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Sexual Imagery In Women's Art

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Women's sexual art tends to stress either strong positive or strong negative aspects of their experiences. Feelings of victimization and anger, while sometimes expressed as masochistic fantasy, often become politically directed, especially in contemporary works. Those artists whose work celebrates female sexuality as a joyous, liberating and creative experience also seem to be consciously influenced by feminist ideals.

In some of the earliest modern examples, sexual themes were abstract and ambiguous subconscious manifestations, often denied by the artist herself. Yet powerful sexual overtones in the work of Georgia O'Keeffe, Lee Bontecou, Louise Nevelson and Helen Frankenthaler, among others, consistently evoke those readings. Abstractions permitted the disguising of explicit sexual content which 15 to 20 years ago was socially and psychologically unacceptable.

Women, for whom sexual experience and all its ramifications has been historically the central life experience (other avenues having been blocked), have seldom been permitted to comment upon that experience. Carol Duncan points out in "The Aesthetics of Power in Modern Erotic Art," that although Bohemian romance with sexuality as a liberating revolutionary force in the beginning of the century was embodied in the works of numerous male artists, that liberation was seldom extended to the women of their fantasies who were usually objectified and presented as prostitutes. Duncan continues: ". . . the modern art that we have learned to recognize and respond to as erotic is frequently about the supremacy of men over women."¹ Significantly, erotic work by contemporary men often celebrates the same attitudes found in the girlie magazines, albeit with considerably more style and class. Artists such as Tom Wesselman, Richard Lindner, Mel Ramos, and John Kacere purposely adopt the slick, brassy look of the pop vernacular and conscious pornographic iconography,

skillfully referring us back to other contexts. This referral to a realm of experience thought to be antithetical to "sacred" art is characteristic of Pop art in general. However, in the case of erotic imagery the evocation of the pop culture tends to absolve the artist of any responsibility for the content and its implications. The Pop look thus facilitates the acceptance of the subject matter.

The sexual art of women, on the other hand, ranges wide in styles and attitudes and is far more direct and concrete. Moreover, much of the imagery is disturbing on a subliminal level. In 1966, Allen Kaprow referred to an exhibition of Martha Edelheit's work which states the contrast:

Female art in general plays no games as men's art does; no one wins, there are no victims or protagonists. It is thoughtful, but not intellectual insofar as intellectuality is a game. It is not editorial either, insofar as discriminations between degrees of moral good and bad are also a game. Female fantasy is pervasive, boundless, unconcerned with definitions and measure. When sex is its primary involvement the involvement is total and therefore shameless. It is for this reason terrifying to men, not because it implies the loss of their status, but because it implies the loss of the game (which is their life.)²

Louise Bourgeois is the classic example of an artist who consistently produced imagery with a high sexual charge, and who, until recently, experienced near total critical and public neglect as a result. It was only after politicization of the issue that restrictions on sexual content in women's art began to lift enough for her work to receive the acceptance and acknowledgment it long deserved. From her hooded totemic personages of the late 1940s and early 1950s to the blatantly phallic object ironically titled *Fillette* of 1968, she has explored a wide range of possibilities for the phallic image, whether clustered in groups or in erect isolation, sheathed in foreskin-like coverings or dramatically ampu-

tated by diagonal slices. The phallus, a symbol of aggression, is at the same time excruciatingly vulnerable.

Bourgeois' surfaces, be they marble, latex, wood or plaster, often have a flesh-like slipperiness, especially when she uses the female anatomy—wombs, slashed vulval openings or wet, vaginal interiors, but when she develops breast forms they may be baggy with matte, dull surfaces. Her work is dominated by an obsession with sexuality, but the forms she creates carry numerous other connotations and implications as well. Sexuality is so crucial to the life process that images of nurturing, germination, driving force, dependence, fertility, defense and defenselessness are all subsumed beneath its umbrella.

In the past, women who wished to be taken seriously as artists did their best to leave their femaleness behind when they entered the studio. The price for acceptance in the cathedral of "high art" was conformity to prevailing male modes. Today, for the first time, women have begun to develop a unique iconography, which, while fitting into more or less accepted stylistic categories, is radically different in intent and content.

Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago were the first to openly explore the sources of their abstract imagery and insist on a feminist reading of their art. They developed the concept of "central core" imagery which relates the use of a central image to female body identification. Schapiro often speaks of her excitement in choosing the colors for her *Big Ox* so as to deliberately point out its sexual implications. Abstraction, in this case, provided the possibility for women to express their sexuality without entering into the "subject-object" dichotomy.

Many abstract artists have subsequently insisted on the sexual meanings of their abstract work. Joan Snyder, whose earlier dripping slashes were simply accepted as another Abstract Expressionist variant, has recently begun to introduce explicit vaginal images and written allusions to sexual experiences and feminist ideas into her work. These new elements encourage a reading of her earlier paintings within this context.

In the sculpture of Lynda Benglis the sexual content was largely ignored, despite the fact that the artist spoke of orgasm in relation to her use of poured polyurethane. Her slow, sensuous manipulation of the material, its oozing outward, flowing and bellying forth has a direct relation to female sexuality. Her knots vary between thrusting out in a phallic manner and a more inward or protective attitude. Benglis has used the publicity material for two of her shows to direct the viewer to the sexual content of her work and to the sexual politics of the art world. In 1973, her announcement poster was a photograph of herself taken from the rear, nude but for dungarees dropped below her knees above high-heeled shoes, parodying a typical pin-up pose. For her Fall 1974 show, she placed a double page advertisement in *Artforum* featuring herself naked with a man's hair-

cut and 1950s style sunglasses masturbating with a double dildo similar to the object reproduced on her announcement card, which was included in the show. Thus, she forced us to read her work on her terms, lest we misunderstand her intentions.

Many figurative artists also disguised the content in their early work only to explode in recent years with an open attack on the sexual clichés. The work of Marisol, for instance, always seemed somewhat uneasy and out of place in the company of other Pop art. In the context of her recent highly charged sexual imagery, it is difficult even to see her doll-like early pieces as the light-hearted, humorous "popular" icons we thought they were. Now these boxed-in figures seem like trapped mummified victims as well as wry commentaries on sexual role-playing and the nuclear family.

From the disconcerting life casts of her own body parts and face to the masturbation fantasies with their sense of fearing/feeling the inside of self to the more recent work, Marisol has continuously raised the level of psychic tension. Bodily invasion and exploitation are graphically depicted as woman becomes the helpless victim of innumerable atrocities. She is walked on; hands invade every secret part of her; fetuses grow in various places within her body and fall, aborted between her legs. Her vulva replaces her heart in *Fuck a Heart*, while remaining open to penetration as usual.

Women's anger and feelings of sexual victimization are seen in a great deal of figurative art. The angry tension that simmers beneath the surface in Marisol's work bursts out in Nancy Grossman's leather men and becomes an indictment of the macho male. Her figures seem to be prisoners of their own physical power and aggressiveness. Leather encased heads that become penises, penises that become pistols, the use of bindings and masks—all denote loss of self and consequent dehumanization. She treats the male as a sex-object, encasing him completely in a bondage sheath, zippered to allow the mistress access to her slave. A leather girdle feminizes his waist while his arms are bound above his head in a position of total, fearful submission. Man's face is covered because it, like his penis, is a threatening weapon (Fig. 1). The obsession with taming the male devil implies a fascination with his power as something to be destroyed—or emulated.

Upon occasion this anger is converted into humor (always a potent weapon), as in the work of Judith Bernstein, who scoffs at the male mechanical monster by making giant drawings of phallic screws as monolithic power symbols. She dehumanizes the male function to overcome its political and psychological threat. The enormous size of her charcoal screws—nine feet high and room length—is such that men feel intimidated by them. Such a gargantuan sexual apparatus conjured up by a woman makes all normal sized penises seem inadequate. The depiction of more than one penis (which is frequent in women's sexual imagery) also implies inade-

quacy. Men's sexual anxiety is thus exacerbated by her fantasy.

