

“Explore how artists have approached the concepts around ‘gender’ in art practice; providing evidence from at least 2 artists and thinkers”

Gender is one of society's biggest affairs, controversies and points of heated disagreements both locally and globally. Gender is one of those topics that can be considered to be relevant during our history, but still hold immense importance in the present day. Primarily in the world of art and design it can be considered that gender is one of the most illuminated subject matters for an artist or designer. Afterall, gender is an element in society that taints people's perceptions of each other. To be male or female is a highly different experience from one another. Often women are discriminated against by men in the workplace and homelife. Perhaps Mary Wollstonecraft (1759 - 1797), a radical magazine writer in the 1780s, said it best;



(Figure 1 : Opie, J. and Lotha, G. (1998) *Portrait Of Feminist Novelist and Writer Mary Wollstonecraft*, *Mary Wollstonecraft* | *Britannica*. Edited by J. Keenan. New York City: Encyclopedia Britannica. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mary-Wollstonecraft>.)

“How much more respectable is the woman who earns her own bread by fulfilling any duty, than the most accomplished beauty.” - Mary Wollstonecraft

(Wollstonecraft, M. (2013) 'Revolutionary Thoughts', in *The Politics Book - Big Ideas Simply Explained*. 1st edn. DK publishing, pp. 154–155.)

She is seen as one of the first popularised feminist writers in human history. In a time where women were pressured by men to use their sexual allure to gain a man's support, In a time where women were expected to be financially reliant on a man, In a time where women were thought of only to be educated to gratify men. She triumphed as a trailblazer in highlighting these issues to a wider audience in society.

Wollstonecraft argued that if women were to reach happiness and equality with men, women wouldn't have to attain a level of beauty or education to define their own worth in their wider communities. Wollstonecraft anathematized the notion that a woman had to attract the attention of men to provide for her.

This is just one example of how one's gender can change the way one is treated in society, especially when it comes to women. The artist Wangetchi Mutu (1972 - present), a highly celebrated Kenyan-American artist, highlights the prejudices and discrimination women face in her home country of Kenya and across other African nations such as Nigeria. She does this through mixed media and collage to convey and depict herself and other women, including women in pop culture, as abstract and ethereal beings who are marginalised by men in modern african societies. One of her most well known works "Yo Mama" challenges the practice of female genital mutilation against Nigerian girls and women. Showcasing the obstacles women have overcome and challenging the mistreatment of women because of their gender.



(Figure 2 : Mutu, W. (2003) *Yo Mama (2003)*, Wangechi Mutu. *Yo Mama*. 2003. MoMA. Available at: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/96792>.)

“Yo Mama” depicts and pays tribute to the Nigerian feminist, Funmilayo Anikulapo-Kuti (1900 - 1978), who is known as a prominent feminist within Africa, specifically Nigeria. The piece pays homage to her. Bringing attention to her work advocating for women’s rights specifically female genital mutilation. The approach to gender here is critical as the piece by Mutu depicts her stilettos as a phallic instrument destroying another, being the snake. Behind the colourful display and effeminate colours it makes the viewer question why women are viewed this way because of their gender? Mutu also answers this question in this work because it visualises women as creators and warriors. This is apparent in Mutu’s choice of emphasising the female figure with hips and breasts, one of the visual signifiers of gender while also showing her version of femininity.



(Figure 3 : Oyedokun, O.D. and Ransome-Kuti, F. (2024) *Feminist Educator, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, pictured in Nigeria. Known as the ‘Mother Of Nigeria’.*, Meet Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, the formidable Nigerian activist. Africa Rebirth. Available at: <https://www.africarebirth.com/meet-funmilayo-ransome-kuti-the-formidable-nigerian-activist-who-simultaneously-fought-for-womens-rights-and-her-nations-freedom/>.)

Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti inspired Mutu to create this work not only because of her activism, but her sheer strength in battling the binaries of gender stereotypes. Quite often African women are not seen as

equal to African men, especially when it comes to education and rights. This is further supported by Ransome-Kuti's mistreatment which highlights the massive gap between men and women. Women are less likely to have access to education and the civil liberties of those who are the opposite gender. This was reflective in her life because she lived through gender discrimination, being regarded as the first woman to drive a car in Nigeria. Driving a car for women was illegal in many African nations in the early 1900s. She is regarded as founding feminism in her country, inspiring the future generations of African women to speak up against the gender gap between men and women.

"The feminist movement was gaining recognition around the world, and Ransome-Kuti spearheaded the movement in Nigeria. After the 1947 Abeokuta women's tax revolt, she represented Nigeria in London, and the AWU expanded beyond Egba land, becoming the Nigerian Women's Union in 1949."

(Iwalaiye, T. (2024) *5 achievements of Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti besides the first woman to drive a car*, *Pulse Nigeria*. Available at:

[https://www.pulse.ng/lifestyle/food-travel/achievements-of-funmilayo-ransome-kuti-besides-the-first-woman-to-drive-a-car/ebjw15n. \)](https://www.pulse.ng/lifestyle/food-travel/achievements-of-funmilayo-ransome-kuti-besides-the-first-woman-to-drive-a-car/ebjw15n.)

