

Gender in art Practice

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Introduction:

Throughout history, art has been one of the most prevalent things known to man. Art has made us realize how society was and serves as mirror reflecting the values of the past. It serves as a platform to make us think and challenge social norms. Gender is a strong attribute found in all diverse kinds of art from ancient to renaissance to contemporary to modern. Artists have found many ways to approach the concept and expression of gender and bringing up the topics of inequality and discrimination of women specifically. There are many key figures in art that highlight gender but there are a few that have stood out to me in the uniqueness of their work and practice. Expression of gender has been around for as long as we can remember.

The First Figures of Women:

The Paleolithic wonder called the Venus figurine is known to be one of the first sculptures of women's bodies. Standing as one of the first examples of gender in art. There are around 200 of these small 2.5cm (about 0.98 in) to 10.5cm (about 4.13 in) statues that were found on multiple sites across Europe and some parts of Asia expected to be dated around 40,000 b.c. to 10,000 b.c. (Jessica Liew, 2017, paragraph 2) The most well-known statue is the famous “Venus of Willendorf” carved between 24,000 to 22,000 years ago. The Venus of Willendorf was carved in Upper Paleolithic times making it one of the oldest artifacts in the world. As rare as it is to find these old artifacts that are still in shape, the Venus of Willendorf is small enough to fit in the palm of most people's hands and is expected to have been a mini sculpture for a fertility ritual. The Venus of Willendorf does not have facial features, so when you first glance at the statue, you will most likely notice the bodily shape of the sculpture which becomes the main focus of the artwork. All the Venus sculptures all have their own unique look, but all share a couple exaggerated features like the wide hips, large breasts, and butt. But, with the arms, legs and facial features not being very prominent, focusing on the womanly features and figure. Not exactly knowing the purpose of these little statues, we hypothesize that they are symbols of beauty and fertility due to the focus of the womanly anatomy. Although these sculptures are a bit of a mystery and we do not know much about them like we would art today, they are still incredibly important to the art world in the present. These sculptures are more than just mere artifacts, they are expressions of the human and womanly figure and spirituality. Whether they are viewed as symbols of fertility and womanhood, ritualistic objects, or artistic elements, they serve as some of the most precious figurines to the art and history world today.