A number of other feminist sexual images, like Bernstein's screws, succinctly capture the essence of women's sexual and political grievances. Anita Steckel, in her *Last Supper*, ties woman's victimization to capitalism by placing a naked woman on a long banquet table surrounded by black-suited businessmen. In another such image, women are impaled on the towers of Wall Street, playing off the buildings' phallic power against the economic and sexual helplessness of women. Steckel has explored a wide variety of sexual themes, at times emphasizing humor or erotic fantasies, but always underlining the political implications of the sexual situation. May Stevens also connects the phallic image to the capitalist in her *Big Daddy* series, where both the head of the man and the dog in his lap are penile.

Naked explosions of pain and anger in the work of Juanita McNeely relate sexuality to death and madness. She openly confronts abortion, menstruation and forced intercourse, subject matter previously considered taboo. Her wildly expressionist distortions of women and love-making have an hallucinatory power. The bleeding madwoman traversing a tightrope with a doll/baby strapped to her waist in *Delicate Balance* presents a frightening vision of motherhood (Fig. 2). It is based on a woman dressed in rags, bleeding, and muttering or crooning to a doll that the artist saw on the street near her studio. The vision haunted McNeely and she taps a deep emotional chord in her viewer because her own response was so intense. Her image of *Woman* is a terrifying vision of women's physical vulnerability since she is depicted bleeding from facial as well as vaginal openings. There is nothing erotic about this imagery—quite the opposite. Even the scene of intercourse is filled with torture and pain. *The Lovers* battle violently, almost

as though it were a rape. Fear, anguish, madness, death, pain and thwarted maternalism are inextricably bound up in her content. Despite her locus in Expressionism, there is no tradition for McNeely's forthright depiction of such raw subject matter.

Unlike McNeely, most artists use symbols to convey personal sentiments about sex. Fantasies or dreams are often imaged. Nora Speyer never portrays sexual intercourse per se, only its aftermath or prelude. Frequently the protagonists appear to be sleeping or drowning in the post-coital period. They may seem to rest peacefully, or to daydream moodily. Sometimes barely disguised anger disturbs the tranquility of their post-sexual languor, but often a gigantic serpent is intertwined with them in what can only be a symbolic expression of guilt. Ann L. Shapiro, who works in the idiom of California "funk" art, creates phantasmagoric transcriptions of her feelings about self and sex. *Anger* is ablaze with indications of violence—the flames and flaming hair/headress, the claws and bullet-like emanations from bestial arms, and the aggressive adoption of man's phallic state. She posits a hermaphroditic potential for herself in another painting titled *Two Sides Of Myself* where the subject is female identity and the unification of a split personality. Similar content is also being explored by Jane Kogan and others on the east coast. During the 1960s Martha Edelheit executed small watercolor drawings that were playful transcriptions of sado-masochistic fantasies. She also created male paper dolls that enabled her to manipulate and vary a given male character in order to make him more interesting as a sexual ideal.

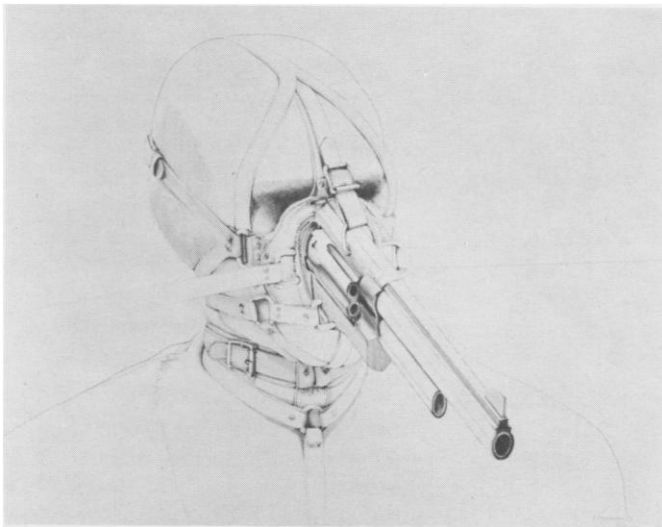


FIG. 1. Nancy Grossman, *Gunhead #1* (1973), Pencil drawing, 19" x 24". Photo: Geoffrey Clements, N.Y.