Ransome-Kuti's commitment to championing women's rights links back to Mutu's "Yo Mama" as it is to be considered that she is being honoured for her bravery and outspoken approach to gender the same way Mutu is also being outspoken in her own right. I personally feel like the piece carries a symbolic emblem between the parallels of gender and the euphoria that can be sensed from the image because of the stylistic choice of it being split into two. It is almost like a gravitational pull metaphorically between men and women. This could mean that Mutu sees a brighter future for women in relation to the political, social and economical imbalance between the genders. She can see through the landscapes of transgression.

The way this approaches gender is a melancholic one but gives hope through the historical acknowledgement of the African community. Could this suggest that gender is also directly related to race?

Maybe Mutu thinks that the treatment of gender is deeply rooted within her culture and possibly race, her work often depicts being a woman while conjoining it into the ideals of her culture. A key attribute to her artistic practice. This links to another African feminist who works in literature, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (1977 - present), who also challenges the ideals of African culture in conjunction with gender. I've noticed a common theme when it comes to feminism in terms of culture and gender. The word gender and feminist is misunderstood and turned into a negative especially when it comes to how men have treated Mutu, Ransome-Kuti and Adichie in their activism. It suggests that there is a lot of pushback when it comes to the female gender. These powerful women's practices, with the focus being on Mutu's artworks are questioned with stigma simply because they want equality for men and women. To close the gap between the genders.

"I was a happy African feminist who does not hate men and who likes to wear lip gloss and high heels for herself and not for men. Of course much of this was tongue-in-cheek, but what it shows is how that word feminist is so heavy with baggage, negative baggage"

(Adichie, C.N. (2014a) 'We Should All Be Feminists', in *We Should All Be Feminists (TEDXTalk)*. 1st edn. London, UK: 4thestate (Harpercollins), pp. 10–11.)

Adichie, just like Mutu, is unashamed to call her a feminist despite the negative connotations that come with it in their communities. This focal point of misogyny and tearing the relations of gender and culture is a key element to these women's practices. Focusing on Mutu's work it was previously mentioned that this tie to gender and culture is a key theme of her work with African inspired prints and sculptures that symbolise many of the frustrations she is dealing with as someone who is misjudged because of her gender. Adichie expands on the frustrations of african women again;

"Because of their historical advantage, it is mostly men who will have more today. But if we start raising children differently, then in fifty years, in a hundred years, boys will no longer have the pressure of proving their masculinity by material means."

(Adichie, C.N. (2014b) 'We Should All Be Feminists', in *We Should All Be Feminists (TEDxTalk)*. 1st edn. London, UK: 4thestate (Harpercollins), pp. 26–27.)

Furthermore, Adichie recognises that men face societal pressure between each other which may lead to why they discriminate and judge women so harshly. Showing a deep wound between gender and societal standards. As formerly mentioned Mutu's work also explores this through imagery of motherhood and womanhood which leads to the finality of her practice revolving around a community of african women who are all approaching gender in a similar way. It carries a common experience that dates back to Ransome-Kuti's time where Mutu honoured her in the work "Yo Mama". Leading into the present and contemporary times of living similar experiences in the present like Adichie. Therefore, it is to be considered that her diverse artworks possess the historical fight and implications of the gender difference. I think it is a timeless beautiful evolution to see despite the somber undertones.



(Figure 4 : Mutu, W. (2020) *MamaRay*, Wangechi Mutu. *MamaRay*. 2020. MoMA. Available at: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/426431>.)

This contrasts well with the philosophy of Mary Wollstonecraft who in her European upbringing historically women are also mistreated. While Mutu highlights the mistreatment of African women clearly defining the gap of the two genders. Wollstonecraft talks deeply about the philosophy of gender and womanhood which ties in with the connection of gender struggles within an artist's practice. Wollstonecraft's outlook on this is still very well reflected today and has inspired so many artists and designers to create work much like Ransome-Kuti's contributions to the art of gender and destroying barriers between them. This suggests that an artist who makes work inspired by the concepts of gender is often a destructive approach.

"She argued [Mary Wollstonecraft], apparently outrageously, that women were capable of reason – all they lacked was education. An early role model, she translated and reviewed essays on natural history, and she was speaking the language of human rights before the term existed. She didn't exclude men, or indeed anyone. Perhaps her most quotable maxim is "I do not wish [women] to have power over men, but over themselves."

(Slater, N. (2015) 'The original suffragette: the extraordinary Mary Wollstonecraft', *The Guardian*, 5 October.)