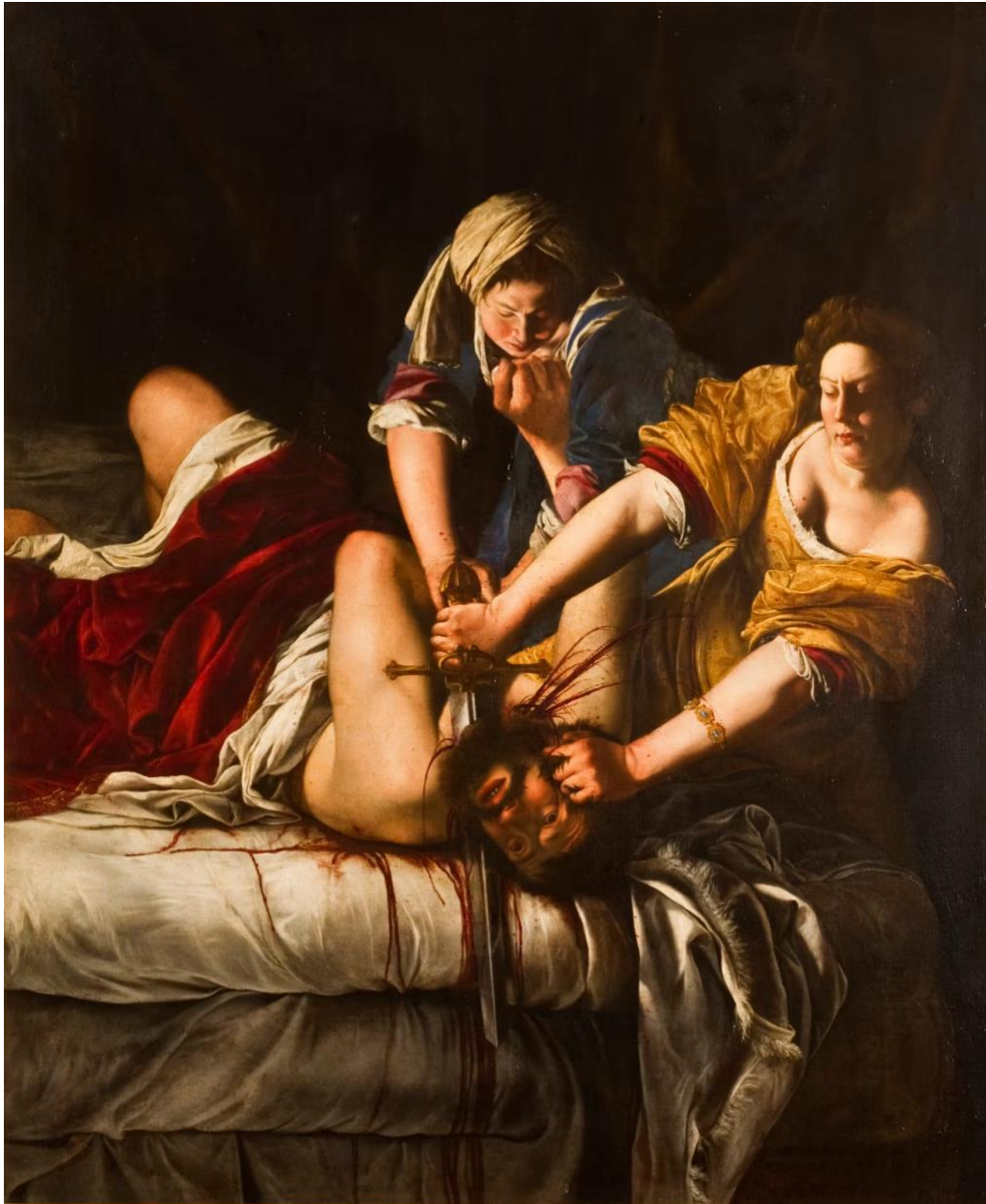
Figure 1: The Venus of Willendorf

A woman painter in the Renaissance?:

Now as we all know, women painting was not a quite common thing in the Renaissance period of art. Women were not taken seriously in the art world but there was one specific painter I want to highlight due to her challenging the gender norms by painting powerful females figures in her paintings, making feminist statements in her art and questioning the traditional ways of gender while advocating for equality. Artemisia Gentileschi was born in 1593 in Rome, Italy. Centuries ahead of her time, Artemisia Gentileschi was one of the first and only female artists to achieve success in the seventeenth century.” (Anna Souter, 2024, paragraph 1) The painting that Artemisia is most well-known for is “Judith slaying Holofernes” located in the Uffizi gallery. This painting is well-known for being art history's “Favorite icon of Female Rage” The story in Artemisia’s painting is a story from the bible about the Assyrian king Nebuchadnezzar who sent his general Holofernes to besiege the Jewish city of Bethulia. Judith in the painting is described as a young beautiful widow who resolves to save her people by slaying Holofernes herself. She seduced him and had him drink wine until he became intoxicated and then decapitated him. In 2020 there was a play by Melissa Moschitto called, “It is true, it is true, it is true” that depicted the thought that Artemisia Gentileschi had behind her Judith painting. Melissa Moschitto wrote superbly presenting a first-person account of Judith's circumstances based on Artemisia’s recount of the biblical story. While also making it known that Judith and Artemisia share similar trials in life. “She also presents a powerful first-person account of the circumstances leading to her sexual assault and the trauma resulting from this event and its aftermath. The play limits references to other aspects of Artemisia’s life, although some of Artemisia’s comments and the brief interlude with the curator point toward the lengthy period where the artists' works were misidentified or underacknowledged. Both the production and its related Zoom events include substantial direct audience addresses, inviting its viewers to draw significant parallels between the artist's life and

