

### **The Importance of the Female Nude in the Work of Contemporary Female Artists**

The depiction of the human figure, specifically the nude, is an intrinsic component of the tradition of artmaking. The female nude particularly is an ever-recurring subject. Women painting the female nude is an important art strategy because it reclaims a previously male-dominated space in the art world, it contributes to female agency and autonomy and it supports the wholeness of the female identity. In this paper I will analyze the practice of women painting nude women by looking at the work of artists who exemplify this strategy; Jenny Morgan, Jenny Saville and Maya Mason. I will use theories and concepts regarding psychoanalysis, scopophilia, semiotics and art history to examine the visual impact of these artist's work.

Women painting the female nude in contemporary art is a way of claiming a place that was denied to women until relatively recently. In her seminal work "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists" feminist theorist Linda Nochlin points out that as late as the 19<sup>th</sup> century women were denied drawing from the nude model in art academia. Studying human anatomy was essential to an artist's training. To be denied the look, even at their own sex, limited women's mobility in art. Nochlin recounts "the complete unavailability to the aspiring woman artist of *any* nude models at all, male or female. As late as 1893, "lady" students were not admitted to life drawing at the Royal Academy in London, and even when they were, after that date, the model

had to be "partially draped." Only at the very end of the 19th century...do we find representations of women art students working uninhibitedly from the nude."



You to me,  
oil on canvas, 92x78 inches, 2013  
<https://www.jennymorganart.com/gallery.html>

The technical skill needed to paint or draw the human body is considered the benchmark of figurative representational painting and requires an extensive knowledge of anatomy and painting materials. Jenny Morgan's works show this kind of expertise with paint. In *You to Me*, we can see Morgan's skill with a brush, attention to fine detail and complete understanding of the body, from skeletal structure of the hips and ribcage to subtle folds of skin around the collarbone and thighs. Jenny Saville's drawings *Time* and *Time II*, are skillful academic drawings showing fluidity of contour line to define form, use of pentimento<sup>1</sup> and perspective. They defy the previous inhibitions set on women artists. Because it is dominant, the white western male viewpoint has been accepted as "correct." These four pieces testify that this system has oppressed greatness in women and distorted the way the female body is looked. Nochlin urges women to face this history and exercise their experiences to "reveal these institutional and intellectual weaknesses... destroy false consciousness."

All images are made up of codes, signs and signals to convey meaning, a system called semiotics. The author of those images, with or without intention, imbues those codes with their ideologies. In Roland Barthes essay "The Photographic message" he explains these "arts comprise two messages: a denoted message, which is the analogon itself, and a connoted message, which is the manner in which society to a certain extent communicates what it thinks of it." (Barthes, p.17). He talks about the myth of the photograph, how its reflection of reality is accepted as truth without consideration for the point of emission and possible motives of its creators, that it is an image without a code. Similarly, society accepts the myth of the "rightness"

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<sup>1</sup> The marks that remain on a paper from previous orientations of a drawing

of the male gaze because it has been pervasive for so long. Images made that perpetuate this ideology subsequently oppresses women.



Time II,  
charcoal on paper, 76x56 inches, 2010  
<https://www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/jenny-saville-b-1970-time-ii-5834383-details.aspx>

According to Lucien Freud's theories of psychoanalysis the female sex organs signify "threatened castration." In film theorist Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" she uses this theory to examine the way women are looked at. "Psychoanalytic theory as it now stands can at least advance our understanding of the status quo, of the patriarchal order in which we are caught... Woman, then, stands in... as signifier for the male other... still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning" (Section I. a.). Through objectification and voyeuristic mechanisms man seeks to alleviate the threat and control of the image of woman. "The power to subject another person to the will sadistically or to the gaze voyeuristically is turned onto the woman as the object of both. Power is backed by a certainty of legal right and the established guilt of the woman" (Mulvey, section I, a). Woman is seen as a passive object for the male gaze to act upon, guilty of not having a penis. Although Freud's theories are debatable, Mulvey attests that there is "a beauty in its exact rendering of the frustration experienced under the phallogentric order." (Section I, a.)

In the works of Morgan and Saville the female genitalia are prominent and straightforward. In her works *You to Me* and *A Baby Named Love Psychedelic* Morgan uses the contrast of light skin and dark pubic hair to draw attention to the crotch and the women's nipples are highlighted. In Saville's drawings she uses contrast and a high level of detail to emphasize the breasts and labia of her figure. These features are not idealized or over emphasized, but accurately rendered. Here the woman is both bearer and maker of meaning. Mulvey says the intention of her essay is to destroy the kind of pleasure found in the scopophilic male gaze. Scopophilia is deriving pleasure from looking at a person as an object, in a controlling way, such as a "peeping tom" who looks without consent (Mulvey, section I. b.-II. a.).