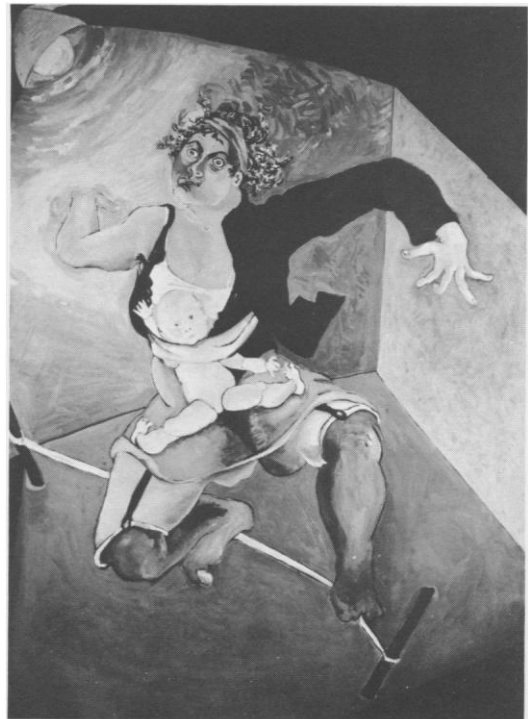


FIG. 2. Juanita McNeely, *Delicate Balance*. Photo: eevainkeri, N.Y.

In her later large, multiple-figure paintings, she repeated the same figure in different costumes and poses for a similar effect.

In Edelheit's work, and in the paintings of Sylvia Sleigh (Fig. 3) and Eunice Golden, the male nude is used as a vehicle to express erotic feelings, just as male artists have always used the female nude. Sleigh's attention to detail in her male portraits is like that of a woman stroking her lover's body. Her young men are soft and vulnerable, with heavy lidded eyes and manes of curly hair falling around their shoulders. They take the stance of Kouros figures while also recalling the youthful gods of Egypt. Golden's abiding interest in male genitalia has sharpened and narrowed in focus over the years. Her early drawings only departed from traditional figuration in their deliberate "exposure" of excited male organs. Later the male pelvic region became a landscape extending from edge to canvas edge as though it were the total world. The phalluses and testicles metamorphosed into pulsating masses of tumescent fleshiness. By consistently stressing the erotic effect of the erect male penis in her paintings and films, Golden challenges the historic suppression of women's sexuality by a culture which discourages female sexual initiative and shrouds the physical realities in romanticized rituals. She demystifies the male anatomy and invites women to shamelessly enjoy the heterosexual encounter.



FIG. 3. Sylvia Sleigh, *Paul Rosano Seated Nude* (1973), 56" x 42". Photo: Geoffrey Clements, N.Y.

The myth of female sexual organs as unclean "Pandora's Boxes" has also been undermined by women artists. The creation of vaginal imagery in different materials and in varying degrees of explicitness shows the stirrings of self-pride, self-love, and self-acceptance. These artists celebrate the vagina as a primary source of sexual stimulation as well as an iconographic symbol challenging the phallus in its claim to power. Hannah Wilke conveys vulnerability and a sensuous eroticized seductiveness in her pink-labia wall pieces held together by grommets painfully stamped into the fleshy folds. The large latex works feel full-fleshed, their irregular edges implying fragility and wear. The delicate, delicious color heightens the sensual impact while multiple petal-like flaps and folds irresistibly invite the onlooker to touch and explore the voluptuous surfaces. Wilke's self-concentration in both her sculptural and performance pieces (in which she simultaneously acts out and ridicules the seduction ritual) unavoidably raises the issue of narcissism. The image of the "femme fatale" given to us by the media is so deeply imprinted on her consciousness that the struggle to break its stranglehold is acted out in her work.

In Buffie Johnson's paintings the flower images that she dedicates to the Mother Goddess also celebrate feminine attributes. Though less specifically vaginal in nature than those of Wilke, they are nevertheless strongly evocative of sexual icons. The seeking out of pre-Christian matriarchal allegory also characterizes Mary Beth Edelson's "conceptual" and photographic pieces. Since 1973, she has been collecting sexual fantasies which she exhibited at the A.I.R. women's cooperative gallery along with drawings she made based on the material she received. *Blood Mysteries* is a collection of stories and statements written by viewers in the gallery about various connections between female sexuality and blood—menstruation, birth, menopause, and what she calls "blood power"—blood's role in magic, sacrificial ritual, and spiritualism. This identification with the positive and power invoking aspects of female biological processes celebrated in prehistoric cultures is a consciously feminist rejection of the misogynist tendencies of the Judeo-Christian theology.