her creations. (Shelia T. Cavanagh, 2022, p. 161) Judith became a popular female icon in art and still is to this day. Especially during the Baroque era, Judith gave painters the excuse to make gory artworks. For example, “In 1599, Caravaggio, for instance, painted an explicit depiction of the very moment Judith cuts Holofernes’s throat, his face looking up in disbelief and his body still struggles.” (Angelica Frey, 2019, paragraph 14) The thing about Caravaggio’s version of Judith slaying Holofernes is that his version of Judith is a young, blonde, and awkward looking as she kills Holofernes. Artemisia’s version shows a grown and powerful version of Judith. The difference between these two paintings is that Caravaggio shows the woman looking awkward and scared whereas Artemisia shows a strong-willed woman getting her revenge. Artemisia is an important figure in art and always will be due to her ability to step over societies standards and become something a woman “should have never” become in the Renaissance period.

Figure 2: Artemesia Gentileschi's, "Judith slaying Holofernes"



A look into non-gender conforming art:

To switch up from the last couple of topics of women in art that we have discussed, there is an artist by the name of Claude Cahun (also known as Lucy Renee Mathilde Schwob) that I want to take a moment to look at. Born October 25th, 1894, in Nantes France, Claude was a French writer, photographer, surrealist and performance artist. Claude's father owned a regional newspaper in the family since 1876. Claude's mother suffered from mental illness and was permanently institutionalized in 1898 so Claude (who was still referred to as Lucy at the time) was sent to live with her grandma. Though her mother was not Jewish, Claude was still Jewish on her paternal side and was exposed to a lot of anti-Semitism. So, to protect her, Claudes' father sent her to England for two years of schooling. After that, she went back to Nantes and met Suzanne Malherbe who would become a lifelong companion and collaborator. Suzanne adopted the gender-neutral name Marcel Moore and Claude and Marcel became lovers. (Naomi Blumberg, 2024) Claude adopted their gender-neutral pseudonyms during their early adulthood. Claude likes to bend the standards of gender to prove a point that in all reality, it does not really matter and that we are all humans at the end of the day. Claudes artwork is a variety of different things, but they are most known for photography. Claudes most well-known photograph is the one shown below, "I am in training don't kiss me" This is one of the photos from this series that Claude did multiple photographs of. Claude takes the paradoxical approach of representing a feminine strong man and does poses that correlates with being both feminine and masculine. In this photo Claude represents masculine and feminine stereotypes by wearing stylized clothing, more "dramatic" looking makeup, props such as weights, nipples that are sewn onto the shirt that makes the chest flat, short hair that looks like a mustache on top, and pursed lips. Across Claudes

shirt reads the title of the artwork, “I am in training don’t kiss me” which makes the viewer feel almost humorously ridiculed for being attracted to something that is “not available”. Claude Chaun was being sentenced to death because of taking part in the resistance against the Nazi’s, producing anti-Nazi propaganda. Claude was arrested with their partner Marcel Moore, and they were sentenced to death together because of their rebellion. But they were kept alive and waited death in separate prison cells for a year but were then freed just to find that their homes were destroyed by Nazi’s. In 1951 Claude was awarded the Medal of French Gratitude for being a part of the rebellion. Claude Cahun died after dealing with poor health for years in 1954 at the age of 60. “Claude’s artistic work, diverse persona, and unusual personal life have made Cahun a figure of inspiration and interest for many later artists. The gender-shifting self-presentation, and non-heterosexual relationship makes Cahun important to homosexual activists and feminism lovers alike.” (Anna Souter, 2024, paragraph 31) Claude Cahun’s artwork is so important to this day. Claude lived such a hard life but still persevered to create and fight for what they believed in. Claude is such an inspiration for gender in art because they do not necessarily “conform” to a certain gender.