*A Baby Named Love Psychedelic*,  
oil on canvas, 90x60 inches, 2014  
<https://www.jennymorganart.com/gallery.html>

These artists take that control from the male and exert it on their own terms, dictating how the nude is shown. Wherein the scopophilic tradition women's appearance is coded to appeal to and signify male desire, these works acknowledge a woman's sexuality - she is the owner of it. They profess woman's guiltlessness for not having a penis to reverse the assumption that the male gaze is the "natural" state; challenging the "legal right" that society has given to men to look.

In his book "Ways of Seeing," theorist John Berger explains that in the art historical traditional "*men act, and women appear.*" (Berger, pp.46). This passivity is directly addressed in the work of Maya Mason. In *Storming the Vivarium* and *Charge*, Mason's nudes are running towards the viewer, fists raised as they stare straight ahead, not there for visual pleasure but a physical purpose. Rendered in hurried brushstrokes, they are messy, confident and confrontational. Their skin rough and inconsistent, breasts and the flesh of their bellies morphing into shapes that defy any notion of an idealized body. Saville's drawings also refuse the tradition of passive nude female. Though the position of the viewer would have them above the subject, the violent strokes of line intersecting her body, the multiple limbs they create show its potential for quick, decisive movement. It refers to the passivity typical of a nude and resists that supine state in a way that makes the viewer uncomfortable for being in the power position.

Berger talks about exceptions to the rule of passive nude. "The way the painter has painted her *includes her will and her intentions in the very structure* of the image, in the very expression of her body and her face (Berger, p.58). This can be found in all the works so far. In "An Introduction to Visual Culture," theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff posits "men are haunted by the fear of castration, while women are marked by their lack of the phallus" (p.165) Here woman is not

defined by what she *is*, but by what she *lacks*, prohibiting women from seeing themselves as whole. Their bodies are ugly and wrong, and they are held responsible for fixing “the various “defects” of their bodies” (Mirzoeff, p.172-173). Mulvey attests to this as well, considering “the paradox of the phallogocentric in all its manifestations is that it depends of the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world. And idea of woman stands as linchpin to the system: it is her lack that produces the phallus as a symbolic presence, it is her desire to make good the lack that the phallus signifies” (section I, a.).

It is essentially human to search for our likeness, the human form, since birth. We look to this to define our relationship to the world. Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s theory of the “mirror phase” posits that the recognition of ones’ own image during early life is crucial for the development of the ego. “[This] phase... gives rise to the future generation of identification with others.” (Mulvey, section II, b.). The nudes of Morgan, Saville and Mason are empathetic reflection of womanhood. Berger describes how nudes that are made with love for the subject break the mold of the male gaze, even more so, because these works are painted through the experience of woman, that empathy creates an accurate representation of the nude woman (p.57). In Morgan’s *A Baby...* a woman stands in white space with her hands holding her pregnant stomach. Every fold, wrinkle and vein are shown. In *You to Me* we see two women, the differences in all parts of their bodies emphasized by the contrast between them. Morgan’s subjects are distinct individuals, she does not deny their sexuality, but seeks to display it as an aspect of the whole person. Saville’s facial expression in her drawings, her large knuckles and long labia are unique to the subject.





*Time*  
Charcoal on paper, 66x52 inches, 2010  
<https://www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/jenny-saville-b-1970-time-5362561-details.aspx>



*Storming the Vivarium*,  
oil on canvas, 71x65 inches, 2018  
<http://mayamason.com/#/storming-the-vivarium/>

Mason's running figures have a wide range of pigmentation, body weights and heights. All these elements signify specific beings with personality. Where before a naked woman must be framed

as a narrative character, a Venus<sup>2</sup> for instance, the fiction allowing for easier objectification, these works are studies of an individual, not an archetype. The woman-made female nude, with its imperfections intact, is an active way of refusing the terms of a culture where there is a “right” way for a woman to look and painting their natural appearance is an act of defiance. The recognition of the natural female form by other women in these works heals the assumption that there is something wrong with women’s bodies. Any visual pleasure derived from here must be had while also encountering all these “flaws” and accepting the pose and gaze of the woman. It is consensual on the part of the subject, who gave permission to be painted, to be seen in that state. You see her on her terms, denying any voyeuristic pleasure.

These artworks are not images of women that you would see in a magazine because they are not meant to appeal to the male gaze. The subjects all look directly at the viewer, they are life-size or larger, demanding to be considered. They all discuss flesh and the female sex organs, they are sexual, not sexualized. They demonstrate the failings of the male gaze in properly representing women. Morgan’s work uses color and rendering to show acceptance of self and love for the female organism. In her restless figures Saville demonstrates the frustration and discomfort, of being a woman looked at. Masons joggers demand an acknowledgment of their agency and action. They ask women to consider other women. These works are vital representations of the physical world imbued with their experience of being a nude woman contrasting and challenging nudes made by men, challenging that dominant ideology. These artworks embody the thrill that Mulvey promises, “that comes from leaving the past behind without rejecting it, transcending

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<sup>2</sup> Roman goddess of love and beauty



outward or oppressive forms, or daring to break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language of desire.” (Section I, b.)



*Charge*  
Oil on separate canvases 11.5x24 feet, 2017  
<http://mayamason.com/#/charge/>

## Works Cited

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