housework usually delegated to the female of the house. The focus shifted slowly from WW2 'Morale Boosters' to 'The Girl Next Door,' or Housewives to more accessible and relatable images for the average working American man. Despite the pin-ups being more accessible for men, they became less and less achievable for women.



Fig. 3 (Elvgren 1959).

Between their tiny waists, sizable busts, and daintily tapered limbs, the American pin-up became more of an abstraction of the female form, something completely unobtainable to the average woman. Their perfectly sculpted, hairless bodies made for the cookie-cutter template that other pin-up artists would soon follow.

One artist that refuses to perpetuate the stick thin blonde pin-up archetype is Duane Bryers, whose muse comes in the form of a plus-sized woman called Hilda. Hilda often sports exaggerated facial expressions, minimal clothing, and a shock of bright orange hair.



Fig. 4 (Bryers, 1968).

Her often times asexual nature proves that Hilda wasn't entirely created for the male gaze, though she still exhibits trace amounts of misogyny, such as her hairlessness. Comparing this to the works of Elvgren, there is a clear disparagement between the two artists. Though both male, one appreciates women, and the other appreciates the abstraction of a woman.

Connecting this back to hooks' theory that for true female sexual liberation, women have to decentre men, these pin ups are a perfect example of centering men in female sexuality. The domestic situ, the thin, young, white woman, and the coy, lightly sexual expression paints a picture of the ever-helpful housewife in a conventional family. Ann Oakley defines the conventional family as 'nuclear families composed of legally married couples, voluntarily choosing parenthood of one or more children'. Which delegates women to sweet, gentle, domestic creatures that not only take on the physical labour of raising children and doing household chores, but shoulder the emotional burdens of their working husbands. These pin-ups pushed the idea that not only do women have to do all of this unpaid labour, defined by Marx as 'the unpaid labor performed by workers beyond what is

necessary to produce their own means of subsistence'. (Marx, 1863), but they also have to seem sexually available and attractive for their husbands, as the normalisation of these domestic pin-ups conditioned men at the time to think this is how women *should* look. This can be linked back to Mackinnon's point about pornography making violence against women not only seem normal, but necessary.

In Practice.

Using all the knowledge and theory I have collated throughout this proposal, I will apply it to my third year practice of broadening the horizons of pin-up art, much like the aforementioned Duane Bryers. However, unlike Bryers, I will aim to include diversity in not only body type, but skin colour, sexuality, et cetera. I will not expand my work to include men, as I want my work to appreciate natural, realistic women in a society that finds that exceptionally difficult. Some preexisting examples of this in my work include,



Fig 5. (Niamh Morgan, 2025).

I believe this piece demonstrates a diversity in body type, as the character provided is visibly plus-sized. Despite this, she is still white and possesses conventionally attractive features, which is something I could perhaps work on in future. I would also like to expand my knowledge and representation of hair types, especially protective black hairstyles. I would also like to expand my facial expressions, as I struggle especially with the mouth. I aim to exaggerate my facial expressions similarly to

My exploration of deeper skin tones with differing undertones will also hopefully strengthen my knowledge of colour theory, especially if I strive to study painters like JC Leyendecker and Duanne Bryers.



Fig. 6 (JC Leyendecker, 1922).

I appreciate Leyendecker's use of colour, especially when painting skin, and aim to apply this to my work through master copies and studies. As well as this, I will strive to apply Bryers' lively compositions and detailed backgrounds to strengthen my work further.



Fig. 7 (Duane Bryers, 1966).

I love the airy brushstrokes that make up the components of Hilda's world, as well as the lovingly detailed full figure of Bryers' muse. I feel like Hilda is the perfect example of a pin-up that doesn't take into account the male gaze, though painted by a man. She is funny and lively, as well as uniquely full figured, and despite Bryers painting mainly throughout the 1960s and 70s as opposed to the 1950s heyday of pin-up art, she provided a breath of fresh air into what was otherwise a stagnating genre of art.

A modern pin-up artist that inspires me is Missupacey on Instagram, who shows a wide range of body-types and skin tones throughout her work.



Fig. 8 (Missupacey, 2025).

I love the composition of her pieces, as well as the way she removes the male gaze from her work by omitting men from her artistic process. Her illustrations show realism whilst still being glamorous, something I strive to do in my third year practice. I would also like to entirely eliminate the male gaze through my work, something that will be difficult in a patriarchal society. I strive to do this by thinking about hooks, Mackinnon, and other such feminists, as well as their theology.

I plan to include many qualities of women usually airbrushed out by editors and painters, such as body hair, stretch marks, and other such details named 'imperfections' by the public. By doing this I hope to deconstruct my own internalised patriarchal views and focus my work on authenticity, rather than a warped, misogynistic view of women that our current society perpetrates.

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