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Context: 604 words

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Introduction:

Inspired by the feminism movement, my exhibition is based around the historical art world's perception on women and how this is impacted by social movements. As social expectations start to shift today and with the recent protests of 2020, new light is being shed on injustices such as racism, homophobia and sexism.

Through the recent disappearance and death of Sarah Everard, an outcry on social media has begun to question social pressures on women. With these ideas in mind, I want to use the work of artists such as the Guerilla Girls and Yoko Ono to support the theme of Feminism which I will be exploring. Key theories that I want to bring into my exhibition will be the Hall's Representation Theory and Ideas around the Male canon. Berger's Ways of thinking and Routledge's Photography: A critical introduction, will be important literature for the background of my exhibition.

Context:

The theme of femineity has been explored for a long time throughout art history. For centuries women were seen as objects of desire and this was how they were portrayed (Loreck, 2016). Art carried on showing women in the light of these ideals because men were the mainstream source of most art created.

These ideals were also upheld in society, with Straight white men being the key influencers of laws (Hall, 2006). It wasn't until 1975 that the sex discrimination act was passed (Allwood, 2017) to ban discrimination based off gender. This was a long time coming and began a shift in the narrative for the respect of women.

Art critic John Berger talks about the male gaze on the female body, “A man’s presence suggests what he is capable of doing to or for you” (Berger, 1972). In a variety of paintings this is showcased. With men as the onlookers to the female body.



Fig 1: Reclining Bacchante, Trutat, (1824-1848)

This painting by Trutat, entitled “Reclining Bacchante”, showcases how most western women were presented in paintings. Direct eye contact is held by the model in an attempt to please male onlookers. The model’s expression is dry, she is aware that she exists for pleasure and observation. In John Berger’s book, *Ways of Seeing*, he simplifies the ideas behind this with “Men act, and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.” (Berger, 1972).

In 1860, the first woman was accepted into a Royal Academy School (Liu, 2018). This shift saw women begin to be recognised as artists. In turn they were now in control of their own emotions and how this was displayed in paintings. Beginning with self-portraiture, women started to reclaim femineity for a completely different stance than male painters had done in the past (Liu, 2018).

Since this, women have used art to question how femineity has been shown throughout history. One of the most famous, was the 1989 poster entitled 'Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?' by the Guerrilla Girls. In this poster shocking statistics about the exposure of women in the Met. Museum are outlined.

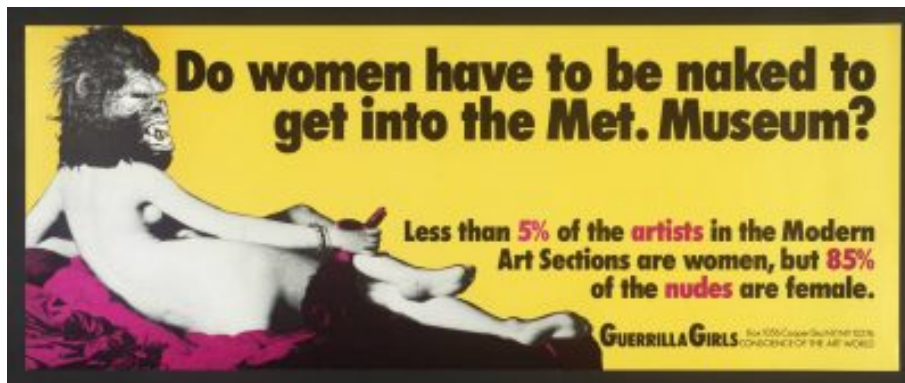


Fig 2: Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?, Guerrilla Girls, 1989

The main aim of the work was to shed light on the sexism and intrinsic way that women were treated as artists. The identities of the people involved in the movement were kept secret (Tate, 2021) through Gorilla masks. The forefront of their art became a very poignant message questioning the male cannon, rather than who was behind the art. A wide range of other posters about sexism, racism and social injustice was made since this poster as well.

Even since 1989, there has been a continuation of art which has followed the theme of the heterosexual male gaze.



Fig 3: Strip, Jemima Stehli, 1999

Jemima Stehli created a body of work in a collaboration with a range of men, who watched her undress and took photos using a trigger throughout the process. All images were displayed in the exhibition.



Fig 4: Strip exhibition, Jemima Stehli, 1999

What makes this photographic project so interesting is the use of a self-portrait when the actual artist has their back to the camera. The only person identifiable is the man, and his expression can be seen as the main focus of the image. The responses have a correlation with how the men react to the female body, in some photos, there is a real sense of uncomfortability and in others, a sense of normality to the process of Stehli undressing.

Artists and Artworks



Fig 5: Self Portrait aka The Model, Knight, 1913

Currently situated in London's Natural Portrait Gallery, Laura Knight's 'Self Portrait aka The Model' was created to protest her lack of access to female nude models at college (Lambirth, 2013). Here she references the oversexualisation of women in art history by creating a self-portrait of herself painting a naked woman. The key colour of red could be read as reference to symbolic connotations of romance, and danger. For its time, this

painting was extremely controversial. It directly referenced sexism in the system. The outcome proved that her gender didn't define ability.

