

Research and Context

Tutor: Gwenllian Beynon

Name: Charis Copp

Student: 1902580

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Question 1: Explore how artists have expressed Gender in art practice providing evidence from at least 2 artists and thinkers.

The purpose of this essay is to explore gender expression with a focus on the works of Jenny Saville and Silvia Sleigh. In addition to the ongoing lack of female representation in the art world and how this issue can be solved.

This essay will focus on the “core question” of curator and activist Maura Riley “How can we get people in the art world to think about gender, race and sexuality, to understand that these are persistent concerns that require action?”(M Riley 2018 p.7). In conjunction with a famous quote by musician Nina Simone titled ‘An Artist’s Duty’ in which she asserts it is a creator’s obligation to “reflect the times’ “. “When everyday is a matter of survival, I don’t think you can help but be involved.” (Tate, 2020) Through thorough research the artists Sylvia Sleigh and Jenny Saville have been selected. In addition Sleigh’s 1974 Paul Rosano Reclining and Saville’s 1992 Propped will be used as relevant pieces of work which support this topic.

Ian Chilvers, author of *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Art and Artists* writes that Feminist Art is “A term applied to art that deals with issues specifically relating to women’s identity and experience” He goes on to write “The imagery often focuses on sexuality, both in celebrating female eroticism and in attacking male sexual violence.”(Chilvers, 2003) It can be argued that no artist better exemplifies this criteria than Sylvia Sleigh.



Figure 1

In Figure 1 we see Sleigh's 1974 painting, Paul Rosano Reclining. Sylvia Sleigh is renowned for her reversal of long standing stereotypes surrounding nude paintings by "presenting males as the subject for female erotic delectation" (Chilvers, 2003). She was a prominent figure in the surging Feminist Art Movement and is acclaimed for "turning traditional portraiture on its head." (Cary Whittier) In a blog post titled A Love Letter to Paul Rosano, author Kate Geha states that work like Sleigh's introduces a "meta Male Gaze", In which young women artists "cast the male gaze, back onto the male"(Geha, 2012)

What is the Male Gaze? As Janice Loreck, Teaching Associate in the School of Media, Film and Journalism, Monash University put it. In the male gaze, woman is visually positioned as an "object" of heterosexual male desire. Her feelings, thoughts and her own sexual drives are less important than her being "framed" by male desire. It is important to underline the male gaze is not just at work and obvious in hyper-sexualised examples. But is instead the default way that women are portrayed in our society. This harkens back to the Gorilla Girls famous piece regarding the discrepancy of female nudes in museums compared to female artists. Stating that "Less than 5% of the artists in the modern art section are women but 85% of the nudes are female.

This piece perfectly serves as a subversive and radical take on the female gaze and gender as a whole. Particularly the subjectivity of male contemporary identity. In her own words Sleigh states:

"I wanted to give my perspective, portraying both sexes with dignity and humanism," she once said. "It was very necessary to do this because women had often been painted as objects of desire in humiliating poses. I don't mind the 'desire' part, it's the 'object' that's not very nice."

This discrepancy of females to males in the art world is further compounded by Sleigh herself. She claims that, "I do think things have improved for women in general there are many more women in government, in law and corporate jobs, but it's very difficult in the art world for women to find a gallery." According to Sleigh, there is still more that needs to be done in order for men and women to be treated as equals in the art world." (reference).

That being said it could be argued that Sleigh's work can be seen as less progressive in our modern context as her work can be viewed as simply flipping this objectifying gaze onto men. Therefore It is not necessarily changing the ways of looking, just the subject in view. It could instead be considered as keeping the spirit of objectification and dehumanisation alive. "Reducing things to two types of gaze doesn't make much sense to me" (Braier, 2016).

So should one discount Sleigh's work as nothing more than a shallow flipping of the script? Absolutely not. Nina Simone wrote of "reflecting the times" and that is exactly what this piece does.

Andrew-Graham Dixons 2008 book Art The Definitive Visual Guide states that, Feminist “Imagery is necessarily often sexual, but challenges the stereotype of women as an object of male erotic desire or fantasy”.(AG Dixon, 2008) No one better exemplifies this than Jenny Saville. Her work strives to embrace what is considered as grotesque and challenges societies perception of the female body and acts as a counter to the male gaze, by painting nude obese women.



Figure 2

Figure 2 depicts Jenny Saville's 1992 Propped painting. Described as a "self-portrait in which the artist sits naked (albeit wearing pointy white flats on her feet) atop a phallic black post. Her nails dig into her legs, pushing her ample breasts together." (Cohen, 2018) .