Destruction could be in one's practice when it comes to their work as a way of deconstructing the restraints of gender in our world. Much like the impact of Ransome-Kuti, Wollstonecraft has inspired many artists to tackle the war on gender that holds such a cruel grasp onto our species. Destruction and the sense of community of shared experiences being a prime factor in one's practice. An example of this is an artist who approaches gender in their work, Alexandra Gallagher (1980 - present). A Manchester-born artist and designer who creates work in the realms of surrealism in order to paint and collage the beauty of womanhood. A powerful message when it comes to gender and differences.

"Entropy" depicts the form of the female body in an abstract and non-realistic setting. This work is interesting to me because of the imagery of the snake which is a very masculine animal. Its distinction between the snake and the use of the female body is purposeful as it creates an antagonistic feature to the piece. The female body is also representing a delicate and yearning of glamour almost. The common link between Gallaghers and Mutu's work is the use of imagery of the snake as a battle of the genders which is really interesting to see because it's addressing the same issues of gender but using different approaches in their practices to convey their own feelings on it.



(Figure 5 : Gallagher, A. (2023) 'Entropy', ARTWORK | alexandragallagher. Available at: <https://www.alexandragallagherart.com/artwork-gallery?lightbox=datapitem-lfs8zkq6>.)

This symbolism also carries emotive tensions within Gallagher's work and the use of flowers is also significant to her practice. They are considered to be feminine by society's view and an example of natural beauty. Maybe she is trying to say that the female body isn't always sexual. They are otherworldly and warriors. This similarity to Mutu's work is amazing between the two because they are completely unrelated, suggesting that her approach to gender carries on through themes throughout artists as an almost collective mind of consciousness. This is suggested by the website "Rise Art".

"Taking inspiration from mythology and art history, Gallagher's imaginative art splices representations of passive femininity with wild natural forms. A nude woman is intertwined with vibrant florals and soaring birds. The digital edits, neon highlights and surreal collage give the familiar nude a contemporary twist"

(Gallagher, A. (2019) *Alexandra Gallagher, artist: Contemporary art for sale*, Rise Art. Available at: https://www.riseart.com/artist/15891/alexandra-gallagher?srsitid=AfmBOorrOwiC-L_bwt2SFeZCyN443dysr0HaizJZFDG9loAK6E_u6FmP.)

Her approach to the female body in her work is very important in highlighting gender because mythology is heavily gendered historically from culture to culture, usually based on gender's biggest issue today,

Patriarchy. Her work challenges patriarchy in a way that is visually articulated to form an analogy of what is considered masculine or what is considered feminine. Within her practice this is of utmost importance to her because I think a lot of women feel like patriarchy is an evil and aggravating system which benefits nobody.

“The idea that the patriarchy doesn’t exist would be a hilarious joke if it weren’t for the fact that it makes women’s oppression the punchline.”

(Bates, L. (2022) ‘Patriarchy? What Patriarchy?’, in *Fix the system Not the women*. 1st edn. New York, New York: Simon&Schuster, pp. 38–39.)

Laura Bates (1986 - present) sums up this idea perfectly in her book, when it comes to gender and patriarchy, why is it funny to men? Gallagher has the right idea when it comes to her practice because it is almost a mockery of that insinuation. Her body of work is the very medicine this world needs in order to tear down this stupid idea that men have created. Meaning that women and Gallagher in her practice make stupidity and fun out of this redundant idea of gender differences because it is pointless. It is laughable. The comedic approach in her work with surrealism is effective at getting this point across, I think even Laura Bates would agree.

“The idea of equality of opportunity only holds up if you don’t stop to look too closely. As soon as you do, it all tumbles down like a house of cards.”

(Bates, L. (2022a) ‘Patriarchy? What Patriarchy?’, in *Fix The System Not The Women*. 1st edn. New York, New York: Simon&Schuster, pp. 44–44.)



(Figure 6 : Bates, L. (2024) *Portrait of Laura Bates, American Feminist Author, Laura Bates: Everyday Sexism Project - The Fix Podcast*. Available at: <https://thefixpodcast.org/episodes/laura-bates-everyday-sexism-project/>.)

Ultimately, looking at artists and thinkers' practices and works surrounding gender, I believe that the approach to gender can often be evoked through someone's culture, someone's country or someone's surroundings and upbringing. The connections between all these women speaking and making art about gender is ultimately a universal experience despite the difference in locations. This is something that is ultimately common among the issues of gender. From the way I see it. There is a lot to address and take from these works in order to improve society and its expectations. I think the biggest picture someone can make of all this is that we can only tear down this gap in gender through speaking up, education and quite often deconstruction of the current system. The works from Mutu, The writings of Adichie and to the works of Gallagher. All these women have a voice and perspective when it comes to gender in relation to the cruelty and injustices that come along with it.

Figures

(Figure 1 : Opie, J. and Lotha, G. (1998) *Portrait Of Feminist Novelist and Writer Mary Wollstonecraft*, *Mary Wollstonecraft* | *Britannica*. Edited by J. Keenan. New York City: Encyclopedia Britannica. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mary-Wollstonecraft>.)

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