This painting will be perfect in my exhibition, as the male gaze is being redefined by a woman.



Fig 6: Untitled film still #35, Sherman, 1979

Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* are a reflection on women empowerment. I have chosen *Untitled film still #35* to be included in my exhibition. In the *Untitled film stills* project, Sherman transforms herself into a range of roles for movies where she is the main character (Alexander, 2016). Through her photography, the gender roles of women are exposed, with some images holding a sexualised nature and others holding a softer approach to femininity.

At the time of the creation of these images' women were only just beginning to see fashion barriers break down. Women were still wearing platforms and suede - as they had in the 1960's (Leaper, 2021). With the new decade of the 70's, Jeans were now in style for women and the poster 50's woman was beginning to become a thing of the past. This is why it is so

interesting that Cindy Sherman has decided to pose as a woman from this period. As an artist who creates self-portraits becoming the strong woman lead of each still was a very influential thing to do.

Fetishism (Routledge, 2004) is a term defining the link between photography and the male gaze. “The photograph can be a fetish because of its physicality – we can touch and hold an image” (Routledge, 2004). However, an interesting thing happens when the male gaze and fetishism is combined to create a performance. The flatness of an image becomes a 3D reality - In which the subject is physical, and participants can touch and connect emotionally to the performer.



Fig 7: *Cut piece*, Yoko Ono, 1964

Artist Yoko Ono used the themes of fetishism to inspire a performance piece where she invited onlookers to cut off part of her jacket (DiRuggiero, 2017). Ono only speaks to explain her performance, and she remains still as her clothes are cut. She puts herself in a place of complete objectivity – making her fully vulnerable to the audience.

Including this performance in my exhibition will solidify the context of the artwork around it.

I have chosen to have this performance take place at the back of the Mission Gallery where

there is a cut-through circle. Visitors will be able to see Ono as though they are in an intimate and cramped space which will add to the uncomfortability of her performance. Through this I hope to challenge the emotions linked with the male gaze and power.



Fig 8: Red Cannas by Georgia O'Keeffe, 1924

The painting *Red Canna*, on oil, by artist *Georgia O'Keeffe*, now currently situated in Amon Carter Museum of American Art (Google Arts and Culture, UD) is a very important part of my exhibition. As well as blending well into the colours in other work exhibited, the background history of this painting is very important. In the 1920's Georgia O'Keeffe was the first woman to be named a 'pioneer' in the New York world of Art (Tate.org). This was not long after Laura Knight was painting for the unfair treatment of women in college. A recognition was being acknowledged of female talent for something other than their presence in a nude painting.

I have decided to include this painting in my exhibition because it will be eye catching beside the other art I have selected, and it portrays a delicate side to femineity that the

other works of art I have chosen to exhibit do not have. This is because the use of floral imagery will have a sharp contrast against female portraits.

The final piece of art that I have chosen to include in my exhibition is Jemima Stehli's Strip, which I have referenced in the context of my exhibition. Stehli's photography has a powerful background to it. She challenges the attitude men have towards the female body and portrays it in a way that allows the viewer to see each stage of her undressing. All of the other artworks I have chosen do not have men in the frame so including these photos will bring context to the other art in the exhibition.

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List of Figures

Fig 1: Reclining Bacchante, Trutat (1824-1848)

<https://cannellerm.wordpress.com/2017/02/16/representation-of-women-in-art-and-advertising/> Date accessed 5th April

Fig 2: Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?, Guerrilla Girls, 1989

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Fig 3: Strip, Jemima Stehli, 1999 <https://museemagazine.com/culture/art-2/features/jemima-stehli-friends-with-benefits> Date accessed 5th April 2021

Fig 4: Strip exhibition, Jemima Stehli, 1999

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Fig 5: Self Portrait aka The Model, Knight, 1913 <https://www.artrenewal.org/artworks/self-portrait-aka-the-model/laura-knight/58567> date accessed 6th March 2021

Fig 6: Untitled film still #35, Sherman, 1979 <https://www.thebroad.org/art/cindy-sherman/untitled-film-still-35> date accessed 6th April 2021

Fig 7: Cut piece, Yoko Ono, 1964 <https://lbjsbathroomreadersite.com/2019/02/20/this-month-in-music-history-february-18-1933-yoko-ono-born-in-tokyo-japan/> date accessed 4th April 2021

Untitled film still #35, Sherman, 1979
24 × 16.7 cm



Self Portrait aka The Model, Knight, 1913
H 152.4 x W 127.6 cm



Cut Piece, Yoko Ono, 1964
Performance



Strip, Jemima Stehli, 1999
217 × 179 cm per image