What is interesting about Propped is the faint text inscribed backwards onto the painting. Specifically sprawled across the canvas and the skin of the figure. As Alina Cohen explains, the text is a quote from Belgian-born feminist writer Luce Irigaray. The text reads

"If we continue to speak in this sameness—speak as men have spoken for centuries, we will fail each other. Again, words will pass through our bodies, above our heads—disappear, make us disappear".

"Scrawled across both the background and the figure's skin, the message appears more intended for the subject than for the viewer, who is forced to read it backwards." This creates the impression that Saville chooses to be subversive and not "speak in this sameness". It serves as almost a mantra to herself (literally). It can be easy to deduce that the objective of Saville's is carving her own path. Everything she makes, she makes for herself. Her work can be viewed as an inspiring message of independence and agency in her work. She is not concerned with whether or not her viewers can read these words. So long as she can read it that's all that matters.

In a recent video essay *The Take* explains today's "cultural conversations are making big strides in addressing a number of long entrenched prejudices. So why do many people still act like it's okay to mock lecture or belittle fat people?" (*The Take*, 2021) Even Ian Chilvers described Saville's subjects as "Mountainously obese nude women". (Chilvers, 2003) This book was released during the early 2000s. A period described as Postfeminism. However, tabloid culture and gossip blogs cultivated an environment of an immense and accepted misogynistic treatment of women such as Britney Spears, Paris Hilton and Megan Fox.

Maura Riley writes in a 2017 *Art News* article that this "Western male viewpoint, which has been unconsciously accepted as the prevailing viewpoint, "may—and does—prove to be inadequate" A post by *Artsy.net* explains that Saville proclaims herself as "Anti Beauty". Her work instead focuses on "exaggerating bodily elements that society generally deemed unsightly." (*Artsy.net*, 2018) Saville herself has stated: "I'm not painting disgusting, big women. I'm painting women who've been made to think they're big and disgusting." She is essentially calling out these sexist ideals and giving the floor to all the women who do not comfortably fit into this standard.

It could be said that Saville's work serves as something of a response to the male gaze, as The Saatchi Gallery posits "Her exaggerated nudes point up, with an agonising frankness, the disparity between the way women are perceived and the way that they feel about their bodies." In today's society of rampant fat-phobia, social media and body positivity it would not be a stretch to assume that this is something people of all genders can relate to. *The Take's* video essay continues to explain that "One of the main drivers behind fat phobia is the fear of becoming sexually undesirable. Which stems from

unattainable beauty standards westerners have been exposed to for generations' '

Perhaps the reason why Saville's work still prevails is because viewing these pieces provide viewers of all body-types with a sense of comrodery. "Saville portrayed her figures not as idealised Madonnas and Christs, but as harried contemporary humans" (Cohen, 2018)

Saville expertly places female experience at the forefront of her pieces. In part through her studies and reference of many famous male artists which came before her. Such as Henri Matisse, Leonardo da Vinci, Willem DeKooning, Peter Paul Ruben and Pablo Picasso. Her pieces centring on motherhood and children serve as a reference to the works of Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci "albeit from the perspective of a person who's actually experienced childbirth." (Cohan, 2018)

Cultural critic Bell Hooks encourages creatives to look inward and be self critical. To "This interrogation itself becomes an act of critical intervention, fundamentally fostering an attitude of vigilance rather than denial." This sentiment is extremely apparent in Saville's Propped piece . It is almost as if Saville is laying out something of a personal mantra to herself. One might wonder if she had read the works of Bell Hooks to come to this conclusion herself. It is clear that the objective she set out with has been followed very closely.

In conclusion, it can be said that both Silvia Sleigh and Jenny Saville's work serve as more than adequate examples of gender expression. While it goes without saying, there is a lot more work that needs to be done in terms of reaching a future where everyone is granted equal opportunity and exposure regardless of gender, race or sexuality. It is important to acknowledge the strides we have made so far and to continue being self critical of our work. As Hooks put it "fundamentally fostering an attitude of vigilance rather than denial." So, was Nina Simone right? Is an artist's duty to purely reflect the times. The answer is no. Considering all that has been discussed, simply reflecting the times now reads as somewhat shallow and passive. Of course reflecting the times is an inevitable thing all creators must do. These are the times we live in. But how can we make it better ourselves? What are our biases? How can we overcome them? Instead of reflecting the times we are in; let's reflect upon ourselves and take affirmative action to change the times we are in.

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