Figure 3: Claude Cahun's, "I am in training don't kiss me"



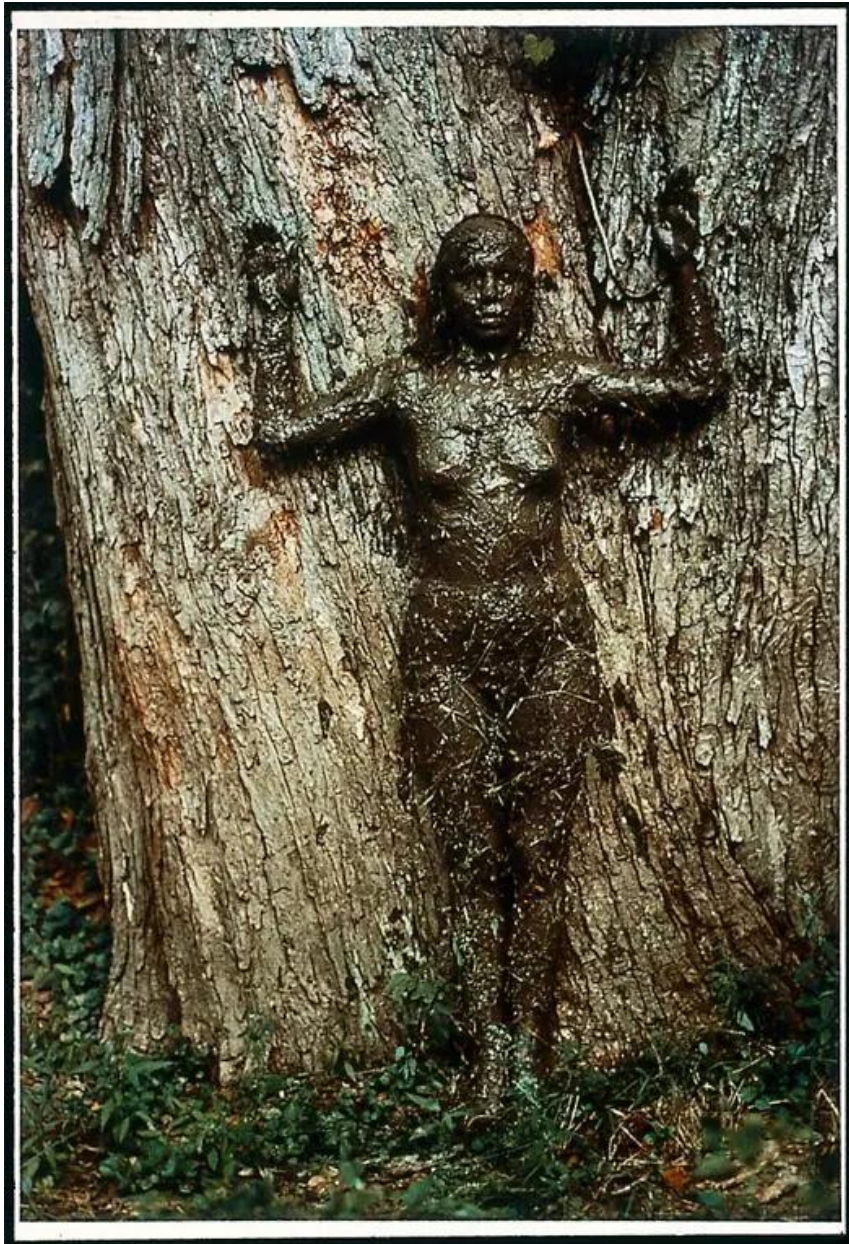
Using Nature as a guide to Create:

There are many ways to create art whether that be painting, sculpture or even using nature like the artist I will be talking about now. Ana Mendieta was a contemporary/ modern performance artist and sculpture artist that was born on the 18th of November in Havana, Cuba. Ana Mendieta was a Cuban American artist whose work broke artistic boundaries dealing with identity, body, and gender. Ana liked to use the earth as her “canvas” and use the natural world as an opportunity to connect her work and thoughts to the earth. Ana had a multidisciplinary way of going about her practice by using many diverse types of mediums such as sculpture, performance, video, and using the land to create art. Ana’s art was influenced by her experiences as a person whether that be, cultural, feminist, heritage, or other reasons of influence. When Ana was 12, she was sent to the United States for safety reasons due to her father supporting Fidel Castro’s rise to power and inevitably breaking with the leader of the Cuban revolution. 12-year-old Ana and her 14-year-old sister were sent off to America and moved around foster home to foster home and orphanage to orphanage through Iowa and Florida which had a profound effect on her and showed up in her artworks. In 1966 Ana enrolled in a school called the University of Iowa in Iowa city and chose a painting program to do while studying there. Also, in 1966, Ana reunited with her mother and brother after being separated from them since she was 12. Ana earned her bachelor's degree in 1969 and her master's degree in painting in 1972. Ana then enrolled in the University of Iowa’s Master of Fine Arts intermedia program where she was encouraged to explore more conceptual art, land art, video, and performance art. There are a couple pieces of Ana’s work that I want to discuss. The first one being when she was still in the intermedia