Other artists define women as powerful, autonomous and sexually potent in works which are affirmative and joyous. The gigantic *Nana* of Niki de St. Phalle evokes a Pop-goddess whose fearsome monumentality is mitigated by the brilliant colors and whimsical motifs from various folk cultures with which she is decorated. There is a fine blend of the grotesque, the humorous, and the sexual in her work. If Dada had ever formulated a heroic personification, *Nana* would be his mate. She is Venus, fertility goddess, bacchante and fat woman on the beach at Coney Island all rolled into one. St. Phalle has also constructed an environment in Stockholm which is a gargantuan female figure called *Elle*. She is spread out on the ground with an entrance through the vagina and a bar set up for nourishment in the breast in a

poetic/ironic condensation of the conflicting demands of the mother/whore fantasy. She is described as a cathedral, mother, factory, Noah's Ark and as the biggest prostitute in history because of the thousands of people who have "visited" her. It is typical of Niki de St. Phalle's attitude toward female sexuality that *Elle* is multi-leveled in meaning, all-encompassing and overwhelming in scale.

Woman as a heroic figure is the major theme of Mary Frank's work (Fig. 4). She depicts woman in a state of ecstatic union with the forces of nature. Her head is thrown back, torso extended and thrust forward, nipples erect, vulva puffed out in positive shape. Man crawls on his stomach in desperation to reach her, a creature who is both landscape and building, nature and culture. Leaves pattern her chest, waves lap around her limbs fusing with them, twigs criss-cross her thighs, stars open in her sides. Her hair becomes leaves or sand or sea water. As a building she is solid and durable. Her arms form the post and lintel basic to all construction; her legs are like logs or the braces for a cantilever. As a woman, she is a whole made up of disparate parts, constantly reconstituting the fractured bits of herself. Her skin may be broken, worn, stretched or scarred, her breasts soft from nursing, her rib-cage expanded and belly slack from childbearing, but her nostrils are flared, her mouth is open with excitement, defiance or joy. Mary Frank portrays woman at the supreme moment of her self-awareness, whether that moment is one of pain or ecstasy.

Woman exulting in the pleasure and strength of her body, whether alone or with a partner, is the dominant theme in Joan Semmel's work (Fig. 5). The act of love is no longer accepted as one of exploitation and sub-

mission, but rather as the coming together of two people, equally participating and desirous, each demanding and each giving. Semmel's larger-than-life depictions of the sex act fill the viewer's visual field with richly colored flesh. She inundates us with it, making us aware of its tactility and giving us a corresponding sensation of having our own body touched, caressed. She portrays the naked body, male or female, with loving attention to its gentle rhythms, swellings and concavities, as though

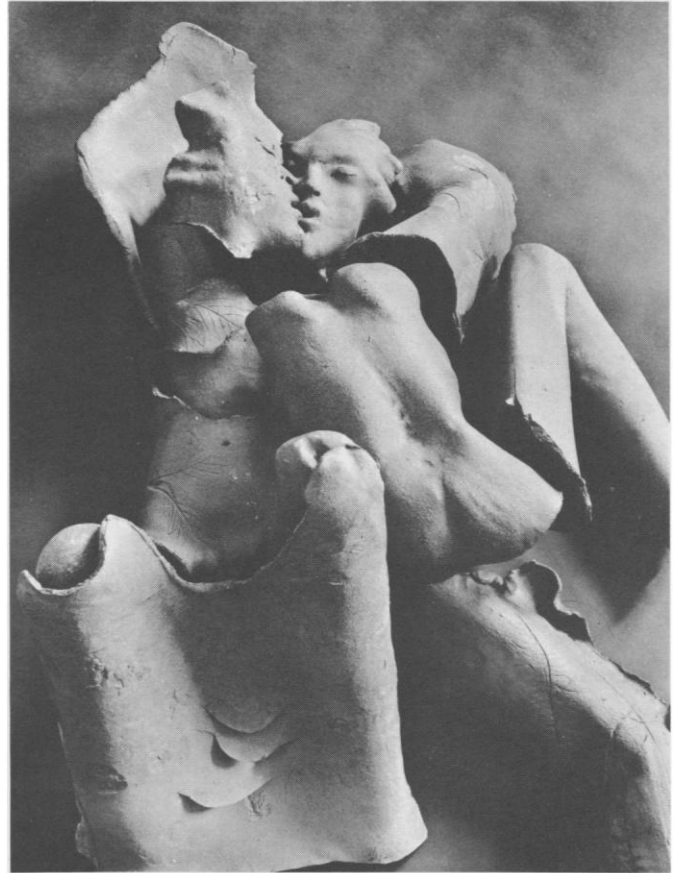


FIG. 4. Mary Frank, *Lovers* (1973-74), 5' 1 x 3' w x 19" h. Courtesy of Zabriske Gallery, N.Y.



FIG. 5. Joan Semmel, *Touch* (1975). 57" x 103". Photo: Bevan Davies, N.Y.

she is following them with her hand instead of her brush. Her sense of touch and color comes from her early involvement with Abstract-Expressionism which she left to enter the frank world of photo-derived realism. Using dramatic cropping and radical viewing angles, she creates composite images that are formally dynamic and open psychologically. In her auto-erotic explorations of woman's emerging self-awareness, her own nude body becomes the landscape and foreground of her experience.

Carolee Schneemann utilizes her nude body in various innovative performance, photographic and film pieces, drawing on dreams, orgiastic ritual and autobiographical source material. She was already insisting on a positive creative sexuality as a political imperative in the early 1960s. In *Cezanne, She Was a Great Painter*, she writes:

In the early sixties I felt quite alone in my insistence on the integrity of my own sexuality and creativity. There were many reasons for my use of the naked body . . . to break the taboos against the vitality of the naked body in movement, to eroticize my guilt ridden culture and further to confound this culture's sexual rigidities—that the life of the body is more variously expressive than a sex-negative society can admit. I didn't stand naked in front of 300 people because I wanted to be fucked; but because my work and sex were harmoniously experienced I could have the audacity or courage to show the body as a source of varying emotive power: poignant, funny, beautiful, functional, plastic, concrete, "abstract"; the key to related perceptions of our own nature as well as the organic and constructed worlds with which we surround ourselves In some sense I made a gift of my body to other women; *giving our bodies back to ourselves.*⁸

When writing about her film *Fuses* she says: "Perhaps because *Fuses* was made by a woman, of her own life, it is both a sensuous and equitable interchange; neither person is subject or object." One of her performances

culminates with Schneemann, after painting her body in bright swatches of color in late Picasso style, standing on a table slowly pulling a long scroll from her vagina. She reads aloud from the scroll affirming her feminism. This image of woman as art/sex object giving birth to a proclamation stands as a summing up of women's sexual politicization today.

It hardly seems accidental that so many women artists are dealing so extensively with sexual themes. Certainly, since woman's total identity and function have been inextricably linked to her biology it seems only logical that her art would be influenced by that experience. Men tend to associate sex primarily with pleasure but for women the risks have been infinitely higher. The wide ranging attitudes expressed in their art indicate the complexity of their feelings. However varying their levels of feminist consciousness and however disparate their views, women artists have rejected the traditional female role of the "acted upon" to insist upon defining their own sexuality. They see themselves through their own eyes. •

1. Carol Duncan, "The Aesthetics of Power in Modern Erotic Art," in *Heresies*, 1 (January 1977), 46-50.
2. Allen Kaprow, *Village Voice*, April 28, 1966, 12.
3. Carolee Schneemann, *Cezanne, She was a Great Painter* (New Paltz, N.Y.: Tresspass Press, 1975), 24.

JOAN SEMMEL, a painter, exhibits at the Lerner-Heller Gallery, New York. She is Assistant Professor of Painting at Douglas College, Rutgers University, New Jersey and has compiled and edited a book on sexual imagery in women's art called *Through the Objects Eye*.

APRIL KINGSLEY, an art critic who wrote for the *Village Voice* and *Newsweek*, teaches at the School of Visual Arts in New York. She recently curated an exhibition of "Afro-American Abstraction" at P.S. 1 in Queens, New York.