program. It was one of her first performance pieces that addressed violence against women. Ana often used animal blood as a prop in her performances, making them more violent and realistic. One of the pieces I want to discuss was loosely based off the March 1973 brutal rape and murder of a fellow University of Iowa student, Sarah Ann Ottens. This piece is a brutal and grueling look at reality and what can happen to women. “For the performance, Mendieta left the door to her apartment intentionally ajar, inviting her audience to enter. They found her tied to a table, naked from the waist down, and smeared with animal blood, with broken objects and bloodied clothes scattered around her. Mendieta remained in that position for about an hour, after which her observers sat down and talked about the work. The performance was documented in photographs that can now be found in museum collections around the world as “Rape scene” (1973).” (Alicja Zelazko, 2015, paragraph 3) This is what Ana Mendieta’s work is all about. This is one of the many examples on how her work portrays the suffering and disgustingly horrific parts of being a woman. Not only was “Rape scene” a piece of performance work, but it was also a protest. A silent protest for her fellow classmate Sarah that did not have a voice anymore. Ana creates so many powerful pieces like this so let us look at another. Made in 1976, Ana’s work titled “Arbol de la Vida”, or “Tree of Life” Is a very iconic example of Ana’s work. This piece is Ana covered in earthy toned mud to “blend” in with the trees. This photograph was taken in Iowa near “Old Mans Creek” where she had many of her pieces take place by. No one is entirely sure on what the meaning of this piece is but there are many guesses. “Mendieta’s work describes a metaphorical and personal journey of exile and union. Many writers have seen her constant inscription of the female body in the landscape as a reference to her exile from Cuba at the age of twelve. Others have interpreted Mendieta’s work as a statement of female power and fertility.” (J. Blocker, 1999, page 53) Ana Mendieta has had an inspiring and powerful effect on artists.

Especially women. In 1992, the Guggenheim Museum held a show, but it turned out to be short lived. The show was a very memorable one not because of what was happening inside of the museum but because of what was happening outside. To get through to get into the museum that day, you had to pass through a massive line of around 500 feminist protesters carrying posters and banners that read, “Where is Ana Mendieta”. They held up these signs in direction to the overly male dominated art world and establishment. They also held these signs up because it so happened to be that Ana’s former partner Carl Andre was in the show who many people suspected was responsible for Ana Mendieta’s death. “On Thursday 5 September 1985, the couple had dinner with Spero and her husband, the painter Leon Golub. Spero later described them as “happy and relaxed.” Three nights later, they stayed in to have a Chinese takeaway, watch a movie and drink champagne. The following day, she was found dead on the roof of the delicatessen, 33 floors below an open window of their apartment, her body having hit the surface so hard that her head left an imprint. Even her death echoed her art.” (Sean O’Hagan, 2013, paragraph 30) Ana Mendieta lived too short of a life that was unfairly taken from her. Her work will forever leave an imprint in the art world.

Figure 4: Ana Mendieta's, "Tree of Life"



Conclusion:

There are many ways gender can be found and expressed in art. Whether that be through a tiny sculpture or through a painting that depicts the strong nature of a woman. Also, it could be through someone that expresses both genders at the same time. It could also be expressed through nature. Gender in art needs multiple ways to express itself. It is not selective and needs variety to be truly expressed. Gender in art is so important and always will be in the art world. As the world becomes more accepting, the more unfiltered art will become which is what we truly need.

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